

# CROSS-LINGUISTIC INFLUENCE AND STRATEGIES OF MEANING CONSTRUCTION

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**Abstract** – In this paper, we will look at the way in which Italian adult student of English enrolled at the MA Course of Psychology at the University of Salento (academic year 2023/2024) manage the meaning construction in L2. In particular, the presence of cross-linguistic influence in their verbal reports obtained through the think-aloud technique will be recognized and analysed as well as all the specific traits of English spoken by non native speakers. Finally, we will argue that, because of their own personal interests, adult students are able to improve and maintain their L2 knowledge through various sources of L2 inputs.

**Keywords:** L2 English; Meaning construction; Cross-linguistic influence.

## 1. Introduction

In this article, we examine the features and the reasoning processes of the strategic behaviour used for the meaning construction and, in particular, we focus on the linguistic activities and processes which take place in the spoken performances in English language by Italian native speakers. In order to identify those specific traits of a language spoken by non native English speakers, the Think-Aloud Technique and the Verbal Report Method (Cohen, Hosenfeld 1981; Ericsson, Simon 1984; Pressley, Afflerbach 1995; van Someren *et al.* 1994) were applied to examine the linguistic productions of students enrolled at the Master Degree Course of Psychology at the University of Salento in the academic year 2023/2024. They study the Specialized English Language of Psychology and are able to read research papers and essays in English according to their subjects of studies. Now we try to understand how they use these abilities in a verbal performance, that is if they are also able to re-use the lexical and syntactic features they are able to understand while reading transforming those in speaking abilities and what are the processes they rely on to fulfil their communicative intents.

Communicative goals, even in specialized language, rely on communicative competence made up by linguistic and non linguistic devices, pragmatic knowledge, general language knowledge and specialized features knowledge along with strategies of meaning construction used to improve the verbal performance. This performance in people with partial knowledge of a L2 is strongly conditioned by the cross-linguistic influence, that is the use of their L1 or of other languages in the language they are acquiring. This definition can be distinguished by the term “transfer” (Selinker 1972) as it indicates a linguistic influence which comes from more than one source and can be traced in both directions (from L1 or other languages to L2 and vice versa) (Chapetón 2008).

As for strategies of meaning construction, we intend here all the strategies used by learners to acquire the L2 and to interact through it to manage and reach their communicative intents. In this paper it is also investigated if individuals are able to develop creative language to express something in a real context of communication, when

they do not possess a complete language competence which could allow them to cope with not predictable linguistic registers and other aspects of a social interaction.

## 2. Theoretical background

The learners involved in this study voluntarily decided to take part in the data gathering and were recorded after having passed their English exam (we need to remember that these are student enrolled in non linguistic Degree and their main subject of studies are psychological disciplines). Their English course is interdisciplinary, because it proposes language learning topics from a socio-psychological perspective to improve their Specialized English of Psychology. The survey data were used to investigate their language skills in the general language in order to understand if they have developed a *creative language* that will enable them to be successful in a real conversation and to use different kinds of linguistic registers according to the context of situation (Halliday 1984; Giampaolo 2014).

A Specialised English Language course should aim at developing the linguistic, textual and pragmatic features of a specialised genre and register, but should also aim at deepening the general language. It is well known that in order to improve a communicative competence that is indispensable for dealing with a specialised context, it is necessary to possess a specialised conceptual competence that enables one to understand and produce messages at the ideational level (Halliday 1984), in addition to the knowledge of the specialised linguistic features (lexical, syntactic and pragmatic) of the L2. Ringbom (1987) states that L2 learners attempt to reduce their task burden by constantly using their pre-existing language knowledge, i.e., their L1 (or other known languages) and their already acquired knowledge of the language being acquired. According to this approach, the learner is able to link the new L2 items to their pre-existing linguistic knowledge (L1 or other languages) even at early stages of learning. Kellerman (1983) argues that the learner has an active role in the learning process as he or she is able to decide which items can or cannot be transferred from L1 to L2, and that the influence of L1 is not based solely on similarity or dissimilarity between the languages involved. In the early stages of language learning, the learner needs to refer to or draw on his or her pre-existing linguistic knowledge and the influence of L1 or other languages is more evident. The consideration of language transfer as a problem-solving and decision-making procedure arrives in linguistics thanks to cognitive theories. In this view, L1 is used to solve a problem or to fill a gap in a communication (Chapetón 2008).

Gotti (1992) argues that a course on Specialised Discourse should provide learners with communicative competence to be used in different professional situations. In fact, the purpose of the course should be set in terms of competence and not performance. Communicative competence is given not only by knowledge of linguistic rules, but also by pragmatic rules and operative competence. These topics have been addressed by many scholars, who have provided various and specific definitions to help better understand the different aspects. In Candlin's view (1987, p. 7) "our communicative competence is part pragmatic and part cognitive, while Canale (1983) defined these competences as grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discursive competence and strategic competence needed to overcome a deficiency in the knowledge of the L2 and to increase the effectiveness of the communication in which an individual is engaged (Giampaolo 2013).

Faerch and Kasper (1983) affirm that the knowledge of a L2 learner can be

considered as formed by internalized rules and chunks of language, defining this as *declarative knowledge*, that is “knowing that” and also by the strategies and procedures adopted by learners to handle L2 information for acquisition and for use, defining this as *procedural knowledge*, that is “knowing how” (Ellis 1985, p. 164). A more detailed definition of *procedural knowledge* is given by Guido (2004, p. 361) as she defined it as “the knowledge of how to achieve an illocutionary goal by verbally planning the actualization of the required speech act”. At this “planning stage” an essential role in the realization of the goal is played by the sociocultural background of the speaker. Production and reception strategies as well as communication strategies are the processes of using L2 knowledge. Andringa and Rebuschat (2015) provided new highlights on the implicit and explicit learning, a distinction founded on the presence-absence of awareness in language learning and knowledge useful to understand how L2 proficiency develops. Godfroid (2022) reviewed the main lines of research about this topic and, in particular, on the hypotheses about an interface between explicit and implicit knowledge in SLA.

