Culture Contact, Cognitive Development, and Linguistic Behaviour: A Socio-cultural Approach to the Experiences of International Adult Students

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ANNO ACCADEMICO / ACADEMIC YEAR   2022-2023

ABSTRACT

This study has explored the higher education students' experiences of contact with a diverse socio-cultural context from two sociocultural and educational perspectives, aiming to firstly understand and explore the students' experiences of contact with a diverse socio-cultural context, Secondly, to identify the impacts of these sociocultural contacts on students' cognitive development, identity, attitudes, and behavioral patterns, and thirdly to investigate how these contact with other cultures can shape the students' verbal interactions inside and outside the classroom. A qualitative integrated methodological approach has been employed in this research combining ethnography and autoethnography within a narrative framework. Ethnographic interviews are adopted as the central aspect of this research methodology which is then integrated by the autoethnography method through my personal experiences as an international student. Moreover, I applied classroom observation as a complementary method in this research to observe the students' verbal interactions in the context of their classrooms. The participants of this research are 12 students from higher education studying an international course at the University of Milano-Bicocca in Milan, Italy. The participants consist of one Italian, and eleven international students, from various countries and cultural backgrounds.

The research findings offer many valuable insights into students' sociocultural experiences in a new cultural setting. First, the students' cultural contacts in Italy shape new perspectives on their perception, knowledge, beliefs, behavior, and their becoming and learning, and they develop different strategies to overcome their sociocultural conflicts, including mere awareness, othering, critical reasoning, and adaptive strategies. The research also provides insights into the interactions of the students with peers, educators, and the broader social context beyond the educational setting. It identifies that the diversity of languages as a cultural sign is a key concern of the students which influences their interactive behaviors. Moreover,

from the sociocultural approach of this study, language as a sociocultural tool mediates the shaping of individuals' mental abilities. This study also focusing on the students' perspectives toward identifying themselves in a different cultural setting, illustrates the dynamic process of identity formation as the result of their social life experiences including the tension between the expectations of societies, families, and individual perspectives and choices.

Additionally, the findings reveal the strong potential of Italy as a context for contact with cultures due to the presence of diverse ethnic groups within the country, and specifically, the universities, that have provided both international students and native students with touching diversity and developing more awareness about being and becoming. Therefore, emphasizing the multiculturality of Italy, the research addresses the need for establishing strategies in the higher education system for the integration of culturally diverse communities, inclusive educational practices, the students' cross-cultural understanding, and the implementation of language policies for unity and diversity.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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Introduction
Journey to Becoming a Researcher
To introduce my thesis, I describe my journey towards becoming a researcher, the way I finalised my research ideas, exploring the insights into my personal perspective and my positionality in relation to the research. I also provide an overview of the main aims, research questions, and the contents of the thesis, guiding the readers through the upcoming chapters.

My personal perspective

As a teacher of English as a foreign language (EFL) for non-native speakers in Iran, I have faced many issues in interacting with students when I invited them to talk in the classroom or with each other. I remember a day that I had a full-time teaching in a class of an English dialogue course with a group of undergraduate male and female students who were all non-native speakers of English, to motivate them to participate in classroom interactions in English, I asked the students to describe a normal day of their life, everybody said something based on their knowledge of English language. One of the studious students just stared critically at me and refused to answer and only said "an English daily life or an Iranian one?"!. I was misinterpreted about her response to my question. She was a good student and serious about her activities in the classroom, besides I had a friendly and non-hierarchical approach to my students. To me, it seemed like a resistive or odd behavior toward something that was a struggle in her mind like cultural, contextual, psychological issues, or any other causes. In years of teaching English programs in the same situation, I have faced such behaviors a lot. The reasons why some of my adult students do not interact in the classrooms while I knew they had enough proficiency and knowledge of English language, have been a conflict of my mind as a teacher. To cast the light of mentioned behaviors, that puzzled me, I needed to overcome my identity as a teacher and become a researcher in education.

It is significant that I describe the context and situation in which I was teaching. From my point of view, it could be a particular context because, unlike the schools' policies for registration of students who live in the region nearby where the schools are located, the language learning centres and universities allow students from different cities, regions, and

even foreign citizens to register and attend. Therefore, I had some students from different regional and cultural backgrounds, for example, from different cities, towns, and rural areas in the province where I was working, and some students from Afghanistan immigrated to Iran, and all the students were coming from various social statuses that enrolled in the same classroom and course. The described context of my classrooms and the diversity of the sociocultural status of the students made me develop my identity as a researcher in educational and sociocultural studies. In addition to my conflicts of mind and the dominant context of that educational setting, my curiosity and interest in exploring classroom interactions specifically, and the social and cultural differences between students which may affect the students' acts and behaviour, motivated me to do research on the mentioned areas in a larger multilingual and multicultural context which again is not an English-speaking one.

I chose Italy as a great destination for the given context because it has hosted many international students originating from diverse cultural backgrounds around the world. Besides, countries like Italy which have not had a previous Anglo affiliation are now facing the expanding dominance of the English language. This situation presents these nations with a complex dilemma: preserve their own language, culture, and history and not to participate in the growing impact of English. Knowing this, I applied for a PhD in Italy and the University of Milano-Bicocca which is an international university including many foreign students from all around the world.

When I came to Italy and to the University of Milano-Bicocca, as a PhD student, very soon I personally faced challenges and resistive behaviours with both languages, English and Italian. I still remember the first session of one of my online courses with an Italian teacher and my Italian and non-Italian classmates. In the beginning, the teacher spoke in the Italian language, but when she realized that two of us didn't speak Italian as our first language, she switched to English. To me, that short time was a stressful time as someone who doesn't know the Italian language. During the class, we had some problems with the internet connection and the platform that we were using. While trying to fix the issues, the teacher continued to talk and ask my classmates in Italian language, and I was just quiet and following the procedure.

It was the first time I noticed how a dominant culture and language can affect the environment of a context like an English language classroom.

Suddenly I realized that I was no more a teacher, but a student from a different regional and cultural background who had to use the English language for her social and educational

interactions in a non-English setting. Therefore, I had an identity shift from a foreign language teacher into an international student and I gained a new perspective on the old and new conflicts of my mind which redoubled my interest and decisiveness, in developing reflexively my research ideas on the mentioned areas.

It was during our initial meeting with my supervisor that we discussed my ideas in depth. I remember that I was stressed and concerned about effectively communicating and explaining myself and my ideas to my foreign supervisor whom I never worked with, and I was aware that she came from a different educational and cultural background than me. Later I found that my supervisor had never worked with an Iranian student, and I was feeling her for trying to know me, my concepts, the language that I use, and my ideas while she knew that I came from a different educational background. My approach to the research was characterized as positivistic epistemologically with a linear view of the hypothesis that was mostly oriented in a linguistic framework, and it was coming from my previous educational and research background and context. My supervisor addressed the limitations of the framework of my research questions and suggested me to gain a more complex and educational perspective. Additionally, I was encouraged to consider reflexivity as a useful aspect of my research. In conclusion, my first interaction with my supervisor was both confusing and informative and a very challenging start for my proposed research project which made me broaden my horizons.

After that, I had a struggling dedicated to build a theoretical framework more coherently related to doing a PhD in education and to become oriented and positioned toward my epistemological approach. At the same time, I found out that I needed to overcome my identity as an educator and an international student to become a researcher in education. To this end, I started to reframe my ideas through the literature reviews and analysis of my personal educational and social experiences in Italy. Gradually, I began to change the topic and focus of my research proposal. The first title of my project- Culture Contact, Critical Thinking enhancement, and resistance to Speech act production in a Study- abroad Context – changed into **-** Culture Contact, Cognitive development, and Linguistic Behaviour: A Socio-cultural Approach to the Experiences of International Adult Students.

The main aim of my study is to explore the learning experiences of international students living in a new sociocultural context, coming from different cultural backgrounds, and using the English language as a second and non-native language. My participants are international students who study at Milano Bicocca University in Italy, the same place where I am doing my

PhD. Because of this choice, I had to clarify my own position as an international student in Italy, not least to the participants of the study, and to reflect on how this position shapes my actions, analyses, and interpretations of the participants' experiences and narrations. Since my research ideas are rooted in my personal experiences, and evolving along the path, I cannot deny the significant role of those experiences in my research process. I plan to incorporate some autoethnographic stories, drawing from my personal experiences in different chapters of my thesis. Then, by comparing and contrasting the experiences of the participants and mine, I aim to achieve a deeper understanding of my own research results and theory.

Research approach and paradigm

Choosing the research approach and research paradigm for my doctoral research was one of the most noticeable promotions and struggles of my academic career. It was an experience of transformative learning which is the process of making meaning of our experiences through reflection, critical reflection, and critical self-reflection. During this process, I experienced the changing of central perspectives and making sense of all my daily experiences while I reformulated the key assumptions that my perspective was constructed on (Meziro,1991).

As I mentioned before my previous academic training was in a quantitative perspective and a positivistic background, and when I applied for the PhD, my proposed project was supposed to be conducted through both the sociolinguistic, and psycholinguistic frameworks to explore two issues:(a) the relationship between culture contact , and critical thinking enhancement among international students, and(b) the possible effects of enhancement in critical thinking on resistance to pragmatic ability to produce two speech acts: requests and opinions in second language. I wanted to collect the data through a culture contact survey that examined the amount of time learners spent in contact with other cultures. Critical Thinking Test (CCTT) to measure the critical thinking ability of the undergraduates involved in the present study, a pragmatic resistivity questionnaire (PRQ) to measure pragmatic resistivity, and finally a pragmatic test to check the English language ability of the students.

From the presented research design, we can see that several interconnected variables are supposed to be measured through some surveys, and tests, which provide limited insight into the experiences, perceptions, and cultural context of international students. Moreover, lack of the flexibility in the data collection methods, the analysis of the collected data, and then my research goals, and the risk of producing findings that are not very rich were other problematic issues of my initial research plan.

When I came to the University of Milano-Bicocca and to the Department of human sciences for education, I found out that the main applied research approach in this department is the qualitative approach. At that time I was reading a paper on culture contact by (Laura & Silvia, 2020) on Migration, culture contact, and the complexity of coexistence. A systemic imagination. The epistemological stance of this paper is rooted in recognizing that knowledge is context-dependent and relational and shows that knowledge is not static but is continuously shaped through interactions and connection with the environment. Furthermore, the adopted methodology for the mentioned paper goes beyond traditional observation and data collection, aiming to actively engage newcomers, researchers in the physical space to enhance their sense of connectedness. The adopted methodology for the mentioned paper was another point of widening my insight into the qualitative research methodology and paradigm. The used methodology and epistemological stance of the paper widened my insight into the qualitative research approach and paradigm, and notably, I found it more suitable for my own research ideas and an opportunity for new achievements and learning. Finally, after the meeting that I had with my supervisor, I got more curious about being more flexible and context bound.

After taking some methodology courses by the faculty of education at our university and reading some valuable resources on the methodology, for instance, Benson, Hewitt, Heagney, Devos, & Crosling (2010) which offers using students' stories to identify transformative experiences through a qualitative approach. Cohen, Manion, & Morrison (2017) provide comprehensive information about r*esearch methods in education*. I was also informed about the biographical methods by West and Merrill(2009). Navarro Sada & Maldonado (2007) provide another edition of Cohen, Manion, and Morrison's work on the methodology of educational research. Furthermore, Creswell and Poth's book on qualitative inquiry and research design(2015) provided me with insights into the most suitable choices for a qualitative approach, I became aware of approaches that see humans deliberate and creative in their behaviours and actions and also made me less interested in an approach that regards human behavior as passive, essentially determined, and controlled, thereby ignoring intention, subjectivity, and freedom (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2002) which doesn't suit my research goals and interests. Then I decided to adopt a qualitative approach.

A new perspective was slowly redefining my research goals and interests in another direction. I needed to shape my research practice through an inquiry paradigm, a very important step in designing my research, because I was aware that it would be guided by assumptions, beliefs, norms, and values. Therefore, to me as a beginner in the qualitative research approach, identifying a research paradigm was another challenge in addition to another space for learning

and practice. According to Kivunja & Kuyini (2017), the diverse sense of what constitutes a paradigm challenges Ph.D. students and early career researchers. In order to position oneself towards a paradigm, it is necessary to understand and name this diversity.

In educational research, the term paradigm is used to describe a researcher's 'worldview' (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006). This worldview is the perspective, or thinking, or school of thought, or set of shared beliefs, that informs the meaning or interpretation of research data. Then a paradigm constitutes the abstract beliefs and principles that shape how a researcher sees the world, and how she or he interprets and acts within that world (Lather ,1986).

In this study, the paradigm is the conceptual lens through which I examine the methodological aspects of our research project, finally determining the research method that I employ and how I analyse the resulting data (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Guba (1990) described a paradigm as sets of beliefs that guide action which is embedded in all educational research (Brooke, 2013). Overall, paradigms represent the researchers' beliefs and values about the world, the way they define the world, and the way they work within the world (Kamal, 2019).

In the context of this research, my thoughts and beliefs about any issues explored would subsequently guide my actions. In other words, the paradigm adopted directs my investigation which includes data collection and analysis procedures. Finally, the paradigm has been important "implications for every decision made in the research process" (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017, p. 26)

After I found that my position toward my research is not neutral or objective, I acknowledged how my personal, professional, and political commitments influence all aspects of the research, and when I adopted an interpretive approach in this study which suggests knowledge construction and also looks for the truth that is not absolutely ready to be discovered but rather is conditional, contextual and multiple (Saldana, 2011), I realized that the constructivist paradigm can be the best choice for my research. With this approach, I can understand the subjects and interpret what they are thinking or the meaning they are making of the context(Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017).In addition, Mogashoa (2014) declared that constructivism is an educational theory that involves a need to take into account the role played by essential aspects such as culture, context, literacy, language, learners' interests and needs, personal experiences, interpretation of reality, as well as application of knowledge, which the researcher can analyze to determine their impact on educational policies (Mogashoa, 2014).

From a constructivist view, I decided to draw my research design and interpret my data based on the following interpretive frameworks.

Ontologically, I followed researchers such as Neuman (2000), Lincoln & Guba (2000), and John Searle (1969) who believe that there are multiple versions of reality, and they can be explored and reconstructed through interactions and conversations with the subjects of the study. Regarding this, I was aware that knowledge is always constructed in social interactions and is not an individual experience. I moved from my previous objective perspective to a more subjective approach, or better inter-subjective, to understand the situations and phenomena that I wanted to illuminate with my study.

Epistemologically, I was advised not to detach myself from the study. I was invited to make meaning of the data with my participants through a range of interactive processes of knowledge building such as dialoguing, questioning, listening, reading, writing, and reporting. From this view, the researcher, participants, and even the research site collaborate in the definition of the research activity and influence each other. Therefore, instead of working objectively, I tried to ground my interpretations of data in the intentions and interpretations of the participants, in my own presuppositions and interpretations, and in the role played by the context.

Methodologically, I decided to adopt a qualitative approach, since it suits an exploratory study better. I realized that I wanted to find the meanings behind people's activities and build a deep understanding of my research questions (Leavy, 2020). I applied a methodology combining ethnography and autoethnography with a narrative framework to have a more comprehensive understanding of the research concepts. Through the ethnographical interviews, I aimed at an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, behaviours, and cultural values, and by writing autoethnographic stories I could provide a detailed explanation of my own experiences within the research context. Therefore, I used ethnographic conversations, narrative interviews, autoethnographic stories, and also classroom observation as the most appropriate methods for generating data for this study. I will discuss the related details in the chapter on methodology.

Constructivist paradigm in relation to my research

Among the different types of constructivism theories, I selected social constructivism. Based on Kim (2006), social constructivism emphasizes the importance of context and culture in understanding what occurs in society and constructing knowledge based on this understanding.

In my research, exploring the experiences of the students in contact with other cultures illustrates the role of culture and context in students' perceptions and interactions. This is related to the ideas of social constructivism like the development of knowledge by humans through their social and cultural experiences and interactions.

Furthermore, according to social constructivism, Language is one of the cultural tools developed and available to people in different societies(Au, 2005). Educators should take into account the native language of students from diverse backgrounds to support them in the learning process. My research also from a sociocultural perspective identifies the role of languages in shaping interactions and knowledge construction of individuals in their new educational settings. They both refer to the importance of interactions, and culture in the development of student's thinking abilities.

In general, my research ideas and the social constructivist paradigm are closely related, and I think this paradigm provides a suitable framework for understanding the multifaceted theory of my research.

Significance of the study

I can claim that this research is significant in some key aspects. To begin, I address the cultural diversity in the Italian educational setting, since Italy has hosted an increasing number of students who come from all around the world. These students inevitably come from diverse sociocultural backgrounds. This research endeavors to make a significant contribution by shedding light on how cultural diversity impacts the mental and social development of students. Therefore, it particularly provides educators with the required insights to understand the complexities of teaching students from diverse backgrounds through providing inclusive teaching practices, effective strategies, and a culturally responsive learning environment that considers the educational needs of all students. Furthermore, This study illustrates the relevancy and applicability of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory in contemporary educational contexts. It provides some empirical evidence and case studies for considering the effects of sociocultural factors on the teaching and learning process.

Additionally, Regarding verbal interactions and language, I refer to Xiao, Chin, & Yao(2010) who declared that The difference in languages is the most important issue in a cross-culture environment like Italy. Following the non-Anglo affiliation background of the Italian people that I discussed before and based my own experiences of living and studying in Italy for around

four years, and the subjects' experiences with their daily interactions, the difference in the dominant language (Italian) and English as the second language is the most significant challenge of non-native speakers of Italian language. Based on the created data of this research, almost all the non-native speakers of the Italian language have experienced the language barrier and its disincentive influence on their social and educational interactions at different levels.

In such a condition doing research on the problems related to second language use in educational and social multicultural contexts and its pros and cons in order to provide awareness, any contribution, and solution can be vital and quite necessary. More importantly, the application of this study is not only for educational systems but also for societies in broader case. It can also be applied to policies and practices related to multiculturalism, social integration, community engagement, and also in educational contexts, with the final goal of fostering positive intercultural experiences and enhancing educational outcomes.

General Aims, Research Questions, and Structure of This Thesis

My main aims with this research were firstly to understand and explore the students' experiences of contact with a diverse socio-cultural context. Additionally, I aimed to explore the impacts of a multicultural educational setting specifically on students' cognitive development, attitudes, and behavioral patterns. Furthermore, this study sought to investigate how contact with other cultures can shape the students' verbal interactions inside and outside the classroom.

In the present research, the main questions are:

i. How do international students in higher education experience and narratively construct their contact with other cultures?

ii. How do the students identify themselves in a new sociocultural context?

iii. How do they shape their mind, thoughts, and cognitive abilities through it?

iv. Is cultural contact an occasion to develop or hinder students' social and classroom interactions?

Thesis structure

Chapter 1 contains the theoretical framework for my research by introducing Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. I also reviewed the literature related to sociocultural theory in the field of adult education and the theory's implications for this research in particular .

Chapter 2 presents the discussion of the foundational constructs of my research weaving together theories and concepts related to cultural contact, and also its relationship to cognition, the formation of identity, and verbal interactions.

Chapter 3 outlines my research paradigm, the integrated methodology, and methods, and the challenges that I faced during the implementation of the process. I also argue that this research is a co-construction of knowledge between my participants and me, focusing on meaning-making in understanding lived experiences.

In the second part of this research, chapters 4 to 6, I will present how I have used the proposed theoretical and methodological framework to shape my research using twelve interviews and the fieldnotes of my classroom observations as the qualitative materials of the research. To this end,

Chapter 4 presents the analysis and interpretations of the interviews addressing the first and second research questions related to the international students' experiences with cultural contact and the construction of new identities in a different sociocultural context. I also present the interpretative portraits of twelve participants in the initial part of the chapter.

Chapter 5 replies to the third question of this research through the exploration of sociocultural experiences from the perspective of the participants, aiming to understand the interplay between culture contact and the development of students' minds, thoughts, and critical thinking as a type of cognitive abilities. This chapter is presented in the form of a paper under review for publication.

Chapter 6 presents the analysis of interviews and classroom observations contents, enriched with my interpretation, aiming to reply to the fourth question of the research which explores the way sociocultural settings shape student's social and classroom interactions.

Chapter 7 provides an overview of the whole findings of the research; and outlines the main challenges and insights that I faced. And finally, to conclude the research, I note my final reflections.

Chapter one: The origins of the sociocultural theory: exploring Vygotsky's contribution
1.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I situate my research in its theoretical framework by describing the sociocultural theory and its key concepts. The concepts are chosen and developed based on my research objectives and at the end, the implications of the theory will be specified to the perspective of the research and set the scene for the exploration of the literature in chapter two.

1.2 My rationale for choosing this theory

My curiosity and personal interest in the exploration of the interplay between the different cultures, interactions, and cognitive development led me to surf and read several related literature and resources about them. During the journey of discovery, I faced Tulviste's article on Vygotsky and contemporary developmental psychology (1992). From Tulviste's work, I got familiar with the deep ideas of Lev Vygotsky and his theory of socioculture. Then I went deeper into the theory by reading some other books on *the principles of the sociocultural theory* of Lev Vygotsky, for instance, the remarkable book of *Sociocultural Studies of Mind* by Wertsch, del Río, and Alvarez (1995). I found Vygotsky's insights on the concepts of culture, cognitive development, and social interactions as the missing piece of the puzzle and a turning point in my research journey. I was particularly fascinated by the theory's claim about the role of culture in shaping mediated mind and actions. The sociocultural perspective recognizes the relationship between cognitive development and an individual's social, cultural, and historical context (Siemens, 2008), and furthermore, it positions social activities such as verbal communication and the language used to guide those activities as structured and gaining meaning in historically and culturally situated ways (Johnson, 2016). The mentioned aspects of the theory clearly provide me with a rich lens from which I can explore my research concerns about the diversity of culture of a community like international students and the way they improve mentally and act verbally in a particular sociocultural setting.

Furthermore, the fact that many of Vygotsky's ideas seem directly relevant to issues in education and other fields of intervention (Moll, 1990; Scott and Palincsar, 2013) motivated

me to choose the sociocultural theory as an educational foundation for my research. In the field of adult education research, the theory has been used by scholars such as Matos (2014), Edwards and Daniels (2004), Bonk & Kim (2013), Rogoff (2003), Wang (2007), Alfred (2002). They applied Vygotsky's sociocultural theory in the context of education to explore the social and cultural aspects of teaching, learning, and development.

1.3 A biographical note on Lev Vygotsky

In order to understand the context in which the theory was developed and the theory itself, it is required to know who Lev Semyonovitch Vygotsky is, a founder of cultural-historical psychology (Akhutina and Pylaeva, 2011). He was born on November 5, 1896, in the town of Orsha, northeast of Minsk in Byelorussia in a middle-class Jewish family. In 1913 he completed gymnasium in Gomel with a gold medal(Vygotsky & Cole, 1978). According to Seymon Dubkin, Vygotsky's school friend, he was particularly interested in the philosophy of history and was recognized as the leader of a small circle of students concerned with the problems of Jewish culture and history (Vygotsky,1986/ 2012).

In 1917, he graduated from Moscow University with a specialization in literature, and then he began his literary research. Vygotsky taught literature and psychology for six years in a school in Gomel where he also directed the theater section of the adult center and gave many speeches and lectures on problems of literature and sciences. He also founded a psychological laboratory in the teacher training institute, in which he gave a course on psychology and its content then published in pedagogical psychology (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978). The Russian father of cultural psychology, in fact, provides a more complete and appropriate description of social influences and human action. He declares that human action involves higher mental functions and is mediated by cultural tools and signs. Thus, cognitive development involves, as a central feature, the socialized use of tools that support thinking and problem-solving (Goody, 1977; Wertsch, 1998). Lev Vygotsky died as a result of tuberculosis when he was young on June 11, 1934, but it seems that during his short life, he made significant contributions to education, psychology, and other disciplines.

1.4 The sociocultural theory

The concept of sociocultural processes shaping the human mind has been used for research in education, anthropology, applied linguistics, and psychology and it has been employed with different applications and in diverse contexts. Basically, the epistemological stance of a sociocultural perspective defines human development as a dynamic social activity that is situated in social contexts and involves the interactions of persons, tools, and the activities they are engaged in (Rogoff, 2003; Salomon, 1993; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1991). A sociocultural perspective focuses on sociocultural activities as the essential processes through which human cognition is formed. In other words, a sociocultural perspective seeks "to explicate the relationship between human mental functioning, on the one hand, and the cultural, institutional, and historical situations in which this functioning occurs, on the other" (Wertsch, 1995, p. 3). According to Vygotsky (1987), human communication has the unique and distinctive capacity to convey generalized meaning, described as the key feature of a very advanced human activity. A broad way of describing the understanding of meaning is that meaning enables social communication to take place in a variety of situations (Vygotsky, 1987) and contexts.

The principles of the sociocultural perspective are rooted in the entire work of Lev Vygotsky (1978, 1986) and his followers Leont'ev (1981) and Luria (1982), and later in the work of those who have extended his theories, including Cole (1996), John-Steiner (1997), Kozulin (1998), Lantolf (2000), Wells (1999), and Wertsch (1991). More recently, Lantolf & Poehner (2023) argued that Vygotsky's theory is also referred to as "height" or "peak psychology," which means that its concern is with "the possibilities of humans becoming conscious creators of both themselves and the world" (Dafermos, 2018, p. 238). It refers to the role that humans play in making individual and collective agency. Van der Veer (2007) believes that Vygotsky's theory was still a work in progress at the time of Vygotsky's death in 1934 at the age of 38. However, he constructed a foundation that was later revised and expanded by those who were attracted to this theory, after a long period of censorship imposed by Stalin's regime.

In the following part, I will describe the main tenets of the sociocultural theory. To do this, I will refer to James Wertsch's ideas from Vygotsky's writings. "It seems that his analysis of Vygotsky's work is very deep and effective" (Finnegan, personal communication, 2023).

James Wertsch studies language, thought, and culture, with a special focus on the function of national memories and narratives. Some of his publications are: Vygotsky and the Social Formation of Mind (1985), Voices of the Mind (1991), and edited volumes with Cambridge

University Press on Vygotsky and memory studies. In his book titled Voices of Mind (1991), he mentions the three basic themes that run through Vygotsky's writing:

1. a reliance on genetic, or developmental analysis;

2. the claim that higher mental functioning in the individual derives from social life; and

3. the claim that human action, on both the social and individual levels, is mediated by tools and signs.

1.4.1 The genetic domain

To study something historically means to study it in the process of change; that is the dialectical method's basic demand. In this context, the word "genetic" refers to the genesis (from the Ancient Greek for "being born"), that is the process by which something is created and develops. To encompass in research the process of a given thing's development in all its phases and changes, from birth to death, fundamentally means to discover its nature, its essence. Thus, the historical study of behavior is not an auxiliary aspect of theoretical study, but rather it forms its very base. (Vygotsky, 1978, pp. 64–65).

Vygotsky reasoned that the adequate approach to the study of higher mental abilities was historical. Based on this, he proposed four *genetic* domains for the proper study of higher mental functions (Scott and Palincsar, 2013):

- The *phylogenetic* domain, which is related to how human cognition distinguished from mental processes in other forms of life through the integration of mediational means over the course of evolution.

- The *sociocultural* domain, that is concerned with how the different types of symbolic tools developed by human cultures influence thinking and how cultural artifacts like numeracy, literacy, and computers, shape the mediation and types of thinking that are valued by societies and cultures.

- The *ontogenetic* domain, that is how individuals integrate mediational means, primarily language, into their thinking activities as they get more mature.

- The *microgenetic* domain, that concentrates on the reorganization and development of mediation over a relatively short period of time, for example, being trained to criteria at the outset of a lab experiment, learning a word, sound, or grammatical feature of a language.

Although the sociocultural theory recognizes four genetic domains, the ontogenetic domain has been the main interest for most authors, namely those belonging to developmental psychology, who have focused the ways on which abilities such as voluntary memory are formed in children through the integration of mediational means into the thinking process (Lantolf, 2000).

Regarding the ontological process, however, Vygotsky argues that there are tasks in which adults still require external forms of assistance and tools of mediation. To clarify this, Wertsch (1998) provided an example describing a situation where an adult is asked to multiply two sets of high numbers (for example, 245×987); most adults are unable to carry out this task internally and must rely on paper and pencil to complete the operation. If the numbers are even higher and, say, include decimals, subjects might even require the use of a more powerful artifact, such as a calculator (Lantolf, 2000).

In support of this perspective, Vygotsky (1978) introduced the construct of the *zone of proximal development* (ZPD) as a metaphor for observing and understanding how mediational means are appropriated and internalized (Lantolf, 2000).

1.4.1.1 Zone of proximal development (ZPD)

According to Vygotsky, all higher mental abilities appear twice in the life of the individual: first at the inter-mental level, where the process is located and distributed between the individual and some other person(s) and/or cultural artifacts, and later the intra-mental level, when the capacity is carried out by the individual acting via psychological mediation. Vygotsky's definition states that the ZPD is the difference between what a person can achieve when acting alone and what the same person can accomplish when acting with support from someone else and/or cultural artifacts (Lantolf, 2000). Through the concept of ZPD Vygotsky emphasizes the dynamic process of development, the function and relevance of interactions in

development and learning, when individuals benefit from tasks beyond their current abilities with the help of their social interactive supports and mediation tools, the role of culture and cultural tools like language and symbolic systems in cognitive development in shaping cognitive processes.

1.4.2 The social origins of mental functioning in the individual

Vygotsky claims that the higher mental functioning in individuals is rooted in their social life. According to this, in order to understand the individual, it is necessary to understand the social relations and contacts in which the individual exists (Wertsch, 1991). This theme is also represented in Vygotsky's genetic law of development which I discussed in the previous part.

From this perspective, as individuals engage in broader joint activities and internalize the outcomes of working together, they develop new strategies and deepen their understanding of the world and culture (Scott & Palincsar, 2013). This principle is demonstrated by studying interactions between individuals with various levels of knowledge, for instance, interactions between educators and students. This principle is interesting, but how the human mind and functions can be formed if individuals interact with others who have different educational and sociocultural experiences and come from different backgrounds? Regarding this question, I refer to what Tudge and Scrimsher (2003) noted about Vygotsky's interest, that is not only focused on what more knowledgeable others bring to the interaction but also considers what the person himself or herself brings to the interaction, as well as how a broader cultural and historical setting shapes the interaction (Scott and Palincsar, 2013).

1.4.3 Mediation

The third general theme in Vygotsky's formulation of the sociocultural approach is the claim that higher mental functioning and human action, in general, are mediated by tools (technical tools) and signs (psychological tools) (Wertsch, 1991). These tools and signs include "language; various counting systems; mnemonic techniques; algebraic symbols; Systems; works of art; composition; schemes, diagrams, maps, and mechanical drawings; conventional signals" (Vygotsky,1981, 137), computers, calculators, paint brushes and the like, all of which are useful in representational activity (Scott and Palincsar, 2013).

In contrast to many other analyses of language, focusing on the structure of the sign systems independently of any mediating role that they may play, Vygotsky approached language and other sign systems in terms of how they are part of and mediate human action (Alkhudiry, 2022). An example of this approach is Vygotsky's research (1987) on children who had trouble remembering a list of words; they were given image cards to aid their memory, and this had a positive impact on their overall performance, and, after a while, their brains adapted to these facilitating methods and no longer required image cards for later stages of memory formation. He found that mental pictures can be also invoked by both youngsters and adults, and these images could be linked to the ideas they had learned before (Alkhudiry, 2022). In his view, when we claim that individuals appropriate a sign, or master it, we should consider how they use it, or not, to mediate their own actions or the actions of others (Wertsch, 1991). Therefore, in the mediation process, how individuals use signs like language is important and shapes the process finally. The development and the acts of language modulate behaviour, and different behavioural patterns with a variety of meanings are possible (Vygotsky, 1987).

