

A Qualitative-Exploratory Pilot Study to Explore Students' Perception on Experience and Multiple Intelligences' Impact on Their Linguistic & Personal Growth

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ABSTRACT

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Since learning represents one of the most relevant aspects of a humans' life on which many researches have been conducted, nowadays more than ever it is essential exploring forward-looking theories, achieving inspiring improvements and making an action towards innovation within the educational systems. The qualitative-exploratory pilot case study at issue aims to investigate a potential connection between Experience and Multiple Intelligences in relation to the linguistic and personal learning process. Specifically, its main goal is to draw a better understanding of students' perception on the impact of past living-studying experiences and multidimensional teaching techniques on their linguistic and personal growth. To further investigate these objectives, there have been analysed 33 qualitative feedback from academical students studying languages collected through an inductive reasoning-based online survey structured as written interview and composed by closed-ended multiple choice questions, open-ended questions and ranking questions. The major findings claim that both living and studying abroad contributes to acquire metalinguistic awareness, to improve language skills and to develop life-long skills. Additionally, students recognised the implementation of Multiple Intelligence as an effective alternative to lectures as language teaching-learning strategy thanks to its flexibility and openness towards skills diversity.

1. Introduction

Generally, the standardised educational system may increase the knowledge gap between students by creating high and low achieving students that directly get in competition one with another instead of designing a fruitful learning and social environment. Indeed, the most innovative educational systems are now focusing their attention on improving the act of teaching, on the active construction of knowledge by the learner, on considering students personal needs and personalities, valuing their self-assessment, interaction and social relationships (Curriculum Development Institute, 2001; OECD, 2011; Passarelli & Kolb, 2012; Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2013; European

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Commission, 2018). As Robinson (2006; 2010) stated, the school vision should be shifting from an industrial model to an agricultural one. In particular, considering the language sphere, similar considerations have been taken in account within many researches on assessing how language learning could possibly be enhanced by cutting-edge features. Indeed, the philosophy of these innovative systems is based on the same methods and approaches of the current high-quality language learning like student-centered approach, creative and peer-to-peer education, experiential and cooperative learning, task-based/inquiry-based learning (Anil, 2017; Knutson, 2003; Richards, 2012).

1.1. Theoretical Background

Defining “learning” and “experience” can be considered a very challenging process, especially because being characterised by such various factors. Among the many proposals that have been gathered over the last century, there are two of them that are worth to be mentioned. First of all, Wilson’s definition is particularly relevant due its precision in their association’s description: “Learning is a relatively permanent change of knowledge, attitude or behaviour occurring as *a result of formal education, training or development, or as a result of informal experiences*” (Wilson, 2012: 47). A second interpretation is given by Kolb (1984: 30) that draws a strong connection between these two concepts using these precise words: “*Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience*”. Analysing these two definitions, it can be noticed how their relationship is considered fundamental for humans and students’ growth and development. As Byram (2000) reported, students have the opportunity to enhance their intercultural development by living-studying abroad and experiencing unfamiliar and unexpected situations under several viewpoints such as cultural, social and relational. Furthermore, several researches state that living abroad contributes to transform a person’s sense of self (Adam et al., 2018). Indeed, the application of an holistic learning approach could lead them toward a deeper understanding and, furthermore, could make them acquiring significative awareness (Passarelli & Kolb, 2012). This specific concept, merged with Lewin’s feedback process, inspired Kolb to develop his Experiential Learning Theory - ELT (Kolb, 1984). Thus said, it’s essential applying ELT’s strategies on language learning teaching like shifting from a teacher-centered approach to a student-centered one, including real-contexts role play and developing knowledge-skills and emotions through experiential situations. In particular, within the English Second Language (ESL), it could help students developing their personal identity as successful language learners (Mollaei & Rahnama, 2012). Moreover, these techniques help students improving their collaborative skills by enhancing active participation within the classroom (Knutson, 2013). An additional evidence is represented by Sharifi and Shariati’s (2017) case study in which the experimental group, after receiving a special language training treatment, outperformed the control group which only received a traditional language training. Thus, students, if immersed in an experiential learning environment, could acquire awareness on humans’ diverse approaches towards reality. This last specific concept of diversity is perfectly expressed within Gardner’s Multiple Intelligence Theory - MIT (1983) which is based on considering intelligence fragmented into eight specific typologies labelled as Verbal-Linguistic, Logical-Mathematic, Visual-Spatial, Musical, Bodily-Kinesthetic, Naturalistic, Intrapersonal and Interpersonal. Each intelligence represents one of the many spheres that compose the world-reality context and shows its own features and it can be preferred compared to another one depending on abilities, habits or even passions. In addition, the MIT is strongly connected with language language as much as it allows both teachers and students to use and apply several learning activities with the chance of training and developing all their intelligences (Nolen, 2003). Indeed, Therefore, it

has been decided to conduct a pilot study so to better explore students' perception on the impact of the factors above described both on their linguistic and personal growth.