All the efforts made to increase communication effectiveness are integrated in communication strategies in Canale’s view (1983) and he affirmed that a strategy can also be considered as a plan to fulfil a communicative purpose. Tarone (1977) asserts that communication strategies are employed to overcome a linguistic inadequacy of the speaker in communicating a message. It is well-known that native and non native speakers use the same strategies, but the difference lies in the frequency with which the same strategies are used in their communications (Giampaolo 2013).

It was already proved that an interlanguage system is developed by a L2 learner using the received inputs (Ellis 1985, p. 47) Selinker was the first scholar to use the term *interlanguage* to refer to that *system* and distinguished five processes operating in it. These are: language transfer, overgeneralisation of the L2 rules, transfer of training, strategies of L2 learning and strategies of L2 communication (Selinker 1972, p. 27) All these processes establish the way in which a learner tries to internalise the L2 system (Ellis 1985). Odlin (1989, p. 27) states that transfer is “the influence that results from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps not perfectly) acquired”. He suggests an explanation of the results to better understand the multiple effects that similarities and differences between languages can produce. His classification includes negative transfer, positive transfer and the time required to reach a high degree of language proficiency. From Corder’s (1993) perspective, the concept of mother tongue influence is a broader term to indicate the phenomenon usually named as transfer, which according to the description given by the original theory about transfer is limited to the role of the mother tongue in L2 learning. Gundel and Tarone (1993) emphasised the complex interaction between L1 and L2 systems and language universals and the deceptive use of the term “transfer” because it attributes the process exclusively to surface patterns. The new definition “cross-linguistic influence” was introduced by Kellerman and Sharwood (1986) and includes various phenomena such as transfer, avoidance, interference, borrowing and other L2 related aspects. According to these scholars, this term (CLI) is more suitable and can encompass all the activities and processes involved without indicating the direction of influence. It can be said that CLI is considered by Kellerman and Sharwood to be a particular field of investigation in second language acquisition and can explore all theoretical problems concerning the identification and explanation of the interaction between native and target language in acquisition and performance (Chapetón 2008).

The linguistic production of L2 learners reveals also further interesting expedients actualised to handle various settings of interactions, and these processes can be found both

in the speech of native and non native speakers. These are the linguistic outcomes which are defined as *formulaic speech* (Lyons 1968, p. 177) and *creative speech* (Ellis 1985, p. 170). “Formulaic speech consists of expressions which are learned as unanalysable wholes and employed on particular occasions” (Lyons 1968). The interlanguage system is made by L2 learner’s rule and they produce *creative speech*. L2 learners’ rules thus represent the interlanguage system and produce *creative speech*. Faerch and Kasper (1983) recognised two processes as strategies used to shape interlanguage rules and to automatize them, these are the *hypothesis formation* and the *hypothesis testing*. In their view, hypotheses about interlanguage rules are produced following three patterns: by means of prior linguistic knowledge (L1, existing L2 knowledge or knowledge of other languages); through the elaboration of new rules from the input; and by them both (Ellis 1985, pp. 170-171). Most L2 learners, as seen by Selinker, do not complete their target language competence. This stop, which is defined as *fossilization*, occurs in the learning of the L2 in a point in which the acquired rules diverge from those of the target language system. Selinker observed that even if more *input* is given the learner does not convert it into *intake*.

An attempt will be made to identify these examples of communicative acts in the verbal production of the L2 learners recorded during this data collection. This will allow us to establish whether they are able to deal with linguistic problems in general English communication as they usually do in specialised English L2 communication. Strategies of meaning construction and cross-linguistic interference in L2 performances were identified through the think-aloud technique (Cohen, Hosenfeld 1981; Ericsson, Simon 1984; Pressley, Afflerbach 1995; van Someren *et al.* 1994) and the verbal reports obtained. This method makes it possible to observe the thought processes adopted in completing a task when researchers want exact data regarding the processes taking place. In the words of van Someren, Barnard and Sandberg (1994, p. 1), “It is possible to apply this technique to psychological and educational research on cognitive processes as well as knowledge acquisition research”. It is also used to study the creative reasoning processes. Regarding the validity of the execution of the assigned task, Ericsson and Simon (1984) argue that people perform the task in the same way when they provide verbal reports or not. This method of data collection might reduce the speed of the execution, but it does not have other interferences on the task itself. The strategies of meaning construction used by the learners will be examined in order to identify those most frequently used in the different verbal reports and to trace a pattern of strategic linguistic behaviour and cross-linguistic influence typical of a given group of learners (Giampaolo 2009, p. 163).

### 3. Method

This is a case of ethnographic research based on data drawn from verbal reports obtained from students’ descriptions of a cartoon. The description was obtained using the think-aloud technique (Pressley, Afflerbach 1995) and the research sample was formed by Master Degree students (male and female, age range 22-30) of the University of Salento, enrolled at the Degree Course of Psychology in the Academic Year 2023/2024. They study the Specialized English Language of Psychology and usually read research papers and essays in English about their subjects of studies. All the participants involved came from Lecce or Brindisi (Apulia, Italy) From a sample of 40 students selected, we reported here only five representative performances showing the most widely used linguistic patterns and only the qualitative aspects were considered. The cartoon was made by images and no texts, in order to let students use all their own linguistic knowledge and

they had no time limit to avoid time pressure. Nobody else but the researcher was in the room while they were recorded and their interviewer's role was limited to the explanation of the task performance and in providing them some prompts when they asked for assistance or when they were stuck in long silence pauses and were losing their focus on the task. The participants were individually recorded in a linguistic laboratory for the period from March 2024 to June 2024, when the students had already familiarized themselves with the researcher, who was also their professor for the English Course. They had attended the English Course advanced level, which was based on the study of processes of language acquisition and language loss, to be connected to their main subjects of study, but also to let them acquire new lexical items and syntactic features of Specialized English of Psychology as well as to improve their general language.