1.4.3.1 Thinking and speech

In exploring the relationship between speech and thinking, Vygotsky's primary emphasis is on how different forms of speaking –we consider them as mediation tools – are related to different forms of thinking (Wertsch, 1991). Vygotsky emphasizes that verbal mediational means would be used as widely as possible. Based on Wertsch (1991), his preference for verbal forms probably is derived from two basic sources. First, it reflects Vygotsky's own cultural background. He grew up in a literate Russian Jewish Family where the verbal formulation of problems was highly valued, and as an adult, he continued to live and work in a professional setting that placed a premium on verbal representations. Second, the formal instruction of literacy stood at the centre of his theoretical and practical interests during the period when he produced most of his writings. Today one of the main and important instructions comes from the strong preference for using verbal mediational means to solve a wide range of problems (Wertsch, 1991, p.30).

However, the emphasis on verbal language is not necessarily useful for all cultures, or individuals. An example of communicative and mental functioning in a certain sociocultural setting is noted by Rogoff and her Colleagues (1990) about the socialization practices in some non-western cultures. They mentioned that these cultures have less reliance on verbal

communication than what is normal for Western children. It doesn't mean that they are deprived of stimulation, it only means that forms of guided participation in which these children are involved mostly rely on nonverbal forms of communication.

Regarding this, Kearins (1981, 1986) explored how children from different backgrounds may differ in their tendency to use verbal mediation to solve problems. Kearins compared the performance of aboriginal children from the Australian desert on a series of visual spatial memory tasks with the performance of European Australian children with an age range of 6 to 17 years old. Kearins observed and documented the superior performances of aboriginal children on the tasks, whereas the European Australian were trying to apply verbal mediation strategies, like rehearsing lists of verbal labels, the aboriginal children showed very little evidence of employing verbal mediation strategies and, instead, they relied on visual strategies. The findings of Kearins and Rogoff have been the core of many other studies that reveal the presence of an ethnocentric bias, when it comes to researching the relationship between speech and thinking (Wertsch, 1991).

The discussion should be related to the ways that mediational means are shaped and shape the possibilities of knowledge, evolution, and learning in a certain context. Focusing on the mediational means gives a wider sense of the human mind as overcoming the boundary of the skin (Wertsch, 1991). The idea of mediational action stresses how individuals act in relation to a range of mediational means that are provided by the context. A lot of scholars like Bateson (1972) recognized this point in different ways. Bateson states that the minimal unit of attention to understand evolution and learning is the human-plus-the-environment, together, as an interacting whole. A sociocultural approach suggests that cultural, historical, and institutional factors have a role in shaping mediational means and actions. Vygotsky and other scholars who were inspired by his work declared that most features of mediational means originate in social life. Luria (1981) states that

> In order to explain the highly complex forms of human consciousness one must go beyond the human organism. One must seek the origins of conscious activity. . .in the external processes of social life, in the social and historical forms of human existence. (p. 25)

Although Vygotsky agreed with this general theory, his studies of social processes were limited to inter-mental functioning. He claimed that a sign is always originally a means used for social purposes, a means of influencing others, and then influencing oneself (1981, p.157).

Accordingly, when addressing the sign system of language, Vygotsky argued that "the primary function of speech, both for the adult and child, is the function of communication and social contact influencing the surrounding individuals'' (1934, p.45).

1.5 Culture for Vygotsky

Vygotsky's conceptualization of culture suggests that humans are never as autonomous and as free of outside interference as they might at first appear. Instead, human mental functioning, even when carried out by an individual acting in isolation, is inherently social, or sociocultural (Tulviste, 1992). Vygotsky outlined his idea about the relationship between mental functioning and culture in the following statement.

> The word "social" when applied to our subject has great significance. Above all, in the widest sense of the word, it means that everything that is cultural is social. Culture is the product of social life and human social activity. That is why just by raising the question of the cultural development of behavior we are directly introducing the social plane of development. (Vygotsky, 1981, p. 164)

This statement reveals that Vygotsky saw culture as something concrete, expressed through actual social interactions. He believed that these social processes provided the basis of individual cognitive processes, how we think and understand are shaped by the cultural contexts in which we interact with others.

Vygotsky's notion of culture must be understood through the analysis of the role played by culture in his overall theoretical system, a role based on the notion of mediation. In his view, human action is *mediated* by cultural tools. He states that the incorporation of mediational tools in the process of behaviour sustains and shapes the entire flow and structure of mental functions. In fact, mediation is a determinant in structuring a new instrumental act, and as a technical tool changes the process of natural adaptation by determining the form of operations (Vygotsky, 1981c, p. 137), and higher mental functioning can be seen through the new acts. According to Vygotsky (1981c), many human cognitive actions entailing conventional signs,

such as language, various systems for counting, mnemonic techniques, algebraic symbol systems, works of art, writing, schemes, diagrams, maps, and mechanical drawings are examples of psychological or cultural tools (p. 137) and mediational means that are the products of sociocultural evolution, appropriated by groups or individuals as they carry out mental functioning.

He also argues that culture creates special forms of behaviour, by which it shapes or changes the functioning of the mind and constructs new stories in the developing system of human behavior (Vygotsky, 1983a, p. 29-30).

1.6 How the Socio-Cultural Theory has been criticized?

Although there is little doubt about the positive and effective influence of Vygotsky's theory on contemporary studies in education, anthropology, and psychology, this does not mean that there are no weaknesses in his approach. In this section, I address a few of these issues. One of the main critiques of Vygotsky's approach is related to his theory of the ontogenetic domain. In this domain, he argued that two lines of development, the cultural line, and the natural line come into contact and transform one another (Tulviste, 1992).

> The growth of the normal child into civilization usually involves a fusion with the processes of organic maturation. Both planes of development: the natural and the cultural, coincide and mingle with one another. The two lines of change interpenetrate one another and essentially form a single line of sociobiological formation of the child's personality. (Vygotsky, 1960, p. 47)

Actually, Vygotsky did not say enough about it and was quite unclear about the natural line of development and what he specifically means. Moreover, he said almost nothing about how the "elementary mental functioning" that grows out of the natural line of development might influence the "higher mental functioning" that derives from the mastery of cultural tools. Instead, he focused almost exclusively on ways in which cultural forces transform the natural line of development. Following such a view, the natural line provides a kind of raw material whose fate is to be transformed by cultural forces (Tulviste, 1992).

Another problem with the theory of the natural and cultural lines in ontogenesis is considering these two lines independent of one another during the early phases of life. Some scholars like

Piaget (1952), Bower (1974), and Bruner (1976) brought this assumption into question through their research, and even Leont'ev and Luria, who were Vygotsky's followers, noted that "after all, even in children at the very earliest ages mental processes are being formed under the influence of verbal social interaction with adults who surround them" (1956, p. 7).

Another concern with this theory is Vygotsky's Eurocentrism (Tulviste, 1992). Even though Vygotsky highlighted the relevance of historical differences, he seems to assume that modern European cultural tools and forms are superior to other cultures' tools and functioning (Tulviste, 1992).

Ameri (2020) who discussed the critiques of sociocultural theory in her paper, argues that Vygotsky's sociocultural theory does not seem to apply to all social and cultural groups. She describes Vygotsky's assertation about mind which is not separated from group and knowing is relative to the situation in which the knowers find themselves. Based on Ameri the theory does not consider the ability of some individual to rise above social norms based on their own personal understanding and capabilities. An example of such individuals is gifted students (Ameri,2020, p.33).

One of the frequently criticized aspects of Vygotsky's theory is related to the application of the ZPD in practice. Ameri (2020) argued that practical application of ZPD is problematic. She refers to Shayer (2002) who claims that Vygotsky failed to provide much about the effective use of ZPD in classrooms. Piaget (1995) suggests that participation in an activity for which a child is not ready with a more knowledgeable other, leads mainly to imposing the partner' views and will not affect the structures of child's actions. Lambert & Clyde (2000) critiqued the concept as follows: "We feel […] that Vygotsky's ZPD presents a restricted view of learning processes and reduces the learner's role to one of passivity and dependence upon the adult" (p. 29).

1.7 The sociocultural theory and adult education: A general review of the literature

In this section, I discuss some previous work of different scholars on the sociocultural theory in the field of adult education; my aim is to show the relevance and contribution of this theory for research on adult education and learning. Sociocultural theory has gained popularity in recent years, particularly in educational settings (Ameri, 2020). While the sociocultural

perspective continues to have an impact on the general field of education (Niewolny and Wilson, 2006), the contribution of sociocultural perspectives to the learning and cognition of adults has been largely under-developed and under-theorized (Alfred, 2002, 2003; Hansman and Wilson, 2002; Wilson, 1993, 2005). To choose the work, I checked the bibliographies related to the terms of sociocultural theory and adult education. The bibliography of the previous works on this topic was the most applied source for my exploration. Then I selected those works that have the most relevant titles to the various aspects of higher education including teaching and learning from social and cultural perspectives, I also included a few works, specifically on second language education to understand the existing literatures on contributions of the sociocultural theory to this area. Regarding the year of publications, from my explorations the sociocultural theory has been argued and used widely in research work of the last three decades, I didn't consider any limitation for the years, and I tried to involve both the older work and the contemporary research programs to understand the application of the theory and its related arguments in different ages.

Wilson (1993) emphasizes the role of a sociocultural perspective in expanding the theory and practice of adult education by recognizing the learners as active participants shaped by their cultural and historical contexts, embedded within social relationships, and engaged in tool-mediated activities. Based on this, Vygotsky's (1978) idea of guided learning can be utilized by instructors. The teacher and learner are active participants in the learning process. Learning involves observation, collaboration, and "scaffolding" (Shaffer, 1994, p. 78). The student develops culturally relevant skills through thought and action (Vygotsky, 1978). Teachers who adopt a sociocultural approach to adult development focus on how social inequities based on characteristics like race, language, class, and gender affect adult development and learning. They may take an approach that focuses on social justice, encouraging students to think critically about why social inequities exist and how these inequalities remain part of the educational experience (Baumgartner, 2001). Additionally, educators with a sociocultural perspective recognize the importance of increasing students' cultural awareness (Baumgartner, 2001) and they should encourage the students to actively participate in all aspects of society and their educational activities.

From the aspect of educators and teaching, I refer to research in recent years by Shah and Rashid (2018) who noted that the sociocultural theory is uniquely positioned to inform and integrate these trends in adult education. In their work, the authors reviewed the ten teaching

techniques discussed by Bonk and Kim (1998) and Collins et al. (1989) which are based on the sociocultural theory. These ten techniques are:

i. Modeling to illustrate performance standards and verbalize invisible process

ii. Coaching to observe and supervise students in guiding them towards expert performance

iii. Scaffolding and fading to support what learners cannot yet do and gradually removing that support as competence is displayed

iv. Questioning to request a verbal response from learners by supporting them with mental functions they cannot produce alone

v. Encouraging student articulation of their reasoning and problem-solving processes

vi. Pushing student exploration and application of their problem-solving skills

vii. Fostering student reflection and self-awareness (e.g., through performance replays)

viii. Providing cognitive task structuring by explaining and organizing the task within students' ZPDs

ix. Managing instructions with performance feedback and positive reinforcement

x. Using direct instruction to provide clarity, needed content, or missing information (Shah & Rashid, 2018).

The application of these techniques is very relevant when the sociocultural theory is used in relation to adult education (Bonk and King, 1995), and many experts in adult education and learning such as Apps (1991), Brookfield (1990), and Jarvis (1995) have adopted and supported such teaching techniques and approaches for adult learners, since these techniques encourage adults' responsibility for their own learning through discussion, role play, and reflection.

The application of sociocultural theory to adult learning demands us to recognize the patterns of learning assistance that are implemented in the environments of adult learning. What is significant about these scholars is their tendency to shift the adult education curriculum from the acquisition and memorization of facts or concepts (still a dominant way to teach in many educational settings, not least in higher education) to more collaborative, active, and authentic learning experiences (Millis, Davidson, and Cottell, 1994), and that is the reason why they emphasize the application of principals of the sociocultural theory.

Another approach to sociocultural theory in the education field that is frequently used is viewing the sociocultural theory as a theory of adult education and development (Lisa, 2001; Giannoukos & Besas, 2015). Lisa (2001) argued that sociocultural theory is considered one of the theories for adult development. In this paper, she discusses the development from a sociocultural perspective and by referring to Miller (1993) she argues the cultural diversities in educational contexts and the possible outcomes of them. She refers to Miller (1993) who argues that adult development cannot be understood apart from the sociohistorical context in which it occurs. This developmental stance asserts that culture influences what people think about, what skills they obtain when they can participate in certain activities, and who is allowed to do which activities (Miller, 1993). Miller (1993) writes:

> Different cultures emphasize different kinds of tools (for example verbal or nonverbal), skills (reading, mathematics, or spatial memory), and social interaction (formal and informal interactions inside and outside the educational setting) because of different cultural needs and values. (p. 390)

He claims that this finally influences who people become. Sociocultural elements such as race, class, gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation shape adult development and cognition (Chavez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999; Cross, 1995; Kroger, 1997; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Lisa, 2001).

One example to clarify the mentioned idea is what Johnson-Bailey (2001) investigated. She explored the common experiences shaping the persistence in higher education of African American women who enrolled at a non-traditional age (older age than the typical age range for education). Through these women's stories, she demonstrates how discrimination based on race, class, and gender affects their educational journeys. Johnson-Bailey notes racism and sexism impact the educational experiences of, for instance, black women. As black individuals, they are labelled intellectually and morally inferior. At the same time, as women

they face gender-based discrimination. (p. 91). This intersection of racism and sexism creates some barriers for black women in an educational setting and such experiences may lead them toward isolation or silence.

Giannoukos & Besas (2015) also introduces sociocultural theory as a theory of learning. He argues that based on this theory gaining knowledge is socially determined, and it occurs in environments where the subjects collaborate, communicate, and interact with each other, and by participating in various activities. He claims that Lave (1998) was influenced by this theory and introduces Situated Learning which emphasizes that learning comes from some autonomous activities with the backup from social and mental support. Moreover, he notes that there is another version of this theory which is Cognitive Apprenticeship (Collins, Brown, & Newman, 1989) where doing papers guided by the educator who teaches the learner how to achieve his goals can lead to a successful learning experience(Giannoukos & Besas, 2015).

Related to the mentioned arguments of situated learning and cognition from the sociocultural perspective, Niewolny & Wilson (2006) also review the key sociocultural perspectives of adult education learning and knowing to improve learners' cognition concerning their social and cultural situation. They emphasize socially and culturally mediated cognition and learning. To support their idea, they cited Hansman (2001) who noted that: "The nature of the interactions among learners, the tools they use within these interactions, the activity itself, and the social context in which the activity takes place constitutes the learning" (p. 45).

As I found from the bibliography related to the sociocultural theory and education, the theory has been also applied in the research and studies on learning a second language. Since the verbal interactions (the second language) of the participant of the present study is one of the main constructs of my research, I see it rational to have some insights into the previous literature on this scope. The sociocultural theory offers a rich framework for studies in the area of second language learning and education by emphasizing the role of social interactions, cultural contacts and contexts, and collaborative learning experiences.

According to Lantolf & Poehner (2023), the year 1994 was propitious for research on second language learning and development informed by sociocultural theory. In that year two collection of research focused on SCT-L2 were published. One publication was an edited volume by Lantolf and Appel (1994b) and the other was a special issue of *The Modern Language Journal* guest edited by Lantolf (1994). Both collections encompassed empirical

research that used the theory as a lens to examine various aspects of L2 development. The research explained how we can understand the learning process from the perspective of theories like the zone of proximal development (ZPD), private and inner speech, activity theory, regulation, and situation. Translation of writings of Vygotsky and his colleagues into a number of different languages, including English, German, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, French, Japanese, and Chinese is another reason for growing the area of this research (Lantolf & Poehner, 2023).

Alkhudiry (2022) in a paper synthesizes the main concepts of SCT to show how it may help to enhance L2 learning practices. He argues the Vygotsky's Socio-Cultural Theory view about human mental performance which sees it as a process arranged by concepts, social objects, and activities, and declares that applying the Socio-Cultural theory in practice can be the more suitable approach for establishing a comprehensive framework in which second language learners can participate in diverse language activities .The interactions of L2 learners with collaborative activities probably have instructional implications on their cognitive progress. Consequently, this can reflect positively on their L2 language performance, leading to meaningful and constructivist L2 learning experiences (Alkhudiry, 2022). In this work, finally, the use of collaborative techniques that integrate instructors and L2 learners with the socio-cultural norms is recommended, to provide a more successful L2 learning experience.

To summarize, the literature review showed that the sociocultural theory offers a robust framework for adult education. Its principles of guided learning, social interactions, social justice, and cultural awareness not only inform teaching practices but also contribute to a comprehensive understanding of adult development and learning experiences. Therefore, the sociocultural framework can be the best lens through which I examine the role of adult students' social and cultural contexts and interactions in shaping their cognitive development, functions, and learning, while I view the research process from both the perspective of a teacher and a student.

1.7.1 Implications of the sociocultural theory: my study's perspective

I begin this section by giving an example from my own experience as an international student in a multicultural setting. As I will argue more in chapter three, the critical analysis of personal experience (as in auto-ethnographic research (Adams, Ellis, & Jones, 2017) can illuminate how

the researcher constructs her research objects, design, and data. So, I describe the situation of one of the classrooms that I attended at the University of Milano-Bicocca, in Milan, Italy.

It was the first session of an Italian language course that was offered to international students at the university. There were more than thirty students, male and female. The teacher was a woman in her forties and was trying to welcome all the students. To get familiar with the students, the teacher asked us to introduce ourselves, who we are? What we are studying and where do we come from? We introduced ourselves. As I remember, In the classroom, there were students from the Philippines, China, India, Pakistan, Morocco, Spain, Poland, Guatemala, Russia, one North American student, and other students from Ethiopia, Iran, and Vietnam. We were from various colours, languages, and nations.

At that time, I could see a context of diversities. Not only differences in nationalities, but also there were differences in culture, race, ethnicity, the diversity of gender, age, and sexual orientation. I was thinking about how our various cultural backgrounds shape our behaviours, interactions, and learning process in this specific classroom and how the teacher is going to manage these diversities and its outcomes.

Considering the heterogeneity of this classroom, Alfred (2002) argues that this type of diversity, that is typical of adult education but especially of international programs in higher education, brings both enthusiasm and difficulty into the field. The enthusiasm comes from the potential for transformative change and innovation that can result in an attempt to embrace the diversity of perspectives that learners bring. On the other hand, adult educators and teachers are challenged by these contexts, especially if they want to establish a responsible learning environment where students can participate in the discourse of learning without sacrificing their personal and cultural identity. For example, in a context like the Italian university, adult educators and teachers who are working in a Eurocentric dominant institutional culture should consider the diverse range of social and cultural backgrounds that are brought by students, not least those coming from abroad, and that shape their experiences as learners. These challenges bring new questions into the field of research on the education and learning of adults, and my study addressing the presence of international students in an Italian university can sustain a better understanding and sharper awareness of the challenges entailed by it, and possible answers.

Another issue to be considered is learning as a much more complex activity than the individual.

Engagement, but also related to the social and cultural perspectives of the individuals. Some scholars in adult education such as Fenwick (2001) and Guy (1999) argued the importance of social and cultural contexts in determining what and how we know and learn. Based on this view, the sociocultural approach can evidently contribute to the field of adult education, since it addresses the significance of social and cultural perspectives that students bring to their educational environment.

The sociocultural approaches to learning are based on "the concept that human activities take place in cultural contexts, are mediated by language and other symbolic systems, and can be best understood when investigated in their historical development" (John-Steiner and Mahn, 1996, p. 191). From this point of view, an educational approach to teaching in a university is needed to focus and understand the cultural worlds within which students have grown and developed, how they interpret who they are concerning others, and how they have learned to process, interpret, and encode their worlds (Perez, 1998). Perez (1998) also added, as another principle of sociocultural theory, that students are members of a defined culture and bring a cultural identity, so the degree to which they engage in learning is a function of this cultural identity. However, today there is an increasing dissatisfaction with the notion of a 'defined' culture or cultural identity. In the era of super-diversity (Vertovec,2023) and transnationality (Ong,1999), it is acceptable that individuals can belong to many worlds, and they can learn how to shape and calibrate their identities in relation to different communities.

In this framework, learning cannot be considered to be content-free or context-free, for it is always filtered by one's previous experience with one or more cultures and one's ongoing developing cultural identity, that is shaped by the culture of origin (language, family, schooling, dominant or marginal values, and perspectives of meaning) as well as by further experiences. In other words, learning is connected to a specific content, and it takes place within a particular cultural context, including values, beliefs, and social norms of that culture. Lave (1988) considers learning as socially and culturally *situated* (Lave, 1988). It is actually a description of how learning and functional development shift from individuality to recognizing its connection to interactions with and within a larger sociocultural context.

1.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, I presented the main features and also criticisms of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. Then, I reviewed some previous work of different scholars on the sociocultural theory in the field of adult education, focusing on the application of the main principles of sociocultural theory like guided learning, social interactions, social justice, and cultural awareness in both teaching practices and contribution to a comprehensive understanding of adult development and learning experiences.

Furthermore, I specified the theory's implications from my study's perspective, including *first* the consideration and embracing of the diversity of the students and the social and cultural perspectives that they bring to their educational settings, *second* the need for educators and teachers at universities to focus and understand the cultural worlds within which students have grown and developed, *third* the consideration of learning as a socially and culturally situated process.

The specification of the implications of sociocultural theory lays the foundation for the next chapter. In chapter two of this research, I will further review the theoretical framework through an extensive review of the literature, and I will also illustrate the connections between Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and key concepts like cultural contact, cognitive development, and verbal interactions. The main objective of these illustrations is to explore how the sociocultural context shapes individuals' cognitive abilities, identity, and social and educational interactions in further chapters of this research.

Chapter Two: Culture, Cognition, Construction of identity, and Verbal Interactions
2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss the foundational constructs of my research weaving together theories and concepts related to cultural contact, and more specifically its relationship to cognition and the formation or transformation of identity. To contextualize my arguments, I initially describe notions of cultural cognition and language as means of meaning construction through verbal and nonverbal interactions. Regarding the interdisciplinary nature of my research merging two educational and sociocultural frameworks, the review of literature follows two perspectives. This multifaceted review aims to provide insights into the experiences of international students at a multicultural university focusing on their interactions, learning, and identity formation in Italy as their foreign educational and sociocultural setting.

2.2 Contact of cultures: the context of my research

In order to know how cultural contact affects individuals, I need to illustrate what I mean by contact of cultures. The history of humankind is full of examples of persons and groups who traveled to foreign lands for a variety of purposes, the main ones being to escape war, famine, poverty, and other life-threatening situations (there are millions of refugees in the world), as well as to work, study, teach, conquer, assist, have fun, or settle in the country (Bochner, 2003). No matter the reasons, traveling between societies involves some personal contact between culturally dissimilar individuals and groups, from both the travellers and the host-society members. Bateson (1935) suggests that in the exploration of culture contact, we should not only consider the contacts between two culturally different communities, but also the culture contact between differentiated groups of individuals within a single community. He adds that we can extend the idea of contact so widely as to include those processes whereby a child is molded and trained to fit the culture into which (s)he was born (Bateson,1935, p.179). For this research, I define culture contact as the concrete meeting between individuals with different cultural norms of behavior, beliefs, and characteristics such as race, skin color, language, and

religion. Based on the purpose of this research, I considered the idea of contact to explore the interactions of adult students from diverse cultures in a single sociocultural context which is the university of Milano Bicocca, in Milan, Italy.

The students of this research interact with other international students, teachers and their English-speaking classrooms in a multicultural university – or better, in a multicultural subsystem within the university. In fact, Milano Bicocca is an Italian university that is building an international reputation, hence designing courses for international students in English, but most courses are still in Italian and targeted to Italian students. Since the Eighties, there has been a thread of research on cultural contact among international students in Higher Education. Many scholars have become interested in such a context to explore the conflicts emerging from the intercultural interactions among students, the experiences of the students with these interactions, and the conditions upon which students from various cultures interact with each other (Cook, 1985; Smith, 1994, Salz & Trubowitz, 1997, Brewer & Brown, 1998; Dovidio, Gaertner, & Kawakami, 2003; Halualani et al., 2004).

For instance, Halualani (2008) claims that past intercultural contact studies have not noticed enough the need to focus on how the students define, experience, and interpret the ''what,'' ''how,'' and ''why'' of intercultural interaction in their own words and in the context of their lives, in order to gain a fuller understanding of this phenomenon.

She examined how culturally different students define, make sense of, and experience intercultural interaction at a multicultural university. She conducted 80 interviews with students of different cultural backgrounds and found that multicultural university students have complex and multilayered interpretations of intercultural interaction that are shaped in part by surrounding ideologies of diversity, specific definitions of culture, and perceptions of the nationality, race, or ethnicity of their interactants.

2.3 Identity construction from the sociocultural perspective

The sociocultural approach to identity formation views the poles of sociocultural processes on the one hand and individual functioning on the other as existing in a dynamic, irreducible tension (Wertsch, 1991). This approach considers these poles of sociocultural processes and individual functioning as interacting moments in human action (Wertsch,1991, Penuel & Wertsch, 1995, p. 84).

In order to explore the sociocultural aspect of identity construction in relation to my research, I intend to question how adult students' identity is shaped by contact with individuals from other cultures (international students) in a specific and new sociocultural context (the Italian university). So, I reviewed the existing literature that focuses on sociocultural studies of identity formation, drawing upon Vygotsky's approach.

Based on the significance of contributions to the main theory, I selected some of the most cited scholars who discussed identity formation from a sociocultural approach. The first one is Erikson (year) who provided a comprehensive outline of identity formation in the 50s, 60s, and 70s, that gave more weight to sociocultural processes in identity formation (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995). Erikson (1968) borrowed his basic definition of identity from James (year), who considered identity as a subjective sense of invigorating sameness and continuity. The sense of sameness is for Erikson an inner sense of being active and alive; it has a dynamic nature hence it is not based on permanence or stability (Erikson, 1968). Besides, Erikson argued that identity cannot be considered only in personal terms but must be integrated in terms of culture; he mentions "a unity of personal and cultural identity" (Erikson, 1968). Based on this, the ongoing process of identity formation brings an intrinsic tension between the individual and the collective, personal, and cultural forces. This conflict will depend on one side, on the force of social pressures to conform to cultural expectations, that is expressed by the degree of validation received by the other members of the culture and community to which one belongs. Today, we are more aware of the plurality of cultures and communities that are present in an individual's life, which brings another source of conflict.

On the other side, the individual brings his/her own strategies. In fact, Erikson integrates James's conceptions by considering self-reflection, self-observation, and self-judgment. He notes that family and others provide a set of expectations for individuals of what they can become and for what wider identity they look for confirmation, but he later emphasizes individual choices. Penuel and Wertsch (1995) in their work examined the contributions of Vygotsky and Erikson to a sociocultural approach to identity formation. They argue that although Vygotsky offers a complex account of sociocultural processes in the development of mental functioning, he does not offer any guidelines for understanding specific problems of identity formation. Moreover, Erikson's focus on individual choices in identity formation with Vygotsky's sociocultural approach should be integrated (Penuel and Wertsch,1995).

They presented an integrative sociocultural approach to identity construction, that considers sociocultural processes and individual functioning as interacting aspects in human action, rather than static processes that exist in isolation (Veresov, 2020) from one another. Action is

then the unit of analysis proposed by these authors to highlight the role of cultural tools in the formation of individual functioning:

"Human action, whether by individuals, groups, or institutions, provides the unit of analysis for a consideration of how individual intentions are, moreover, realized by different cultural tools or mediational means used for carrying out the action, tools that in turn shape individual functioning" (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995, p. 84).

They suggest that identity formation must be viewed as being shaped by and shaping the forms of action, that involves a complex interplay among cultural tools employed in the action, the sociocultural and institutional context of the action, and the purposes of the action (Veresov, 2020).

> Taking human action as the focus of analysis, we are able to provide a more coherent account of identity, not as a static, inflexible structure of the self, but as a dynamic dimension or moment in action, that may in fundamental ways change from activity to activity, depending on the way, in each activity, the purpose, form, cultural tools, and contexts are coordinated. (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995, p. 84)

They emphasize an action that is meaningful and shows how individuals use cultural tools to form their identities.

Another important addition to the sociocultural theory of identity formation is presented later by Wertsch (1997). He states:

> Knowledge about the past is widely viewed as a crucial ingredient in the construction of identity. From this perspective, we can't know who we are if we don't know where we have been, or, in the words of the historian David Lowenthal (1985): "the sureness of I was is a necessary component of the sureness of I am". (Wertsch, 1997, p. 5)

Wertsch assumed history is an essential ingredient in the construction of identity, and the way people narrate their past is a kind of cultural tool in a mediated action that constructs and

reconstructs identity. So, Wertsch's work is very valuable because it includes many important aspects of identity theorization, which are history, cultural tools, and mediated action.

Canagarajah (1999) brings a specific contribution to my study since he characterizes the sociocultural perspective of identity formation in educational contexts. He notes that:

> Learners should be encouraged to become reflexive about their classroom relations since knowledge is socially constructed. Eventually, learners must be encouraged to become reflexive about themselves, - i.e. how their values, community membership, historical background, and subject positions motivate them to negotiate language and knowledge in particular ways (1999, p. 186).

This author emphasizes the engagement of the students in reflective thinking regarding their classroom interactions because knowledge is culturally constructed. He believes that students need to be aware of the way their values, community membership, historical background, and contexts shape their knowledge and language. In other words, during the process of learning, there is an interplay between personal identity and the social nature of knowledge.

From the reflections of these theorists using a sociocultural perspective of identity formation, and from the sociocultural perspective itself, I will explore the processes of identity formation of the participants to my study who are individuals with diverse cultural backgrounds. The study identifies the participants' sense of belonging and becoming through their interactions with members of different cultures in a new social and cultural context which is Bicocca University in Milan, Italy.

2.4 Culture and mind

A review of the theoretical background of research related to culture and mind reveals that these studies are mostly developed in the field of Cultural Psychology. Bruner (2008) established this field by asking a main question: how does mind come under the sway of culture? Considering mind as 'inside' and culture as 'outside', we could ask: How does the 'outside' get 'inside'?

In the present research, I consider this approach within the framework of the sociocultural perspectives that I have presented in the previous chapter, focusing on cultural, historical, and institutional perspectives of mental functioning. Hatano and Wertsch (2001) note that the sociocultural approaches are given different labels, such as 'sociocultural', 'cultural-

psychological', and 'situative'. There is, in fact, considerable variation among them. However, the emphasis on the significant role of culture in shaping the mind is a shared idea among them. We can see these approaches as complementary parts of a larger whole (Hatano and Wertsch, 2001), and what is central among all of them is the emphasis on the significant role of culture in shaping the mind.

As I wrote in chapter one, probably the most significant early research attempt to promote this idea came from the Russian School of Lev Vygotsky (1978) and Alexander Luria (1971), and their associates in the West, including Michael Cole (year) and others Nisbett and Norenzayan, 2002). These scholars challenge a dominant belief that assumes the existence of singular, universal, and unchanging cognitive processes across various contexts, cultures, and historical settings (Nisbett & Norenzayan, 2002).

They argue that the social activities that are culturally constrained and historically developing can shape the cognitive processes (Luria, 1973, 1979). For instance, Luria claims the historicity of psychology:

> Psychological processes, and most of all, higher, specifically human, forms of psychological activity […] must be understood as a social phenomenon in origin, mediated in their structure, and consciously and willfully directed in their functioning […] psychological processes are of historical character and […] psychology must be understood as a historical science. (1971, p. 272)

For Vygotsky, the process by which culture becomes mind is 'internalization' (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015). It seems that Vygotsky's ideas about both culture and its internalization in the mind were influenced by the emergence of post-revolutionary Russian literary theory and psychology, he was deeply impressed by how new and changing worldviews produced by the Revolution among Russia's peasants also affected their sense of autonomous selfhood and their level of abstraction (Bruner,2008, p.33)

So, Vygotsky's notion of the relationship between culture and mind is based on internalization: the outside becomes inside. Internalization is in essence the process through which higher forms of mentalization come to be, and it assumes that the source of consciousness resides outside of the head and is in fact anchored in social activity (Lantolf, 2000). In order to gain a deeper understanding of the process by which culture becomes mind we need to understand better the process of internalization. Vygotsky and his editors in the book *Mind in Society*

describe the process of internalization in terms of three transformations, as Zittoun and Gillespie (2015) cited:

I. Initially, an external activity that is reconstructed internally. The development of higher mental functioning relies on the transformation of sign-using activity, and the development of practical intelligence, attention, and memory illustrates the history and its characteristics.

