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Learning American English Through Tv Shows: "*Friends*", a Journey Between Language and Culture

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*Alla Puglia, dov'è nata quest'idea.
Al mare e ai fenicotteri che ogni anno mi aspettano là,
dove il sole si accende e ogni schermo si spegne.*

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Abstract

This dissertation aims to explain the importance and the fundamental role played by the audiovisuals during the process of learning and commanding, step by step, a foreign language.

In this thesis, the idiom object of study is American English.

In particular, since both language and culture-bound elements need to be taken into consideration to fully handle a foreign language, this work is based on the linguistic and cultural analyze of a famous American tv show from the Nineties, early Two Thousand, the popular and evergreen "*Friends*".

The following work will deal, in different sections, with the power of videos during the process of learning, especially tv shows, focusing in particular, among the other topics, on the use of subtitles.

A section will be dedicated to the cognitive studies in the field of linguistics linked to the use of audiovisuals along with the problems related to it, such as brain overload, and to the role primarily played by the so-called "mirror neurons".

Afterwards, the relational skills in the field of communication will be studied starting from the tv show, following a communicative competence model which includes both verbal and non-verbal issues, such as the ones linked to gesture and the value of culture-bound elements, more generally, present in the show.

Finally, the issues of teaching and learning with audiovisuals will be presented, along with the different activities and games which can be proposed after watching the show, and the benefits they can produce in this field, in a playful and "cheerful" perspective of foreign language learning.

Introduction

The study of this dissertation focuses on the use of audiovisual material in the field of foreign language learning and stresses its importance as a parallel component, along with the traditional means for teaching such as grammar books, manuals, classic methodologies employed at school or University etc.

The entire work will deal more specifically with the role played by tv shows, discussing one of the most famous American series of the history, "*Friends*" (1994-2004).

Since, nowadays, young generations all over the world spend many hours of their free time watching tv shows, both on tv and on the Internet, and it often occurs that these are produced in foreign countries, this can be taken as an excellent chance to get in touch both with an authentic use of the spoken foreign language and with the respective "target" culture.

More specifically, what is remarkable and distinguishes "*Friends*" is its intercultural stamp, which is highlighted by the huge number of sketches over the ten seasons which often involve foreign characters, together with a three-sixty outlook on the everyday life of the main characters, a group of six friends from New York.

This allows the audience to experience a "full immersion" both from the linguistic and from the cultural point of view during the process of learning of American English, the object of study of this dissertation, as if living "inside" the show.

The following work is divided in three sections or parts, corresponding to the three macro areas of interest, which are discussed.

The first part focuses on the power of audiovisual materials during the path of learning and on the cognitive studies in this field, together with the different educational methodologies which include the use of videos. This also provides for a scientific overlook on the brain functions involved in these activities, especially on the brain overload when exposed to the audiovisuals, along with a focus on the fundamental role played by the "mirror neurons". Moreover, in this first part the importance of using subtitles will be analyzed in depth, following the

three different steps which foresee a former use of them and, subsequently, their latter elimination and efforts in order to be able to handle the comprehension without their use, only hinging on sound (voices of the actors) and images (gesture). This last chapter included in the first part consequently introduces the focus of the second section of the dissertation, which examines the transmission and communication of elements carrying a cultural value and analyses their role. In the second part, the interest is in the "relational skills", namely a communicative competence model is presented in order to spot all the elements with a specific cultural connotation, along with stereotypes and intercultural comparisons, underlining distances or similarities and how to cope with them. The salient scenes analyzed, in particular, concern interesting use of gesture and verbal aspects and the related issues experienced by a foreign audience when exposed to them. All these aspects are at the basis and hugely enhance the process of language learning and following command.

Finally, the third part concerns the educational activities that can be proposed to the students after watching the tv show, in the framework of schools attended by students of different ages. The study will focus on the assorted number of tasks the students are encouraged to unfold together, in a recreational perspective of learning which entertains and motivates the student and allows pupils to be first-hand the protagonist of the scene they are playing, immediately putting into practice what they are learning. This last principle is founded on the renowned "rule of forgetting" stated by Krashen (1983), under which, engaging in different activities that do not have apparently foreign language learning as a main goal, students forget their linguistic commitment. The direct consequence is a reduction of anxiety and, consequently, the achievement of higher results.

First part: The power of audiovisuals. An overlook inside the brain.