This task was also meant to increase their cognitive skills in focusing on the psychological processes by which a meaning is associated to the behaviour of the protagonists of cartoons. The protocol data were analysed after the transcription of the students' recordings into verbal reports (Ericsson, Simon 1984). The reason why verbal reports protocols are used in this study is their possibility, when they are well interpreted, to provide information about cognitive processes to the investigators. (Ericsson, Simon 1984; Pressley, Afflerbach 1995). The think aloud method and the verbal reports' analysis allows the researcher to identify those areas in which the cross-linguistic influence is more recurrent at the students' level of linguistic knowledge, providing insights for language reinforcement in teachers and awareness of the use of strategies of meaning construction in learners. A discussion of the cross-linguistic interference and of the strategies of meaning construction is provided in the sections Verbal reports and analysis and in Discussion.

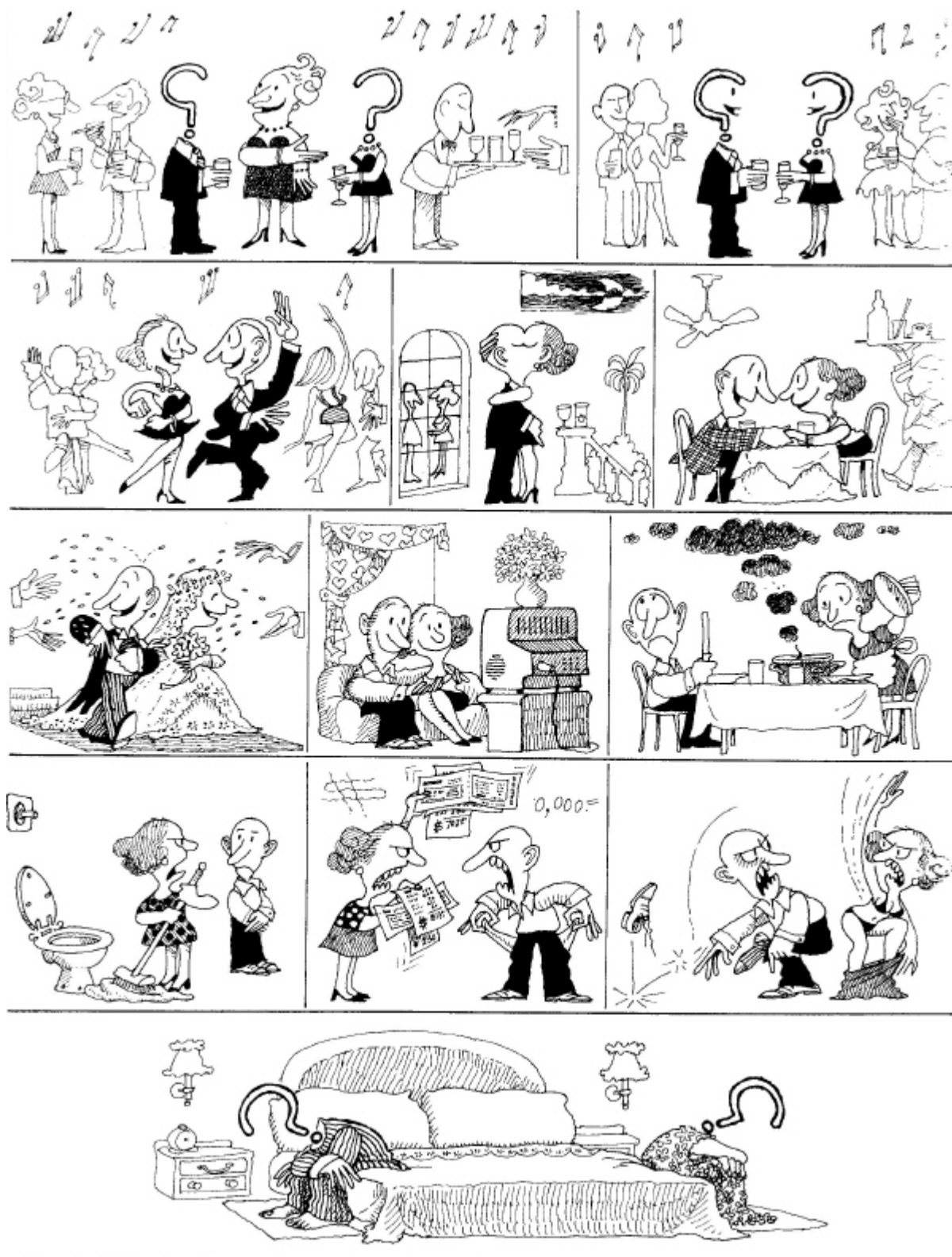


Figure 1  
(Quino 1993, p. 22).

#### 4. Verbal reports and analysis

Student n. 1

The first student starts her task with some fillers (full and empty pauses) and proceeds quickly, demonstrating a good knowledge of the required vocabulary. Fillers are a common device used to maintain the communication channel while working out a hypothesis. This student resorts to her L1 when she is trying to understand the meaning of an image and needs to be focused on the conceptual level. Subsequently she uses many times in her description the vowel lengthening as a filler and also operates hypothesis formation on a conceptual level while she is speaking, i.e., she describes what she sees and at the same time wonders if it can be correct. This can be seen as a meaning construction strategy, but also as a strategy to indicate to the listener that she knows the vocabulary, but just needs time to provide the correct interpretation of the image. She immediately self-corrects twice after incorrectly using the -S suffix of the plural.