1.2. Purpose of the study

The main goal is to explore the impact induced by the combination between experiences and intelligence diversity on individuals' language learning process. More in specific, the core aim of the research is drawing a better understanding of students' linguistic and personal growth by means of living-studying abroad experiences and multidimensional teaching-learning methods that involve Multiple Intelligence strategies. The research displays 2 main objectives: (a) assessing if, and in case how, studying and living abroad could possibly contribute towards both a linguistic and self-development; (b) drawing a detailed report on students' opinion regarding personal and innovative language learning-teaching methods, Multiple Intelligence Theory and its possible contribution within the language learning-teaching process.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design

The case study taken at issue represents a *qualitative-exploratory* pilot study that allows an open window towards broader and more exhaustive research on the above mentioned objectives. It has been chosen an exploratory method for its effectiveness in constructing the foundations in view of more detailed and further studies. Indeed, this definite method favours the researcher to identify potential problems that could be addressed before conducting a new study case, enabling research questions to remain open and free to be merged with upcoming findings (Fraser, Fahlman, Arscott, & Guillot, 2018). Furthermore, this type of research is indicate to calibrate measurements so to find out which are the best research design, methods and sample (Hallingberg et al. 2018) in order to be applied for a more complete study. In addition, the fact of choosing a qualitative approach relates to its powerful way to collect information and the chance to building a deepen interpersonal connection with to know what students think, how they think or why they may hold a particular view on definite matters (Busetto, Wick & Gumbinger, 2020). The reasoning approach used within this manuscript combines the inductive and the deductive one.

2.2. Measurements

In step with the qualitative method, Primary and Secondary Research have been combined to assess and verify the main objectives. On one hand, as Primary Research, it has been designed an anonymous and voluntary Google Forms inductive reasoning-based online survey that has been delivered on the web via social networks like WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram exclusively through groups related to the language academical students. The questionnaire consisted of 10 closed-ended multiple-choice questions, 3 ranking questions, 17 open-ended questions and 1 explanatory video on Gardner's Multiple Intelligence Theory with the specific goal to help participants orienting through the selection process. Furthermore, the questionnaire was structured into three main sections: (a) questions on personal data such as age, gender, languages spoken and both past living and studying experiences; (b) questions about students' perception on the Multiple Intelligence Theory (MIT); (c) questions to explore students' more suitable language learning strategies and both their opinion on the relationship between MIT and language learning/teaching process within the academical sphere. As asserted by Aung, Razak & Nazry (2021), starting the interview session with warming-up questions such as demographic data questions might help participants to feel more pleased and engaged. Therefore, they can answer further questions being fully relaxed and giving sincere and meaningful feedback (Wilkinson & Birmingham,

2003). Undoubtedly, taking into account that questionnaire's purpose is generating understanding (Stenbacka, 2001, p. 551), it is hardly sustained that within qualitative research distinct validities such as content, criterion-related and construct are not necessary due to its direct reflection towards the world's study object (Mount & Marais, 1996; Dikko, 2016). In addition to it, several studies (Denzin & Lincoln, 1984; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; In Golafshani, 2003) suggest that the term reliability only relates to quantitative study, highlight how Credibility, Neutrality or Confirmability, Consistency or Dependability and Applicability or Transferability are instead essential criteria for quality within the qualitative research paradigms. More in depth, considering qualitative research both as immersion and involvement into the world real time's changes, according to Patton (2002; 2014) the researcher should be reporting the event before and after the change will happen. Moreover, its characteristic of asking a personal view or perspective on specific issues allow us to consider it as in-depth semi-structured interview. In this sense, it can be stated that the pilot case at issue take advantage of clear cut qualitative research tool as beneficiary assessment (Singh, 2007). Thus said, as last confirm of its relevance, it can be considered that a pilot study represents itself a good way to pre-test a research instrument in view of a full scale study (Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001). On the other hand, as Secondary Research, it has been decided to use already existing data such as peer-review articles, online books and previous researches to support data gathered by the survey by performing additional analysis of the original dataset (Hinds et al., 1997; Heaton 1998).