II. According to Vygotsky, all higher mental abilities appear twice in the life of the individual: first on the social level, and then on the individual level. The first one is between people and cultural artifacts, and later is inside the individual self and is carried by the individual. Zittoun and Gillespie (2015) describe the process as an interpersonal process that is transformed into an intrapersonal one.

III. The process of internalizing cultural forms of behavior includes reconstructing psychological activities based on sign operations (Zittoun and Gillespie, 2015).

Following this argument, I add three main points about the Vygotskian internalization process.

A) from this approach, culture and social interactions are internalized, and then they will appear in individuals' social functions;

B) the internalization of social and cultural activities is a distinctive characteristic of human psychology;

C) and the barest outline of this process is known, in other words, their understanding of this process is still basic, and it requires more exploration (Vygotsky, 1978, pp. 57–58).

Lack of clarity is the main criticism of internalization. Based on Vygotsky's concept of internalization, culture, social interactions, and actions are internalized, but it is not clear how these external phenomena are internalized (Zittoun and Gillespie, 2015*)*. According to Van der Veer & Yasnitsky (2011), the process of internalization has received some critiques after the

publication of new translations (i.e. *Thought and Language* in 1986 (Vygotsky, 1986), and the first volumes of the collected works. To contribute to the debates on the process of internalization, and also to provide a deeper understanding, Zittoun & Gillespie (2015) described the role of the experiences with the change of position and symbolic resources in the process. In the following part, I discuss these two types of experiences from the perspectives of position change, and symbolic resources.

a) *Experiences guided by social situations: from the perspective of position change*

Societies comprise numerous differentiated social positions both at a macro level and at a more micro institutional level, and even the level of routine practices, (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015). A social position is similar to, but with an emphasis on the social structuring of the situation to drive both thought and action. For instance, thinking of the social position of a student, a teacher, or a parent involves a diverse set of requirements, limitations, opportunities, and expectations that shape the individual's perspective and possibilities in their social positions. Zittoun and Gillespie (2015) note that the social positions can be identified at an abstract level, such as being in a group, being in power or poverty, being a minority, or facing discrimination. Research in social psychology demonstrates the surprising extent to which human behaviour can be determined by their immediate social situations (Gillespie, 2012).

People routinely experience changing their social position while moving from one situation to another one. In the long run, children become parents, employees become employers, students become teachers, and the unemployed become employed. But in a shorter time, positional changes can also happen on a micro level in the same situation, for example in the exchanges between helping and being helped, giving and getting, questioning and answering, talking and listening, apologizing and forgiving, and so on (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015). This description of a variety of changing situations and social positionings of human beings can be very useful for the approach of my study, since they affect learners, and provide mechanisms for the layering up or integration of different experiences, goals, and orientations within the individual (Smith. 1999), influenced by social interactions, positions, and cultural artifacts. This layering up or integration of different experiences shapes individual mental perspectives in those situations. For example, the perspective of a person as a teacher (you should do the tasks) is different from his/her position as a student (I should do the tasks).

Thinking about myself, coming to Italy brought about some shifts in my social and professional role. I experienced many changes in my position when I came to Italy. Firstly, my social

position from being a citizen in Iran became that of a migrant, a foreigner, and a visa bearer. Then, my academic position changed from being a teacher in my country to being a PhD student in Italy.

These changes in position and my changed social situation have demanded adopting new and different perspectives and strategies. I would go deeper into the psychological orientation if I could view the process psychologically. Ross & Nisbett (2011) noted that individuals' perspective and psychological orientation is significantly formed by their social position, and they stress the power of the social situation.

This review of social psychology emphasizes the process of layering up the mental perspectives of individuals by their social positions which is one of the aspects of formation of cognitive functions mediated by social life, and in other words, it is the process of internalization that I discussed before.

Educationally thinking, the concept of *guided experiences* by society and social relationships has also been used to sustain different educational practices that are mostly based on the sociocultural perspective. They assume that learning is socially situated and is dependent on the social relationships and practices that a person experiences in his/her position as a learner in a certain educational situation.

Vygotsky (1978) described learning as a process that occurs through activities that are mediated by social interactions and cultural artifacts. More recently, Mann (2011) worked on the different perspectives on the social cognitive development that come from individuals' previous and new experiences. From a sociocultural approach, he argues, the learner brings his or her personal knowledge, skills, attributes, and previous experiences, that have been built in another sociocultural setting. So, the learner faces and interacts with others, including teachers, students, colleagues, on the basis of those internalized experiences. According to Mann (2011), through these interactions with different experiences and actions, individuals acquire perspectives and knowledge and the ability to do some tasks well. This can happen due to the layering up of different experiences.

B) Experiences guided by cultural artifacts: from the perspective of symbolic resources

Another contribution to the debates and understanding of internalization was proposed with the concept of symbolic resources (Gillespie & Zittoun, 2010; Hale, 2008; Hale & de Abreu, 2010; Muller Mirza, Grossen, de Diesbach-Dolder, & Nicollin, 2014). Symbolic resources refer to complex semiotic artifacts, such as books, films, or songs. Using symbolic resources, education

can offer complex forms of semiotic mediation that facilitate the comprehension of new events and thoughts (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015).

Traditional cultural objects, such as books, films, or songs present a relatively stable form, because of their frame and their material or institutional support. They are made of a complex semiotic configuration of different modalities (sounds, words, colors) and they induce an imaginary experience. Therefore, a cultural experience – mediated through this kind of objects - is a semiotically guided imaginary experience, such as reading a novel or watching a movie. The semiotic guidance, here, comes from the outside while the experience itself comes from inside the person. Individuals feel a film scary, or romantic, because they have their own personal memories of events or situations, or an imaginary experience of what may happen and the associated embodied emotions (Vygotsky, 1971). These culturally guided experiences come from outside the person, but the experiences are built as inner psychological phenomena. These experiences can leave a strong impression, can be repeated, and eventually become personal.

People may refer to a movie situation or a book character, or think of a song, to make sense of a daily situation (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015). They conclude that what has been internalized is the pattern of experiences guided by semiotic configurations. Additionally, internalization is not putting "in" what has been "out": first, semiotic guidance operates at the boundary of self and the world; and second, it allows guiding one's inner flow of experience through semiotic configuration (Zittoun and Gillespie, 2015, p. 484). The developed idea of semiotic-guided experience in general is another approach to understanding how culture becomes the mind.

Vygotsky's conception of culture and mind has provided a new awareness of the field and has been strongly promoted by an international school of followers in different fields, such as an anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, two American cultural psychologists, Michael Cole and James Wertsch, Jerome Bruner, a psychologist in Education and culture, however the mechanisms of shaping mind by culture are still rather vaguely formulated (Bruner, 2008; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015).

A notable discussion on the sociocultural perspective of culture and mind is presented by Hatano & Wertsch (2001). They cited Säljö (1991) for his argument about the two main domains that are accepted by all socioculturalists: (a) interaction with other people and artifacts plays an important role in learning and in the development of mind, and (b) what occurs in the microenvironment in which individual learning is observed is affected by larger contexts, both at community and global levels. They refer to the importance of understanding the activities or practices that are involved in different settings and occasions. These practices are shaped by

the culture in which a developing person lives and result in some important outcomes (Hatano & Wertsch, 2001), such as the ability to interact in a multicultural society or classroom. This is a type of participation in the practices.

Based on Hatano and Wertsch (2001), repeated participation enhances the specific cognitive skills that are required to perform well in these practices, even when participants do not engage in them actively. Therefore, the authors expanded a set of factors that lead to the cognitive consequences of repeated participation in a given practice.

The first factor is cultural tools or mediational means. The common perspective among scholars who study cognition from a sociocultural approach is on human action that generically involves many kinds of cultural tools, which shape practices, and the cognitive functions resulting from these practices. More specifically, Vygotsky (1987), Bakhtin (1981), and Wertsch (1991, 1998) explored human action from the perspective of language. Hatano & Wertsch note:

> The power of language (e.g., grammatical organization, literacy, 'speech genres', narrative) to shape human discourse and thinking is so great that it is often quite justified to say that language does part of our thinking or speaking for us. The fact that forms of language reflect and reproduce specific cultural, institutional, and historical settings means that human-mediated action and humans in general are always socio-culturally situated. (2001, p.80)

The second factor is about the ways in which cognition is socioculturally situated by society and culture. Hatano & Wertsch (2001) highlight the role of narratives and story-telling in shaping thinking. They note that ways of telling stories are culturally prescribed and they are used in a variety of practices. These ways of narratives can be incorporated into the developing mind to form schemata for observing and comprehending the world as well as for talking about it. And finally, such schemata are examples of culture in the mind.

The third factor is cognition which is socioculturally situated based on the way it fits into the division of labor and distributed knowledge. When individuals work in a group, they construct a shared system of cognition, but they have different tasks or roles, and nobody has all the required knowledge to achieve the outcomes or to do well in an activity. A good example is outlined by Hutchins (1991) which is about a team navigating a ship. In this system, excellence can be achieved by understanding who can be trusted in different situations and tasks. These

experts have learned how to use social and cultural settings to facilitate their functions when they are involved in problem-solving activities.

In this section, I discussed different arguments to build a theory of the relationships between culture and mind. In doing this, I aim to support one of the main objectives of my research which is understanding the role of culture and cultural artifacts in sustaining the development of cognitive functions. As we understood,

a) there is an agreement in this field of studies on the important role of social and cultural interactions to shape learning and the development of mind, however, there have been some debates about the mechanisms entailed in the processes, and the factors that are involved.

b) The involvement of context, domain, type of cultural practices, and cognitive functions in the process doubles the significance and complexity of exploring the interplay between mind and culture, specifically in a particular context focusing on a particular cognitive function such as verbal interactions in an educational setting.

The consideration of the role of social and cultural interactions in shaping mind and mental functions like verbal interactions begins an account for how human mind can construct culture. Therefore, a coevolution of culture and mind can be realized.

2.5 Language beyond words: the multifunctional role of language in human exprience

As I anticipated in the introduction to the thesis, I have taught English in different settings, such as teaching students at universities, teaching teenagers in foreign language centers, and teaching foreign citizens in Iran from a mixed age range. From the viewpoint of a second language teacher, language is an object of learning, a tool, and a medium. When I started this research, my initial approach to language was only as a facilitator of learning, which I see as a process of discovery and development. So, a specific way to use language, beyond ordinary activities, is required to facilitate and sustain the learning process.

In the context of teaching, language is made of interrelated and rule-governed symbol systems, it is a social and purely human activity and a method of communicating ideas, emotions, and desires (Sapir,1921). It is used to create meaning, coordinate action with others (see Pearce, 2005), and build the context of interaction itself. As well as being a defining feature of culture, language is a presentation of our personal and social identities (Holmes, 1997), and a medium for forming interpersonal relationships, understanding social situations, extending experience, and reflecting on thought and action.

The sociocultural perspective allowed me to give a more significant and specific role to language. Language and speech have a special place in Vygotsky's psychological system because they play a double role (Vygotsky and Kozulin, 1986), as both tools for interaction and communication, on one side, and cultural tools mediating higher mental functioning an action, on the other side. So, this is how language became a key construct of my research, since it offered me the possibility to consider it in both ways. Following this multi-function representation of language, I will develop the related literature considering both functional sides and the interplay between them.

2.5.1 Classroom interaction

The first function of language is as a means of classroom interaction. Classroom verbal interaction and its contribution to learning have been studied by many scholars and researchers in educational sciences as well as psychology, sociology, and linguistics, such as Ellis and Shintani (2015); Markova, (2003); Gurevitch, (2001); Skidmore & Murakami, (2012). Tsui (2001) noted that the study of language and interaction in the classroom is not peculiar to second language classrooms, since more recently in the 1960s the educationists in the UK emphasized the importance of 'language across the curriculum'. Sedova et al. (2019) declared that the interest in how students participate in classroom talk is grounded in sociocultural theory and Vygotsky's theory of internalization and the interlinked nature of speech and thought (Vygotsky, 1978). Mitchell and Myles (2004) argued that learning is seen as a mediated process, and as a mental activity carried out through mental tools such as language. Through the negotiation process in a second language context, learners can use their first language to internalize and focus attention on second language knowledge (Gánem-Gutiérrez, 2008). This means that L2 learners in the language-learning classroom use language both as a means of mediation to enhance their ability to learn and as a tool (Alkhudiry, 2022). Drawn upon the sociocultural theory of Vygotsky, many scholars have explored different aspects of language. For instance, Lantolf and Pavlenko (1995), Cummins (2000), Blommaert (2010), Canagarajah (2018); Swain et al. (2015); Wedin & Norlund Shaswar (2023).

As I mentioned above, language is a central principle from a sociocultural perspective because it argues that the human mind is mediated by socially constructed symbolic artifacts and language is the most important of them (Lantolf, 2000). From a sociocultural perspective, language is a vital means by which humans represent thought. Vygotsky (1978) described language as not only a psychological tool for individuals to understand their experiences but also a cultural tool that is applied for sharing and interpreting experiences with others.

Therefore, it can be considered as a means of acquiring cultural awareness and understanding. Additionally, based on the sociocultural theory, an individual's language develops through functioning within the sociocultural activities, and since all social activities are structured and gain meaning in historically and culturally situated ways, the language used to describe an activity gains its meaning not from some underlying representation encoded in the words themselves but from actual communicative activities in different sociocultural contexts (Johnson, 2009).

2.5.2 Language and cognition: from thought to word and back again

> We are aware of ourselves. For we are aware of others, and in the same way as we know others; and this is as it is because in relation to ourselves, we are in the same [position] as others are to us. (Vygotsky & Kozulin, 1986,p.23).

The mentioned quote is a summary of Vygotsky's theory about individual consciousness development. He suggested that socially meaningful activity can serve as a generator of consciousness (Vygotsky & Kozulin, 1986) and individual consciousness is built through relations with others. According to Vygotsky, human higher mental functions must be viewed as products of mediated activity. The role of mediator is played by psychological tools and means of interpersonal communication (Vygotsky & Kozulin, 1986).The notion of a psychological tool initially emerged in Vygotsky's ideas by analogy with a material tool, that functions as an intermediate between the human hand and the object it interacts with. Vygotsky was in fact influenced by the Hegelian concept of the "cunning of reason" which is a process in which reason's mediating activity leads objects to act and react to each other based on their own nature. Vygotsky states that both material tools and psychological tools are artificial constructs since both are social. The material tools are aimed at controlling the natural process and objects, while the psychological tools master and shape natural forms of individual behavior and cognition. Later Vygotsky differentiated lower natural mental functions, such as elementary perception and higher or cultural mental functions, which are specifically human and appear as a transformation of lower functions. He adds that the lower-level functions after maturity do not disappear, but they are restructured and reorganized based on human social goals (Vygotsky & Kozulin, 1986).

In order to describe this process, Vygotsky follows Pierre Janet who claimed that intrapersonal processes are just transformed interpersonal relations (Vygotsky & Kozulin, 1986) and writes:

> Each function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people and then inside the child.
> (Vygotsky & Kozulin, 1986, p. 26)

This integration occurs in the process of *internalization* or the reconstruction of social activities with others that we bring to our minds. The process of internalization has been studied by the followers of Vygotsky such as Zinchenko, Vladimir (1985), Galperin, (1968), and Zaporozhets (2002).

For example, Lantolf (2000) in his work on the implications of the sociocultural theory for language education, notes that internalization is in essence the process through which higher forms of thinking will be formed. Based on the internalization theory, the source of consciousness does not exist only in our head, but it is rooted in our social activities. In other words, the activities are initially regulated by others, or better by interactions with others and the physical environment, but then, during the normal development, we learn to organize and regulate our own mental and physical activities, so that interaction is no more necessary. At this phase, psychological functioning comes (at least partially) under the voluntary control of the person. It is important to know that internalization is not just the transformation of external guidance into our heads. The sociocultural theory emphasizes that this process needs considering the possibilities and limits of natural mind and biological capacities.

Regarding this, Kozulin (1998) in cross-cultural research argues that all humans are capable of classifying objects, which may be a biologically specified ability. However, the criteria for classification and the way it is done are culturally specific. In some cultures, for example, the classification of objects is primarily based on the objects' functional role in everyday practical activity, while in others they are classified according to formal schema internalized in school. Therefore, even when an ability like classification has a biological basis, the concrete design that individuals apply is constructed culturally. This argument also rejects mental development in isolation.

Diaz and Berk (1992) explain the process of cognitive development focusing on a linguistic example based on self-directed speech in English. They describe this form of speech as unaccomplished dialogues between individuals with a close personal relationship or things that we sometimes tell ourselves, for example, when we use utterances such as What? Wait, done,

etc. This type of speech - called "private speech" - has social origins in the speech of/with others, but it takes on a private or cognitive function. As cognitive development proceeds, private speech becomes subvocal and ultimately evolves into inner speech, or language that at the deepest level loses its formal properties and gets brief. According to Vygotsky, it is in the process of privatizing speech that higher forms of consciousness arise on the inner plane and in this way our biological capacities are organized into a culturally mediated mind (Lantolf, 2000).

Therefore, I conclude this discussion emphasising the role of social activities, such as communication with others and linguistically organized mediational tools, in shaping all those activities that are linguistically organized, for example, conversations, metaphors, narratives, poetry, and writing. Here, I am mainly referring to Shore (1998) and Kozulin (2018).

I like to add that although Vygotsky's theory embraced all higher mental functions, Vygotsky himself was entirely interested in the development of language in its relation to thought. In Vygotsky's book *Thinking and Speech* (1934), he begins his argumentation by stating that previous researchers did not understand the "true nature" of verbal thought, since they did not consider that the meaning of words develops over time, thus one and the same word may refer to different aspects of reality. The adult's concept of "father," for example, differs substantially from the child's concept. Vygotsky added that the transition from thought to word and back again is actually a very complex process with various stages (van der Veer and Zavershneva, 2018).

2.5.3 Human language as communicative action: meaningful action

My other approach to language in this research is considering it as communicative action.

Drawing upon the sociocultural perspective, Wertsch, del Río, and Alvarez (1995) conceptualize the meanings of mediation by describing the role of language as communicative action. They argue that the communicative action (human language) has firstly an illocutionary function; it consists of an action by which individuals express claims about aspects of reality including personal experiences, shared understanding, and objective facts. It means that when people communicate, they can contribute to shaping and changing these aspects of the world. Therefore, this idea suggests that language plays an important role in the construction and formation of our understanding of the world. Indeed, these authors claim, language can be considered as "the author of the world" (Wertsch, del Río, & Alvarez,1995).

This is the first meaning that we can give to the concept of mediation.

Authors like Saussure, quoted by Wertsch (1995), argue that the formal relations established between phonetic production and representations of the world tend to become crystallized and makeup signs. These considerations are relative to the development of natural language in time, dependent on the sociocultural context. Therefore, the two faces of the sign (signifier and meaning) are not stable, due to their sociocultural nature.

Another function of communication as an action derives from individuals using language to express and declare things about the world. During this process, different aspects of the world can be rearranged and represented in specific signs and systems. The subjects internalize cultural knowledge and this itself makes up a filter for access to the world. This idea represents the second meaning of the concept of mediation.

As human activities mediated by language develop and change, the language also becomes channelled into different forms of organizations or discourses. Discourses are modalities for structuring language activity. People tell the world while acting within it. For example, the individual events and incidents to which they are linked turn to a meaningful configurational structure or story. Therefore, only in the case of meaningful action, the formed discourses contribute to the foundation upon which individuals build their understanding of the world. This is the third meaning that can be given to the concept of mediation (Wertsch, del Río, & Alvarez,1995).

To summarize, we have three meanings of mediation:

    a. The illocutionary function of language that contribute to shaping and changing the aspects of the world

    b. The internalization of cultural knowledge that acts as a filter for individuals' access to the world

    c. The formation of meaningful discourses by which individuals construct their understanding of the world

Regarding this, we understand the participants in interaction as human actors involved in the negotiation of meaning, and "orchestrating language and other semiotic resources to their advantage" (Canagarajah, 2018, p. 5). Verbal resources may obtain new meanings through negotiation and are here understood as mediated and nested in a variety of semiotic resources, and to that end "situated in expanded social, material, historical and geographical scales" (Canagarajah, 2018,p. 7).

2.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have conceptualised the key constructs of my research – culture, cognition, identity - from both the sociocultural and educational perspectives. My aim was to build a theoretical framework for these concepts in relation to the research objectives.

The most notable contribution of this literature review to my work is related to my understanding of two aspects. Firstly, the integrated and multifaceted role of key constructs of the research, such as language. My understanding transitioned from focusing its role mainly as a tool for verbal interaction to a deeper, more articulated and multifunctional construct, that highlights the relationship with communication and action in context.

Secondly, the exploration of the interrelations of the concepts reveals a dynamic process of coevolution. Consideration of the role of social and cultural interactions in a particular context in shaping mental functioning can be a starting account for the coevolution of culture and mind.

In chapters four, five, and six I present and discuss the participants' perspectives based on these explored contributions to achieve a deeper and more concrete understanding of my primary research goals. To this end, I applied an ethnographic methodology involving the interviews and classroom observations conducted during the research process. In chapter three I present my methodological approach to the research.

Chapter three Methodology: a journey in knowledge construction

3.1 Introduction

Doing a PhD research is an ongoing construction of knowledge and a learning journey. The topic of my study is especially layered and complex, it also involves me, the researcher, as a learning subject. So, my methodology grew with me, starting from a positivistic paradigm, and the idea of demonstrating a causal relationship between culture contact and cognition, and evolving through an exploration of themes and experiences in adult learning that cannot be reduced to linear causes. Hence, my epistemology became more constructivist in time and my methodology developed towards qualitative inquiry, namely an integrated ethnographic /autoethnographic approach.

In this chapter, I discuss my research paradigm, methodology, methods, and related ethical considerations. I also argue about the challenges I faced during the implementation of the research procedure. I begin with an illustration of social constructivism, the research paradigm that I have met and adopted along the way, and then I clarify my integrated approach to the methodology, merging ethnography and autoethnography, focusing on the meaning-making of lived experiences as the center of knowledge construction and learning.

3.2 Research paradigm: Social constructivism and interpretivism

While there are many constructionist frameworks (Galbin, 2014; K. Gergen, 2015; Lock & Strong, 2010), the main idea is that knowledge is socially and culturally constructed. Social constructivism is the paradigm that I have selected for my research; it can be considered as an alternative worldview in respect to the dominant paradigm of research (Creswell & Poth, 2015). Mertens (1998) notes that it is combined with interpretivism, hence highlighting the interpreting role of human subjects as constructors of knowledge. Kivunja & Kuyini (2017) argue that because the key tenet of the interpretivist paradigm is that reality is socially constructed, this paradigm has been called the Constructivist paradigm. In the social constructivism worldview, individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences about certain objects or things to understand the world. These meanings, which are negotiated

socially and historically, are varied and multiple and lead the researcher to look for the complexity of views rather than narrow the meanings down into a few categories or ideas (Creswell & Poth, 2015).

Schwandt (2014) described social constructivism in the following way:

"We are all constructivists if we believe that mind is active in the construction of knowledge. We believe that knowing is not passive or a simple imprinting of sense data on the mind. So, knowing is active, and it is the mind that uses these impressions and forms abstractions or concepts" (p. 36).

Regarding this view, constructivism means that human beings do not discover knowledge, but they construct and make it. We make concepts and schemes to make sense of the experiences. It is part of this paradigm acknowledging that these constructions have a contextual, cultural, situational, and historical dimension. Constructions and interpretations are not done in isolation, they come from shared understanding, practices, language, and so forth (Schwandt, 2014).

This approach had a major development at the end of the Nineties, when many different scholars argued in favor of it, such as Crotty (1998), Lincoln and Guba (2000), Schwandt (2001), and Neuman (2000).

Lincoln and Guba (1985), and Morgan (2007) suggested some characteristics of the social constructivism paradigm which are:

i. The belief that realities are multiple and socially constructed;

ii. The acceptance that there is inevitable interaction between the researcher and his or her research participants;

iii. The acceptance that context is necessary for knowledge creation and knowing;

iv. The belief that knowledge that is shaped by findings can be influenced by personal and cultural values, and these values need to be expressed openly for knowledge creation;

v. The need to understand each individual and the diversity and complexity of their experiences and to challenge the idea that universal laws can address human behaviours and situations;

vi. The belief that contextual factors need to be taken into consideration in any systematic pursuit of understanding;

Later, Creswell & Poth (2015) summarized the principles of applying the constructivist approach regarding the position of researchers. I outlined them as following:

a) The research questions become broader and general in a way that participants can construct the meaning of a situation, which comes from discussions or interactions with other persons;

b) A more open-ended questioning is preferred, because the researcher listens carefully to what people say or do in their life setting. Therefore, constructivist researchers often address the "processes" of interaction among individuals;

c) Researchers focus on the specific contexts in which people live and work to understand the historical and cultural settings of the participants;

d) Researchers know that their own background shapes their interpretation, and they "position themselves" in the research to understand how their interpretation flows from their own personal, cultural, and historical experiences. So, the researchers take responsibility for interpreting what they find, knowing that their interpretation is shaped by their own experiences, background, and frameworks of meaning.

In conclusion, the goal of a constructivist researcher and research is to make sense or interpret the meanings that others have about the world relying on the participants' views of the situation (Creswell & Poth, 2015). This requires specific methodological attention, as I will argue later.

3.2.1 Social Constructivism in education: Vygotsky's contribution

As I said, there are many forms and traditions of constructivism. Here, coherently with my theoretical framework (see previous chapters), I rely on scholars who have developed their epistemological reflections in the Vygotskian tradition. It is assumed by many scholars, indeed, that Vygotsky is the pioneer of social constructivism (Liu & Matthews, 2005; Liu & Chen, 2010; Chand, 2023). Based on Vygotsky's social learning theory, psychological phenomena emerge from social interaction. They are established by social relationships, and their elements are social artifacts such as signs, symbols, and linguistic terms (Liu & Chen, 2010). He emphasises "the significance of sociocultural learning; how learners internalize interactions with adults, more capable peers, and cognitive tools to form mental constructs via the zone of

proximal development" (America et al., 2021, p. 56). According to Chand (2023), the zone of proximal development is "the realm of potential learning that each learner could reach within a given developmental span under optimal circumstances and with the best possible support from the teacher and environment" (Oxford, 1997, p. 43). Following Vygotsky's ideas there are many social constructivists who argue that knowledge is initially generated in a social context and then utilized by individuals (Bruning et al., 2011; Eggen & Kauchak, 2004; Chand, 2023). Cole and Wertsch suggested a deeper discussion of Vygotsky's social learning assumptions relating to active learners. They discussed Vygotsky's emphasis on practice, speaking, and thinking as the focus of an extended treatment, in an educational context (Zinchenko, 1985). They noted that active individuals within an active environment are required to make "co-constructionism", a term that emphasizes the shared construction of understanding through interaction and reciprocity among people. Besides the active individuals and the active environment, the third essential element to sustain the process of co-construction is the product of an accumulation of prior generations which is culture (Liu & Chen, 2010). By this essential element, the active individuals and the active environment can interact with each other. In this view, the development of mind is the result of interaction – at the microlevel - of the human body/organism and the culture (language, artifacts, places, objects, institutions…) that plays the fundamental role of interconnecting and organizing people with each other and the surrounding environment (Cole, 1996; Wertsch, 1991, cited by Liu & Chen, 2010).

From this argument, we understand the interconnection and importance for (adult) learning and education (or, as Vygotsky assumed, social learning and construction) – and for my research - of the learners' active interactions, active environments, each individual's culture, and the cultural context where they are embedded. There is also a shared assumption on the close connection between the specific environment in which individuals live, and their psychological processes, as a link between Dewey (1938) and Vygotsky (1929) which is summarized in what John Dewey wrote:

"we live from birth to death in a world of persons and things which are in large measure what it is because of what has been done and transmitted from previous human activities. When this fact is ignored, experience is treated as if it were something, which goes on exclusively inside an individual's body and mind. It ought not to be necessary to say that experience does not occur in a vacuum. There are sources outside and individual which give rise to experience" (Dewey, 1938, p.39).

In this research, I embrace the belief that knowledge is constructed through active social interactions and cultural contexts. This perspective aligns with the idea that learning is a socially mediated process and emphasizes the role of social relationships, artifacts, and language in shaping cognitive development. By adopting a social constructivist paradigm, I realized the importance of sociocultural context in the generation of knowledge, which guides my epistemological orientation.

3.3 My integrated methodological approach: life stories combining ethnography and autobiography

My aim for applying a methodological approach to this research was to understand the students' experiences with their contact with other cultures in another sociocultural setting and the way that their identity, actions, and interactions have been shaped during this contact. What kind of methodology would be more adequate to answer my research questions and coherently represent the constructivist paradigm? I struggled for a while, to answer this question. In the process of doing my PhD, I met different methods and approaches, and finally, I decided to use a methodology combining ethnography and autoethnography with a narrative framework.

Firstly, I came to see a qualitative research approach such as ethnography as useful in exploring my research questions, regarding the cognitive development of culturally diverse students and their social and educational interactions in contact with others from different cultural backgrounds. In fact, an ethnographic approach considers what people do in a specific context and it is aimed at building a deep understanding of the inter-relations between cognitive, cultural, and communicational aspects of social life. In this regard, it has been used in research on higher education learners (Leavy, 2020). Ethnography in general refers to the description of people and their culture (Schwartz and Jacobs, 1979). In this sense, the subjects engage in meaningful behavior, and guide the mode of inquiry and orientation of the researcher. However, also due to constructivism and critical analysis of colonialism, in the last thirty years ethnography has developed from a more objectivist position to a new approach. Today, ethnographers cannot hide behind or try to pretend that they are completely neutral or objective in their descriptions of culture. Any attempt to do so signifies a lack of awareness of the interplay of interaction between ethnographer and participants, and at worst an abuse of power over research "subjects". The ethnographer's observations, in fact, suggest more about the

ethnographer and her/his orientation than about the reality of cultural "others" being studied (Adams, Ellis, & Jones, 2017).

In my case, as a researcher who was a full-time teacher and now is an international student living and studying in the same context as the participants, trying to be neutral about the students' views, experiences, and educational situation, was a challenging part of my exploration. During the research process, sometimes I naturally tended to give my voice to the research by talking about my own experiences in various situations, and sometimes the students were making connections to my position as an international student who probably had some shared experiences.

This awareness pushed me towards the autoethnographic approach (see next paragraph), by which my individual standpoint, position, stories, and experiences can be integrated into the research. Autoethnography is a form of ethnography (Creswell & Poth, 2015), often focused on connecting the researcher's self to a broader community (Qutoshi, 2015). Auto-ethnographers draw upon their own personal lived experiences and refer to the sociocultural settings where these experiences were embedded. They can also explore their experiences with respect to others, to make meaning of those experiences (Allen-Collinson, 2013; Luitel, 2009; Taylor et at., 2012). Reed-Danahay in her edited volume on autoethnography (1997), describes a "double sense" of this methodology. It encompasses both one's group and autobiographical writing with ethnographic interest. Therefore, either a self (auto) ethnography or an autobiographical (auto) ethnography can be signalled by "autoethnography" (1997, p. 2). She aims to point to how the two senses of the term are related.

A relevant aspect of ethnography and autoethnography is the use of narratives, and my research adopts a narrative approach. The importance of storytelling and personal narratives has been argued by several scholars from different paradigms and qualitative approaches (Bochner, 2014). It has been used, among others, to illustrate how a researcher's perspective informs and facilitates research processes, products, and the creation of culture (Adams, Ellis, & Jones, 2017).