This shows that she is also able to recognise her mistakes and that she has good monitoring over her language production (Levelt 1989) even though she is not a native English speaker. Another interesting aspect in this task is the influence of a third language, Spanish in this case, when the student does not remember words in English, despite the fact that she has a very good knowledge of English. Sometimes she resorts to direct or indirect appeal for assistance, but on many occasions she is able to find the words immediately afterwards or use a paraphrase. This indicates an ability to deal with language problems.

<p>Uhhh+++ so uhm++ in the first picture there are two people eh ++ that++eעהhm++ are ++ meeting for the first time, infact there is a third person who is uh + introducing uh + the woman to the man and+++ uh + in the second one they are ah ++ these uh +++ these two people are talking ++ they are knowing each other+ and + uhm + infact we can seeee how uhm ++their +++their faces are uhmmm +++ SI STANNO FORMANDO uhmm SI STANNO COMPONENTO +++ SE VOGLIAMO++ eh ++ in the third one they are both +++eh ++ dancing ++ and uhm, they look like uhhm they seem, they seem to be happy, ehm they are having fun, eh ehm then they are uhm ++ uhm eh ++ ODDIO, so they are kissing?? I think, eh, infact their faces look like a heart aaaaaand and +++ we can see they are ++ they are having dinner??' or lunch?? Together eh ++ eeeh+++ sooo++ uhm ++ then they ++there is a marriage??+ there is and eeeeh they <i>startS</i> living, they <i>start</i> living together, eeeh doing things together like watching TV, eh on the sofa eeeh ehm ++ and ++ <i>oh my God</i> + and eeeh uhm, so eeeh the ODDIO NON MI VIENE IL TERMINE ++ah ++MOGLIE?? The wife, the wife eeh <i>burned</i> the lunch <i>and the man looks like uhm??</i> ++++ <i>not annoyed but???</i> uhm I <i>don't know how to say this</i>, R: MAYBE DISAPPOINTED? Yes! A little bit! Uhm ++ and so does her, uhm +++ then we can see a a uhm ++ <i>they startS</i> tooooo fight, <i>they start</i> to fight eeeh like for example when she uh she's uh, ah ODDIO! ++eh eh MI VIENE IN SPAGNOLO! Eh eeh STIA LIMPIANDO EL AHAAHAH (RIDE) eeeh the bathroom ehm ehm and she starts, she seems really angry to him uhm then they <i>start fight</i>, they start to uhm uhm talk to each other but they are uh very ehm <i>hangry</i>, she starts to move eh these ++ <i>I don't know, what this is, what is this?</i> Eh eh journal? R: NEWSPAPER? IT SEEMS A BILL Bills! Yes <i>It seems bills</i>, yeah.++ infact there is a ++ dollar?? And ++ zeros ++ eh ++ ahahaha (ride) uhm ++ eh +++ LA PENULTIMA è DIVERTENTE! Eh ++ they ++ they are still fighting, they are ++ still talking to each other but they are throwing things up like he is throwing his shoes, she is throwing eh eh I don't know, maybe <i>his</i> t-shirt she +++I don't know + and in the last <i>pictureS</i> they are uh in the <i>last picture</i> they are separated, they are at the ODDIO eh eh AI BORDI DEL LETTO uuhm uhm NON MI VIENE + to the border of the bed?? And they are apart R: AT THE EDGES? They are so far and eh we can see these eh ehm PUNTI ESCLAMATIVI?? Like they I don't know, eh like theeeeeeeyyy ++ eeeh return to the beginning where they didn't know each other?'</p>	<p>Fillers (full and empty pauses) Vowel lengthening and full and empty pauses</p> <p>Use of L1 and hypothesis formation on conceptual level</p> <p>Use of L1 Vowel lengthening and empty pause Hypothesis formation at conceptual level Vowel lengthenings Wrong use of plural and immediate self-correction Empty and full pauses Use of L2 then use of L1 and direct appeal for assistance Utilizzo di overgeneralization for the past tense of the verb, actually the form ed in this case is mostly used in USA, Hypothesis Formation and indirect appeal for assistance</p> <p>Wrong use of plural and immediate self-correction Use of L1 to describe a sensation</p> <p>Use of L3 (Spanish) Omission and reformulation with a paraphrase Omission</p> <p>Direct appeal for assistance in L2</p> <p>Prompt repetition with wrong use of pronoun</p> <p>Comment in L1</p> <p>Wrong pronoun Wrong use of plural then self-correction</p> <p>L1 and Indirect appeal for assistance in L1</p> <p>Indirect appeal for assistance in L1</p> <p>Vowel lengthening and full and empty pauses</p>
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Student n. 2

This report starts with the use of L1 to ask in which order to describe the pictures and to have time to find the right words. At the beginning we find the incorrect use of a verb and many empty and full pauses. The student describes the picture in L1 and indirectly asks for assistance not only to know the words in L2, but also to confirm her hypothesis. This girl very often uses vowel lengthening as a filler to have time to understand the picture and find the words in L2. She asks for help several times directly and indirectly and on several occasions repeats the received suggestion partially incorrectly or avoids repeating them when the difficulty occurs. In one case she uses a previously received suggestion, but in the wrong form. An important aspect of this verbal report is the presence of cross-linguistic influence examples, as in *dress code* used when she is talking in Italian and L1 influence in many cases, as in *reflecting*, used to indicate “think about something”.

