Breaking the "Cultural Bubble" through the Immersive Model

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Abstract

This paper is based on an observation conducted on a population of around 700+ US students (yearly) in some study abroad programs based in Florence, mainly Kent State University Florence Center (KSUF). KSUF is the program abroad of Kent State University whose central campus is in Kent, Ohio. Observing KSUF students for over a decade has allowed to conduct some reflections about their way of reacting when they enter the host culture and activate immersive strategies. Approximately 70% of these students have never traveled outside the United States. Some have not experienced significant cultural differences and most have not studied Italian prior to their arrival in Italy. The official language of the program is English, and students share apartments and courses for the entire semester. The result is that students tend to reproduce their original framework of reference in a sort of "cultural bubbble" which functions as a transitional setting. In order to help students abandon the "bubble" KSUF has developed a model based on the idea of immersion focused on the city of Florence as academic, cultural and social context. The immersive model is centered on two different perspectives: using the city as a learning framework and connecting students to local institutions following their request to act as volunteers. This paper describes the model used by KSUF to bridge the inside of the program to the outside, guiding students towards adaptation using the language as a tool to penetrate the new context.

Keywords: *cultural bubble, immersive model, volunteer, language.*

1. Introduction

The "study abroad bubble" is a widespread phenomenon among International students who decide to study in a different country for one semester or more. Typically, the idea of "filter socio-cultural bubble" (Holliday,1999) refers to the tendency to create a socio-cultural and linguistic context in which an individual builds relationships and networks. This phenomenon mainly involves mono-cultural and mono-linguistic groups that share the same background and it coincides with the first phases of transition into a new environment. In the study abroad system a "cultural bubble" generally refers to a physical or ideal place where students replicate their original framework of reference. It is a space where they feel protected and try to reconstruct a comfortable situation with someone of their age who shares the same values and, in particular, speaks the same language. The metaphor of the "bubble" details the environment that students try to reproduce at the beginning of their experience in a phase where they begin to develop intercultural sensitivity moving from an ethnocentric outlook to an ethnorelative one (Bennett, 1977). A bubble inflates slowly during the first weeks of stay and then it pops abruptly when students realize that they can actively impact on the host culture. Despite the many challenges that students decide to take by studying abroad, the intercultural adjustment remains a controversial aspect of the experience that requires a shift toward a new mindset and a higher level of self-efficacy. From their arrival in the host country students are exposed to new stimuli that must be processed in a very short time. This process generates from improved coping strategies and greater empathy towards the new experience.

1.1 Study Abroad from U.S. university students' perspective

While college or university students engaged in the Erasmus project experience a more rapid transition into the host culture due to their need to cope in the new study and living context, for Northern American college and university students the transitioning phase requires more time. At their arrival in the host country, U.S. students typically spend most of their time in the same environment and travel together during field trips or independent trips with few possibilities of interaction with locals and native speakers. Despite the difficulties, students show a strong desire to partake in the host country and have positive reactions. However, the initial enthusiasm turns into a defensive recoil as soon as they realize that their cultural competence is not developed enough to be effective outside the school. This is a very delicate phase and in this specific moment the "bubble" represents a shelter where they can interact with compatriots–protected by the wall of their school. In semester students, this shift is registered towards the third week of their stay: their defensive approach is a reaction to an

invisible threat that is the generated by their perception of being threatened by "competing" cultures (Bennett, 1977). In the case of students spending a semester in Florence the "bubble" is reinforced by the massive presence of many U.S. study abroad programs. In this specific phase, the school has the opportunity of helping students in breaking the bubble and stepping outside in a positive, guided way.

1.2 Breaking the bubble through the immersive model

Recent literature review shows that students benefit from their experiences abroad in terms of personal and professional growth, increased autonomy, openness to otherness and diversity. While at the end of semester every student can perceive the beneficial and positive impact of the overall experience, the steps towards adaptation and immersion while the semester progresses can be, sometimes, very intense. As students consider the school the center of their "bubble," the school is often expected to provide students with the tools and the framework toward adaptation. In this regard, KSUF has developed a model based on the idea of immersion and flipped classroom focused on the city of Florence with all its multifaceted aspects that encompass art, history, language and social dimension. Syllabi and course materials emphasize the role of the student as the center of the learning process in an immersive setting, which is represented by the city considered as a context. One of the core objectives of this method is to move students from passive to active learning based on some common, shared objectives: learning the culture, earn flexibility, enhance critical approach. The "immersive model" goes beyond the students' academic life: it entails a number of different initiatives, such as social activities and volunteer/service work.

1.3 "Florence as Classroom"

The expression is an homage to Marshall McLuhan theory of "city as classroom", in which the author underlines the importance of knowledge acquired outside the classroom exploring a wide range of characteristics of the cultural and social environment (McLuhan, Hutchon, McLuhan, 1977). The city of Florence, conceived as a living-learning community, is the theatre of the immersive model proposed by KSUF. Florence represents an extraordinary cultural and artistic resource but also a model of complexity, negotiation, growth and innovation. A number of contextualized activities are offered to the learners in order to exploit the properties of the city in the courses and for extra-class activities. In particular, some activities foster a predisposition of some students to volunteer in multiple institutions in the city. Volunteer/service learning can be framed variously in study abroad: it can be offered as part of the study abroad program or can be offered separately as Service Learning (Doerr, 2019; Plater, 2011). The two possibilities are offered through different channels: Service Learning is an experience that students conduct as part of their study process and it is focused on specific elements of the host culture. Volunteer/service work is embedded in the semester and it is not offered for credits: it is based on the student self-involvement in activities organised and promoted by the school and participation is based on a genuine, spontaneous initiative.

1.4 Volunteer/Service Learning and intrinsic motivation

The most popular volunteering activity is the service offered to public schools and public institutions, a project based on language teaching. KSUF students offer to cooperate with English teacher as language experts and in turn they have the opportunity of penetrating authentic Italian environments and interacting with Italian students of their age whom offers their availability in speaking Italian. Volunteer activities are not credit-bearing, nor do they fulfil graduation requirements: they are grounded in an intrinsic motivation that students show toward an opportunity to immerse in the service of others. Volunteer activities are prepared through a series of meetings and encounters where students are informed about the expectations of the host institutions. Successively, they visit the host institutions and they meet the reference person who introduces them to all the participants. Students receive information and guidance in order to adequately develop the expected activities. Every three meetings they have debrief sessions with the school tutor in order to adjust the activities and process the information obtained.

1.5 Italian language: a tool toward socio-linguistic competence

While at the very beginning of semester students feel encouraged to participate in the volunteer project because they can use their own language, one of the first results of their experience is that they understand the importance of learning and improving Italian in order to function at a higher level of participation. On the one hand the Italian language courses serve as a framework of the immersive project and the language class represents an important extension toward the host culture; on the other

hand final feedbacks and weekly reports show a significant improvement in Italian language proficiency and a change in their communicative language skills. Moreover, the opportunity to speak Italian with native speakers and the process of preparation to enter a different environment progressively reduces their L2 anxiety. In this scenario students enhance different forms of motivation for the study of Italian language: from an intrinsic motivation, which at the beginning refers to the satisfaction of learning for personal fulfillments, they transition to an extrinsic motivation (Dörnyei, 1998; Gardner, 2010) related to external regulations or opportunities. This shift in motivation corresponds to their progressive desire and need of breaking the cultural bubble and immerse in the host socio-cultural environment, a process that is accompanied by the building of a socio-linguistic competence.

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