Additionally, by adopting a methodology combining ethnography and autoethnography, I can have a more comprehensive understanding of the research concepts. In fact, I consider the ethnographical interviews to offer me an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, behaviors, and cultural values. At the same time, writing autoethnographic stories provides a detailed explanation of my own experiences within the research context. I conclude my notes on the process of integration of my approach in this research by referring to what Qutoshi

(2015) argued in his work because it addresses my standpoint to the integrated perspective that I have experienced through my research process,

> Embracing an auto/ethnographic journey not only enables to reflect critically on past and present experiences of the lifeworlds to bring a paradigm shift in thinking, beliefs, and perspectives but also it empowers to make the private, undetached-fluid self as public. And such kind change at conscious level that alters my way of being in the world is central to the field of transformative learning (Qutoshi, 2015,p.183).

3.4 My methods: purposes, main concepts, and practical aspects

3.4.1 Ethnography

Ethnography is a type of qualitative research methodology that is used to study cultures. Ethnographers study the meaning of the behavior, the language, and the interaction among members of the cultural groups (Creswell & Poth, 2015). The word ethnography comes from the Greek words ethnos, which means "the people" and graphics, which means "to write". Among many definitions of ethnography (Ryan, 2017), I refer to the way that Harris and Johnson (2000) described ethnography, that is as a written portrait of a people's customs, and beliefs, collected through fieldwork.

Ethnography originated from comparative cultural anthropology and was pioneered by early 20th-century anthropologists like Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, and Mead. While these researchers initially drew inspiration from the natural sciences, they set themselves apart from traditional scientific methods by engaging in firsthand data collection on existing "primitive" cultures (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994). In the 1920s and 1930s, sociologists, including Dewey and Mead at the University of Chicago, adapted anthropological field methods to investigate cultural groups within the United States (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). More recently, the scientific approaches to ethnography have evolved to encompass various "schools" or subtypes with distinct theoretical orientations and goals, such as structural functionalism, symbolic interactionism, cultural and cognitive anthropology, feminism, Marxism, ethnomethodology, critical theory, sociocultural studies, and postmodernism (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994, Creswell & Poth, 2015).

There are many forms of ethnography, such as confessional ethnography, life history, feminist ethnography, ethnographic novels, and the visual ethnography found in photography and video, and electronic media (Pink, 2001; Creswell & Poth, 2015). In my research, I used the

ethnography methodology focusing on the individuals' life histories and their lived experiences to understand their views toward the world and the way they analyze the world's phenomena. Ethnographers argue that they can better understand the beliefs, motivations, and behaviours of people than can other types of researchers. Furthermore, ethnography is an inscription practice whereby people's stories are represented (written or visually) in a historical, political and personally situated account, rather than simply as a research report (Monrouxe,& Ajjawi, 2020).

3.4.2 Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a method for exploring personal lived experiences in stories about the self told through the lens of culture to make meaning of the complex life within a sociocultural setting (Adams, Jones & Ellis, 2015). It is a product of three spaces (Qutoshi, 2015) that are the space of personal experience ("auto"), the space of description and interpretation ("graphy"), and the cultural space, made of texts, experiences, beliefs, and practices ("ethno") (Adams, Ellis, & Jones, 2017). Since this method is based on storytelling, Ellis and Bochner (2000) describe it as a "methodology that involves evocative, emotional, dialoguing and engaging writing […] closer to literature and art than to science" (p.740).

Autoethnographers can describe moments of everyday experience and epiphanies that cannot be easily captured through more traditional research methods, for example, a person who studies racism cannot do the study in a laboratory. Instead of simply gathering field observations or stories about racism, autoethnographers tell and analyse their own experience as victims, witnesses, or perpetrators of racism. Racism and the way that people experience it can be described and recorded by using personal experience in different situations such as learning or teaching in a university classroom (Boylorn, 2011). According to Adams, Ellis, & Jones (2017), by autoethnographic fieldwork, we can share what we see, hear, think, and feel to become part of the "field." Taber (2010) listed some of the writers and scholars who have conducted autoethnographic research such as Ellis and Bochner's (2000); Ellis (2002), Holt (2003), and Wall (2006). He adds that each of these authors addresses the use of self in a different way, but all of them bring emphasis on using and analysing the researcher's own experiences (Taber, 2010).

In choosing this method to be mixed with ethnography as the main method of this research, I considered the goals and contributions that were described by Adams, Ellis, & Jones (2017). The first goal they suggest focuses on personal experiences to provide alternatives to the dominant, taken-for-granted, and harmful cultural scripts, stories, and stereotypes (e.g.,

Boylorn, 2014). Autoethnographers may offer accounts of personal experience to complement or fill gaps in existing research. These accounts may show how generalization in research can mask important cultural issues (Adams, Ellis, & Jones, 2017), for example, social class and appearance (Hodges, 2014), gender norms in social interactions, smoking and eating habits in educational settings, cultural communicative behaviors in the classrooms.

The second purpose of autoethnography is related to articulating insider knowledge of cultural experience (Adams, Ellis, & Jones, 2017). The ethnographer can inform readers about some aspects of culture that everyone is not able to know. When we tell stories about issues such as racism, homesickness, loss that we experienced directly, or other experiences that we have lived as insiders of the researched phenomenon, our description is thick and reflexive, hence different from those who have not direct experiences with these issues, but also from other insiders. Besides, most autoethnographers tell their stories in a literary way, writing as an author in a way that other insiders may not be able to do (Adams, Ellis, & Jones, 2017).

The third goal of autoethnography is to show how the researchers' observations and conclusions can offer insights that go beyond attempts to counter judgmentalism, colonialism, othering, and racism present in potentially harmful ethnographic accounts by cultural 'outsiders'(Adams, Ellis, & Jones, 2017). Instead, it aims to bring nuance by highlighting the complex ways in which these insights contribute to a deeper understanding of cultural dynamics and interactions. Smith (1999) notes that social research is "not an innocent or distant academic exercise but an activity that has something at stake and that occurs in a set of political and social conditions" (p. 5).

The fourth and final purpose of autoethnography, according to Adams and colleagues (2017), is to create texts that are accessible to larger audiences, even audiences from outside of academic settings. Examples of these types of texts are those written by scholars who share their research on social media sites, international news sources, or online blogging sites. These authors believe that by doing auto/ethnography they can involve both academic and non-academic audiences.

3.4.3 Narrative Inquiry

Narrative research also has many types, uses a variety of analytic practices, and is rooted in different social and humanities disciplines (Daiute & Lightfoot, 2004). The term 'narrative' can be assigned to any text or discourse. In the context of qualitative research, it can be used in an inquiry framework with a specific focus on the stories shared by individuals (Creswell &

Poth, 2015). Pinnegar and Daynes (2006) suggest narrative can be both a research method and the subject of the study. As a method, it begins with the experiences as expressed in lived and told stories of individuals. Various analytical approaches have been used by writers to understand these lived and told stories.

For this research, I define narrative as a qualitative method in which "narrative is understood as a spoken or written text giving an account of an event/action or series of events/actions, chronologically connected" (Czarniawska, 2004, p. 17).

To apply this method my focus is on studying a few numbers of individuals, gathering data from their stories and individual experiences, and making meaning of these experiences and stories. Narratives can also be employed to document, affirm, or critique various aspects of human experience, such as social structures, lifestyles, and policies (Formenti, 2014). Additionally, adopting a narrative method together with my another methods allows me for the development of reflexivity, relationships, dialogue collaboration, and interpretation (Bochner & Herrmann, 2020).

Based on Creswell & Poth (2015), narrative research includes various approaches. One of them focuses on analytic strategies. Polkinghorne (1995) distinguishes between "analysis of narratives," involving the identification of themes across stories, and "narrative analysis," where researchers collect descriptions of events and shape them into a coherent story. Chase (2005) aligns with Polkinghorne's approach, suggesting narrative studies can explore how individuals navigate social resources, engage in interactive performances, and construct interpretations.

Another approach emphasizes the diverse forms of narrative research practices which include biographical studies, by which researchers document another person's life (Ellis, 2004). Life histories capture an individual's entire life, while personal experience stories focus on specific episodes or folklore oral history involves gathering personal reflections on events from one or multiple individuals(Creswell & Poth, 2015) and so on.

3.5 Building the field

There are obvious constraints on finding and approaching participants and fields for any research, and there are considerable specific constraints if your research is qualitative (Richards, & Morse, 2012). The most important constraints are related to ethical issues and practicability. If, for instance, we want to work with vulnerable populations such as some

cultural groups (Richards & Morse, 2012), we must obtain different types of permission depending on the institutional level and condition of our research field and populations. Moreover, having permission, proper access, and relevancy together provide practicability.

From the beginning of my research journey, I was thinking of having a sample of students, but I was not sure about which students of which level and which institution. Regarding the conflicts in my mind about language use and learning, specifically English, I needed some adult students who were non-native speakers of English language in an English-speaking context. To select the research field in qualitative studies, the research purposes, the need for the research, what gave rise to the research, the problem to be addressed, and the research questions can be taken into account (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2002), however, my experience in the qualitative research approach shows that all these items can be changed during the process of the research. The first institution that came to my mind as a research field was the university in which I was studying; in fact, the access to the students at this university could be more convenient for me as a student/researcher who is not from Italy and at that time was not familiar with the educational, academic, and even the geographical system of Italy.

At Milano-Bicocca University, most courses for Bachelor's degrees are in Italian, so I had to think about students who were studying for their Master's degree or Ph.D. The latter do not have to attend many classrooms, so Master students were the best option. I was in Italy, where the first language is Italian, but there are many non-native speakers from other countries, who came to Italy for different purposes: education, immigration, job. So, English is used as a second language to sustain communication among people of diverse origin. At this point, I was asked if I wanted to focus on Italian or international students. I decided to target international courses in English including foreigners as well as Italian students. The reasons for this choice consist of my curiosity and interest in the diversity of students in an educational context, the increasing number of international students in Italy, and having the chance to use my personal experiences of educational and cultural practices.

Then I had to define the size of my research sample. The sample size used in qualitative research methods is often small because qualitative research methods are concerned with gaining an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon and focus on meaning (Dworkin, 2012). Besides, they demand a considerable time for data construction, analysis, and interpretation. Most researchers in the qualitative approach are not interested in discussing how many participants are enough, since their aim is not to generalize, but they praise the "the quality of data, the scope of the study, the nature of the topic, the amount of useful information obtained

from each participant, the use of shadowed data, and the qualitative method and study designed used" (Morse, 2000, p.1).

I aimed to listen to the students' stories and to interview and observe them in a natural setting, so a small number of students were chosen to participate in the research. After deciding on the sample size and type, I needed a sampling strategy to select the participants. According to Morrison (1993), the quality of research depends not only on the appropriateness of methodology and methods, but also on the suitability of the sampling strategy that has been adopted. I decided to apply snowball sampling because this method is useful for sampling a population where access is difficult, or where communication networks are underveloped (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2002). In this method of sampling, researchers identify a small number of individuals who have the characteristics in which they are interested. These people then contribute to the researcher as informants to identify or to put the researchers in touch with the others (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2002). Therefore, most participants of this study were introduced to me by other participants, after I explained my research goals and required conditions. I involved 12 international students from different countries. All of them are studying in different Master courses of the Science School at the University of Milano-Bicocca. All the students are attending a course that is presented in English, so the language of instruction and interactions in the classroom is English. In the following table in the next page, I summarized the key information of the participants of my study.

N	Name	Age	Gender	Country	First language	Second language
1	Abai	25	Male	Ethiopian	Amharic	English
2	Nima	27	Female	Iranian	Persian	English
3	Amanda	24	Female	Brazilian	Portuguese	English
4	Lucia	22	Female	Italian	Italian	English
5	Amer	24	Gay male	Turkish	Turkish	English
6	Parvin	25	Female	Uzbek	Uzbek	Russian
7	Mao	38	Female	Japanese	Japanese	Portuguese
8	Victoria	23	Female	Ethiopian	Amharic	English
9	Sheri	22	female	Indian	Indian	English
10	Luis	23	Male	Spanish	Spanish	English
11	John	26	Male	Guatemalan	Spanish	English
12	Dayzi	23	Female	Filipino	Filipino	English

Table one: key information of the participants of the research

I interviewed the students all individually. Except for one of the interviews, that was done online, I did all the interviews face-to-face and in English language. some of the interviews were not informative enough due to the time limitation of the interviewees for example, so, after some weeks, I conducted follow-up interviews with six of the students to get enough information and understanding from the collected data.

During the field-building process, I experienced various challenges. Some of the students refused to participate in my research or they changed their mind. I realized from their words that a reason for rejection, at least for someone, was their lack of confidence in providing informative and helpful insights during the interview process. It seems very common that participants are eager to be "good interviewees," and want to give the researcher something that is valuable; so, this can paradoxically block the production of interesting stories and descriptions (Brinkmann, 2013, p.16) or change their mind about attending in the interview sessions.

3.6 Ethnographic interviews: a conversational approach

Qualitative interviewing has become one of the most widely used research tools in the human and social sciences such as in Education, and a very widespread method for collecting data in ethnographic research in particular (Brinkmann, 2013; De Fina, 2019). Denzin and Lincoln noted that "the interview is the favorite methodological tool of the qualitative researcher" (2004, p. 353). However, there are many different ways to frame the interview as a research method, so my aim is to keep coherence with my epistemological and theoretical framework. In this respect, it is significant to know that an interview is a social, interpersonal encounter, not only a data collection exercise (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2002), and the use of this method is considered a move from seeing human subjects as mere sources of information toward recognition of their capacity to create knowledge as generated between humans, that is often through conversations (Kvale, 1996). Emphasizing the importance of conversations as a central resource in the construction of knowledge, Brinkmann states:
"People talk with others in order to learn about how they experience the world, how they think, act, feel and develop as individuals and in groups, and in recent decades such knowledge-producing conversations have been refined and discussed as *interviews"(*2013,p.1).

In a philosophical sense, since we are linguistic creatures and language is best understood in the context of conversation, all human research is conversational (Mulhall, 2007), and this

conversational process of knowing has been conceptualized as interviewing. The focus on the concept of conversation in the form of interviews in human and social sciences does not only aim at devising another research method, but a means of knowing people and their cultures in depth, since "cultures are constantly produced, reproduced, and revised in dialogues among their members" (Mannheim & Tedlock, 1995, p. 2). The conversational nature of human life can provide a bed for the exploration of cultural phenomena, or what we call ethnography. This achieves its best results through the combination of the interview with ethnographic methods, as De Fina (2019) described.

Applying ethnographic interviews in qualitative research dates back from the early work of anthropologists such as Margaret Mead (1928), Bronislaw Malinowski (1922), and Clifford Geertz (1972, 1983). They were initially seen as participant observers, taking ethnographic notes to grasp the natives' point of view, their relation to life, and to realize their vision of the world (De Fina, 2019). In the late 1980s and 1990s, qualitative interviewers experienced the "interpretive turn" (Rabinov & Sullivan, 1987). The interpretive turn refers to a major paradigmatic change, abandoning the view of reality as something external that could – and should - be captured by the researchers, to see the process of knowledge creation as shaped by the subjectivity of researchers (De Fina, 2019). This view emphasizes an interpretive process through which the specific interactions between the researcher and the field/participants bring to the construction of the interpretations of cultural practices.

This process of knowledge construction is strongly dependent on the relationship between the interviewers and the interviewee, and the development of their conversations. The issues related to the interviewer-interviewee relationships have been discussed from two main perspectives. According to Creswell (2013), one of them is related to the positioning of the researcher, both in relation to the interviewee and to the context and the process of the research. Many researchers using ethnographic methods have commented on how their identities as insider outsiders affected their ability to relate to members of the community they were studying. For example, De Fina (2003) talks about how she realized in the course of her project she needed to reveal her nationality to her informants, who were Mexican migrants, to gain their trust. Creswell (2013) notes that the identities of interviewers and their reciprocal relations with interviewees have been conceptualized as questions of positionality (De Fina, 2019).

The other perspective is about the ethics of interviewing. Treating the interviewee as a source of information rather than an informant (Mishler, 1986) has been an ethical issue for qualitative interviewers. There are many suggested ways to reduce these issues, for instance, using words

and creating a context to involve the interviewees as research collaborators, explaining the research goals to them, asking their ideas about the used methods and tools, suggesting them to read the transcribed data, and the research findings, and asking their feedback. During the interview sessions, I suggested the participants of my research read the research findings, and some of them seemed interested in that.

Among the main categories of qualitative interviews that are structured, semi-structured, and unstructured (Edwards & Holland, 2013, p. 29). I chose the semi-structured interview. "it is defined as an interview with the purpose of obtaining descriptions of the life world of the interviewee in order to interpret the meaning of the described phenomena" (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008, p. 3).

The most important reason for my choice was that the semi-structured interview allows flexibility and the improvement of the relationship between interviewer and interviewee.

Furthermore, in semi-structured interviews, as researchers we have not only a specific topic in mind but also a set of questions about the topic that may change according to the response and interest of interlocutors, and we can allow the participants to digress ensuring flexibility while considering time limitations (De Fina, 2019).

Focusing on the main objectives of the research, I used some topics as the guidelines for conducting the interviews. These topics are summarized in the following table in next page together with the themes that emerged from conducted dialogues.

Topics	Themes
I. Can you share your experiences with living abroad(in Italy and any other country) and the cultural contacts that you have had?	i. culture contact experiences ii. understanding cultural diversity iii. expression of cultural identities iv. identity construction v. cultural shock
II. How do you think your cultural contacts and context have influenced your thoughts and beliefs?	i. reflection on cognitive activities ii. transformation of mental functioning iii. cognitive activities like sensing thinking, reasoning
III. What are your experiences with encountering language diversity, and more specifically with the use of English and Italian languages?	i. Language diversity ii. Students' perspective on the use of English iii. Italian, and their first languages iv. Language barrier
IV. How would you describe your interactions inside and outside the classroom in contact with other cultures and cultural contexts?	i. Social interactions ii. classroom interactions iii. factors fostering communications iv. communications barriers, language barriers v. productive/ unproductive classrooms vi. diverse educational backgrounds vii. linguistic issues

Table two: topics and the themes emerged from conducted dialogues

Applying this type of interview also covers the emergence of life stories, and biographical narratives, in which interviewees' opinions and experiences in specific domains of life are elicited through the conversations and interactions between the interviewer and interviewee.

My aim for doing the interviews was to understand the students' experiences with their contact with other cultures in another sociocultural setting and the way that their identity, actions, and interactions have been shaped during this contact. It is notable that while students were talking about their current situations and experiences, they recalled to the same extent events from the past in their own countries or other countries that they have lived in before. This transition between past and present gave me some clues about participants' life experiences and variations over time in different contexts. Moreover, through our conversations, I have discovered many new ideas and refined my initial theory. These outcomes were beyond my initial expectations from interviewing.

During the interviews, I faced some challenges, for example, the participants' refusal or difficulty to talk about their experiences with, for instance, the educational system, social interactions, and living issues in Italy because they wanted to be careful to not share any information or personal experiences that can put their current positions at risk. Even though research procedures are regulated by ethical committees, researchers still face questions about privacy and confidentiality (De Fina, 2019).

There was a question that all the participants of my study who did not know me before asked: "Where are you from?''. I replied: "From Iran". This short exchange has considerably reduced the challenge of students' resistance to talk during the interview. For them, my status as a foreign student was a type of evidence of my trustworthiness and safety, because they could share their experiences and life stories with someone who might have similar situations and experiences. This is my feeling and my guess, based on small clues. For example, when students used the expressions such as, "*You may know",* and *"you may face",* or when they used the pronouns of *"we"* or *"us".* To me, these linguistic clues suggest a sense of shared situations and experiences.

3.6.1 Interview Recording

I audio-recorded the interviews using my cell phone. I knew that the participants might feel uncomfortable and unsafe with being recorded, so I explained to them the purposes of recording their voices and the considered ethical regulations for their privacy (see further on, 'Ethical

considerations'. However, I could feel that a few of them were not completely ensured even after my explanations. In the following chapters, I will describe the participants' positioning as supportive informants, and how it made them accept the conditions of the interviews such as being recorded. Following my argument on the issue of recording the interviews, I refer to *Merrill* and West (2009) who describe the goal, and challenges of mainly PhD students as the interviewers, and also the participants' reactions toward it:

> We favour recording interviews, partly to enable us to listen more attentively, but their presence needs to be talked about with our interviewees. In running workshops for doctoral students, the use of recorders can be a major topic for discussion. One would-be biographical researcher, after being interviewed, felt he was talking to two people: the interviewer and the recorder. He was aware that someone else – a transcriber – would listen to the material and this made him feel, initially, uneasy. On the other hand, most people will accept the use of recorders and soon forget their presence. We need to talk openly about such matters with our subjects as part of building good and reflexive practice (Merrill & West, 2009, p. 124).

3.6.2 Transcription

I transcribed all the interviews. To understand and interact with the participants' words, feelings, and shared viewpoints better, I needed to transcribe the interview as they were told. As I mentioned before, all the participants of my study are non-native English speakers and I conducted the interviews, except for one, in English as the shared language used by students for their communications in Italy. This made me face struggles with students' language fluency and accuracy. Their mistakes in grammatical structures and vocabulary, when written down, were even more problematic than when I was talking to them, because I had more clues to understand them in the context of the interviewing than reading my manuscripts later. My other concern was that using a language that is not well known could very easily bring to misunderstandings, dichotomies/hyper-simplifications, or contradictions, so I wondered how I could make the right or reliable interpretations.

Thus, I shared the transcriptions with my supervisor, and since she also had the same concerns after reading them, we decided to correct only those mistakes that clearly caused problems in understanding the texts. In the transcriptions, I used some signs, including three dots that

indicate pauses, the parentheses for inaudible or unclear words, brackets for nonverbal communication like laughing or crying, and so on.

3.7 Classroom naturalistic observation

"Observational data are attractive as they afford the researcher the opportunity to gather 'live' data from 'live' situations. The researcher is given the opportunity to look at what is taking place in situ rather than second hand" (Patton, 1990, p.203)

Morrison (1993) argued that observations enable researchers to gather data on the interactional setting, such as the interactions that are taking place: formal, informal, planned, unplanned, verbal, non-verbal etc. Among the different types of observations, I apply the naturalistic observations for my research since it is common within the interpretivist or constructivist paradigm. The naturalistic observation acknowledges the importance of context and the co-construction of knowledge between researcher and 'researched' (Mulhall, 2003). This type of observation is known as an unstructured observation. In contrast with a structured observation that is very systematic and enables the researcher to generate numerical data from the observations (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2002), unstructured observation is used to understand and interpret the behaviors. Mulhall (2003), however, emphasizes that labelling the naturalistic observation as 'unstructured' is misleading, because it may give the idea of an asystematic or sloppy process. This is false, since it does not follow the approach of strictly checking a list of predetermined behaviours, as it would occur in structured observation, but simply avoids predicting the behaviors that might be observed. Obviously, the observers have ideas and expectations in their mind, but they may change during the observation and gaining experiences (Mulhall, 2003).

Another important argument about naturalistic observation is the degree of participation in observation (LeCompte and Preissle, 1993, p. 93–94). So, there are different types of observers, such as a complete participant is a researcher who takes an insider role in the group and is an unknown researcher. Another type of participant is the participant as an observer, this participant is a part of the social life of the participants of the research and records what is happening for research purposes. The observer as a participant is a known researcher to the participants of the research and may have less contact with them (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2002).

Regarding this argument, I see myself as both the participant as an observer and the observer as a participant, since I had access to the participants both during my fieldwork and in some informal social meetings and occasions. Besides, as I will show, there were clues that the students saw me in both ways themselves. I decided to take this in-between position when I found out that observational data from social events could be complementary to what I observed in the classrooms. I add that I am aware of the possible risks entailed by this choice.

In the classroom, I have observed each participant/student three times in three sessions of her or his different courses. My intention was to have more trustworthy information and understanding about students' classroom situations and interactions by staying with them for a longer time. Morrison noted that by 'being immersed in a particular context over time not only will the salient features of the situation emerge and present themselves but a more holistic view will be gathered of the interrelationships of factors' (1993, p. 88).

As any method that we use for collecting (or generating) data, observation also brings some arguments or struggles that we need to be cautious about when we are in the field. For example, the observer's selective attention about what can be seen, depending on where we look, what we look at, how we look, what we think, whom we look at, what is in our minds at the time of observation; what are our interests and experiences.

Another challenge with doing the observations is about the participants who may change their behavior if they know that they are being observed; for instance, they may try harder in class, they may feel more anxious, they may behave much better or much worse than normal, they may behave as they think the researcher would wish them to (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007), and put the observer a situation of distraction."Attention deficit" (Cohen et al., 2007.p. 404) is another downside. It is about the possibility of being distracted or missing an event in the observation context. To cope with these risks, I tried reflexivity to improve my self-awareness of biases, I tried different perspectives to mitigate the selective attention, and ensure a comprehensive view of the observed context. In the field, I tried to position myself to the participants of the study in a way to reduce the observer effect.

3.7.1 Recording observations

According to Mulhall (2003), every ethnographer or observer has his or her own preferred strategies for recording data. I used field notes to record data from my observations. Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2002) noted that field notes can be written at several levels. One of

these levels that I used in the process of recording observations is the level of description (Spradley, 1980; Bogdan and Biklen, 1992; LeCompte and Preissle, 1993) that includes:

• quick, fragmentary jottings of key words

• transcriptions and more detailed observations in written form

• descriptions that, when assembled and written out, form a comprehensive and comprehensible account of what has happened;

• pen portraits of participants;

• reconstructions of conversations;

• descriptions of the physical settings of events;

• descriptions of events, behaviour, and activities;

• description of the researcher's activities and behaviour (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2002).

I tried to take notes of the events as soon as they occurred, both in the classroom and outside of the classroom. I wrote about:

    a. How the environment looks like

    b. How individuals interact, behave, and talk

    c. How their activities are processing

    d. Conversations and dialogues

    e. My personal reflections and thoughts are based on my own experiences and conflicts that as Mulhall said influence the way in which we filter what we observe (2003, p.311).

3.8 Ethical considerations

A qualitative researcher usually faces many ethical issues during data collection in the field, data analysis, and publication of the research. I found that ethical issues often have a central message which is avoiding harming the research participants (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Despite following the formal ethical issues regulations and requirements presented by the University of Milano-Bicocca, including the signed consent letters for each participant, and the permission letters signed by the professors for attending their classrooms as a participant observer, I needed to consider the related ethical issues in various parts of my research process.

A summary of my approaches regarding the ethical rights of the participants of my research is,

a. to protect the anonymity of the students, I did not mention their real names, but I chose an avatar inspired by their diverse nationalities.

b.   I explained to them clearly that they were participating in a study with fundamentally educational objectives.

c. I tried to ensure them about protecting and respecting their private life stories and narratives.

3.9 From data to theory: Meaning making out of the lived experiences

Doing autoethnographic research that includes autobiographical stories and ethnographic interviews and observations, and using constructivist or interpretivist lens, my aim is to explore and reflect the construction of selves and meaning making out of lived experiences in a particular sociocultural context (Luitel, 2012). If I talk with others about the past, it is to reflect on experiences and represent them in a meaningful way, as stated by Adams, Ellis, and Jones:

"We use the tenets of storytelling devices, such as narrative voice, character development, and dramatic tension, to create evocative and specific representations of the culture or cultural experience and to give audiences a sense of how being there in the experience feels" (2017, p.2).

The analysis of these narratives is essential to move beyond mere description and go for meaning making. "Analysis helps us to make sense of a person's story but also to move beyond description, as important as this is, to refine understanding in more systematic and sustained ways" (Merrill & West, 2009, p. 128). The process of interpretation and construction of meaning goes beyond the identification and recordings of qualitative data (Willig, 2012), and this needs a foundation for the chosen analytic approach, namely a choice between an inductive, or a deductive approach.

In the inductive approach, researchers move from specific instances to the general, and they extract concepts or themes from raw data. Conversely, the deductive approach involves applying a theory to data. As qualitative researchers (Creswell, 2013; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Leavy, 2020), in line with the constructivist paradigm, where knowledge is co-constructed through conversations, I employed an inductive approach. This means engaging with the data first, allowing themes and concepts to emerge. I aim to foster a dynamic interaction with the data, focusing on generating context-based subjective/intersubjective meaning (Qutoshi, 2015).

Working intensively and iteratively with the qualitative materials of my research I have experienced a range of various feelings and ideas triggered by listening to the different stories, reading field notes and transcriptions, and trying to grasp the essence of what was being told. I was reacting, and thinking about what I heard, and what I read, and how they were related or not related to my research purposes. Unlike the common belief among novice researchers such as PhD students that working with the given information or material is easier than working on the abstract parts such as theory, epistemology, or methodology, I believe that working with the narrated stories and experiences is a highly complex task, because when I am interacting with the participants, I feel deeply involved in the meaning that they are presenting to me, their life, people in their life, their success, their difficulties and experiences, even those that are not related to my research. Yet, when I have to analyse these stories, I need to find detachment, and a new perspective. I have to consider all these stories as constructions, so they are partial and shaped by the present context and the interpretation of the situation. As a constructivist researcher, my aim is not to search for the truth, or for a real account of experience. It might be that some stories are just stated. Yet, they present meaning that is relevant to the subject, and to the situation. Furthermore, Formenti (2014) notes that individuals' stories, for example, show more than personal meaning-making, since they include ideas, myths, perspectives, and paradigms that come from an individual's family, environment, culture, and relationships. She also mentions the role played by language in storytelling, by learned cultural frameworks, and the structuring influence of social factors such as gender, age, social status, and education, that shape the content and the form of collected stories.

During the process of analysis or meaning making of the generated data of interviews, I was careful to pay attention to all these aspects when I was trying to find the answer to the entire research questions and also to new emerging questions, shaped by listening and interacting with the research participants.

For the analysis of students' behaviour and interactions in the classrooms, my interpretation already started from the observation field, when I needed to decide what evidence could be relevant for my judgment. For example, when I was observing some behaviour, such as smiling, how could I interpret it? Was it a nervous smile, a friendly one, or an opponent smile? In writing my notes, I realized that my interpretation never stopped. Our recordings, such as field notes, are a part of the interpretations that we make from the phenomena (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007).

To gain a deeper understanding of the ongoing observed communication, and the meaning it created, and to identify the relationship with theory, I applied ethnographic content analysis (Altheide, 2001), since it provides me with a reflexive movement that connects every part of my research: concept development, sampling, data collection, data coding, data analysis, and interpretation. Although there are some categories that lead the research from the beginning (see chapters one and two), new emerging categories and ideas are allowed and expected to appear during the study. Therefore, ethnographic content analysis is embedded in constant discovery and constant comparison of relevant situations, settings, styles, images, and meanings (Altheide, 2001).

Through my analysis, I employed a systematic approach to identify themes from the generated data. Initially, I did a manual coding by assigning descriptive labels to the relevant segments of the data. Then I identified connections and relationships between the labels or codes and grouped them into broader categories. These themes (see Table 1) were then reviewed to ensure that each one made a key contribution to answer the study's research questions. I also assessed that data were rich enough to evidence the themes, the themes were coherent, and they contributed to the overall narrative behind the data (Braun and Clarke, 2022).

The result of the interpretive analysis for this research is presented in chapters four to six. Chapter four aims to answer research questions one and two that was extracted from the analysis of the data: *"How do international students in higher education experience and narratively construct their contact with other cultures"? "How do Individuals identify themselves in a new sociocultural context"?* Chapter five replies to the third question of the research which is: *"How do students shape their mind, thoughts, and cognitive abilities through it",* chapter six includes the fourth research question: *"How cultural contact can be an occasion to develop or hinder students' social and classroom interactions"?.* Chapter seven finalizes the thesis presenting the final discussions and conclusions.

3.10 Ending notes

My main goal for changing my research paradigm was that I found my PhD as the best opportunity for learning and integrating my perspectives toward doing research in education. The process of choosing the research approach and paradigm for my research reveals a big shift from a quantitative and objective research background to a qualitative and subjective one. Before I mentioned that it was an experience of transformative learning (in the introduction section).

Through choosing the constructivism paradigm, I experienced transformative learning which is the process of making meaning of our experiences through reflection, critical reflection, and critical self-reflection. I have changed some of my central perspectives and made sense of all my daily experiences while I reformulated the key assumptions that my perspective was constructed on (Meziro,1991).