This student’s description is particularly interesting because it presents some characteristics found in reports of students enrolled in Foreign Languages Degree courses (Giampaolo 2009) In particular, during the execution of her task she focuses on the detailed description of the pictures, not considering the meaning of the cartoon as a whole. However, she is able to construct meaning at the end of the task by looking at the pictures and also describing her own feelings in understanding the meaning.

<p>Uhm++ ALLORA uh in the first picture there is uhm ah PARTO DA SOPRA? Ok + there <i>is</i> some people eh uhm ++ uh ++ and they are in + probably in a party ++ and there is uuuh++ uhm the music ++ ehm and it is aahh ++ probably uhm CIOE’ ++ UNA FESTA TIPO ehh CON UN <i>dress code</i> ELEGANTE eh there is a party  R: an elegant party  <i>an elegant party</i> uhm ++ they +++ they are talking??  R: yes  eeh + TRA LORO each other? Ok? They are talking each other and uh theeeyyy are drinking ++ uhm and In the second uhm in the second one ++ eh + there is also aaaa ahhh ++ an elegant party eh + and there are ehhh there is also music and there are people ehmm STANNO RIDENDO?’ eh  R: they are laughing  Ok! <i>They are laughing</i> uhm in theeee ++ in the third picture eh + there is also an elegant party, there is music and theeee yyyy are uhm they are dancing eh + and uhmm ++ probably is aaa ah a a party for ahmm CIOÈ TIPO PER I PIÙ GIOVANI??  R. for youngsters  Eh yo? ok? <i>For young eh</i> ++ QUARTA FOURTH?’ eh (ride) eh eehm there are two lovers ehm theeeeeyyy ++ probably they are + <i>uhm have just finished? Uhm to drink?</i> HANNO APPENA FINITO DI BERE? Ehh because there are two glasses ehm + and they are uhm out, CIOÈ eh  R: outside  <i>outside</i> eh + from the party eh + two lovers that are din .. dinner, NO, <i>that eh have?</i>  R: are having  <i>are having</i> dinner eh and there is a ODDIO CAMERIERE??</p>	<p>Use of L1  Wrong form of verb, empty fillers    Useo L1    L2 influence    Prompt repetition, indirect appeal for assistance    L1 for direct request to confirm the hypothesis, vowel lengthning,    Direct appeal for assistance in L1    Prompt repetition  Vowels lengthening, full pauses    Indirect appeal for assistance    Wrong prompt repetition, Hypothesis confirmation  Vowel lengthening    Hypothesis confirmation and direct appeal for assistance    Indirect appeal for assistance in L1    Prompt repetition  Indirect appeal for assistance in L2    Prompt repetition, Direct appeal for assistance in L1</p>
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<p>R: a waiter waiter? On ehm ++ NON SAPREI COME DESCRIVERE PROPRIO IL VASSOIO, LA ++ CON LE COSE SOPRA UH ++ BOH OK VABBÈ ehm + oh ++ in this picture there is ++ there are also two lovers and they + ehm + have just eh (ride) SONO APPENA USCITI DALLA CHIESA??</p> <p>R they have just married ok, <i>eh have just married</i> and eh the the people near them eh LANCIARE??</p> <p>R throwing COME?</p> <p>R: are throwing <i>ah ok are thr?? Eh eh (ride)</i></p> <p>Ok some rice? Ok! And + uhm + in this other picture there is eh ++ uhm MO MI VIENE DA PENSARE TIPO AI MIEI NONNI eh eh eh (ride) ++</p> <p>R: It's a couple? UHHH + SI??</p> <p>R: It's a couple! Yes, <i>It's a couple</i> and ++ CIOE' COME?? That remind me?? CHE MI RIMANDANO ALLA VISIONE DEI MIEI NONNI??</p> <p>R: Remember me <i>Remember me</i> ++ my grandparents and + they they are watching TV ehm ++ and it is a a comfy?? Situation? Uh! Uuuuhh +++ eh In this picture there is + there are eh also a couple eh a SI! A couple and eh eh + the the <i>sm... smoke??</i></p> <p>R: Yes! <i>the smoke</i> ehm ehm MI FA PENSARE CHE eh eh (ride) COME SI DICE?? <i>R It makes me think</i> Ok <i>makes me thinking</i> about the food eh eh the food eh is burned + NO!</p> <p>R: is burnt ok <i>is burnt</i> ok and he don't eh NON È TANTO CONTENTO eh eh <i>don't know he doesn't is happy??</i></p> <p>R: He doesn't look happy ok <i>look happy</i>, ok eh eh ++ ehm In this picture there is a couple in a toilet and sheeee ah ehm uhm + she is <i>wa wa washing??</i> She is washing the the toilet and + uhm they, they are uh, CIOÈ LEI È ARRABBIATA <i>she is angry ..angry??</i></p> <p>R: Yes, she is angry Angry and ehm...he is .. BOH! CIOÈ (eh eh (ride) eh ++++</p> <p>R: he seems not interested SI! <i>He is not interested</i> and ++ here there is a NO a couple that eh are uhm +++ STA LITIGANDO??</p> <p>R: arguing COME?</p> <p>R: arguing <i>they is arguing</i> and probably for the ++</p> <p>R: They are having a word you can say Ok eh eh</p> <p>R: About what? eh eh BOLLETTE?? COSA SONO??</p>	<p>Prompt repetition, comment in L1 Description in L1 e direct appeal for assistance in L1</p> <p>Direct appeal for assistance in L1</p> <p>Partial prompt repetition, direct appeal for assistance in L1</p> <p>Direct appeal for assistance</p> <p>Avoidance Hypothesis confirmation Comment in L1</p> <p>Avoidance</p> <p>Prompt repetition, comments in L1 and direct appeal for assistance</p> <p>Prompt repetition Hypothesis confirmation Full and empty pauses Hypothesis confirmation</p> <p>Direct appeal for assistance in L1</p> <p>Prompt repetition and sentence completion Hypothesis testing</p> <p>Prompt repetition and Direct appeal for assistance in L1, hypothesis confirmation</p> <p>Partial prompt repetition, full and empty pauses Vowel lengthening, hypothesis confirmation</p> <p>Direct appeal for assistance in L1, and hypothesis confirmation</p> <p>Use of L1, empty pauses</p> <p>Prompt repetition, L1 use Full and empty pauses</p> <p>Prompt repetition Direct appeal for assistance in L1 Use of L1</p> <p>Wrong prompt repetition Avoidance Direct appeal for assistance in L1</p>
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<p>R: Yes, BILLS!                  ok, <i>about bills</i> aaaanddd ++ he probably said that he <i>don't have</i> money ++ eh ahhhh (ride) eh In this picture they are eh probably in a eh in the bedroom and they are wearing, they are wearing? NO They are wearing SI DICE?? CIOÈ SI STANNO VESTENDO                  R: They are getting dressed                  Ah, ok! <i>They are dressing</i> uh + and also in this picture probably they are <i>eh they is arguing</i> + and in the end in the last picture they are uhm ++ in the ++uhm in a bedroom and they <i>are reflecting</i> about + eh ++ their situation eh ++ SI STANNO INTERROGANDO SULLA LORO??                  R: They are wondering                  Ok <i>they are wondering</i> about their situation. In general,, this is a couple story È COME SE FOSSE LO SVILUPPO, GIUSTO? OK OK CI SONO ARRIVATA ALLA FINE IO! Eh eh (ride)</p>	<p>Prompt repetition, Vowel lengthening                  Wrong use of L2, fillers                    Hypothesis confirmation, direct appeal for assistance in L1                    Partial prompt repetition                  Wrong use of a previous prompt                  Empty and full pauses                  L1 influence                  Direct appeal for assistance in L1                    Prompt repetition                  Comment in L1</p>
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Student n. 3