This very first part focuses in three different chapters on the many functions carried out by the brain during the exposition to audiovisuals and what happens *inside* when it receives the linguistic auditive impulse together with the visual one. For this reason, in the first chapter this dissertation will deal in particular with the description of a specific cluster of neurons present in Broca's Area, the so-called "mirror neurons", which are responsible for the possibility of imitating behaviors both physically and linguistically. They are strictly linked with emotions and the concept of *empathy*, which will be highlighted as a cornerstone of foreign language education through the use of audiovisuals.

Subsequently, in the second chapter the two pedagogic techniques of "*learning by doing*" and "*learning by being told*" will be discussed, alongside with the presentation of the characteristics proper of the two different types of memory respectively involved with the two, namely the *implicit* and the *explicit* memory, and the corresponding approaches, the *bottom-up* and the *top-down*.

Finally, in the third chapter a topic which has always been related to the use of videos and broadly discussed will be introduced, namely the use of subtitles and their effects on the brain. This chapter will analyze the first three phases during which the spectator activates the subtitles and the specific benefits they can generate in a perspective of linguistic improvement, according to their use in the native language of the student or in the original one spoken by the actors, combined with the soundtrack in the original language or the mother tongue of the audience watching the show. Subsequently, the final broad step will be also taken into consideration, describing what happens when the spectator at last decides, according to an enhanced level of comprehension, to manage without the use of subtitling, simply trying to seize the meaning of the scenes by listening and observing, without reading anymore through the help of the captions.

Chapter one: Mirror neurons and the involvement of emotions in linguistic education

The use of cinema and, more generally, of audiovisual materials has been broadly discussed over the last decades, in the field of linguistics, for the benefits it can produce in the enhancement of many aspects of foreign language learning. In particular, being exposed to videos, be them foreign movies or tv shows, watching and listening at the same time, students are able to storage in the brain new information and data about a context which concerns both the foreign language and the respective culture, through an activity that encourages students and springs through amusement their commitment, as maintained by professor L. Salmon:

“Vi sono, invece, tecnologie che possono essere assai utili per lo sviluppo delle abilità linguistiche degli studenti: gli apparecchi satellitari e i lettori DVD (per guardare film), ad esempio, stimolano lo studente a vivere l’esperienza quotidiana del cinema e della televisione (con ogni genere di trasmissione) direttamente in lingua straniera. Il film, il telegiornale e gli spettacoli in lingua sono prodotti di *comunicazione* reale, che gli studenti condividono con milioni di cittadini reali, diventando spettatori effettivi, sentendo di partecipare a qualcosa che non è un artefatto didattico, ma un prodotto culturale del mondo reale. Il cinema, in particolare, è uno strumento altamente efficace grazie alla sua capacità di suscitare emozioni contestualizzate sul piano linguistico-comunicativo, coinvolgendo l’attenzione emotiva [...]” (Salmon L., Mariani M., 2012: 169-170)¹

¹ The following translation is by the author of this thesis.

“There are, instead, technologies which can be extremely useful for the development of students’ linguistic abilities: satellite receivers and DVD readers (for watching movies), for instance, stimulate the student to live the daily experience of cinema and television (with every kind of broadcast) directly in the foreign language. The movie, the newscast and shows in the original language are products of real *communication*, which are shared by the students with millions of real citizens, becoming effective spectators, feeling they are taking part in something which is not a didactic artefact, but a cultural product of the real world. Cinema, in particular, is a highly efficient instrument thanks to its ability to cause emotions contextualised on the linguistic-communicative plan, involving emotional attention [...]” (L. Salmon, M. Mariani, 2012: 169-170)

After the step of watching, this new information is available for a subsequent active reproduction, through the process of *imitation*. In this sense, a specific cerebral section that is primarily involved in the activation of the imitative behavior is Broca's Area, in the specific through a cluster of neurons called "mirror neurons".

The first chapter firstly illustrates the scientific studies accomplished in the last decades on this bunch of cerebral cells.

Subsequently, it demonstrates in what sense they play a fundamental role linked to the involvement of emotions when the spectator is exposed to the auditive and visual impulse at the same time, when watching the tv show.

This peculiar cluster of neurons is considered fundamental in the ability of reproducing an action after being exposed to someone who executed the same movement before (physical involvement, e.g. in sport). Lately researchers have discovered their huge involvement and their activation also in the field of linguistic education, for instance when the learner concentrates the attention on someone speaking a foreign language and then is able to reproduce some aspects of the linguistic input, be it grammatical or phonological (e.g. syntactic frame, accent, prosody etc.).