2.3. Sample

In order to contextualise the pilot study sample, it's fundamental taking into account two significant features: (a) qualitative research does not require a pre-determined specific amount of participants (Russell & Gregory, 2003; O'Brien et al., 2014; Sim et al., 2018); (b) the sample, as Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey (2011) suggest, should share as similar criteria as possible to the group of participants for the major study. Therefore, to define the final pilot sample has been decided to group up only academical students who are studying languages at Italian universities between 19 and 30 years old. Consequently, only 33, 25 females and 8 males, respondents out of the total 47 has been considered within the data analysis due to sample criteria just listed.

2.4. Data Analysis

It has been decided to analyse data both quantitatively and qualitatively. As a first step, the participants personal data such as demographics it has been grouped, coded and analysed by using the percentage function of Excel (Microsoft Corp., USA), so to simply categorising the data set. The same approach has been also used for categorising, combining and comparing certain variables or events in the form of numbers and percentages. Nevertheless, since numerous studies employed qualitative approach to investigate people's subjective experiences, opinions and beliefs that cannot be measured statistically (Percy, Kostere & Kostere, 2015), the data has been manually coded and simultaneously analysed more in depth through the qualitative framework analysis method (Srivastava & Thomson, 2009). This kind of analysis is very different from the quantitative one, indeed it is a dynamic, intuitive and creative inductive reasoning, thinking and understanding (Basit, 2003) and it focuses on exploring hypotheses, meanings, thoughts that will further investigated, categorised (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). Therefore, it is stated that data accuracy in qualitative research refers to the amount and richness of information collected from each and not the number of subjects investigated Agabrian (2004).

3. Findings

From the data collection, it merged that 69,7% of the sample (23 out of 33) speaks at least two languages besides its mother tongue (of which 36,4% speaks three languages), the 21,2% of the sample (8 out of 33) stated to have studied abroad, specifically participating at the Erasmus Programme (European Commission, 2021) and 48,5% of the participants (16 out of 33) had a living abroad experience, of which 56,2% also feel to dispose interpersonal intelligence as one of the most developed. Also, 81,3% of the students (26 out 33) feel to have changed after experiencing living in another country in the sense of getting a deeper knowledge of one-self. More in depth into the quality of results, at the question *“Have you learned/gained something from your studying-living abroad experience?”* it emerged that living abroad allows them to acquire specific life-long skills like becoming independent, adapting to unexpected situations and being able to relate with people coming from different cultures. From the data analysis, it can be stated that all the participants who have experienced this kind of situations attested to have grown as a human being. For example, a student reported: *“I have lived in Norway during my Erasmus and it has certainly been a growing experience under several points of view such autonomy and independency and self-esteem”* and another one added: *“I learned to live by myself and to valuing diversity”*. In addition to it, participants also declared to have improved their linguistic abilities as these students who specifically affirmed: *“Even if it has been only for few months, my studying-living abroad experience has enabled me to learn English and acquire a deeper adaptability spirit”* and *“Living in a foreign family-context boosted my language learning and made me improving my French skills”*. These findings are strictly related to the students’ perception regarding their importance within the learning-teaching process. Indeed, the data collected shows how they consider them fundamental because it gives the opportunity to learn more about one selves, to discover their strongest passions and, also, to boost their self-esteem. This fact leads the data analysis towards Gardner’s Multiple Intelligence Theory which, despite being known by only a third of the sample (11 out of 33), is considered to be interesting and useful both for students and teachers by a solid 69,7% of the sample (23 out of 33). Moreover, 87,9% of the students consider it an fruitful teaching tool for language learning and for learning itself in order to guide students towards the development of their intelligences by giving them the opportunity to valorise each of them. This is well expressed within the following student’s statement: *“It allows teachers to better understand the students’ nature and could help them valorising their talent”*. Indeed, more than half of the sample, 57,6% (19 students out of 33), dislike the lecture as language teaching method because considered boring and not interactive enough; they argue that it should definitely be more involving and dynamic so to engaging their attention and stimulating them to participate, as this student firmly states: *“Students are more stimulated when engaged in real-context activities, not only theoretical but also practical”*. Consequently, data reveals that only 18,2% (6 students out of 33) declares to like the lecture saying it helps learning, it is useful and it is more immediate as a teaching method. Furthermore, students suggested alternative methods like interactive games, role play and task-based projects or field trips.