This student’s report shows some of the most common examples of fossilisation (Selinker 1972) in Italian learners of English L2. Specifically, the wrong use of the plural (*one people, peoples, two peoples, another two person*). Numerous direct and indirect appeal for assistance with L1 influence (*apparted*) and the use of the L1 in forming hypotheses at a conceptual level. The latter strategy is usually applied when one thinks it is needed to provide a quick answer but does not has an adequate mastery of the language being learned, so the s/he conceptualises and answers in L1. We know that it is common practice for non-native speakers to think in L1 and then translate into L2. The student in the course of her description manages to form hypotheses, test them and perform self-corrections. It can be seen that in one occasion in the description she uses her existing knowledge related to topics studied for the English language exam and has readapted them to her linguistic needs of the moment, managing to give a correct description (*critical period*, studied in relation to L2 learning, used here to indicate a difficult moment for the couple in the cartoon). This is a good example of creative language, which also implies strategic behaviour in the use of prior knowledge.

This student’s description presents some instances of avoidance of a received prompt and the omission of some suffixes (-ed) in verbs. She concludes her task with a comment in L1, stating that she is unable to unfold overly complex concepts in English.

<p>ALLORA ++ there is a party eh hh eh (ride) <i>one people</i> eh ++ <i>is</i> eh between two people, <i>peopleS</i> aaand + the are talking + they are talking eh + in this party there <i>are another two person, two peopleS</i> eh UN COPPIA eh eh (ride) UNA a+ a+                  R: a couple                  uhm <i>a couple</i> and + INTORNO? Round? Around there are people ++ <i>peopleS that are</i> ++ dancing? That are dancing eh + eh SUCCESSIVAMENTE?                  R: Later  <i>Later</i> ehm the couple is dancing in the ...in the ..PISTA DA BALLO eh (ride) and eh                  R. Dancefloor                  The <i>dancefloor</i> and after eh + the couple is eh</p>	<p>L1                  Wrong use of plurals                    Wornng use of plural, use of L1 and indirect appeal for assistance                    Prompt repetition, hypothesis testing                  Wrong use of plural, hypothesis testing                  Direct appeal for assistance in L1                    Prompt repetition                  Direct appeal for assistance in L1                    Prompt repetition</p>
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<p>++<i>apparted</i>?? APPARTATA IN DICIAMO SI È ISOLATA eh SI È ALLONTANATA DALLA SALA DA BALLO eh FORSE ALL'ESTERNO</p> <p>R: Outside <i>outside</i> the ehm <i>outside</i> and and the next day the couple is meeting and + they are + <i>din..dinner</i>? and the next year they are ehm they are <i>worr..NO! married</i></p> <p>Eh the couple is married eh eh ? SI, married and they are by a home + but+ one night eh + the + the woman HA BRUCIATO? NON MI STA VENENDO IN INGLESE</p> <p>R: Has burnt The dinner eh + the situation is ehm ++ is complicated + andddd it start the the +the <i>critical period</i> eh eh ( ride) ehm ehm for example eh the eh IO PENSO, STO INTERPRETANDO eh eh the woman STA SGRIDANDO eh eh +++??</p> <p>R: Is angry SI! <i>Is angry</i> eh È COME SE LO STESSE + + SI STESSE SFOGANDO, IN POCHE PAROLE, ++ COME SE FACESSE TUTTO LEI and after eh eh ENTRAMBI?</p> <p>R: Both <i>Both</i> +eh + GRIDARE NON MI STA VENENDO IN INGLESE</p> <p>R:are shouting St: COME?</p> <p>R: are shouting St: eh and eh and + + the story is finish eh È COME SE NON SI CONOSCESSERO PIÙ ALLA FINE, CIOÈ NON + È COME SE SI FOSSERO FORMATI ALL'INIZIO COME SI SI FOSSERO CREATI UN PROFILO RELAZIONALE, LEGATO ALLA RELAZIONE E E POI FOSSERO RITORNATI AL PUNTO DI PARTENZA O ANCORA PRIMA DEL PUNTO DI PARTENZA, COME SE AVESSERO PERSO LA PROPRIA IDENTITÀ + + NON SAPREI SPIEGARLO IN INGLESE EH (ride) TROPPO COMPLESSO + + SEMBRA MOLTO PSICOLOGICO!</p>	<p>L1 influence, L1 use and hypothesis formation at conceptual level</p> <p>Prompt repetition Indirect appeal for assistance in L2 Hypothesis formation and testing, self-correction</p> <p>Direct appeal for assistance in L1</p> <p>Avoidance Vowel lengthening, full and empty pauses, Use of existing knowledge adapted to the situation (<i>critical period</i>),Use of L1, Direct appeal for assistance</p> <p>Prompt repetition, Hypothesis formation in L1</p> <p>Direct appeal for assistance in L1</p> <p>Prompt repetition, full and empty pauses, Direct appeal for assistance in L1</p> <p>Avoidance, omission of suffix -ED to the verb, comment in L1</p>
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## Student n. 4