By embracing an auto/ethnographic journey, I went beyond a research tool, it was a personal voyage of discovery and a journey that enabled me to uncover different facets of myself, for example, I found my ability in being reflexive about my theories and claims, in narrating and writing stories, in understanding and viewing students from their view and perspective to the world's phenomena, rather than my view as a teacher in the classroom.

Moreover, it allowed me to see the world, research, and education from new richer perspectives. For example, the exploration of students' interactive behavior in their educational context can be studied in their life histories, and experiences rather than their immediate educational context. The richness of diverse perspectives that I have met in this process – theories, methods, subjective experiences, and stories - has shaped my research insights and also contributed to a new understanding of human experiences. Using an auto/ethnographic integrated methodological approach not only enabled me to reflect on past and present experiences, but also brought a shift in my thinking, beliefs, and perspectives (Qutoshi, 2015). However, employing this approach I encountered some struggles and limits. One of my notable challenges relates to establishing a balance between objectivity and subjectivity. Maintaining my position as a researcher and at the same time presenting my personal experiences has demanded careful navigation. Additionally, the interpretative nature of auto/ethnography has created complexities in ensuring the reliability and acceptability of the findings. The potential bias rooted in my cultural background and experiences required conscious consideration and attempts to be mitigated as much as possible. To capture the richness of individuals' life stories, I had to be careful about the ethical dimensions of presenting the experiences of others within a personal narrative framework. These are some of the most important cases of struggles that I have faced.

From the literature, I knew that this approach is considered a bridge that connects the lived experiences of the participants (and the researcher) to allow their multiple voices to be heard if it is concretely done because nothing is granted. When we listen to individuals and their conflicts, perspectives, and ideas, we try to mention their voices through our research practices. Therefore, this approach can serve as a research effort against inequalities in societies in

various sections by developing capacities and awareness at personal and then social levels, which is one of the main goals of any sociocultural, and educational research.

Chapter Four: The narrative construction of culture contact and socio-cultural identity

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I present the results of my analysis of the interviews concerning the first and second research questions, which are: How do international students in higher education experience and narratively construct their contact with other cultures? ,and *How do the students identify themselves in a new sociocultural context?* My thesis is that the students' narratives about their experiences illuminate their strategies of adaptation and learning in relation to otherness and diversity. Besides, in doing so they can develop richer socio-cultural identities. I will show how different processes and strategies work for each of them.

In the chapter, I first introduce each of the twelve participants (see Table 1, p. 60) by drawing their *portraits*, i.e. an interpretative synthesis of the information I have about the students and the positions they took during the interview. I prepared these portraits to contextualize each student's narrative within their life worlds and the singular context of their experience as international students. I also tried to understand what their position was within the present context of the interview itself, which revealed uniqueness, diversity, and their subjective interpretation of my questions. This choice follows from the idea that constructivist inquiry does not look for generalizations but tries to illuminate the narratives of experience – and their complexity - from the insiders' perspectives (see also chapter 3).

Through these portraits, I try to show the intrinsic relationality of my research process, based on the diversity of the people and situations that I have met. These narratives represent the intercultural meeting of two subjectivities, beyond the interviewee/interviewer relationships. In fact, each of the participants brings a subjective perspective on their story and history of previous relationships with learning, culture, language, and identity, that shapes in very complex ways how they interpret culture contact and cope with the challenges posed by it, and

how this colors their position towards me. The other subjectivity is mine: I have interpreted what was going on during the interviews and tried to be faithful to what these students have done and said in our conversations. Meanwhile, I am aware that my presence contributed to shaping their discourses, and my cultural identity was there all along. I will show how the challenges of culture contact entail the whole life and personality of these students.

In the following part of the chapter, I try to answer research questions 1 and 2 by providing a selection of the most significant parts of the interview transcripts. The presentation is enriched with my interpretation of each participant, and finally, I discuss how the considered components answer my research questions. My interpretation is evident throughout the analysis, and in the title that I have created for each student and conversation, where I summarized in a catchphrase the most relevant information that I retain about the participant's strategy for coping with culture contact in a new social environment, at least as it is narrated in the conversation.

4.2 Students' portraits; twelve personalities and their coping strategies

4.2.1 Abai: *happiness seeker*

I knew Abai when I invited him to attend my research as a participant. He was living in the same campus where I live, and I used to meet him there. Abai is a young black man from Ethiopia. At the time of the interview, he was 25 years old, and he had been living in Italy for three years.

In fact, we fixed the first session of the interview, and we met in the lobby of one of the big buildings of the campus, an open, noisy space, not very apt for an intimate conversation. Before starting the interview, Abai said that he really wanted to help me, but he needed to know more about what he was supposed to talk about, and how he could help me. I explained again for him the main goals of the research and the purpose of the interview. Then I asked him if he was ready to go.

He talked about his personal information, like his first language, and where he belongs but also revealed to me that he was in a hurry to leave the campus; besides, we got interrupted by other students who were passing there. So, it was clear that the interview could not be done in that moment and environment, so we agreed to fix another session. For the second round, I invited

Abai to my room in the student's house. I tried to behave with him like a guest, in a way that he could feel comfortable. He seemed relaxed and he did not feel source of information and liked to share his stories with me.

During the whole meeting, he was listening to me carefully and was trying to describe his experiences in depth. Abai is studying Material science at the University of Milano-Bicocca. Living in Italy is his first long-term experience of living abroad. Abai's first language is Amharic. The English language is his second language, and he speaks fluently, but his specific accent made me not fully understand his speech, so I found myself asking him to repeat, in some occasions.

Abai told me that in Italy he has many friends from different nationalities, students, and nonstudents, he tries to enjoy life and he thinks some of his friends are happier than others, so he prefers to spend time with them to avoid being stressed or anxious about life.

Writing Abai's portrait illuminates different challenges of the method that I have chosen: the linguistic barriers, the choice of a suitable space, the creation of a setting, and the construction of trust. Coping with these difficulties made it possible for him to open, at least a bit, and share values with me. He appeared to me as an easy-going person, looking for a positive contact. This also figures in his own narrative of a strategy based on going along with positive people and selecting out any source of stress.

4.2.2 Nima: *being supported, becoming independent*

I was in a classroom observing one of the research participants when I met Nima for the first time. In the classroom, I realized that Nima is from Iran. After class, I went to him to talk. We had a short talk and after that, we set up a meeting to get more familiar with each other at the university. During our first meeting, we had an informal conversation about different topics. Since I would like to also involve an Iranian participant, I asked him for participation. We arranged the interview in a coffee shop where Nima used to go between lessons. Based on his preference and suggestion, we did the interview in Persian language. The choice of our first language was Nima's suggestion and it made Nima, and even me feel comfortable and talk without any hesitation. The interview was translated into English later.

At the time of the interview, Nima was 27 years old. He is from Iran, a city in the neighborhood of the city where I come from, culturally we have some similarities such as language and religion. Living in Italy is his first experience of living abroad. He studies Material science at the University of Milano-Bicocca. Nima also does rock climbing professionally. He presented himself as an independent self-secure person. On one hand, he told me that during his time in Italy he has learned how to find a solution for his educational, social, and financial problems, instead of complaining about them. On another hand, he also experienced social support, namely, he said, some Italian people gave him support in key moments. So, he knows that supporting and being supported is an advantage of being abroad.

After interviewing Nima, I became aware of another side of the interactions abroad which is contact with odd people and being supported by or supporting these odd others. A new and different perspective to live in Italy.

4.2.3 Amanda: *master of multicultural friendships*

Amanda was introduced to me by one of our shared friends. We set up a meeting through WhatsApp texting. At the time of the interview, Amanda was 24 years old. She is from Brazil and is doing her Master's degree in Material science at the University of Milan-Bicocca. Living in Italy is not Amanda's first experience of living abroad. She has been in the United States for four years to do her Bachelor of Arts. The first time that we fixed the meeting for the interview, she texted me and apologized for cancelling it, because of her sudden illness and hospitalization.

This made me think of her as a helpful and promising person who cared about our arranged meeting. A few days later, we rescheduled another meeting, and we met each other in the study room of the university's dorm. She was ready to help even though she had not fully recovered after her illness. She asked me about the goal of the interview, and after I explained the goals for her, she got more interested in the research, and she claimed that she can help me a lot. When we started, she laughed loudly: positioning herself in a formal interview was funny to her, since she interpreted our relationship as a friendly one. She appeared comfortable along the whole interview, she listened carefully to me and tried to narrate experiences and describe her insights for me in detail and clearly.

When I stopped recording, Amanda asked me about the participants of my study. Then immediately, she checked her cell phone and quickly shared with me many phone numbers of her international friends. I was surprised that she did not ask them for permission, it showed her strong connection to her friends, and engagement with helping me. She seemed to be sure that they would help me with no problems, after her suggestion. When I contacted the students that she had introduced to me, all of them were willing to help me with my research. In a way, this demonstrated her ability to socialize with people from different types of personalities and nationalities. I was struck by her supportive and friendly personality.

From Amanda's statement, she has been in contact with many cultural identities in the United States and Italy and she is proud and grateful for that. She claims that she can understand people of different cultural backgrounds, and she has been successful in making close connections with them. I think her attempt to provide me with the number of phones of her friends was a confirmation of her successful intercultural interactions.

4.2.4 Lucia: *an Italian who does not like to be racist*

I got familiar with Lucia in the university dorm where we both live. She was asked to participate in my research by one of our shared Italian friends. When I contacted her for the interview, she already knew about it. Lucia is from Verona, Italy. She is studying Material science at the University of Milano-Bicocca. To do the interview, I invited her to my room to run the conversation in a quiet place without distractions. We interviewed in a friendly and not very formal way. She was interested in my research goals and tried to provide me with some detailed information about herself and her ideas related to the research. At the time of the interview, she was 22 years old. She speaks English fluently, while her first language is Italian.

Lucia seems very open to having conversations and contact with non-Italian students and other people. She welcomes cultural and linguistic diversity. Her approach to foreigners in Italy is that Italians should not see diversity as a weakness but try to learn more about the existing cultures in the world, which she finds very interesting.

4.2.5 Amer: *who sees himself behind the wall*

Amer is from Turkey. He studies material science at the University of Milano-Bicocca. At the time of the interview, he was 24 years old. He was introduced to me by another friend, and we met each other for the first time to do the interview. Amer is transgender and he told me about it when we started the interview. We interviewed in the study area of the university, and I tried to make him feel relaxed and not too formal. He was very interested in the interview process and I found he likes to talk to someone about the challenges that he was facing in his life, especially in Italy. So, he shared some of his stories with me in depth. I interviewed Amer twice, both on campus, since I wanted to understand more about his experiences, and I guess he was happy to talk. At the time of the interview, Amer was living in Italy for less than one year. Before coming to Italy, he had lived in the US for four months to work. His first language is Turkish, but he speaks English well.

During the interview, he told some stories about challenges that he has faced related to making relationships with Italian people, and he thinks that his gender type (a Gay male), and his identity as a person who comes from the Middle East are the reasons why he has not been successful in making any connection to Italian people, and says there is a wall between us.

Amer brought to my research another topic of diversity and culture contact: Genderization is another very common way to define the other.

4.2.6 Parvin: *a person who improved in the context*

I got familiar with Parvin during a language course where we were both students. She is from Uzbekistan and is studying economics at the University of Milano-Bicocca. During the first round of the interview, she seemed stressed and uncomfortable, so I proposed to do another interview to gain a deeper understanding and she agreed to that. The second interview, two months after the first one, presented a noticeable change in the atmosphere. Parvin appeared more relaxed and friendly since she could overcome some of her conflicts like the difficulty of her courses.

She tried to provide me with some detailed descriptions of her life and experiences. At the time of the interview, Parvin was 25 years old. Living in Italy was her first experience of living abroad. She did not speak English fluently and seemed to me from an intermediate level of English proficiency. Her first language is Uzbek; however, she prefers to speak Russian.

Parvin for me is a sample of noticeable changes in her lifestyle, feelings, and her educational situation as I mentioned above. Her main conflict seems to be about the religious (Islam) and cultural issues in her origin country and using Italian and even English languages in Italy. Here, religion becomes another marker of diversity and cultural conflict which shapes the narrative construction of her experiences.

4.2.7 *Sociable Mao*

I met Mao in a shared Italian Language course. I told her about my research and how she could help me with that. We were living in the same residence. We fixed an online meeting because of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was a formal interview. She started the conversation confidently with this statement: "I am very good at cultural information because I have lived in various countries and with so many cultures''. Because of time constraints, we fixed another interview session. In the first session of the interview, she gave me some useful and interesting information, but she didn't share her private information, like her age. Two months later we did the second interview face to face. I invited her to my room, and we did the interview in a quiet and friendly environment. She told me about her relationships with her family and friends from her childhood, and her exact age. Mao shared many stories of her interactions with people from different cultures. Mao was 38 years old. She was born in Japan and then she grew up in Brazil. She identifies herself as Brazilian. She has been in Italy for more than one year. She lived also in Australia. We did the interviews in the English language, and she speaks English fluently.

She appears, and describes herself, as a social woman, and I found that her social relationships seem to be the most significant aspect of her life, because I see that she has made even the decisions about her educational and work life based on the satisfaction of her social interactions and life.

4.2.8 *Mindful* Victoria *who analyses everything*

I got familiar with Victoria in our shared Italian language course. She was a stylish black girl. She agreed to participate in my research. On the day of the interview, she initially rejected a handshake and told me sorry and then she hugged me. We interviewed outside on the

university's campus, and despite distractions on campus, Victoria replied to all my questions in detail. She looked like a confident young woman and narrated her experiences with some ideas and reasonings that I felt she had thought about all of them before. Because of the distractions, I suggested a second interview, conducted indoors. The second interview was more friendly than the first and provided me with deeper information. Victoria was 23 years old at the time of the interviews, she is from Ethiopia and has been in Italy for more than one year, pursuing a Master's degree in an international course at University of Milano-Bicocca in Milan, Italy. Living in Italy was her first experience of living abroad. She speaks English well and she tended to learn the Italian language. Victoria has a critical perspective on her new sociocultural context. During the interviews, she described some of the social and cultural issues that she has faced.

I saw her attitude kind of analytical: because she analyses the issues thoroughly, and finally, she decides about her own way of living and communicating.

4.2.9 Sheri: *isolated from diversities but happy*

Sheri is from India, and I met her in the classroom for the first time, when I was in her classroom to observe one of her classmates who is another participant in my research. I invited her to participate in my research, and she accepted. On the day of the interview, we met each other in the lobby of the residence. Some other students were sitting around, chatting, and studying. We tried to be focused on our conversation. Sheri was interested and ready for the interview and we did not hesitate about time, but I can say it was too much a formal interview. I found our talk useful, but I wanted to continue it in a better condition. So, I proposed her to have a second interview in a different place with no distractions. For the second session of the interview, I invited her to my room, and we did it in a quiet and more friendly atmosphere. After the interview, we went to the balcony of my apartment and we had a long friendly chat.
At the time of the interviews, Sheri was 22 years old. Living in Italy is her first experience of living abroad and she has been here for more than one year. English language is her second and normally used language. In Italy, Sheri studies Material science for her Master's degree at the University of Milano-Bicocca.

I found Sheri a very motivated student for studying and having a happy life in Italy, while she prefers to avoid being in contact with people outside of the university, for instance, students in the dorm where we live.

4.2.10 Luis: a person who has never been shocked by the Italian culture

I got familiar with Luis in a classroom of the Italian language course, where we were doing an exercise together. I invited him to participate in my research and after he accepted it, we planned for the interview. Luis is from Spain, and he goes back to Spain every weekend, as he said, so he suggested me for doing the interview online. The online session of the interview was not satisfying for me, but I had to keep on the interview, and Luis said he could not be available for the interview another day. He told me about his experiences with living and studying in Italy and also some personal information.

At the time of the interview, Luis was 23 years old. Living in Italy was his first experience of living abroad. He studies Material science at the University of Milano-Bicocca. His first language is Spanish, but he speaks English well. He has been in Italy for one year, and he lives with his Spanish friend in an apartment in Milan.

During the interview, Luis emphasized the similarity of cultures in Spain and Italy. I can claim that experiences and conflicts of Luis were different from all other participants, and he stated that he has not faced any cultural diversity.

4.2.11 Adaptable John

John was introduced to me by one of my close friends. I met him in the university's residence first time, where we were both living. I asked him to participate in my research and I explained briefly to him how he could help me with my research. He accepted immediately and then we scheduled a date for doing the interview. On the day of the interview, he was waiting for me in the lobby of the residence where John and the other students meet and spend their free time. I tried to provide a kind of friendly atmosphere to make him feel calm and relaxed. He asked me "please ask me questions, then I will reply to them because in this way I can help you more". I

started the questions by asking for some general information about him. He is from Guatemala. He said "there is no student here from Guatemala, and I am the only one".

John was 26 years old at the time of the interview. His first language is Spanish. He has an advanced level of English language. Living in Italy is not his first experience of living abroad. He studied for his Bachelor's in the United States, so he has lived there for five years. John is doing his Master's degree in an English course at the University of Milano-Bicocca in Milan, Italy. During the interview, he said that he has been in contact with a variety of cultures and he claimed that the differences of cultures are very interesting and surprising to him and he welcomes the diversity of cultures while he stated that he is getting used to some differences like the difference in languages. In general, it seems to me that he has taken an adaptive approach to living abroad. He tends to enjoy his social life with no regard for the diversity of contexts and cultures.

Talking to him brought to my research the idea of adaptation to a different sociocultural context.

4.2.12 Dayzi:a girl who is unconfident in her social interactions

Dayzi, 23 years old, is from the Philippines and her first language is Filipino. She is studying for her master's degree in an international course at the University of Milano-Bicocca in Milan, Italy. Living in Italy is her first experience of living abroad. I contacted Dayzi through an exchange of text messages at first. She welcomed my invitation to participate in the research. She was living in the same residence, but I never met her before that day. We did the interview in a quiet and friendly environment in my room. Dayzi asked about my nationality first, and she was interested in the cultural aspect of my research. She started the conversation by showing me a photo of the geographical location of the Philippines and then she described the country in detail to give me an insight into the diversity of its regions and languages. She is a fluent speaker of English. Dayzi shared with me very personal aspects of her identity when the recording was stopped.

She narrates some unpleasant experiences with her social and classroom interactions in Italy. While she expresses a feeling of being unconfident with her social interactions, she prefers to lead a safe and isolated life by taking a conservative approach to her communicative acts and

behaviors, such as staying alone, having fewer social connections, and staying quiet in group talks and conversations.

It seems to me that our conversation builds a narrative where she becomes reflexive of her interactive experiences, which made her think and analyse her cultural identity and contexts more than before.

4.3 The students' narratives about culture contact

The construction of "us" and "the others" is quite common when it comes to culture contact. We interpret other people's behaviour based on categorization. For example, Abai, one of the students, states:

> Just like that, for example. Let's say they (some people) always want to be happy smiling like. Yeah, it's, it's it's Maybe closer to the Spanish people, yeah. The expression of happiness for them is much more different. They don't want to be like everybody and don't want to be sad, but they just live their moment in the present. They don't think too much about the future. This is the difference here for us. We think a lot. We stress more than them. Of course, everybody stresses. But for them, they even know what's going to happen in the future. There's like at the present.(Abai)

In this phrase, Abai explains why he is spending so much time with the community of Spanish students in the residence, preferring them to other groups. He seems attracted by their lifestyle and the interactions that he has with Spanish people. He interprets this as an expression of happiness and compares his cultural view of the world ("we think a lot, we stress") with the view of Spanish people, who appear to him more able to enjoy the present, don't lead a stressful life, and are not worried about the future, while he didn't use to be such. He thinks that, in his current context, he can be happier if he interacts with some particular social or cultural groups, that for him are the happier ones. Besides, they welcome him, unlike the Italian students:

> For the first time like last year when we were drinking together (with Italian students), let's say we had a good time, all of us. And then the next day, they don't even say hi and they continue with their life, and when you say hi, this is like they'll give you that cold reply by

just saying yeah. Then I was like OK, that happened frequently and then I realized the cultural differences and everything. This is part of the cultural differences, as I found. (Abai)

So, the experience of culture contact is interpreted by Abai on the basis of comparisons in the management of relationships. He talks about his experience with social interactions and lack of recognition with some of the Italian students from his first year of living in Italy and explains how he could not have a close friendship with them and how their interactions remain superficial and never go to a deeper level. Abai believes that the root of these different interactive behaviours is cultural and such social conflicts are the result of diversity in cultures. He claims that he has felt and understood the differences through his experiences with his contacts, and his gained understanding is shaping his interactions.

Nima, another participant in the study, points to a different kind of contact, related to helping and being helped:

> It's good (the contact with other cultures), but it has some positive and some negative sides. For example, helping other people is the positive side, sometimes the person who is helping you is not the same (he means from the same social and cultural background) but he helps you in a good way , so it is the best. For example, once I was in the subway, but my ticket didn't work. An odd person came to me and shared his card with me and it made me to learn how to help someone else on another occasion.(Nima)

He narrates another experience that happened to him in the classroom of his Italian language course.

" For me, it was very interesting that there was a Brazilian girl in that class, she helped me a lot, and she wrote answers to tasks for me in both languages to help, to me it was very interesting because we didn't know each other and we hadn't had any interaction before".(Nima)

He continues and tells a story about "making friends", related to the first time he came to the cafeteria, where we were doing the interview.

> That was an Italian girl who made us familiar with this cafeteria, and she introduced the other Italian friends to us, everything was unclear for us at first, I was with S. (his Iranian friend), and after that, I went with them to Parco Sempione, now we are friends. S.'s brother is living in Germany, he said when he says to his brother that I'm going to the cafeteria with

my friends, his brother is surprised and asks him how you could find friends that much soon because I've been here for some years, but I couldn't find any friends yet. (Nima)

From Nima's narrations about his experiences with his new sociocultural context, he has faced different types of supportive behaviours from the Italian people, and others. He thinks it is very important and pleasant if people of various cultural backgrounds help each other even when they do not have familiarity. He states that from the support that he received he has learned to support others. Additionally, he welcomes contact with other cultures and he knows Italy as a proper context for providing these efficient contacts in comparison with a context like Germany (based on the experience of his friend's brother).

Amanda talks about another aspect in the diversity of cultures: the management of time and the tacit rules that govern daily life. She describes it by telling a story about a conflict that she has had with her Italian roommate.

> I had a therapy session online, my therapy was from 8 to 9, and I really needed that therapy. I sent a text to her if she could free the room for me, said no, no I'm gonna eat between 8 to 8.30, I said like ok ok, she has a fixed time to eat. Usually, I cannot cook when she gonna cook, she gonna start to cook before. It is the only problem that I had, and I'm not sure whether it is because she's Italian or not, maybe she has a tight timetable, I don't know because I'm not a therapist and I really don't have a fixed time to do things (laugh) but I know that many of Italian have fixed time to eat to do things.(Amanda)

When Amanda asked her roommate to free the space for her therapy sessions, she did not accept it because she wanted to eat at that time. Amanda attributes her roommate's refusal to the Italian culture which is about having a fixed time for eating. In a way, this seems easier than taking it personally; she is legitimizing her roommate behaviour.

After giving other examples of her experiences with various cultures, she concludes by saying:

"Now here I've got to know people from everywhere in the world, like people that I've never imagined meeting, so now I'm having more experience with other cultures, I could even make a list of countries that I have friends from (laugh)''. (Amanda)

Amanda has a very positive attitude towards cross-cultural experiences, and it is no surprise that hers are rich. From her previous experiences with living in the US, when she was very young and could not even speak English, and the way that she led her social life there, to now that she is in Italy and she knows the English language very well and has been able to make many connections with people of her current diverse social and cultural setting, the whole process reveals her progressive social and cultural practices which led her to promote her understanding of diversities and welcome them. She manages with conflict by recognizing the cultural frameworks that shape individual behaviours. Her welcoming strategies towards diversities and unexpected events have been noticeable to me also from observing her on different occasions that we were both attending.

Lucia, who is the only Italian participant in my research, is also the one who most interprets diversity as the others' diversity. She talks about her experiences of contact with other cultures and how she feels about cultural diversity and living in a multicultural context.

> First of all, I want to tell you that my grandmother was born in Tunisia which is [was] a French colony, so she is French. I have been from such a family so I'm half French and half Italian. So, I have been addicted to facing different cultures. I was I am curious to know other people from other cultures, I like to know how they speak. what and how do they pray? How do they approach each other? I think it's beautiful, it is good. When I see someone who is not Italian I think this is good, because I said in Italy especially people are a little bit racist (laugh) to see some strangers and foreigner, I think it's good because we can approach other people from other cultures for me it's not a negative thing but also positive thing and also I'm studying marine sciences, and it's an international course and there are some foreigners, students from Holland, Germany, South Africa (Lucia)

From Lucia's statements and as I know her, she is familiar with multicultural environments, since she comes from a hybrid cultural background, however, she notes that "I am culturally closer to Italian culture". She has done her studies in international courses which include a lot of international students from different sociocultural backgrounds. In such a situation, she expresses her feelings and ideas about the diversities of cultures which makes her curious to know more about them. Moreover, my other insight into Lucia's words is her attempts to separate herself from those Italian people whom she knows as racist people and views this diversity of ethics as an opportunity for learning and discovering more insights about the world and people from different sociocultural contexts.

Amer, the Turkish participant in the study, talks about his experiences of interactions in Italy.

> Actually, like in my first or second month, I used to go to a place to shop. One day when I went there, I put my things in my backpack to carry them and to not use a plastic bag, I just took a step to put the stuff in my bag normally, there was a cashier speaking something in Italian and I didn't know Italian, I said I don't know Italian and she forced me to open my bag to see my stuff. Probably because I have a dark skin tone, like a Middle Eastern-looking person, so she thought that I stole something from there, there were people behind me and she forced me to open my bag in front of the people and I had to do it and she did not even apologize. I was so embarrassed; I was so sad and embarrassed. (Amer)

People who are not acquainted with a new environment make frequent mistakes. This is common in intercultural experience. However, if the environment does not accept the possibility of the mistake, but uses categorization and racialization as an explanation, the contact between the cultures becomes conflictual. Embarrassment, angriness, and confusion are some common negative emotions that can bring to very negative experiences and narratives, hindering the possibility of learning.

Amer continues:

> "… when I try to communicate with people, they say oh this ethnicity is like this .... They don't say it to my face, but sometimes they do not like to know the culture of the Middle East and they make assumptions in the first place. But these assumptions can be like suppressing that I make you feel bad about because you see that they don't know the reality."
>
> "I'm a gay. Being gay is a different thing, so I am from the other sexual bands who come from the Middle East".
>
> "They're nice, the most people I come across treat me very nicely, but I can see that there are some walls between me and them because they have their own culture".

My conversation with Amer was a real open-ended one. He was talking and narrating different conflicts, about racial, gender, and cultural identity, and many stories about how all along the

way he had been feeling discrimination. He thinks that being from a non-conformity gender and Middle Eastern brings a normal sense of looking different. Despite being treated well by some people with whom he was in contact, the negative reactions that he has faced with are more highlighted in his narrative and made him – he says - hopeless about the future.

Parvin, the student who comes from Uzbekistan, describes her understanding of the new cultural context in comparison with the one she came from.

> They (Italian people) are very socialized people. They can make friends very easily and they can speak. In my culture, where I live, we are shy and for example, boys speak with boys, and girls with girls. Ah, but here there is no boundary, gender boundary. People here are very open, ohhh yes, I can say in many Ozbek families, women should not talk to men, it's better to talk to women. In my country sometimes women cannot speak to men, they cannot be accompanied by a group of men (pause). They are not such open-minded. Here people have freedom and are open-minded. (Parvin)

Parvin opens another chapter of culture contact: the comparison between cultures about different possibilities of action and freedom, also related to gender. Her narrative comes from someone who lived most of her life in a religious and tradition-based culture, where people are not free to be in contact with another gender and there are some gender-based limitations for their interactions. Her experience with the Italian culture is interesting and favourable for her; she likes Italians' freedom in making relationships and interactions. Therefore, she is happy, and not worried, with living with people who are more socialized and open-minded than in her country. As I understood from Parvin's statements and conflicts during two sessions of the interview, she used the differences and challenges that she faced in both sociocultural and educational settings and has been trying to benefit from that to improve herself in all aspects. For example, in the first meeting that we had she was confused, stressed about doing her exams, and presenting a cultural shock, but in the second interview, she seemed happy and relaxed, and she talked about the way she could make relationships with her peers and teachers, to improve in her studies, and even the way she could impress her interactions. In the following chapters (chapter 6), I will present more details.

The previous positive or negative cultural experience seems quite relevant for the participants, as a context for interpretation and comparison. Mao, for example, is another research participant who starts her talk by telling stories about her contact experiences with the Japanese culture.

In Japan, they live for work, they don't have a social life, to enjoy, its Japanese culture, I've never accepted that. For example, one day I had training, I told the boss I couldn't come because I had training, was fine, he said OK but he was very angry with me, he made me feel guilty because I wasn't at work. I used to use very creative materials, like games, and creative lessons, I could do everything in the best way, but I was under pressure, I was really really sick mentally, tired mentally, and there was a kind of psychological pressure of culture that was high. (Mao)

In her narrative, Mao criticizes the work-oriented Japanese culture, then she tells a story of the day she was absent from her workplace. She describes her boss's reaction to her absence as an example of culturally embedded behaviour. On the other hand, she mentions how the Japanese social and cultural interactions made her improve her job skills.

Then she talks about her experiences in her current sociocultural context, which is Italy.

In Italy, they are always in groups, especially in the university. Once, I went out to a bar with a group of Italians who worked on the same project. They invited me but then they excluded me. It's not painful anymore, as I got it. Because sometimes they see us as a stranger, just. I know some of them that pretend that they are open to international people. But then I asked them, do you have any international friends? They say no. (Mao)

Mao defines herself as a social person. Her ideal social life is one with many friends and connections, that is one of the reasons that she left Japan and came to Italy, but in Italy, she could not lead her favourite life. She told me about many attempts she made to make proper relationships with Italian people and to achieve what she wanted in her interactions. She states: "I don't feel sad anymore, no I don't. Now I got strong". (Mao)

The most highlighted part of Mao's story is her attempts to overcome the difficulties she has faced in different countries in which she has lived. Her difficulties were related to her family, her medical issues, her job, and her other social and cultural issues. All these difficulties, however, improved Mao's personality and abilities. She learned how to manage, and she "got strong".

4.4 Findings and Related Discussion

One of the objectives of this research is to explore the students' narratives about their experiences of contact with other cultures, and the learning that came out of it. Culture contact

is a fundamental construct of this research, so I allocated a research question to this concept. For this research, I define culture contact as the concrete meeting between individuals with different cultural norms of behavior, beliefs, and personal characteristics such as language, gender, ethnicity, appearance, and religion. This meeting happens in an environment that can be more or less favorable to real contact. The outcome of all these meetings can be desirable, positive, generative, or it can produce distrust, misrecognition, violence, and refusal. So, it is very relevant to know how the insiders of this experience develop their strategies and narratives to cope with this complex process.

In my research, I have considered the idea of culture contact in a very specific environment, to explore the narratives and representations of interactions among adult students at Milano Bicocca University, Italy. Whereby the adaptation, exchange, and transformation of meaning, knowledge, beliefs, behaviours, and habits may occur. This conception of culture contact, while narrowed down to something very specific, allows me to develop some interpretation after my interviews.

First, the analysis of the participants' narratives and statements reveals that the students' conceptualizations of their cultural contacts and cultures are shaped through their social interactions. When students focus a specific behavior, they find a cultural root for it. For example, Amanda said: "I'm not sure whether it is because she's Italian or not, maybe she has a tight timetable", she is not sure that it is a cultural-based behaviour but to make this conclusion she refers to the other interactions that told her about having a fixed time table for eating as a part of the Italian culture, or when Mao says "they live for work, they don't have a social life, they don't enjoy life, it's the Japanese culture.", and then she supports her idea by telling a story of her interaction with her boss at work. Another example is when Amer at the end of his words relates the misunderstandings of Italian people about his cultural background and the cultural background of Middle East to Italian culture, and says that anyway, he sees a wall between himself and *them* "because they have their own culture".