4. Discussion

Starting from the findings, it can be noticed that studying-living abroad may increase students’ language proficiency and personal growth. Even more if it is considered that a consistent number of students that both lived abroad and participated in the Erasmus Programme, also speaks at least two languages or more besides their mother tongue. This evidence at issue is supported by significant evidences given by the Erasmus Impact Study (2014:111) which shows how on of the top improved skills by students has been *‘Foreign Language Skills’*. Furthermore, the study revealed that studying-living abroad also fosters

other life-long skills equally improving intercultural competences, being able to adapt and interact with people from other backgrounds and cultures. This argument is in line with the following statement given by another student *“It definitely gave me a lot! This experience opened my horizons and tempered my nature making me way more confident”*, which is supported by Lewin’s field theory (1951) that highlights the intrinsic connection between the learner and its surroundings, making them interdependent. Thus, it can be assured that immersing into a multi-dimensional environment characterised by several cultural, social and psychological features enhances students’ learning process and augments their language learning. Moreover, there is evidence that facing multicultural experiences leads individuals to become higher on openness to experience and agreeableness (Greischel et al., 2016; Lüdtke et al., 2011: In Maddux et al., 2021). Therefore, it can be stated that all the participants who have experienced this kind of situations attested to have grown as a human being. Thus said, another point to discuss regarding the connection between the experience of living abroad, linguistic and communication development and interpersonal intelligence. As claimed by Passarelli and Kolb (2012:13) *“ELT defines learning relationships to be connections between one or more individuals that promote growth and movement through the learning spiral, ultimately inspiring future learning and relationship building”*, so, considering that displaying Interpersonal Intelligence means having the capacity of understanding the capacity to understand the intentions, motivations, and desires of other people and being able to be surrounded by them, it could be said that Gardner’s Interpersonal Intelligence is part of the clusters of competencies (Boyatzis, 2009). Therefore, since the connection between the studying-living experiences and the language ability has been previously assessed, if learning relationships would be combined with social relationships, it could be possibly said that engaging conversations and building significant relationships abroad help to consolidate the communication and language skills (Ibid, 2009). The importance of being together and developing constructive relationship can be related to the students’ disapproval of the lecture as a language teaching method in favour of a radical change of the educational approach within the linguistic teaching sphere by making it more interactive, engaging and personalised as possible. Indeed, if we look at the global on-going innovative language teaching approaches and methods, the tendency is to switch from a teacher-centered approach to a student-centered approach by using specific strategies such as peer-to-peer learning, cooperative learning, task-based projects, flipped classroom and multi sensory learning (Pressman & Dublin, 1995; Catalano & Catalano, 1997; Christie, 2000; Arnold & Fonseca, 2004; Bukari & Owusu, 2017). According to the data regarding students’ opinion on MIT usefulness as a teaching method, they certainly wish its application so to be able to learn a language in a more pleasant, comfortable and diverse way. Moreover, as Ahmed (2012) exposed, teaching using only methods based on one single intelligence would help only students that excel in that defined intelligence rather than improving the strengths of the whole classroom. Therefore, applying a varied model of teaching may boosts students’ motivation and also increase their attitude towards learning and life itself (Baş e Beyhan, 2010; Pratiwi, Rochintaniawati & Agustin, 2018). To support these statements, there have been reported these three student testimonies that may let us reflect: *“The lesson should be more contextualised and related to the existing reality.”*, *“It should be taken in account to update the current Italian educational system, included the academical one”* and *“...I believe MIT should be further explored by those who are already teaching or those who want to become teachers.”* As reported by the students, there is a powerful willingness and necessity to change the way of learning-teaching a language within the Italian context, so to be able to value their own strengths and to reinforce their weaknesses. More in general, since 5 years more than 169 countries are collaborating towards the achievement of a mutual objective such as establishing a sustainable development (UNESCO, 2014).

5. Limitations

Since this case study represents a pilot, there have been some limits regarding the data collection tools. In particular, the questionnaire could be enriched within its depth and formulation of specific questions so to predict even more uniform and deeper responses from all the participants. Moreover, it would be worth to improve the quantitative analysis in order to better support the qualitative one with more complex and significant statistic analysis.

6. Conclusions

To conclude, it can be said that this manuscript evidences the intrinsic connection between Experience, both studying and living abroad experiences and a linguistic and personal growth in the matter of metalinguistic awareness, language improvement and lifelong learning skills. In addition to, it draws an accurate report on how students relate to MIT and how they would embrace it as language learning-teaching method.

7. Future perspectives

By presenting a model portraying how Experience and Multiple Intelligences impact on students' linguistic and personal growth, the research offers new insights into the cognitive-educational sphere and introduces implications for future studies exploring the phenomenon at issue on a global scale so to be to obtain more significancy and being able to make defined statements. In order to conduct a full research study there will be made several improvement within the measurements already presented integrating other ones such as focus groups or participant observation in case of experiments conducted in presence.

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