This student completed his task quickly, demonstrating a very good knowledge of English as well as an excellent pronunciation and the ability to overcome some language difficulties. He self-corrects on some occasions (*are ehm is*) and sometimes makes some errors that do not hinder the listener's understanding (*take a dinner, fell in love*). In this description we find an example of overgeneralization in the case of the verb *to fall*, used in the simple past tense with the suffix *-ed* instead of the irregular form *fell*. There are also some examples of L1 influence (between instead of together) from the Italian '*tra loro*'. Equally interesting is the influence of a vulgar register form of L1 (*pissed*) also very similar to local dialect forms.

This student asks for help a few times, but immediately finds the words he needs. The greatest use of full and empty pauses occurs at the end of the cartoon, when he is

formulating a hypothesis on a conceptual level, in order to understand the general meaning. In this final part he uses an wrong form (*begin* instead of *beginning*, verb instead of noun) and omits the suffix -s in a plural. Task performed with great mastery at all linguistic levels.

<p>I think that the old lady are + eh is introducing the girl and ++ the man ah they start to know each other. In the second one (image) they are talking, then WE start to know each other better because WE start to dance together also. I think that they interacted a little bit + eh + they falled in love Oh I guess because in this (vignetta) they are kissing, are forming a heart ehm + TAKE a dinner + ah OK! I think he is proposing to her because he wrapped his hand and they get married in this scene. They start their family life watching TV or having a dinner BETWEEN, having a lunch eh I see that she burned + she overcooked the lunch + and he seems DISAPPROVE + eh I think that he <i>pissed</i> over the bathroom eh (ride) because his wife is watching <i>he</i> like I want to kill you eh, + so their relationship is obviously eh breaking up, it feels (SEEMS) they start also to to eh LITIGARE? To eh to have this verbal fight I guess? I don't know. Eh ehm ++ I see + they are going to bed but ehm are uhm are still Angry and they go to sleep eh ehm with ehm like they started soo it's like that they they ehm don't know each other ++ again. So, it's like a story that end like in the <i>begin</i>. So, eh I see ehm the ending scene is eh <i>show</i> a desperation + they are both sad + ehm I think that they will DIVORZIARE COME??                  Prof. Divorce                  St. Divorce, ok!</p>	<p>Self-repair                  Wrong use of pronouns                  Overgeneralisation of the past tense of verb (fell), hypothesis formation on conceptual level, wrong auxiliary                  L1 influence                  Use of vulgar form (L1 influence)                  Wrong pronoun                  Wrong verb, direct appeal for assistance but soon find the word, Hypothesis formation on conceptual level                  Full and empty pauses                  Use of the verb instead of the noun, drop the -S suffix                  Direct appeal for help in L1                  Prompt repetition</p>
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Student n. 5

This task begins with the student immediately understanding the meaning and providing a comment on the story being told (*sad and ironic love story*), There are numerous full and empty pauses and numerous comments in L1. The student asks for assistance directly and indirectly in L1 and avoids repeating a received prompt. In some cases he omits the -s of the plural and comments on his own difficulties stating that he has not spoken English for a long time. He also omits the auxiliary in a verbal form (*they...dancing*). On some occasions after a request for help in L1 he immediately finds the necessary words for the description.

The second part of the description is more fluent and also in the requests for confirmation of his hypothesis he uses English. Some instances of L1 influence are present. The student demonstrates greater mastery of the L2 when freely describing the general meaning, without specific references to images.