In addition to this, I understood that all the experiences that students gained, pleasant and unpleasant, have led them toward building cultural reasons for the perceived diversities, and they all seem to have developed a deeper cultural awareness and gained a critical perspective on the world's phenomena and to overcome their sociocultural and also educational conflicts, they develop some different strategies, including mere "awareness","othering",critical reasoning, and adaptive strategies. For example, Abai, talking about his experiences of

interacting with Italian and Spanish people, said: "It happened frequently, and then I realized the cultural differences and everything. This is part of the cultural differences" (Abai). Abai's approach to cultural diversities reveals gaining a deeper cultural awareness. such as othering and critical reasoning that Mao develops, when she says: "I don't feel sad anymore, no I don't. Now I got strong", I know *what to do* when I am with *them* (Mao). It was about her stories of being excluded or rejected by her Italian connections("they excluded me") or the adaptive strategies of Victoria and John who claim that they are *getting used to* the sociocultural diversities in Italy.

According to Vygotsky, to understand the individual it is necessary to understand the social relations and contacts in which the individual exists (Wertsch, 1991). It talks about the importance of individuals' social lives in shaping their personalities, thoughts, and beliefs. In this research, from the students' statements, we see how they introduce themselves based on the quality and situation of their social relationships and interactions. From a sociocultural perspective, these social processes provide the basis not only for individual mental functioning development, but action and adaptation to the new emerging conditions, that is what we require to think and understand ourselves, others, and the world.

In other words, our understanding and thought are shaped by the cultural contexts in which we interact with others and are sociocultural (Vygotsky, 1981). Therefore, having more social connections in a broader multicultural setting can provide individuals with developing new strategies and deepen their understanding of the world and culture (Scott & Palincsar, 2013).

4.4.1 My similar position

I have had the same position as the participants of my study as an international student living in Italy, in a multicultural city like Milan, and a residence accommodating many students from different cultural backgrounds. However, my level of education was different from theirs. Despite this similarity between us, my experiences are different from the participants' experiences. During the years I have lived in Italy, I have been in contact with a wide range of ethnical groups, cultures, and nationalities. I have even had some close friendships with the minor ethnic communities of Iran that I had never encountered before, such as Kurdish, and Turkish communities. I have never had any notable experience of rejection, exclusion, or being treated with an ethnocentric view in Italy, but I have faced many occasions that made me think, and decide how, and why this specific behaviour, conversation, or even speech act happened.

It was less than one month that I had been in Italy. I used to cook in a kitchen that was shared with some other students. One of these students was Sharon, an Italian girl from Sicily. She was the first Italian person with whom I was in contact. From the routine conversations that we had in that kitchen, we got familiar. She suggested going to the city center to visit the tourist attractions of Milan, then she accompanied me there. It was the first time that I had been there, and she made me feel very good at that time. She could not speak English well but was trying to speak as much as she could. One of the nights that we were both in the kitchen, she did not behave with me as she used to and she only said "ciao" to me, and she did not look at me. During that time another Italian student came to the kitchen, and Sharon kept on her conversation with him. I felt the way she was trying to keep her distance from me, so I was wondering what happened to her, did I do or say something that she disliked? When she was leaving the kitchen, she told me "Sorry Hadiseh, I am very tired tonight, I can't speak in English". (Sharon). On that day, my perception of Sharon's behavior was she did not like to make an effort to talk to me in English when she did not have to, and she could easily talk to another Italian friend who spoke Italian. I think some of our efforts in interacting with people are rooted in our needs, like when we make a connection to avoid feeling alone.

After that day, I faced the same behavior, for example, when coming back from conference my Italian student friends were upset because of the cancelation of our flight, and started to talk in Italian with each other, forgetting about me, and when another group of my friends were discussing the contents of an upcoming meeting that made them worried, and me too. My perception of these types of behavior tends to be based on the beginning on culture and diversity of languages. I find this helpful since these contacts made me develop strategies to overcome language barriers (e.g. taking Italian language courses) and cultural differences. The challenges provided me with empathy and a deeper understanding of the perspectives of others, particularly where language became a barrier to communication.

4.5 Belonging and Becoming in participants' narratives: a new research question

This section is about the second research question. Cultural identity was one of the themes that I extracted from the interviews with the participants of my research. It gave me some clues about the students' identity formation through their social and cultural interactions. In order to explore the sociocultural aspect of identity construction concerning the viewpoint of my research about shaping students' identity in contact with other cultures in a different

sociocultural context, I went deeper into the way that students identify themselves in their new context. In this paragraph, I present the relevant parts of the interviews to three students, I selected them as illustrative examples for their comprehensive representation of sociocultural identity construction, and I am aware that they may not cover all possible strategies. They also provided me with deep and interesting insights. In the end, I discuss my interpretations of the students' statements, involving my own experience with identity formation. I wrote a title for the analysis of each interview using the participant's own statements.

4.5.1 I come from a different culture

Parvin, the student from Uzbekistan, talked about her cultural background, and identity, in these terms: *"I come from a different culture"*. This phrase is the product of a comparison with her current cultural context and is possible only because of this comparison. In fact, If I could ask her this question in Uzbekistan, she might not identify herself as a person who comes from "a different" culture. Difference always entails a comparison.

Then, I asked her "How you and your culture are different from the Italian culture?" and she replied: "We have very strict families. Families are different, I am not the same as them. Some are strict that we should be Muslim, we should…."

By telling this, she is addressing the main differences, that are based on family and religion. We can say that she is giving me some clues about the dominant culture of Uzbekistan, and how she became who she is. We can guess from the repetition of "strict" that Parvin comes from a religious and tradition-based culture, and she is critical towards it. In her discourse, she separates herself from her cultural background and openly says I am not like them. At this point, we do not know what comes first: did she choose to study abroad because of this feeling, or was it generated after she went out? Another question was raised in my mind: how could she express her difference, if she was not in Italy? Later, during the interview, she reinforces her difference from her original identity and background, when she states that "we should be Muslims". To me, she is not sure about her originally identified religion, and she shows me that she is only categorized as Muslim and she may not like to be a Muslim young woman. Her words about the treatment of women in Italy and Uzbekistan highlight the concepts of open minds and freedom.

People here are very open, ohhh yes, I can tell in many Uzbek families, that women should not talk to men, it's better to talk to women. In my country Sometimes women cannot speak to men, they cannot be accompanied by a group of men (pause). They are not such open-minded. Here people have freedom and are open-minded. (Parvin)

So, among the many features that make the Italian culture different from her own, Parvin describes those aspects of the culture in Italy that are related, in her mind, to freedom in relationships and thinking about relationships. While Uzbek culture restricts inter-gender contacts, the Italian culture appears to look at them with an open-minded approach. At least, to Parvin.

This narrative is an example of how a person can come to reflect critically on her cultural identity, and take a distance from it, by contrasting it with some aspects of the new culture, not necessarily the most relevant ones, but built through her interactions with the new environment (people, discourses, cultural objects…). This understanding comes, for Parvin, from her current sociocultural context and interactions (mainly university). She is not critical of the new culture, in her discourse. She does not express worries about losing her identity, for example. She builds a positive narrative. Through the social interactions (and symbolic) that she has had during her life in Italy, she gained a comparative approach that brought her to re-identifying herself somehow. Therefore, she cannot identify herself as she used to be in her origin cultural context, and country. This reveals a process of identity formation.

4.5.2 I came from Middle-east

Amer is the second student who presents a clear identity strategy. This is why I want to discuss his statements and views in order to understand the interplay between contact with other cultures and identity construction. As I said before, Amer is from Turkey.

He states that:

when I talk to the guys, to some of them when I say I'm Turkish, they say like oh OK, so you're Arab and I don't think like Arab people are beautiful. I'm OK with this misconception of the realities of the people, but I'm not OK with like saying the Arabs are not beautiful. So when I try to communicate with the people, they say oh this ethnicity is like this .... They don't say it to my face, but sometimes they do not like to know the culture of the Middle East and they make assumptions in the first place. But these assumptions can be like

suppressing that makes you feel bad about (your identity) because you see that they don't know the reality.

Amer initially presents himself as Turkish. He is not in his origin country, and he has to present himself in a foreign country. As he is telling his stories about his social interactions in Italy, he gives himself new identities. He talks about the social reactions and understanding that he faces when he introduces himself as a Turkish student. Based on his words, his Italian friends or other types of connections do not know about all the countries located in the Middle East, so they judge him based on some stereotypes that they have heard about people of the Middle East, such as having a different skin tone.

Amer's social life and society have made him identify himself as a "Middle Eastern" person. The sociocultural interactions that he has made him identify himself from a bigger region than his ethnic background, as Turkish, where people from outside see it as one region, while from his viewpoint, being Middle-Eastern is not his preference, and even his choice, because the collective understanding of this identity has made him feel "oppressed" In addition to this, in a part of the interview, he states that being a Middle Eastern person, while he is from gender non-conformity makes him a special or discriminated case in Italy.

When Amer talks about his preference for the classroom's environment, he states:

Especially if you are a foreigner. It's probably nicer that the classroom becomes a more foreigner-dominant classroom. Otherwise, the majority is Italian. They wanted to hang out together so you could feel like a kind of outsider. So, I prefer international students and international environments, especially here. (Amer)

In this part, Amer defines two more identities to himself, a foreigner, and an outsider. From my viewpoint, it not only reveals the identity formation process in contact with another sociocultural context but also shows how this type of mentality and shifts of identities can affect the educational demands and situations of the students.

4.5.3 *I'm from Brazil, and Brazilians are easy-going*

Mao identified herself in the first session of the interview as a Brazilian student. In the second one, she tells her life story. She says that she was born in Japan, and her parents are Japanese and are separated.

"I was raised by my grandparents in Brazil when I was twelve. My mother left me with them. I lived with them from 12 to 27, 28 years old. So, kind of the yeah, everything who I am, is due to my grandparents". (Mao)

When she was 27, she went to Australia to work and live there. After some years of living in Australia, Mao goes to her mom in Japan, to work and live there. She narrates; "I went to my mom, and we lived together for five years. It was like experimenting. It was hard, but in the end, it was good because I never lived with her before". (Mao)

The first time that I met Mao, I was sure that she was from Japan, my judgment was based on her appearance, like eyes, and hair, she had a typical Japanese phenotype, and she had also a Japanese name. It was actually an automatic racialization that I committed while I was not right because she introduced herself for the first time as a Brazilian woman. I saw her sometimes when she was spending time with the community of Brazilian students. From the sociocultural perspective, this is relevant when individuals abroad try to get out mainly, with their own people, this is a strategy to cope with the uneasiness of diversity, by avoiding it. So, I could ensure that she was I was wrong with her identity.

"Brazilians are easy-going and friendly. We try to make people happy. We get along well with other cultures because is the way that we are" (Mao).

However, I got more interested in the identification of Mao when in the second meeting of the interview, she told me her life story. we see she has spent the same number of years in two countries, Japan, and Brazil, but she does not declare her Japanese identity and prefers to be identified by her Brazilian identity.

In her interview, she tells at length about living with her grandparents in Brazil when her Japanese mother left her, and her father also was not living with her. They raised her from adolescence to young adulthood. She emphasized that they played the main role in her life, and they had a shared understanding of their relationships and interactions. Then, she states that she faced some struggles when she turned back to her mother because, in the beginning, she could not understand her, maybe as a result of conflictual culture contact. Besides, as I mentioned in Mao's portrait, she presents herself as a social woman who likes to have many connections, and spending time with them is a happiness for her. She also, during the interviews, talked about her experiences of contact with various cultures, and for her the Brazilian culture in social interactions is appreciable. In the first part of this chapter, we see

that she criticized the Japanese culture as a culture defined by working hard and having no joy, which does not match with her personality and interests, and also Italian culture. So, we can say under the influence of her favorable interactions, as well as her unpleasant sociocultural contacts in the past and her current context, Italy, she got fully acculturated to the Brazilian culture, not to her original culture. From a sociocultural theory, the root of individuals 'thoughts and becoming is in their social life.

4.6 Discussion of Belonging and Becoming in participants' narratives

In this section, I present a new research question that arose from listening and analyzing the life stories of the students during the interviews: How do adult students identify themselves in a new sociocultural context? In this regard, I identify the participants' sense of belonging and becoming as a learning outcome of their interactions with different cultures in a different social and cultural context, in the light of continuities and discontinuities with previous lives.

The findings reveal that students identify themselves concerning their social life in both the past and present. I discuss the process of identity construction from two aspects, one is the role of narratives in forming a participant's identity, and the other one addresses the role of social relationships and interactions in individuals' identity formation. Drawing upon Vygotsky and Erikson (see Chapter 2) I argued that family and other significant members of society provide a set of expectations about how and what the person will become (Penuel and Wertsch, 1995), I found that despite the effects of family or social norms, factors such as self-reflection, self-observation, and self-judgment (in Chapter 2) are also involved in the identity formation of the individuals. That's why a person like Parvin identifies herself beyond her previous cultural identity shaped by her original culture and family when she narrates that in Uzbekistan they were expected to be Muslim, and as a woman behave in a certain way, and she is not like them. She shows a part of the process of her becoming. The integrative sociocultural approach to identity construction emphasizes the role of social relationships and interactions in individuals' identity formation, rather than a static process occurring in isolation (Veresov, 2020). Mao's story on another hand, reveals the interplay of family and her social interactions. Besides, her life story from her childhood to the present, talking about her diverse social contacts and the way she has overcome her difficulties in all aspects of her life can evidence an ongoing construction, from the past to the present and future. Mao presented her becoming in a very

effective way, firstly when she introduced herself by narrating her life story from past to present, then talking about the way she has lived, learned, and improved in different contexts, and reflecting on her relationships with her mother, the Japanese culture, her grandparents, and all the diverse people she has met. We can consider her sociocultural identity as an ongoing construction, from her past to the present and future.

Thinking of my personal experiences with identity construction during the time that I have been living in Italy, I have built some new identities rather than my identity when I was in Iran. All these identities come from social interactions with diverse people and groups, and with cultural objects.

In Iran, I was a Muslim woman who obeyed the rules of Islam, but here I have not been identified as Muslim by my social interactions. Some of my Muslim friends who are living in Italy criticize my Islamic identity. For them, I do not wear hijab for example (a cultural object that identifies a woman in many Islamic countries), so I am not (seen as) a Muslim, for my social community I can be identified with any other religion or none. Furthermore, in my previous context, I had never been identified or identified myself, as having an international identity, but obviously, from the entire beginning of registration for the university, I followed that section of the university website (another significant cultural object) that was for international students. Besides, I cannot deny my new identity as a foreigner in the current sociocultural context, even if my co-supervisor says, "I don't see you as a foreigner" (Fergal Finnegan), when I am doing the fingerprinting in the Immigration Police Office (*Questura* in Italy), they call me as *Straniera* (Foreigner in English). My constructed identities are not limited to the cases that I discussed, but I think they could clarify my approach to identity formation through social interactions in different social contexts.

4.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I presented the standpoints of the students who narrated their stories about their experiences with their cultural interactions, and my interpretations of their narratives. I aimed to reply to two questions of my research: first, how do international students in higher education experience and narratively construct their contact with other cultures? Second, how do these students identify themselves in a new cultural context?

Concerning the first research question, I have shown that each student narrates a different experience of his/her interactions with other cultures and has a different and unique perspective. I am aware that all narratives of the participants may not be totally representative of their actual experiences, but I approach them as the outcomes of the meaning-making process, and the construction and reconstruction of perspectives through our conversations. During the interpretation process, I found out that for the exploration of students' experiences, factors such as their previous expectations of living in and studying in a European country, their social, cultural, and family backgrounds, and their previous cultural identity/ies should be taken into account.

One of my main realizations drawn from students' stories is that their experiences with different cultures in Italy are shaping the (new) way they see things, what they know, and believe, how they behave, and their becoming (or learning).

From the exploration of students' perspectives toward identifying themselves, this study illustrates the dynamic process of identity formation shaped by social interactions and cultural contexts. The tension between the expectations of societies, families, and individual perspectives and choices, influences of social interactions and life experiences in forming the way individuals identify themselves, and identity formation resulting from shifting from one cultural context to another, all reveal the interplay between social and cultural experiences and an ongoing construction and reconstruction of identity in a diverse sociocultural setting.

Additionally, based on my own experiences and the narrations of students with cultural interactions, Italy has a strong potential for culture contact due to its multicultural context. Namely, the university has provided not only international students but also native students with touching diversity and developing more awareness about being and becoming. However, From the research, it seems the current situation reflects a lack of efforts in creating a structured and safe space for addressing social and cultural issues. This deficiency can be argued at two social and educational levels. On both levels, there seems to be a reliance on random events rather than a systematic approach to multicultural integration, and it may come from lack of a coordinated initiatives or policies that develop understanding and collaboration among diverse communities.

Chapter five Culture contact, and socially situated cognitive development

In this chapter, I explored the sociocultural experiences from the perspective of the participants, aiming to understand the interplay between culture contact and the development of students' minds, thoughts, and critical thinking as a cognitive strategy for adult learners to navigate cultural disorientations, enhancing the desirable learning outcomes. It is required to note that this chapter is derived from a previously accepted paper for publication in the Journal of INSTED (Interdisciplinary Studies in Education & Society) and addresses the third question of the present research: How do adult learners shape their minds, thoughts, and cognitive abilities through socio-cultural experiences. Through this exploration, the chapter aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the cognitive dynamics involved in culture contact and adult learning and contributes to the depth and richness of the broader context and goals of the entire thesis.

5.1 Introduction

Adult learning is a unique and complex process that can be affected by an extraordinary number of variables (Moore, 2010). Some of these variables are cultural aspects, past learning experiences, life experiences, personal problems, and the ability to think critically. To identify satisfying conditions for adult learners to progress mentally and socially, I explore in this paper the meaning and interactions that accompany culture contact and critical thinking. The latter is

considered by many as a very important skill in contemporary adult education and learning, along with creativity, communication, and collaboration (Lombardi et al., 2021).

CT is widely viewed as an individual and cognitive skill and it is accepted by educators, researchers, and policymakers that the main goal in adult education is the development of critical thinking skills (Brookfield, 1987; Candy, 1991; Mezirow, 1981, Lindeman, 1926, Kokkos, 2011, Raikou, Karalis, & Ravanis, 2017). Top research on the role of transnational and national education policies reveals that CT is viewed as an educational policy, representing a procedural knowledge linked to generic context-independent competencies, which can be applied to a wide range of work and life contexts, with certain skills such as being 'open-minded' and ability to identify, clarify and analyze a particular problem. (Tahirsylaj & Wahlström, 2019).

Despite the attempts to make educational policies for enhancing CT as a valuable skill for life, there is still a lack of shared guidelines for the promotion of this skill(Manalo et al., 2013). Research is needed, then, to address the experiences and needs of adult learners and to feed the current policies. Understanding the interaction of many factors that may affect the appearance and evolution of CT development is essential. Culture and culture-related factors are among the debated conditions that may influence students' capabilities in, and use of, critical thinking (Manalo et al., 2013).

People interpret physical, interpersonal, and institutional events in their various cultural frameworks (Bochner,2003). In a multicultural context, with contact of people from different cultural experiences such established frameworks of meaning (often perceived as absolute truths and given for granted) can lose their certainty. For instance, when people from a society that values autonomy, choice, freedom, and individualism, as is the case in most Western countries, move into a collectivist culture such as Japan, the conflict between these two cultures will influence the interpretation of both newcomers and hosts, and it may affect how they see each other and themselves, and ultimately change their perspective(Bochner, 2003), and brings some behaviors such as withdrawal, refusal of the other, or an effort to dominate and impose one's own cultural norms, since it entails interactions and strategies to overcome the conflicts due to cultural differences.

If previous cultural and intercultural experiences can shape the perspectives of meaning that an adult uses in perceiving, acting, and interacting, how it would be the behavior of a person with

a degree in higher education who is expected to use the complexity of thinking to apply the information critically?

This study adopts a sociocultural approach, to explore how adult learners' critical thinking evolves in interactions with diverse cultures, exploring the interplay between human mental functioning and cultural, historical, and institutional contexts.

5.2 Culture and culture contact from the socio-cultural perspective

Culture and culture contact are the basic constructs of my current research. Culture can be defined broadly as a social system shared among its human constituents (Sprott & Msengi, 2020), but for the present, I confine myself to Vygotsky's conceptualization of culture in his sociocultural theory. Vygotsky's notion of culture emphasizes the role of culture in mediating human mental functioning. In his view, human action also is mediated by cultural tools. Language, works of art; writing, and mechanical drawings are some examples of psychological or cultural tools that alter the entire flow and structure of mental functions (Vygotsky, 1981, p. 137). He adds that culture creates special forms of behavior, changes the functioning of the mind, and constructs new stories in the developing system of human behaviour (Vygotsky,1983,p. 29-30). However, according to Wertsch (1991), this does not mean that such action can be reduced to or mechanistically determined by these tools or the sociocultural setting. Instead, mediated actions and individuals are both involved in the process (Wertsch, 1991) and it allows for innovation that is because of diversity. Regarding the mentioned differences, Scribner and Cole (1981) argued that the key to understanding human mental processes depends on the activity settings, and the heterogeneity of such settings leads to heterogeneity of forms of mental processes and critical thinking skills in various contexts.

The influence of these ideas on contemporary research is many, also due to the greater awareness of new scholars about cultural diversity. For instance, in considering CT as a social mental process, Danczak et al. (2020), maintain that it is not the same for all cultures and different societies. CT is more difficult for some cultural groups like some Asian student groups (e.g., Chinese, Japanese) have been characterized as being more group-oriented, hierarchical, and non-critical thinking in comparison to students from Western cultures who are characterized as being more individualistic, non-hierarchical, and critical thinker (Manalo et al.,2013).

From the developed concept of culture in this research, culture contact refers to the interactions between individuals and groups from different cultural backgrounds within a single cultural setting. whereby the adaptation, exchange, and transformation of meaning, knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, and habits may occur. The utilized conceptions of culture and culture contact allow me to explore and understand the experiences of students with contacts with people of diverse cultural backgrounds.

5.3 Critical thinking: from the cognitive/individualistic paradigm to a cultural interpretation

Within my attempt to understand the evolution of CT, I experienced an integration from its traditional individualistic point of view to a more culturally informed one. Through the process of integration, I explored and discussed various views on the theories of the research, to reach a proper understanding of CT and the social and cultural aspects of development that allow an adult to think critically.

CT is the other main construct of my research. There is a risk in using critical thinking like a "buzzword", i.e. a term that has different meanings and connotations in different contexts. In fact, some authors from various disciplines and ages have signaled the lack of a uniform definition of CT as the main problem with doing research in this field (Lipman, 1985; Garrison, 1991; Vaske, 1998; Kahlke & Eva, 2018; Castaño et al., 2023). Moore (2013) argued that given the social importance of thinking critically, the growing interest in research on CT, and the lack of consensus in the literature about the definition of CT, there is a need to understand this concept better and learn how it has evolved over time.

Many educators and researchers in Nineties tend to define CT as a skill, or set of skills, which refers to the subject's capacity for analysis, inference, evaluation, explanation, interpretation, and self-regulation.For example, Dressel and Mayhew (1954) defined critical thinking as problem solving skill only. D'Angelo (1971) also associated critical thinking with problem-solving, and mentioned that CT consists of some skills, e.g., creativity (Vaske,1998).

A broader definition of CT was elaborated in a two-year Delphi study, sponsored by the American Philosophical Association, involving 46 cross-disciplinary experts. This study revealed that CT contrary to common belief involves cognitive skills and also affective dispositions (Kwon et al., 2007). So there is no emergence of CT if individuals do not show it; they may have the skills, but avoid displaying them. For example, Kwon et al(2007) suggested

that critical thinking *dispositions* relate to consistent willingness, and motivation to use such CT skills. For them, the critical person has not only the skills to seek reasons, and truth but also the disposition to seek them. This could be a first step towards a more complex and critical interpretation, but most of these authors remain within the same rationalist and objectivist paradigm. For example, Siegel (2015) describes a "critical spirit" as an essential component of CTwhich includes the ability to reason and evaluate the reasons but also "certain attitudes, dispositions, habits of mind, and character traits". Siegel's position is rationalist. Besides, it considers CT as a feature of the individual, independent of the context. In fact, he argues that a person *is* a critical thinker if capable of thinking critically in all circumstances, neglecting the context that makes it possible (or hinders) to act critically.

Based on the views that these CT authors have provided, both the skill-based view and skill plus depositions view are individualistic and I consider it a limited approach for my research because, from the sociocultural perspective, we should extend the concept of criticality beyond logicality. A SCT integrates CT definition to the context, present situation, and social relations that sustain or hinder CT, and in the long run, would allow learners to think and act as critical thinkers.

Thinking about adult educators and scholars in adult education, especially in the eighties and later in the Nineties to the contemporary, such as Shor & Freire(1987) , Atkinson(1998) Brookfield, 1987; Atkinson(1997,1998), Mezirow(2009) , Freire(2018) , it seems that they are not interested in the action of constraints and resources, for the presence of an oppressor-oppressed relationship(Freire, 2018) or the internalization of structures, and normative roles when discussing criticality in education. For instance, for Freire, CT is not an exercise in test-taking, instead, Freire views CT as a valuable tool for empowering individuals for active participation in social engagement (Giroux,2010). Brookfield (1987) asserts CT is context-bound. Atkinson (1998) views CT as *cultural thinking*.

5.4 Methodological approach and context of this study

The diversity of definitions and perspectives on CT and cultural contact also brings great diversity in research design and methods. Within the rationalist and individualist tradition, studying CT involves assessing of skills and dispositions. The literature presents challenges in assessing CT in adult students. For example, Moss and Koziol (1991) advocate for evaluating students based on the quality of the arguments underlying their position, rather than the

"correctness" of the answer. Lai (2011) suggested the assessment of CT based on the visible reasoning of students. Brookfield also criticizes the objective assessment of CT and argues that if critical thinking is defined as a social process, then its assessment should also be a social process involving experiences, and perceptions. (Brookfield,1997). Following these ideas, Brookfield(1977) suggested some strategies for assessing CT. One of these strategies is assessing CT in a specific context. This entails studying the dimension of action, including both what students do and what they say. I found this approach as a solution for the assessment process of CT for my research since it is aligned with my research objectives, considering the particular context in which the participants of my research are involved actively in the research process. Furthermore, I adopted an ethnographic approach because this method considers what people do in a specific context and it builds a deep understanding of the inter-relations between cognitive, cultural, and communicational aspects of the social life of higher education learners (Leavy, 2020). It provides strategies for generating "data" that would enable the researcher to describe, analyse and interpret the cultural norms, perspectives, characteristics, and patterns entailed by those data.

5.4.1 The main aim of the research and research questions

The aim of this paper is to explore the value of a socio-cultural approach to critical thinking.

My research questions are :

a. How do international students in higher education experience and narratively construct their contact with other cultures?

b. How do they shape their mind, thought, and cognitive abilities through it?

c. Is cultural contact an occasion to develop critical thinking and its use as a type of higher mental functioning?

5.4.2 Participants

A small sample of five students among the participants of my PhD research were chosen for this study. These five students are those whom I interviewed first when I decided to do the present study.

5.4.3 Data collection

For this part of the study, I applied only qualitative ethnographic interviewing, to obtain the interviewees' points of view, and their relation to life, and to realize their vision of the world (De Fina, 2019).

5.4.4 Analysis of data for this exploration

Despite differences among approaches defining CT, there are some areas for agreement. The researchers of CT agree on the specific abilities:

- Judging or evaluating (Ennis, 1985)

- Analyzing arguments (Ennis, 1985; Paul, 1992)

- Making inferences using reasoning (Ennis, 1985; Willingham, 2007)

- Making decisions or solving problems (Ennis, 1985; Willingham, 2007)

- Asking and answering questions for clarification (Ennis, 1985)

- Defining terms (Ennis, 1985). Interpreting and explaining (Facione, 1990)

As I discussed before, most of the researchers also agree that in addition to skills or abilities, critical thinking also involves dispositions (Facione, 1990). The most cited depositions are defined as the following list:

- Open-mindedness (Ennis, 1985; Facione, 1990, 2000)

- Fair-mindedness (Facione, 1990)

- The propensity to seek reason (Ennis, 1985; Paul, 1992)

- The desire to be well-informed (Ennis, 1985; Facione, 1990)

- Flexibility (Facione, 1990; Halpern, 1998)

- Respect for and willingness to consider others' viewpoints (Facione, 1990)

The inclusion of these abilities and depositions serves the purpose of providing valuable insights into the critical analysis of the participants' acts and statements from different views. I assumed these categories were useful in gaining proper replies to my questions despite my varied and integrated perspective within the theoretical framework of this research.

I used content analysis to interpret the communication of meaning and to identify theoretical relationships. To this end, I implemented an iterative process by which concepts were reflexively developed, coded, analyzed, and interpreted (Altheide,2001). In the presentation of my analysis, I first introduce the participants' portrait, a synthesis of the information I have about the student and the position (s)he took during the interview. I prepared these portraits to contextualize each student's narrative within the context of their experience as international students and within the present context of the interview itself, which revealed uniqueness for each of them.

Then, I provide a selection of the most significant parts of the transcribed data, enriched with my interpretation for each participant, and finally, I discuss how the considered components answer to my research question. My interpretation is evident all along the analysis, and in the title that I have created for each conversation, where I summarized in a single word the most relevant information about the participant's social strategy, as narrated in the conversation.

The students are asked to talk about their experiences with the new cultural setting. I chose those parts of their stories that are considered the most effective ones that lead them to a have new conception of their social and cultural context and themselves.

1) Self-protecting Dayzi

Dayzi, 23 years old, is from the Philippines and her first language is Filipino. She is studying for her master's degree in an international course at the University of Milano-Bicocca in Milan, Italy. Living in Italy is her first experience of living abroad. I contacted Dayzi through an exchange of text messages at first. She welcomed my invitation to participate in the research. She was living in the same residence, but I never met her before that day. We did the interview in a quiet and friendly environment in my room. Dayzi asked about my nationality first, and she was interested in the cultural aspect of my research. She started the conversation by showing me a photo of the geographical location of the Philippines and then she described the country in detail to give me an insight into the diversity of its regions and languages. She is a fluent speaker of English. Dayzi shared with me very personal aspects of her identity when the recording was stopped.
She narrates some unpleasant experiences with her social and classroom interactions in Italy. It seems to me that our conversation builds a narrative where she becomes reflexive of her interactive experiences, which made her think and analyze her cultural identity and contexts more than before. While she expresses a feeling of being unconfident with her social

interactions, she prefers to lead a safe and isolated life by taking a conservative approach to her communicative acts and behaviors, such as staying alone, having fewer social connections, and staying quiet in group talks and conversations.

Dayzi describes an aspect of the Philippine culture regarding greeting habits, a very strict one based on her statements. For instance, using specific words to greet some people, as older people, is mandatory, to show respect for them. According to her, the words they use are cultural signs of respect and restriction. This is the occasion for contrasting her experience here and there. In fact, she continues,

> I think yeah, in a sense, well, Italians are also very respectful, but there is something like a difference, I think that I noticed I wouldn't say culturally, but I noticed people here they tend to say Ciao to everyone, like when you see someone say Ciao, OK, you don't know them but you greet each other and that was something that I was shocked because in the Philippines we don't do that. (Dayzi)

In comparing the two cultures, it seems that she did not expect Italians to have a similar distinction in the way of greeting. From the student's point of view, the Italian way of greeting is a way to show respect to everybody. I see the student's experience as an unexpected one. I wonder if the construction of a different conception about a specific behaviour – a detail, indeed, but socially relevant as greetings - might be a first step towards cultural transformation. In another part of the interview, Dayzi narrated her first experience of contact with Italian people and with a different language which is odd to her and is one of the basic categories to characterize culture.

> The day that I came here, at the reception there was a guard. He couldn't speak English and it was so hard and I could feel him shouting and I think I cried that day because I didn't understand anything, and it was like you have to stay in your room for 10 days. You can't go out, but what about groceries? it was hard. It took a while for me to understand. It was a traumatic experience. It's a sad thing actually. uh. Because in the Philippines I've thought of myself. I was confident and my friends saw that. But when I came here, it was like all that confidence was crushed since day one. (Dayzi)

It seems that her expectation was to face or interact with an Italian receptionist who is able to speak English; instead, the man only speaks in Italian, a language unknown to her. She calls her first experience of contact "traumatic", and she develops a theory around it, claiming that

this experience has made her lose her confidence. She used to be a confident person in her country, she says, but here it is different.

In another section of the interview, she continues :

" I'm thinking about everything now, I have to be careful about what I say about what I do, so I'm more cautious about that. I think I got personality-wise". (Dayzi)

The narrative that Daysy developed in our conversation builds around a new need for self-protection: because of the problematic contact with a new sociocultural setting, her habits – meaning her actions but also the way she thinks about herself - are changing. She reveals that she thinks more than before and she thinks about things she never used to. Based on CT skills, I add that the way she evaluates her behaviors and takes an organized approach finding solutions is noticeable. Even though in course of action she may not take the justified one because - she says - she "should be careful", when she is with others she prefers to be quiet, and most of the time she prefers to stay in her room in the students' residence and to be alone to feel safe. I think that precaution, isolation, and desocialization are not justified solutions to solve the problems and limit the capacity to achieve a higher level of CT. So, Dayzi's self-protecting strategy could, in the long run, limit her possibilities and deplete her international experience.

Then, although she claims that she is thinking more than before, her thinking is not necessarily evidence for being a critical thinker.

2) Adaptable John

John was introduced to me by a friend, I met him in the residence first time. I invited him to participate in my research, explaining its purpose, and he accepted immediately and then we scheduled an interview date. We did the interview in the lobby of the residence. Trying to provide a friendly and relaxing atmosphere, I began with general questions. He is from Guatemala, and he said there are not a lot of students from there. He has been in contact with a variety of cultures, and he claimed that the differences in cultures are very interesting and surprising to him and he welcomes the diversities while he stated that he is getting used to some differences like the difference in languages (Italian). In general, I found out that he has taken an adaptive approach to living abroad normally. He tends to enjoy his social life with no regard for the diversity of contexts and cultures.

John was 26 years old at the time of the interview. His first language is Spanish and speaks English fluently. He studied for his Bachelor's in the United States, so he has lived there for five years. John is doing his master's degree in an English course at the University of Milano-Bicocca in Milan, Italy.

John seems very enthusiastic about his international experience. He says:

> I had a lot of chances to meet people from different places all over the world, very interesting, I would say, Asian culture, but specifically, I met a lot of people from Korea, South Korea, and Taiwan, I think it opened my mind further to the outside of the world that I've never known. A lot of differences, like food, of course, I think it's the first thing and also things that they do in the groups, the games that they play, things that they watch and also it surprised me. they had some American influence; I didn't expect they have this similar stuff. (John)

When talking about his experience with the diversity of cultures in a different sociocultural context, he expresses interest and surprise. He identifies cultural aspects that disconfirmed his expectations, then he claims that his experience with cultural diversity has opened his mind to the world and his mind goes beyond the borders and things that he used to consider and know. Moreover, this cultural contact has changed his thoughts about people with different cultural identities.

He continues:

> I remember when I went to the US, I was shyer, I knew this was a new place, but I didn't do a lot out of my comfort zone, I was insured about things, and it would be hard for me to decide, also I couldn't do things, I had short plans. I met different people who they raised in different ways, they raised different, they looked at things differently, I was surprised to look at them. (John)

Living in various sociocultural settings with diverse cultures has changed – he says - his personality, behavior, and actions. He expresses a feeling of agency when he says: "Now I can make decisions and I can do things". Additionally, when he starts most of his speech by using the phrase ''When I was in …'', from my viewpoint, it can reveal how he is reconsidering and

recognizing the role of those different contexts, building a theory of himself as changed, thanks to these important effective experiences that have shaped his mentality and actions.

Regarding CT skills, I see here a sort of adaptive approach in the way John narratively constructs his thinking, acts, and description of events. For instance, when I asked him about the new educational system, he compared it with the educational system in America and said "Here is completely different and harder than that, but I am getting used to it, I need time to get used to it" (John), and some other similar quotes. If I read it in the framework of socio-cultural analysis, it seems to me that the higher mental functioning goes beyond the adaptive aspect of cognitive development, to entail the concrete relationships with others and with the environment. John's enthusiasm and openness facilitate his social life. The adaptive strategy, however, is not identified by the considered critical thinking abilities.

3) Sociable Mao

I met Mao in a shared Italian Language course. I told her about my research and how she could help me with that. We were living in the same residence. We fixed an online meeting because of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was a formal interview. She started the conversation confidently with this statement'' I am very good at cultural information because I have lived in various countries and with so many cultures''. Because of time constraints, we fixed another interview session. In the first session of the interview, she gave me some useful and interesting information, but she didn't share her private information, like her age. Two months later we did the second interview face to face. I invited her to my room, and we did the interview in a quiet and friendly environment. She told me about her relationships with her family and friends from her childhood, and her exact age. Mao shared many stories of her interactions with people from different cultures. She is a social woman, and her social relationships are the most significant challenge of her life because I see that she has made even the decisions about her educational and work life based on the satisfaction of her social interactions and life.
Mao was 38 years old. She was born in Japan and then she grew up in Brazil. She identifies herself as Brazilian. She has been in Italy for more than one year. She lived also in Australia. We did the interviews in the English language, and she speaks English fluently.

I listen to Mao's stories about her contact experiences with the Japanese culture.

> In Japan, they live for work, they don't have a social life, to enjoy, I've never accepted that. For example, one day I had training, I told the boss I couldn't come because I had training, was fine, he said ok but he was very angry with me, he made me feel guilty because I wasn't at work. I used to use very creative materials, like games, and creative lessons, I could do everything in the best way but I was under pressure, I was really really sick mentally, tired mentally, and there was a kind of psychological pressure of culture that was high. (Mao)

In her narrative, Mao criticizes the work-oriented Japanese culture, then she tells her story of the day she was absent at her workplace. She describes her boss's reaction to her absence as an example of culturally emerged behavior. On the other hand, she mentions how the Japanese social and cultural interactions made her improve her job skills.

Then she talks about her experiences in her current sociocultural context which is Italy.

> In Italy, they are always in groups, especially in the university. Once, I went out to a bar with a group of Italians who we worked on the same project. They invited me but then they excluded me. It's not painful anymore, as I got it. Because sometimes they see us as a stranger, just. I know some of them that pretend that they are open to international people. But then I asked them, do you have any international friends? They say no. (Mao)

Mao defines herself as a social person. Her ideal social life is one with many friends and connections, but in Italy, she cannot lead it. She told me about many attempts she made to make proper relationships with Italian people and to achieve what she wanted in her interactions.

She claims that her personality and thoughts have changed effectively during the years in which she has been living and learning abroad:
"I think I'm much stronger than before, even though now I'm still struggling. now I'm strong, I'm strong, I can do more things, I'm capable of doing more things than before''. (Mao)

From a socio-cultural perspective, we see how the external process of social life shapes Mao's actions and behavior, and how cultural tools and signs mediate her social mind. Regarding CT

skills, Mao uses a critical strategy to describe the social and cultural issues that she has faced. She makes a theory, claims and judgments based on her beliefs, even if they may not be true. She has the ability to analyse the environment, to identify her personal experiences, and reflect on how those experiences were influenced by cultural factors in each context. She is able to make reasonable decisions when it comes to the course of action since she has been trying to solve her problems in any possible way and we can find it out based on her statements in her real academic, social, and job life. She can be identified as a critical thinker who uses CT skills when she needs to do so.

4) Mindful Victoria

I got familiar with Victoria in our shared Italian language course. She was a stylish black girl. she agreed to participate in my research. On the day of the interview, she initially rejected a handshake and told me sorry and then she hugged me. We did the interview in the university's campus, and despite distractions on campus, Victoria replied to all my questions in detail. She looked like a confident girl and narrated her experiences with some ideas and reasonings that I felt she had thought about all of them before. Because of the distractions, I suggested a second interview, conducted indoors. The second interview was more friendly than the first and provided me with enough information. Victoria has a critical perspective on her new sociocultural context. She describes the social and cultural issues that she has faced, she analyses them and finally, she decides about her interactions based on the result of analysis. Victoria was 23 years old at the time of the interview and has been in Italy for more than one year, pursuing a Master's degree in an international course at University of Milano-Bicocca in Milan, Italy. Living in Italy is her first experience of living abroad. She speaks English well and she tended to learn the Italian language.

Victoria describes her experiences with the new and current sociocultural context.

People here smoke a lot because of stress because everything is too much. In my country, it's more common than in the past, but it is not something that you do everywhere, older people and females they don't smoke that much, but here is common for everyone, young guys. I think it's because they are stressed. It might be the education system definitely has some parts, some people out of education may smoke but, most people start smoking in

school so that's the stress starts and it's hard to get rid of it. I'm not sure but I think so. (Victoria)

The educational system in Italy is different and more difficult than in Ethiopia, as Victoria describes. While she is adapting to the new environment and the more demanding assessment system, she faces the smoking habits of the Italian and in general European students, which is an odd behaviour to her. In such a situation, she analyses and evaluates the causes and effects of smoking and relates it to the considerable stress put on students' shoulders by the educational system. This is, in her view, a problem that invests the whole life, not only education. From a sociocultural perspective, the process of student's analysis and evaluation can be understood as the development of advanced cognitive functions. Moreover, The issue that she mentions reflects the interplay between personal experiences, cultural influences, and transformed behavioral patterns.

In another part of the interview, she states that :

> For example in my country when you look different, people notice, you know? But here when you wear something different, you have tattoos, nobody cares about it. You can dress very fancy or the same as a crazy person, no one cares. I personally want to dress up well, people here are more independent, and we can live here independently. (Victoria)

Victoria cares about her appearance; based on the dominant culture in her origin country, people should be attracted by the way she looks, but in Italy, it doesn't happen. She states here people don't care about the way the others look because they "are more independent". (Victoria)

Her sociocultural experiences in the new context have led her to think about this issue which troubled her – paying no attention to appearance. She analysed it and then concluded, so she has developed a new conception of paying no attention to appearance, which is independence. Moreover, she states her will to live and behave independently. This seems a sign of agency and empowerment.

5) Parvin: a person who improved in the context

I got familiar with Parvin during a language course where we were both students. She is from Uzbekistan and is studying economics at the University of Milano-Bicocca. During the first

round of the interview, she seemed stressed and uncomfortable, so I proposed to do another interview to gain a deeper understanding and she agreed to that. The second interview, two months after the first one, presented a noticeable change in the atmosphere. Parvin appeared more relaxed and friendly since she could overcome some of her conflicts like the difficulty of her courses.

She tried to provide me with some detailed descriptions of her life and experiences. At the time of the interview, Parvin was 25 years old. Living in Italy was her first experience of living abroad. She did not speak English fluently and seemed to me from an intermediate level of English proficiency. Her first language is Uzbek, however, she prefers to speak Russian.

Parvin for me is a sample of noticeable changes in her lifestyle, feelings, and her educational situation as I mentioned above. Her main conflict seems to be about the religious (Islam) and cultural issues in her origin country and using Italian and even English languages in Italy. Here, religion becomes another marker of diversity and cultural conflict which shapes the narrative construction of her experiences.

In the interpretation of Parvin's narratives, I considered the difference between her statements and perspectives during two sessions of the interviews.

In our first meeting, Parvin told me about her course, studying, and in general her educational status in Italy.

> I don't know, I don't think that I can have my scholarship, I think it's not possible. Because exams are very difficult here, in writing I am not good, so I don't get good scores. I don't understand what they need. This course is something that I had to do when I was 22, I should change, I think I am not in my way, I think I should do whatever I can do not something hard for me, it is better for me to do what I can handle. (Parvin)

In another part of the interview, she narrates her stories of being robbed twice, in the first months of her arrival in Milan.

> Once, I sat with my friend to write some papers, I was in Tabaccheria (a store that serves coffee and tobacco) we sat in an open area, I put my backpack on the floor, and when I finished filing the forms, I found my backpack was stolen. I even didn't feel it… At 7pm I did not have keys to my room, no money, everything was stolen, you can't believe that at 11pm, the police called me and they found my bag.(Parvin)

Parvin's description of her status and her experiences in the new context transfers senses of confusion, stress, and uncertainty. Even in the interview meeting, I could feel her that is stressed, shocked, and not focused. Maybe because she is not good at the English language, and she faced some challenges with her social and classroom interactions and tasks and while she is wondering about her new context, she faces unexpected happens like robberies. She states that "being international here is a bit pressure".

During the second interview, again Parvin describes her situation, feelings, and new experiences. She states:

> Well, first six months it was difficult to interact to make friends here, but now, I have a lot of friends and professors who helped like because we are doing some projects together with our classmates so we can do for example, presentations and exercises we were doing together with different groups. (Parvin)

> I started to be a bit confident. I started to express myself, yes, and now I have experiences of traveling, of being alone without family. I understand how it works here. For example, when I came here, I didn't know about all these exams. In our country, we have a different type of exams. For the first time, it was a bit difficult now I understand how I should prepare for them and I'm doing my best. (Parvin)

she talks about her improved interactions inside and outside the classrooms, she describes how she works in shared groups with her classmates, and also she emphasizes the supportive approach of her Italian teachers and classmates. From the perspective of my research her improved interactive skills can be shaped through her social interactions. Then She says about her improved abilities in expressing herself, in living and traveling alone in her new sociocultural context. Moreover, she mentions that she can overcome things that she stated in the first interview as her issues. It is a type of problem-solving skill.

From a sociocultural perspective, Parvin's various and integrated perspectives reveal a process of development in her mental functioning through the mediation of some social, and cultural means. We can see how her experiences transformed her thoughts, actions, and behavior.

5.5 Conclusion
I undertook this study to understand how students' experiences of contact with other cultures shape their mind, thought, and cognitive abilities, and how cultural contact develops students'

CT and CT use as a type of higher mental functioning. I conclude this research from two perspectives. First, from a sociocultural perspective, I concluded that students' experiences of their social and cultural interactions in contact with a diversity of cultures in a different sociocultural setting are shaping their minds, thoughts, and ideas, and also constructing new stories in the developing system of their behaviors. I used a progressive tense to describe the process because I see it as a process in progress since we suggest that an adult person is constantly required to reposition and reframe her ideas and actions, relating to previous, present, and future contexts, and within a dynamic world of relationships with society, environment, oneself, and the other which are changing(Formenti, Luraschi, & Del Negro, 2019) an adult person is constantly required to reposition and reframe her ideas and actions, in relation to previous, present, and future contexts, and within a dynamic world of relationships with society, environment, oneself, and the other which are changing (Formenti, Luraschi, & Del Negro, 2019), and my understanding and finding about the participants' mind development and experiences will be probably changed if I do the same exploration at a point in the future. Second, from a CT perspective, I found that despite consideration of students' ability to "think more" than before, their strategies do not always seem to bring CT. Some of the students, Mao, indicate types of criticality in their analysis of the phenomenon and their acts, but from the approach of my research, to "act like a critical thinker" goes beyond thinking development and changes in thoughts. The tendency and having space to use this ability in different social and cultural contexts and situations is also required. In such a situation, the transformations in the students' habits of mind can appear in their actions and social communications (Mezirow & Ass, 2000), and they should be visible. Through this study, I emphasize the experience of CT for international students who enroll in Italy, but some results could be used to reflect on other countries in Europe and beyond that are increasingly investing in opening to international students. Despite the small number of chosen participants, the diversity of the ethnic identity of the students and the multiculturality of the context have provided me with some reliable and nuanced results concerning promoting cultural awareness, and spaces where these struggles can find expression, listening, and solutions.

Chapter Six: Sociocultural Setting and Students' Social and Classroom Interactions

6.1 Introduction

This chapter is allocated to one of my research questions concerning how a sociocultural setting shapes the students' social and classroom interactions. To reply to this research question, I used an ethnographic content analysis of both the qualitative interview transcriptions and the field notes from my observations of the students in their classrooms. In this chapter, I provide a selection of the most significant parts of the transcribed data, enriched with my interpretation for each participant, together with my report on their classroom interactions based on the field notes from observations. By this, I intend to understand the students' social and classroom interactions from their statements in the interviews and also from their practical interactive acts in the natural settings of the classrooms. These two sources of data offer valuable and different information about the students' strategies, that I will compare and contrast in order to discuss how the considered components answer my research question.

6.2 Analysis

6.2.1 Nima - We can have a useful connection with unknown people

Nima narrates his stories about the interactions that he has had with people whom he has never met before. For instance, he says that

"For me, it was very interesting that there was a Brazilian girl in that class, she helped me a lot, and she wrote answers to tasks for me in both languages to help me, to me it was very

interesting because we didn't know each other, and we haven't had any interaction before".
(Nima)

As I realized from Nima's statements about his experiences, he has received some noticeable support and attention from people in his current sociocultural setting, such as the experience that he had with his Brazilian classmate in the classroom. These supportive behaviors have made him not avoid facing and interacting with people. In another part of the interview, he states that:

> For example, when I came to the gym for the first time, I was always alone, one day I decided to talk to one of the player that were there, I though they can't speak English , so I translated my words to Italian, and I asked them to include me in their groups, I did it and they easily accepted me, and interestingly they could speak English mostly because in our field of sport, we have to travel to other countries for doing races, so we have to know English. (Nima)

We see how Nima tries different ways to make friendships or any other connection with people in various situations. In the first part of his story, he calls the members of that Italian group that were exercising at the gym, "they", but then he uses "us". It reveals that he knows himself as one of them, and that interaction was a successful one for him. So, it is not surprising if Nima tries the same contacts.

Once in the classroom, when the students were working in groups, Nima left his group and went to another side of the classroom to talk to another teacher who was there. I was following him; he was discussing something with that teacher. After class, I asked him why he left the group work on the task and went to that teacher (who was not the teacher of that course and class), he replied that he wanted to know that teacher and to know if he could work with her in the future.

From my observations of Nima in the classroom, and some other occasions and his narrated experiences, I understood that he tries to be linked with people not to be alone, and also to learn from them through their interactions.

6.2.2 Sheri - The Italian language is a barrier to interactions

Among my participants, Sheri seems the one who is more isolated from contact with other students. She states that in her interactions she has faced language diversity issues, for example:

I face the language barrier a lot because even in university when we go to Mensa (the restaurant in which the students' foods are served), Yeah, so there are like lots of options for foods, which is usually made with meat and I want to know what is in that meat, So if I ask, they usually either just shout or just say the same thing in Italian, while they increasing their speed, which doesn't help me in any way, so I just either skip that part or just do something which looks like either fish or chicken. So, the language barrier is mainly what I faced out there because I haven't gone out much, and I just stay in my room mainly. (Sheri)

Sheri narrates a story about when she went to the restaurant of the university where students usually go for eating. From her statements, she did not understand the people who work in the restaurant, and she could not understand what is included in some food, consequently, she skipped some of her options for eating. She claims that she usually stays in her room and does not have many interactions outside of her educational context, Language barriers have been the biggest issue that she faced.

In another part of the interview, she describes her Italian roommates. She states that "she's super nice and she understands English very good, while for speaking, she makes some grammatical mistakes, or at times she's not able to recall a word, but she's super supportive and she looks up the word and tries to explain it to me and I'm very happy with my roommate". (Sheri)

I think the way that Sheri's roommate behaves with her has probably made her feel safe within her shared room, and because of that, she often prefers to stay in her room. She appreciates her roommate's attempts to talk to her in a language that she knows.

She continues:

There's a friend of mine. She's from Philippines and her roommate doesn't speak English very well. So, at times if she's sad or feeling lonely, she's having trouble for communicating with her roommate because she would not understand her. But I don't feel that problem because. (Sheri)

So, it seems that the difference in language in Italy is the main cultural issue that she has in mind, and it can shape her social contacts effectively when she avoids them, and stay alone.

In one of the classrooms which was held in the lab, Sheri and the other students were working in groups. In the lab, everyone spoke in English. When I was following her interactive behaviors in the classroom, she asked questions to the teacher and her classmates whenever it was required. All members of the group were non-Italian students. I saw her comfortable with her teacher and the other students. In another classroom including more than 30 Italian and non-Italian students, Sheri was quiet, listening, and taking notes, while, during the class, the teacher asked them some questions to involve the students. I can say she was not actively engaged in communication in that classroom. From the approach of social and cultural practices of the students, considering language diversities, avoiding interactions using different languages, the active interactions of the student in the Lab, besides all other factors like the group work nature, might be shaped by the similarities among them such as shared used language as a cultural tool, and being in a multicultural context.

6.2.3. Amanda's multicultural policy in social interactions

Amanda, who is from Brazil, talks about her experiences with the Italian language in different places and conditions. She narrates the story of a day when she was sick and was at the hospital and she could not understand the personnel of the hospital, because they spoke to her in Italian. Furthermore, she talks about her friends and how they face some difficulties with the Italian language in the Police Office after losing her wallet. She also talks about some of her Italian classmates who do not speak English well while they are studying in English. She states:

> Dealing with other languages in Italy is really hard. It's similar to Portuguese, but not the same, the Italian don't speak English, for example, I went to hospital on Thursday, I couldn't speak Italian, they were talking very fast and fast , I said please talk a little bit slow , what did you say?, I didn't even understand. So, that's a kind of difficulty. For example, my friend lost her wallet, she went to the police office to report it there, but they didn't understand her. So, it's hard here when it comes to English, even some of my classmates study in English but some of them don't speak English well. The Italian language is very hard for some friends that come from Turkey, for them is a new world of language, but for me is easier actually. (Amanda)

We can see how she describes the problem with the main language of her current sociocultural setting in different occasions, such as classroom, hospital, and police office. I feel she has a critical mindset regarding her various experiences with the use of the Italian language by Italian

people. I observed Amanda in her classrooms and some other settings, but I never saw her with any Italian friends or classmates. However, I confirm her big network of friends from various cultures and countries and her common interactions with them in different settings.

As I understood from Amanda's social life and her statements about them, despite of her developed social behavior in contact with other cultures and cultural settings, her interactions and communications with her main sociocultural setting and community which includes Italian people have been affected by language as a main cultural tool.

Additionally, it seems that Amanda's social and classroom interactions are also formed by her other connections to international students. During the interview, she claimed that the Italian language is easy for her because is similar to Portuguese (her mother tongue), but not for my friends. I think about the way that her contacts with diverse cultural identities and experiences, made her view the cultural issues in Italy in different ways, a way that is shaped by others' points of view as well.

In the classroom, she talks to the other students and the teacher. In the group activities, she behaves like a person who cares about all other students who are international students.

6.2.4 Abai- My classmate is very open, and he can speak English

Abai is the student who wants to be happy through his interactions with people, however, he prefers to be included in those communities or groups that he finds happier than the others. He talks about his educational status including his classroom activities, his classmates, and his interactions at the university.

> They are open, my classmate is very open, and he can speak English, and he wants to know about my country as well, what's the situation like, they are open people. When I came first (to Italy). Well, first six months it was difficult to interact to make friends here, but now I have a lot of friends and professors who help me because we are doing some projects together with our classmates so we can do for example presentations and Exercises. we are, for example, four that work in Group. Yes, the group work. It helps a lot. We can not only interact, we help each other. For example, here I don't know some rules and if I'm doing something wrong, my mates Explain to me how it should be. Well, and teachers, professors, our professors were very great, and we can contact them anytime in the classroom, during the break or after the lesson. They say that we are available. We will be in the class. (Abai)

He adds "Now I feel myself better when I came before, yes, and I think everything helped me to make myself more confident and to get some knowledge, more knowledge today". (Abai) Abai talks about his experiences as a newcomer to Italy. He says that he had a tough situation with his interactions with his Italian friends and classmates, and then he describes one of his classmates who helped him feel comfortable with his new context and interactions. His interactions developed with the other group activities in his classrooms. It seems that his new connections with other students and their collaborations in group work and classroom discussions have been very useful to him and they not only led him to overcome his entire issues with interacting with people in his new sociocultural context but also made him construct his path to more interactions than before.

In the classroom, I have observed Abai for his interactive behavior during three sessions of the course. In the class, he talks to his Italian classmates, and they share their ideas about the courses. They collaborate well. I see there's a kind of friendly atmosphere in the interactions and collaboration among Abai and his classmates. Abai seems able to discuss with teachers and other students about different subjects. During one of the sessions of the observations, Abai and his three other students were doing a task, and they were discussing the possible solutions. From what I observed in his classroom, Abai's classroom interactions and activities seem to be shaped by his teachers, classmates, and friends from outside.

6.2.5 Lucia- But for my friend from Germany, the way that we pronounce words in English may be a problem

Lucia is the only Italian participant in this research. She states that "I'm studying marine sciences, and it's an international course and there are some foreigners, students from the Netherlands, Germany, South Africa,… we are mixed (laugh), it's interesting and we speak English".

Lucia describes her international course by the diversity of the students who attend this course and also the language that they use in this course. While she introduces his classmates from other countries as foreigners, she states that it is interesting.

About the use of the English language in the classroom she mentions that:

> I understand lessons in English, because you know Italian pronunciation (laugh)profes-
> sors have the same pronunciation as me, and if I don't understand something I can simply

ask them, and they will repeat it for me, but for example for my friend from Germany maybe they face with a problem with pronunciation but for me is ok. (Lucia)

Lucia, as she states, looks at using the English language as an opportunity, because in some parts of the interview, she declares that she needs to know English to achieve her academic goals in the future. Besides, she claims that contact with the diversity of cultures made her curious to know more about them, and she has not avoided these types of interactions.

In the classroom, again she refers to the diversities of cultural backgrounds, and at the same time, she explains that the similarity of the way she and the Italian teachers use the English language has provided her with less difficulty with classroom interactions in English language. So, she does not view the English language as a barrier to interacting in her educational setting.

As I understood, her shared context with a diversity of cultural backgrounds has made her to think about things not only from her points of view but also, she thinks from the views of the other individuals in that context, and she thinks the situation can be more difficult for non-Italian students. In the classroom, I saw her explaining the content of the classroom for an international student when it was break time. Once in the classroom, the computer of the class was not working, she was the only student who helped the teacher fix it by exchanging verbal interactions, however, later she switched to the Italian language to facilitate the process. It seems the diversity that she has faced in this course and its multicultural context is shaping her interactive habits and even her thinking habits.

6.2.6 Amer- I prefer multicultural classrooms

Amer is the Turkish participant in my research. Amer is the one who sees a "wall" (Amer) between himself and the others, so they cannot interact with each other. Amer claims that because he is gay and from the Middle East, he is a particular case in an Italian sociocultural context, in a way that it might be difficult for people around him to connect with him, or to accept him. He came to this conclusion through the disincentive interactions that he has had in Italy. Besides, he says that he doesn't feel safe with people, and his fear is rooted in when he was living in Turkey and his non-conformity gender was accepted there, neither religiously nor culturally. In addition to these issues, he does not know the Italian language and it also has made a barrier for his contacts with Italian people and students. All the sociocultural issues

such as cultural identity, social type of personality, gender identity, and language and language diversity, that Amer argues can affect the quality of his social interactions in Italy.

From my observations in Amer's classrooms and other places, from his life stories, I understood that he keeps a distance from the dominant culture in Italy, and makes connections to the international communities to protect himself from Judgments.

When I ask the student which type of classroom environment is more productive for him, He states "Uh, I think the diverse classroom I can like to learn more because they're the different cultures and different approaches to problems".(Amer)
Then he continues that:

> Yes, especially if you are like a foreigner. It's probably nicer a more foreigner-dominant classroom. Otherwise, the majority is Italian. They wanted to hang out together so you can feel like kind of outsider. So, I prefer international students and international environments, especially here. (Amer)

Regarding the classroom environment again he claims that prefers a multicultural one, above, we see that his favorite multicultural classroom is full of international students, where he can find some similarities like diverse cultural identities and the same language that is used by that community, rather than the host culture. He may want to bring the other non-Italian students to his side, to not be alone behind the wall that he feels. It seems that his strategy for his conflicts with interactions in Italy is not to make an effort, one reason can be that he feels disappointed, as I understand from his words.

In the classroom, Amer is working in a group of 5 students. The group members are all non-Italian from different countries. They are assigned to experiment.

Amer is taking notes of all the teacher's explanations and the experiment's process. During the interview, he told me that he prefers to study the lessons and the materials after class time and by himself, and he does not talk a lot in the classroom. In the classroom, In a group work of two people, he chose a Turkish groupmate. I saw them discussing and doing the experiment in Turkish language.

From my viewpoint, taking notes full time, asking general questions of the teacher at the beginning of the session, and choosing a Turkish groupmate can be all the student's attempts to get enough of the course while he keeps himself in a safe zone of the interactions.

6.2.7 Luis - I don't feel any big deal in contact with the Italian culture

Luis is a student from Spain. He says" it is similar". The Italian and Spanish cultures are similar. I don't feel any big deal, any challenge, in contact with the culture in Italy.

During the interview, Luis emphasized the similarity of two sociocultural contexts, the Italian and the Spanish. He claims that having interactions with other cultures in Italy is easy for him, while he lives in a shared flat with a friend from Spain. After the classroom of our language course, I saw that joined some other Spanish friends and left the university.

In the classroom, I saw him sitting with three other Spanish friends. It seemed that they attended the classrooms together. In the classroom except once when he had a presentation, he never talked to the teachers. In a class he faced a problem, then he discussed it with his Spanish classmate who was sitting next to him.

When I asked him if he has any close Italian friends. He replies: "no, not close friend". All these notes reveal that the social interactions of Luis are limited to his connections with his Spanish friends. It can be expected for him to be closer to the people of the dominant culture in Italy, but as I found from his interactive behaviours and statements his interactions inside and outside the classroom have become limited to his Spanish community in Milan.

6.2.8 Parvin- Being international here is a kind of pressure
Parvin says:

> I think being international here is a bit of pressure. It's not so easy for international students to live in Italy and become close to them. And you will never experience this. But now I can understand them. For example, when I came here I was a bit shocked. Why? Why no one wants to communicate, no one wants. During these six months (six months that was difficult for her to make friends in Italy) I was studying Italian, because sometimes in our group they can't speak English. Now I can understand them. (Parvin)

We see that she talks about her entire experiences with social interactions in Italy and with Italian people. She narrates her stories in a way to show her feeling of being "surprised" or "shocked". In previous chapters on analysis, I described how Parvin's social, and educational

situation has been transformed into an integrated one, and we saw how her interactions played an important role in this transformation.

I attended Parvin's classrooms three times to observe her classroom's interactions in a natural situation. During classes, she was quiet, and she never had any verbal interactions with teachers and other classmates during break times but, some students came to her, and they had some short conversations.

During the second round of the interview, I asked her what the reasons for the silence of students in the classrooms are, to know her views about it.

Parvin replied:

> For example, I am a very shy person, I can say. Oh, and sometimes it's difficult for me to speak, even in my country, in my native language. Speaking in front of many people… I will work hard on this, maybe it will be better my Interact with professors, and with my mates. Most of the time I'm quiet. I'm silent. (Parvin)

I ask her what makes you feel shy and she says she is afraid of making mistakes, she feels shame for her lack of ability to speak English well, and the she says she usually speaks with a low voice and people may not hear her well when she is speaking.

She continues :

> For example, my knowledge, and previous knowledge is not like students who live here (Italian students). They know more than I. That's why I'm waiting. Maybe someone else will answer. And his answer will be correct. (Parvin)

The interactive behaviors of Parvin in the classroom show her avoidance of talking in public, when some other people may judge her for being not perfect or for her low level of English language and her voice, she prefers to stay quiet in the classroom. For me, these are some other factors that shape students' interactive behaviors when they are in a foreign educational context.

My general understanding from Parvin's statements and beyond her words is that cultural issues such as language, cultural identities, and a new and various sociocultural setting such as Italy which is a multicultural one can shape the way students interact. Additionally, students in contact with a broader multicultural educational society can know themselves and find their

weaknesses and strengths. This awareness can lead them to some practices for overcoming their different issues.