<p>Is eh I see a sad ehm and and ironc love story ehm because in the first scc..+ ehm scene we have a uhm boy and girl with ehm eh NON MI STA VENENDO eh eh PUNTO INTERROGATIVO eh</p>	<p>Full and empty pauses                  Comment in L1 and direct appeal for assistance</p>
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<p>R: a question mark  <i>A question mark</i> ah ALLORA, QUESTO NON LO SAPEVO PROPRIO, OK COSÌ HO IMPARATO UNA PAROLA NUOVA ehm in the head, I think eh this person are SCONOSCIUTI, NON MI STA VENENDO DI NUOVO LA PAROLA  R: They don't know each other?  <i>ehm NO!</i> Ehm Ok, In the second scene we have ehm some persons eh he <i>try</i> to ehm <i>ahia</i>, NON MI STA RIVENENDO, DEVO RIENTRARE NEL MINDSET INGLESE! QUINDI, È DA TANTO CHE NON PARLO eh  R: Ok!  Ehm QUI SI STANNO PRATICAMENTE CONOSCENDO PERCHÈ C'È UN INIZIO DI VISIO, DICIAMO Ehm ok and in the third scene ehm <i>they ...dancing</i> eh and start a love story and eh +++ehm ok the starting point of a love story eh the first date, and ++ ok, marriage and ehm we have a scene with marriage life eh a family life eh with ehm SOLITI IN INGLESE NON MI STA VENENDO eh SOLITI PROBLEMI MAGARI FAMIGLIARI eh <i>Usual family problem</i> and the first ah + I see the first sad face in the story ehm the sad face continues in ah in the next scene with ahh more problem and more ehm PROBLEMI PIÙ PESANTI EEH more + + +  R: Difficult questions  <i>Difficult questions eh like eh aah ok</i> simply bathroom problem eh I think eh problem for eh hygienic problem eh (ride) and money problem in the family ehm ehm the problem continues eh continue in the next scene and the final scene we have another eh helping point?? Helping point, is true??  R: A question mark  <i>A question mark!</i> Eh on the head of the subject +++  R: What do you think is the meaning of this cartoon?  The meaning is I think the circle of life eh starting in one mode and finish in the same mode that is sad ++ ironic but sad at the same time.  R: Why do you say that is sad, ironic and sad?  Because eh ++ I think we don't expect this <i>finish</i>.  R: Have you noticed that they start with a question mark and finish with a question mark?  Uh Uh  R: Do you think the meaning of these two question marks is different?  Uhm ++ Good question! Ehm I don't think about this ... but ++ we have an important difference. In the first scene eh they don't choose to have a question mark and in the final yes! They choose to have a question mark. I think this is the first difference. Ok</p>	<p>Prompt repetition and comment in L1  Appeal for assistance in L1  Avoidance  Dropping of the -S plural, appeal for assistance in L1  Comment about his own L2 performance  Description in L1  Omission of aux verb, full and empty pauses  Appeal for help in L1  Soon he finds the way to describe  Direct appeal for assistance in L1  Prompt repetition, hypothesis formation on conceptual level  Wrong reformulation, omission of -S suffix  Reformulation to test his hypothesis, direct appeal for assistance  Prompt repetition, empty pause  Comment about the meaning of the cartoon  L1 influence  Comment about the cartoon meaning</p>
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## 5. Discussion

The analysis of verbal reports reveals how English L2 learners rely not only on L2 competence to achieve their communicative goals, but also use their own strategic meaning construction processes to overcome their lack of linguistic knowledge. On some occasions accuracy is compromised, but usually this does not hinder communication and comprehension. We analysed here only the protocols with the most relevant data for the research. The most common strategies and errors for Italian L2 learners were traced, such as the omission of the -s suffix of the plural, in some cases readily corrected. This indicates a high degree of control over one's linguistic production (Levelt 1989) not common in non native speakers. The presence of cross-linguistic influence in all the analysed reports (*dress-code, mindset, reflecting, critical period*, etc.) shows how previous knowledge can help to manage communication in L2. In particular, in report no. 3, the student uses the terms *critical period* linked to topics studied for the preparation of the English language exam, i.e., L2 learning processes, and adapted them to the description of the cartoon to indicate a difficult moment for the couple in the images, providing us with an example of *creative language*. Overgeneralisation (Selinker 1972) was also used in some cases (*fallen* instead of *fell*) with the use of the suffix -ed to form a past simple in an irregular verb. In addition, the influence of a vulgar register of L1 (*pissed*), which is also very similar to the form of the local dialect, was observed.

One of the most interesting aspects observed in this research was found in the entire description no. 2 which, despite being performed by a student enrolled in the Master Degree course in Psychology, presents the general characteristics of the descriptions performed by students enrolled in the Degree courses in Foreign Languages (Giampaolo 2009, 2013), who had focused on the detailed description of the cartoons, losing sight of the general sense of the story. The student, in this case, performs her task in exactly the same way as they did, therefore, does not seem to be influenced by the type of main subjects matter studied. In fact, the other psychology students pay more attention to the activation of cognitive strategies concerning problem solving and not to the detailed description of the elements in the images. Completely different is the description of student n. 5 who immediately activated his skills in problem solving, prediction and sense making in a more evident form than the other students to complete his task.

## 6. Conclusions

The analysis of the verbal reports data allows us to state that during the years of university studies, therefore, in the transition from Bachelor to Master Degree courses, the students, although having discontinuous contact with the spoken L2, but more frequent contact with the written L2 thanks to the study of texts in English for the basic disciplines, are able to deal with, non-verbal communication on unpredictable topics and settings. The factors that can influence performance are of various types: the communicative situation, the type of task (Bialystok 1990), clearly the greater or lesser proficiency in L2 plays a major role, but also the cultural context of belonging influences the perception and the type of priorities established in the description (linguistic correctness or comprehension and problem solving). The analysis of the verbal reports in this study showed that each learning process is different and results in a continuum of hypotheses formation and testing until an individual language system is formed.

Each learner develops the L2 not only on the basis of linguistic resources (input), but also on the basis of the quality, variety and frequency of exposure. In these specific cases, it could be seen that learners who use not only a greater quantity of inputs, but also differentiated sources, are able to develop a more complete and articulate linguistic competence, as well as a greater ability to use strategic behaviours appropriate to dealing with communication difficulties.

The most skilled student here interviewed were those who have personal interests that bring them into contact with other languages and who also use foreign language materials for purposes other than university study, diversifying the occasions and ways in which they learn and use L2. These results could constitute the directions to be followed in order to develop and maintain L2 skills by adult learners, whatever their communication goals may be.

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**Acknowledgements:** Special thanks go to my students and, in particular, to Benedetta, Luce, Sofia, Alberto and Lorenzo for agreeing to be part of the survey sample and for their dedication.



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