6.2.9 Victoria - Classroom interactions here are not stressful for all students

I considered Victoria as a student who thinks about the social and cultural issues in Italy, analyzes them, and then acts. About her social interactions also she behaves based on her defined social and cultural norms. When she met me for the first time, she rejected my hand shaking but hugged me. I have never asked her for the reason, but my request for handshaking was not matched with her social norms.

Regarding classroom verbal interactions, she claims that she talks in the classrooms only when the environment is not stressful, and she feels relaxed. For example, she says some students are very nervous when they are for instance presenting something, which makes her also feel nervous.

She continues, "for example, I have a friend. Huh, she's very relaxed. She's From the US. Yeah, we are always in the same group until now". (Victoria)

She states that she feels good about her classmate because she doesn't make her stressed, unlike some other her classmates. Immediately after describing her, she says she is from the US. She relates the nationality of the students to their level of stress. For her, the American lifestyle is not stressful, unlike the European one which is stressful. She claims that when she is with her, she is active in the classroom.

6.2.10 Dayzi- I have to be careful about what I say about what I do

At the beginning of the interview, Dayzi shows a photo of the geographic map and the location of the country. The cities seem separated by the channels of the water and it looks like a combination of some small islands. The geographical separation of the cities provides this country with many different languages.

Dayzi comes from a multilingual background where she had to use a different language than her native one at school. She is very good at speaking the English language and says that she was taught the English language from an early age.

Dayzi narrated her first experience of contact with Italian people and with a different language which is odd to her and is one of the basic categories to characterize culture.

The day that I came here, at the reception there was a guard. He couldn't speak English and it was so hard and I could feel him shouting and I think I cried that day because I didn't understand anything, and it was like you have to stay in your room for 10 days. You can't go out, but what about groceries? it was hard. It took a while for me to understand. It was a traumatic experience. It's a sad thing actually. uh. Because in the Philippines I've thought of myself. I was confident and my friends saw that. But when I came here, it was like all that confidence was crushed since day one. (Dayzi)

It seems that her expectation was to face or interact with an Italian receptionist who is able to speak English; instead, the man only speaks in Italian, a language unknown to her. She calls her first experience of contact "traumatic", and she develops a theory around it, claiming that this experience has made her lose her confidence. She used to be a confident person in her country, she says, but here it is different.

In another section of the interview, she continues:

"I'm thinking about everything now, I have to be careful about what I say about what I do, so I'm more cautious about that. I think I got personality-wise". (Dayzi)

The narrative that Dayzi developed in our conversation builds around a new need for self-protection: because of the problematic contact with a new sociocultural setting, her habits – meaning her actions but also the way she thinks about herself - are changing.

She narrates some unpleasant experiences with her social and classroom interactions in Italy.

Additionally, while she expresses a feeling of being unconfident with her social interactions, she prefers to lead a safe and isolated life by taking a conservative approach to her communicative acts and behaviors, such as staying alone, having fewer social connections, and staying quiet in group talks and conversations.

In the classroom, I found her an active student, unlike her isolation in her conservative approach to her social contacts, in the classroom she takes an interactive approach. During the observation sessions that I had for her, she had useful interactions with the teachers and other students when it was required.

6.2.11 *Mao- They see us as strangers*

Mao talks about her experiences in her current sociocultural context which is Italy.

In Italy, they are always in groups, especially in the university. Once, I went out to a bar with a group of Italians who we worked on the same project. They invited me but then they excluded me. It's not painful anymore, as I got it. Because sometimes they see us as a stranger, just. I know some of them that pretend that they are open to international people. But then I asked them, do you have any international friends? They say no. (Mao)

Mao defines herself as a social person. Her ideal social life is one with many friends and connections, but in Italy, she cannot lead it. She told me about many attempts she made to make proper relationships with Italian people and to achieve what she wanted in her interactions.

Once I met Mao, she told me that one night she went to the shared kitchen of the residence, where we both live, to have dinner. In the kitchen, some Italian students were eating and chatting. She said they did not invite her to join them for eating, while they used to talk to her and they were familiar with each other. She said that she sat alone on the other end of the table while she was feeling bad. Suddenly two of her other friends who are non-Italian came to the kitchen to eat. They joined her for eating. She described their presence in that situation as a "miracle" which saved her from that suppressing situation.

She claims that "I'm stronger than before, I'm much more responsible. I have more empathy with people. Because I know what people face here, because I faced many things that people may face. Now I understand how people feel" (Mao).

I introduced Mao as a sociable person, with many connections. In the part above, we see how she feels about people. From her narrations, her feelings about people, and the external process of social life shape Mao's actions and behavior, and we see how cultural tools and signs mediate her social mind.

6.3 The findings of this chapter

The reflexive analysis and my understanding of the students' narratives on their experiences and points of view about their social and classroom interactions, and their interactive behaviors in the natural setting of their classroom provided me with a diverse range of insights to reply the research question *exploring how* a sociocultural setting shapes students' social and classroom interactions.

When students use language as a cultural tool to share and make sense of their experiences whether in interviews, in their social interactions, or within their educational context, they engage in a reflective process. It involves a critical review of their own cultural backgrounds

and other cultures, while they compare them. Through these reflections, their awareness of cultures is enriched. From the approach of this study, language or verbal interaction is a cultural tool that individuals apply to share and interpret experiences with others, and it can be considered a means of acquiring cultural awareness and understanding (Vygotsky, 1978). The students' narratives illustrate instances where they thought about the sociocultural issues that they faced, and they realized that these challenges are related to culture and they state "it's their culture".This awareness signals a shift in the interactive behavior of individuals.

The shared experiences also highlight the diversity of languages, the Italian and English languages that are the dominant languages of students' interactions in the context of my research as a key concern of the students. The issue of using the English language in Italy is rooted in its cultural and historical background. Italy is one of the countries that has not had a previous Anglo affiliation. These countries are now facing a dilemma: preserve their own language, culture and history and attempt not to participate in the growing impact of English or become involved in the spread of English as the lingua franca of the world (Faez, 2011). Sheri, Amanda, Amer, Parvin, and Dayzi directly address the language barrier as the main cultural barrier to their interactions with Italian people. The strategies that students take to overcome this challenge are different. Parvin and Karolina take some Italian language courses to learn the dominant language to lead a better social life for themselves in Italy. Sheri and Dayzi take a conservative and isolated approach. Amer and Amanda limit their interactions to international students. From the sociocultural approach of this study, our advanced mental abilities come from mediated activities when we use cultural tools as mediators and communicate with others. Language or other forms of communication is one of these tools (Vygotsky & Kozulin, 1986). So, verbal interactions of the students play an important role in their mental and educational development.

Besides, from the students' words and their actual behaviors in the classroom setting, I have understood that those students who have taken a conservative approach in their social contacts, necessarily do not behave and act through the same approach in the classrooms. Moreover, the communicative acts and behaviors of the students in the classroom can be different from their narrated perspectives during the interviews, as an example I can refer to Dayzi and her conflicting approaches in her social interactions, and in the context of the classrooms.

Additionally, I found that in a multicultural context, such as the classrooms of the participants of this research, the conflicts between cultures not only influence the perspective of the international students as newcomers in this context, but also shape the way that the students of the host community behave, act, and see each other and themselves, and it may lead them toward changing their perspective and practices(Bochner, 2003), because it entails interactions and strategies to overcome conflicts due to cultural differences. As well as bringing behaviors such as withdrawal, and refusal, which some of the students talked about, a multicultural context may lead them to improve their language and communicative skills to communicate and help the newcomer student, as happened for Parvin who was in the beginning rejected by her Italian classmates, but then she witnessed a transformative shift in their approach over time when they supported her in their group works. Also, she stated that her Italian classmates sometimes speak English and like to interact with them instead of being resistant to communication. Similarly, Lucia's caring perspective toward her foreign classmates suggests a development in her cultural interactions.

6.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I presented the participants' experiences and points of view about their social and classroom interactions with other students, both Italian and non-Italian. Besides, I described the students' interactive behaviors in the natural settings of their classrooms based on my observations. Both the qualitative materials presented here contributed to the achievement of one of the primary goals of this research exploring how a sociocultural setting shapes students' social and classroom interactions. The findings of this exploration provide new insights into the interplay of the sociocultural context of Italy and the verbal interactions of the adult students in the society and classrooms. While the language dynamic is a central construct of the sociocultural and educational framework of this research, the findings reveal that the most important concern of international students in their intercultural contacts in Italy is language diversity. This resonates with my personal experience, where language, rather than any other cultural differences, made challenges me in social and educational interactions. These insights provide broader implications for educational practices, sociocultural understanding, and the establishment of inclusive environments in multicultural educational settings, focusing on language policies. Additionally, these benefits are not only for international students but also contribute to the development of the social and educational perspectives and practices of the host society's students, which are shaped by cultural conflicts in this multicultural context.

7.1 Conclusion

In the present dissertation, I have explored the experiences of cultural contacts, learning, cognitive development, and interactive behaviors of international students living in Italy in a new sociocultural context, coming from different cultural backgrounds. I have also explored the theoretical and empirical bridges among these different processes, with an underlying premise that doing an international experience - that is, studying abroad in a multicultural context - is not only an investment in learning for a future career, but a complex human experience, entailing adaptation strategies, coping with challenges, and taking decisions based on one's own resources and previous experience, as well as on the opportunities offered by the specific context, groups, and individuals that one meets. To this end, I have provided the perspectives of eleven international students from different countries, and one Italian student enrolled in an international course, all of them studying at the University of Milano-Bicocca in Milan, Italy. The diversity of the ethnic backgrounds of the students (Italian, Iranian, Indian, Ethiopian, Turkish, Spanish, Uzbek, Filipino, Japanese, Brazilian, and Guatemalan) has enriched my research with a wealth of stories, values, and meanings from a variety of sociocultural and educational experiences, both in their past and present in the specific context of Italy, and Bicocca University.

My aims for this study were firstly to understand and explore the students' experiences of contact with a diverse socio-cultural context. As I argued in the methodological chapter, the subjectivity of learners in higher education deserves some attention to highlight the meanings and effects of individual behaviors, so I met my participants iteratively in ethnographic interviews and observations. Secondly, I wanted to identify the impacts of these sociocultural contacts, and context, on students' cognitive development, attitudes, and behavioral patterns. Thirdly, my aim was to investigate how these contacts with others from other cultures and especially the meaning given by the students can shape the students' strategies related to communication and socialization, namely their verbal interactions inside and outside the classroom.

Drawing on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, I explored the social and cultural aspects of students' mental functioning, learning, social and cultural development, and classroom interactions, and I found some very interesting clues of socially and culturally situated cognitive development and interactive behaviors of the students, that may be similar or different in everyday informal social situations with being in the context of formal education. The study also illustrated the dynamic process of identity formation shaped by social interactions and cultural contexts.

7.1.1 The narrative construction of culture contact experiences

A first outcome of the exploration of the narratives and representations of interactions among adult students at Milano Bicocca University in Italy (chapter 4), is that a narrative constructivist approach allow to personalize and differentiate the students' experiences. All the interviews are different and show how relevant may be to listen to the students, on this matter. They revealed that the students' conceptualizations of their cultural contacts and cultures are built on the basis of their social interactions. Accidents, traumatic events, personal observations, challenges are told and constructed in a way that illustrates the ongoing construction of a personal theory (of culture contact, of the "other", of themselves, etc.) and adoption of a personal strategy for coping, When students focus on a specific behavior from the "other" that needs to be explained, they often find a cultural root for it that becomes an explanation and a leverage for further moves. For example, Amanda finds a cultural root (i.e. "having a fixed timetable for eating") for her Italian roommate's awkward behaviour and this helps her in accepting it; or when Karolina emphasizes the hardworking cultural value of Japanese people, she supports her idea by telling a story from her biography of her interaction with her Japanese boss at work, and this becomes a part of her self-narrative about (not) being a Japanese. When Amer relates the misunderstandings of Italian people about his cultural background to a culture that he names as "not flexible", and "racist", he builds a wall that could hinder further contacts.

Another notable finding of this study is that the students' experiences with different cultures in Italy are shaping their learning, sustaining the adoption of a new perspective, a revision of what they know, and believe, and how they behave. In many parts of my analysis, I have highlighted their becoming and learning, and the constraints to it or challenging moment. From

the sociocultural perspective of the research , the students' social practices provide experience-based learning not only for individual mental functioning development, but also for action and adaptation to the new emerging conditions. This is very relevant when it comes to what we consider a requirement (which conditions, which experiences, as well as ideas) to think and understand ourselves, others, and the world. Following this, from the students' narratives of pleasant and unpleasant experiences, their feelings of marginalization and exclusion, or their lack of understanding for some unexpected situations, I found that they develop different strategies to overcome their sociocultural and educational conflicts, including mere "awareness", "othering", critical reasoning, and adaptive strategies. For example, Abai's approach to cultural diversities reveals gaining a deeper cultural *awareness,* when he says that he realized the existence of cultural differences. *Othering* and *critical reasoning* are used by Mao when she states that she became stronger after reading and naming the Italian students' body language ("they excluded me" from their group) and learned how to overcome this cultural conflicts with Italian people ("them"). Victoria and John adopted more *adaptive* strategies by getting used to sociocultural diversities in Italy.

7.1.2 Construction of socio-cultural identity

The identification of students' sense of belonging and becoming from their interactions in their new sociocultural setting (chapter 4) reveals an ongoing process of identity construction that concerns their social life in the past and in the present. Here, I present the findings of this part of my research relating to the process of identity construction from two aspects: one is the role of narratives in forming a participant's identity, and the other one addresses the role of social relationships and interactions in individuals' identity formation. I found that along with the long-standing effects of previous family and social norms (often evoked during the interviews), factors such as self-reflection, self-observation, and self-judgment (Chapter 2) are also in-volved in the identity formation of the individuals. This explains why a person like Parvin is able to identify herself beyond her previous cultural identity, shaped by her original culture and family, for example when she narrates that in Uzbekistan, they were expected to be Muslim, and for a woman like her there is a prescription to behave in a certain way. When she claims "I am not like them", she is showing a part of the process of her becoming. Mao's story, on another hand, reveals the interplay of family and social interactions. The totality of her life story from

her childhood to the present, telling about her diverse social contacts and the way she has over-come her difficulties in all aspects of her life, can evidence an ongoing construction, from the past to the present and future. Adults learn how to rebuild their identities through culture contact; this entails complex conscious and unconscious movements: Mao is expressing a conscious thought, and sharing it with me, the interviewer. This process of social validation is also part of the ongoing construction.

Overall, the exploration of students' narratives and perspectives toward identifying themselves (chapter 4), illustrates the dynamic process of identity formation shaped by social interactions and cultural contexts. The tension between the expectations of societies, families, and individual perspectives and choices, influences social interactions and life experiences in forming the way individuals identify themselves in another cultural context, and construct and reconstruct their identities in an ongoing process.

7.1.3 Culture contact experiences shape students' minds, thoughts, and cognitive ability

Chapter 5 of my thesis is allocated to understanding how students' experiences of contact with other cultures shape their mind, thought, and cognitive abilities, and it develops students' Critical Thinking (CT) and using it as a type of higher mental functioning. My findings from this exploration were discussed in chapter 5 from two perspectives: From a sociocultural perspective, the narratives and presentations of five students, Dayzi, John, Mao, Victoria, and Parvin revealed that their experiences of social and cultural interactions in contact with a diversity of cultures in a different sociocultural setting has shaped their minds, thoughts, and ideas. They built new stories and possibilities in the developing system of their behaviors, through an ongoing process of construction and reconstruction. From a strict CT perspective, I found that although the students' stories show some clues of developed abilities in thinking, when Dayzi, Victoria, Parvin, and Mao state that they think "more" than before, and some of them like Mao seem more able to analyze and reason, there are no clear clues about them as critical thinkers, or "better" critical thinkers after this international experience. This was my expectation when I started my PhD, but coherently with the approach of my research, and field work, acting like a critical thinker and bringing changes in one's thoughts is not enough. Acquiring a generalized tendency to use a critical perspective and moreover having an appropriate, safe, and non-judgmental space where to use this ability in different social and

cultural contexts and situations (for example, in the classroom or in a tutorial setting), are also required.

So, being – or acting as - a critical thinker includes a combination of transformations in thoughts, mind, and practices such as social, cultural, and educational acts and communications, and a context where this can be done with no harm.

7.1.4 Students' social and classroom interactions can be developed or hindered by their cultural contact experiences

In chapter six, I explored how a sociocultural setting shapes students' social and classroom interactions. My insights from this exploration resulted from merging and comparing the students' statements in the interviews and their interactions observed in the natural setting of the classrooms.

First, from the shared stories and experiences of the students, I identified that the diversity of two dominant languages, Italian and English, is a key concern of the students. While Italian has an impact on informal learning and everyday life outside the university, English has an impact on both informal and formal relationships. Knowing/not-knowing one or both languages shapes the context, the overall possibilities for culture contact, and the adaptation strategies. Among my participants, Sheri, Amanda, Amer, Parvin, and Dayzi directly address (in chapter 6) the language barrier as the main cultural issue affecting their interactions with Italian people. Second, the strategies that students take to overcome this issue are different. Parvin and Mao try to learn the Italian language, Sheri and Dayzi take a conservative and isolated approach, and Amer and Amanda limit their interactions to international students. Third, from the sociocultural approach of this study, individuals' mental abilities are mediated by their sociocultural activities and tools, such as language, and communication. So, limiting their verbal interactions with other students can be seen as a limitation in the opportunities for their mental and educational development. Furthermore, the different approaches of some students, like Dayzi, for her social interactions and her classroom interactions, revealed that the students' interactive acts and behaviors after exposition to cultural contacts may not be necessarily the same in these two contexts. And the final insight is related to the influence that contact with other cultures can have on the perspectives of both the international students (newcomers). Lucia and Parvin (chapter 6) showed the possibility of this interplay, when Lucia

states that her foreign classmates made her develop her intercultural interactions and cultural understandings, and when Parvin experienced the transformed perspective of her Italian classmates through their improved language and communicative skills for supporting her as a newcomer student.

7.2 Multicultural Italy

The findings of this research offer many valuable insights into cultural interactions of higher education students, including their interactions with peers, educators, and the broader social context beyond the educational setting. Significantly, the research reveals that Italy has a strong potential for contact with cultures due to the presence of diverse ethnic groups within the country, specifically the city of Milan. Namely, by offering international courses in English, many Italian universities have provided not only international students but also native students with touching diversity and developing more awareness about being and becoming.

The term "multicultural" refers to a particular kind of situation, one in which there are two or more cultures represented. For example, "The international university had a multicultural campus, with more than 15 different national and ethnic cultures represented" (Bennett, 2012). We assume the construct of "different cultures" based on characteristics such as race, ethnicity, or religion, and additionally other characteristics like nationality and aboriginality.

In the past, Italy has been described as a country of emigration (Armillei, 2016). The initial entry of migration into Italy started at the end of the 1960s (Castles and Miller, 2003) as the result of colonial, cultural, and commercial relations between Italy and certain sending nations (Colombo and Sciortino, 2004). Taras (2012) outlines the early arrivals of foreign domestic workers in two waves, initially accompanying Italian colonial officials returning from Africa post-World War II, followed by full-time female domestic workers in the 1960s connected to Italian Catholic missions in countries like the Philippines. Numbers became higher towards the end of the century by a growing number of Tunisians migrated to Sicily, to be employed part-time in the fishing industry where shortages of labor were becoming evident (Taras, 2012), and have increased until the present.

Another early pathway of migration that is relevant to my work included international university students. A significant portion of these students are from the Middle East and Africa (Taras, 2012), and have been granted scholarships by the Italian government aimed at assisting developing nations. The origin and cultural backgrounds of Italy's immigrant population are characterized by a wide range of diversity and it might be a reason for establishing multicultural

policies. More recently, in the academic year 2019-2020, there were 96 thousand students with foreign citizenship at all levels of formal education in Italy (Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca, 2021).

Therefore, Italy can be considered as a multicultural context. However, this research is not aimed at offering insights for the realization of multiculturalism in Italy and its educational system. Nonetheless, it emphasizes the need to understand the learning potential of cultural contact and to clarify the role of subjectivity, meaning, and adaptation strategies to sustain the achievement of more social integration and equality. Knowledge about culture contact and its impact on adult learning could sustain a policy that aims at: a) recognizing cultural differences, and b) facilitating the social and educational integration of people of foreign citizenship (Canivez, 2014).

Regarding this, new research questions may arise, such as: Are the existing conditions within the Italian higher education system adequately addressing the diverse backgrounds and expectations of individuals from different cultures? Are there effective support mechanisms in place to ensure that the educational experience is enriching and inclusive for both immigrants and international students? Moreover, how has Italy fostered an environment that encourages cross-cultural understanding and collaboration within its academic institutions?

From the research, the current situation seems to reflect a lack of efforts in creating a structured and safe space for addressing social and cultural issues faced by incoming students. This deficiency can be argued at two social and educational levels. On both levels, there seems to be a reliance on random events rather than a systematic approach to multicultural integration, and it may come from lack of a coordinated initiatives, policies, and methods (not least, pedagogical) that develop understanding and collaboration among diverse communities.

Armillei (2016); Mascitelli and De Lazzari (2016); Hill, Silvestri, and Cetin, (2016) also challenged multiculturality in Italy. They argue that it is difficult to consider Italy as a multicultural context since, when individuals use the term "multicultural," they typically refer to the visible diversity present in everyday life, such as varied clothing, languages, religious structures, and customs, which has become more common in Italy over the past two decades (Colombo and Semi, 2007). Italians, especially in cities like Milan and Rome, have grown accustomed to the presence of people with various skin colors, mosques, ethnic restaurants, and established ethno-cultural minority populations. Despite these transformations, the Italian society has not undergone a major shift, because individual attitudes toward change and newcomers are slowly changing, and there has not been a national dialogue on how society will change in the 21st

century (Hill, 2013, pp. 120–132). Hill (2013) finally noted that while various Italian communities have shown, locally, humanitarian efforts and acceptance, the nation is not unified in willingness toward integration and acceptance of newcomers. I use these arguments to support my idea of an urgent need for the adoption of strategies devoted to support the complex ongoing integration of co-existing diversities, which is the main requirement of a multicultural society like Italy.

In the educational scope, more specifically, there is a mismatch between education and immigration policies. The multicultural approaches adopted by the Italian educational system are facing difficulties in application, it might be because they are not reflected in the broader model of social integration. This research revealed the significant role of the social and cultural context of living in shaping the students' minds, behaviour, and acts. I have presented how positive and negative social aspects have led these students to take different strategies aimed at overcoming various social and educational issues. I have also argued that these choices are relevant and not neutral: they may change their lives and identities, a never ending ongoing process. Therefore, efficient educational policies and practices related to the diversity of cultures are required.

The higher education system in Italy should not only promote international exchanges through bursaries but provide appropriate and diversified learning spaces for cultural contact, and comprehensive support in terms of inclusive educational practices and policies. My outcomes suggest a need for spaces where struggles and dilemmas could be shared and become leverages for transformative learning. For example, teachers in higher education, as adult educators, can play an important role by implementing policies in their classrooms to involve all the students in classroom discussions and activities or group activities, and in sharing their difficulties. They can avoid the separation of Italian students from international students (chapter 6) by using the tools and strategies of active pedagogy, critical pedagogy, and adult education. As I discussed before (chapter 6), these contacts can be useful for improving the students' social, cultural understanding and learning, but they can also improve specific curricular knowledge, skills, and competences.

Another required attempt for the policymakers in the educational context and other institutional contexts and organizations in Italy, is related to more effective policies for language diversity, since this study revealed a lack of linguistic skills related to English in the Italian people, not only in everyday life but surprisingly also within the academy. This could be also due to the

lack of a clear and well-structured policy for language use in the context of academic international courses, where consideration of the dominancy of a shared international language is obviously necessary and useful.

7.3 My positioning as a qualitative researcher: challenges and insights

I would like to end my research writing about my experiences with positioning myself as a qualitative researcher along the process of doing my research. As I have written in chapter three, an autoethnographic approach allows me to name and interpret some issues that are relevant to my research.

I discuss my experiences from three perspectives:

The first perspective is related to the decision-making process for choosing a methodological approach, paradigm, and methods. I have described this process in detail in the introduction and chapter 3 of this thesis. To address it in brief, it was one of the most challenging parts of the first year of my doctoral program, that entailed far more than merely choosing. I was a newcomer and late beginner (having completed the process of Visa in Iran) to Italy and the University of Milano-Bicocca. It was during the COVID-19 pandemic, so I could not have a face-to-face meeting with my teachers, and classmates, for many months, during which I had to study alone, while I was trying to find my way in my research and I also needed to build a relationship with my supervisor who was from a different cultural background and also a different research paradigm. The described situation impacted the process of my positioning as a researcher. It positioned me in a way to develop strategies to overcome them such as my decision to change the initial topic of my research (see also introduction section).

Selecting my methodological approach has faced some adjustments, and finally, the meetings that I had with my tutor and other colleagues, together with presenting my research proposal in a seasonal school in Klagenfurt, Austria which occurred immediately after the lifting of pandemic restrictions, there, at the University of Klagenfurt I witnessed a different world of research efforts in Education, in a European context.

So, I can say that many cultural experiences have shaped my final decision, that is not totally "mine", but an outcome of all these processes, that started with my application in Iran, and all the following experiences.

The second challenging part of my research journey that is related to culture contact was making meaningful and trustful relationships with the participants of my research. An interview is a human meeting, where both participants bring their cultural identity. I am convinced that my identity as an international student, and the shared conditions that I had with the participants like using the same language, having the same difficulty with using English as a foreign language, living in the same place, and having maybe the same sociocultural issues in Italy - facilitated and improved our relationships. However, I faced some important and very concrete struggles in these meetings. For instance, I had to meet some students in places other than the campus of the university, such as the lobby of our dorm where students usually come to spend their free time and cultivate their hobbies. It was a challenge, because they did not like to spend their free time with a researcher, and the presence of other students was a disturbance to the intimacy of our conversations. I realized how the material context shapes the content of an interview: in some cases, I have chosen to propose a second interview to overcome these limits.

Another limitation was using the English language, which is our foreign language and for those students who had a lower level of English language skills, it was difficult to express themselves well, while using their diverse languages (some of them can speak 3-4 different languages) could be even more problematic. To mitigate the downsides of this problem, I tried to sustain them in keeping on and in using their own words and ideas, no matter how linguistically correct they were. Besides, fixing classroom observation sessions with each student was another challenge because some students were attending theoretical lessons, and other students were not, so it was necessary to analyze their schedules with them to decide where and when I could go, follow and observe, which was not always agreeable to them, or their teachers, and generally demanding.

The next challenging point of my research process is the interpretation of the qualitative materials produced by fieldwork, including the transcription of interviews and notes from classroom observations. As the analysis of the literature shows (chapter 2), the challenge of interpretation is common among researchers using qualitative methods. From the specific perspective of my study, this challenge is multiplied by the diverse sociocultural backgrounds of my participants, however, I see it also as one of the most unique and powerful features of my research that pushed me to develop my own cultural awareness, in the effort of following my insights, but also keeping a questioning attitude.

In fact, I was fully aware that I did not have enough information and understanding about their original backgrounds, and this lack of information made me face a limitation when I was interpreting their statements and claims about their origin cultures. The narrative constructivist framework helped me since my focus all along my research was not to establish truth, but to welcome their narratives as such.

As it can be seen in chapters 4 to 6 of this research, the students have referred many times to different aspects of their origin cultures from language to beliefs, etc. Furthermore, the participants of this research are from diverse ethnic groups, skin colors, gender types, male, female, and transgender. To me, as a person who comes from a city in Iran that has a single ethnic group, apparently homogeneous, with similar seeming characteristics and beliefs, and also where the diversity in gender is not accepted and allowed to be revealed, facing these diversities in all my meetings was a shock and I had to control my feelings and personal views both during the interviews and subsequently the interpretations. Additionally, while I am not Italian, I had to decide about students' comments and views on the Italian culture and Italians' behaviors, compared with their original culture. While I do not belong to any of these cultural groups or the Italian society, and I am hosted by the Italian university and government, so confirming or rejecting these views was another difficulty for me. I am comfortable with the idea that being a researcher entails trying to be neutral, open, and keep a distance from the participants' values and claims, while I interpret them critically.

The last and maybe the most unique struggle that I had with this diversity during my PhD life, has been overcoming my sociocultural issues with not only Italian culture but also many other cultural backgrounds that I have studied and lived with. As a clarification, I was expected to face the different cultures of Italy by coming to Italy, but the nature of my research including some people from various countries and cultures made me face cultures beyond the dominant culture of the country that I am living in.

7.4 My final remarks

This research has been emotionally and intellectually challenging but also incredibly rewarding. Through the integrated approach of this research, and by adopting a dual role as both insider and outsider, I positioned myself in a way that enabled me to review and understand a range of perspectives on the complexity of cultural interactions of higher

education students in a different sociocultural context. The participants' narratives not only illustrated their experiences but also contributed to the construction of a comprehensive understanding. Basically, from the approach that I have chosen knowledge, identity, and cognitive development are viewed as a continuous processes, shaped by active engagement, interactions with others, and the dynamic construction of meaning throughout human conversations.

Besides valuing and naming the developments of the research participants, I can claim that I have also experienced an integration or transformation in my views and perspectives. When I decided to change my research paradigm, I aimed to learn to see educational research and phenomena from a different and new point of view. I intended to overcome my previous understanding of education as a process that should be studied objectively.

I can declare now that I have achieved my aim, since during my research process I have faced many events and experiences that constructed new stories in my mind which have provided me with new insights. Related to my sociocultural understanding, for example, an unexpected experience was listening to my Filipino participant who told me that she was not going out because people judged her as Chinese, due to the form of her eyes, and in those days they looked at her with a hateful gaze because Chinese people were charged with responsibility for the COVID-19 pandemic. Listening to her, I formed a new insight in my mind, replacing that kind of common-sense racialization that previously brought me to draw inferences based on "typical appearance", that can be eyes or skin color. On another occasion, I was talking boy language to my male participant (as I had categorized him), but (s)he interrupted me and said that (s)he was not a boy, but a transgender person. While I was surprised, I tried to pretend that it was normal for me. Then he talked about the many challenges that this gender non-conformity has brought to him from his childhood to the present, and our conversations have shaped new insights for me, that were unthinkable before.

Similarly, when I witnessed how my Italian supervisor supported and respected my black colleague, also my view toward black people and the Italian culture was reformed. And at the end of my research journey in Maynooth, when I was in contact with my Irish co-supervisor, and I shared my personal experiences and ideas about these diversities with him, during our conversations I saw how he welcomes these diversities, diverse cultures, and diverse ideas, and many other lessons and learnings.

Today, I claim that I am not the self/ the PhD student who came to Italy in 2020, I can be an integrated version of myself. Qutoshi (2015) argues that "Transformation is not a momentary and/or a temporary shift in the way we look at the world differently but it is a permanent change in lifeworlds" (p.184). He adds that sharing personal and professional misconceptions, assumptions, and habits is a powerful feature of auto/ethnography that transforms researchers. By challenging one's own behaviors and thoughts, as well as those of others, the researcher aims to understand and improve everyday practices. Therefore, embracing the self-transformation approach may ultimately result in the transformation of others within a sociocultural context (Qutoshi, 2015). Additionally, from the sociocultural perspective of this research, we think of a higher level of mental functioning that sustains some special forms of behaviors and reactions, more critical and integrated. This achievement of adult learning is not granted, not even in the highest level of education, that is university. It needs specific experiences and contexts, narration, and reflexivity. I have shown, with this study, that it can be created or hindered by social practices and interactions, and then made visible in their social and educational life and contexts.

To conclude, we can assume as Vygotsky said,

"Culture is the product of social life and human social activity. That is why just by raising the question of the cultural development of behavior we are directly introducing the social plane of development" (Vygotsky, 1981, p. 164).

LIST OF TABLES

ACRONYMS & ABBREVIATIONS

SCT   Sociocultural Theory

CT   Critical Thinking

ZPD   Zone of Proximal Development

L2   Second Language

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