1.1 Mirror neurons, a scientific overview

The scientific story of the "mirror neurons" is rather a recent one. Scientists have defined this category of neurons with the adjective "*mirror*" since they allow the bystander to reflect with movements an action which was primarily observed or vice versa, namely when the spectator observes an action the mirror neurons turn on exactly like when accomplishing the same action. Assuming this state of facts, scientists discovered that these neurons act exactly like a mirror. This constitutes essential new data for what concerns primarily all kinds of physical activities and to study the human abilities to reproduce an action, fundamental for instance in the field of sport or medical rehabilitation.

The experiment of utmost importance, namely the first one in the field of mirror neurons studies has been carried out in the early Nineties by a team of researchers from the University of Parma, captained by the neuroscientist Giacomo Rizzolatti (1992), who discovered this category of neurons in monkeys' brain before finding out lately that they are present also in human beings:

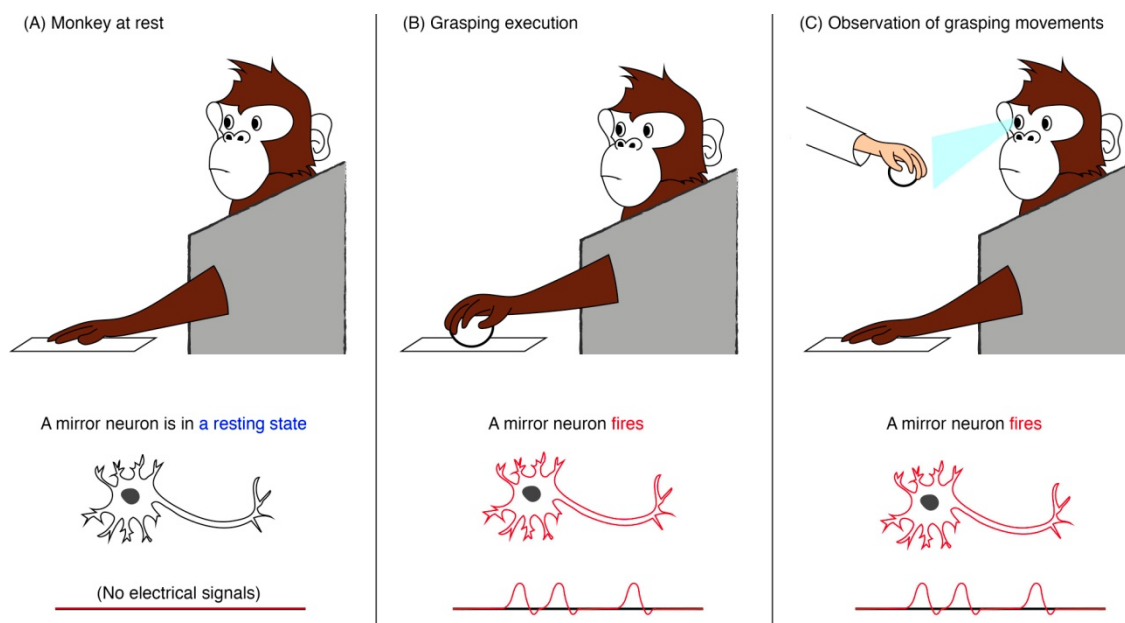
“The story of mirror neurons began simply enough. In 1992, a team of neuroscientists led by Giacomo Rizzolatti inserted tiny electrodes into the brains of macaque monkeys, hoping to better understand how the brain orchestrates the delicate interplay of muscles involved in moving the hand. Using these electrodes, the researchers monitored the activity of neurons, the cells that constitute the smallest processing units of the brain, analogous to microchips in computers. A neuron can be specialized to perform any of a dizzying number of functions, from perceiving a face to regulating sleeping and waking.

Rizzolatti's team, examining neurons in a part of the macaque brain involved in controlling the muscles of the hand, expected to find neurons that fired specifically when the monkey performed particular actions, such as reaching for or grabbing something. They indeed found neurons that fired when the monkey performed these actions, but it turned out that this was only half the story. One day, when the experimenters ate lunch in the same room as the monkeys, they observed something entirely unexpected: some of these neurons also fired when the monkey observed an experimenter performing the same action (in this case, bringing food to one's mouth). In short: these neurons fired both when monkey see, and when *monkey do*.” (Taylor J., 2016)

Primarily thought to be a scientific discovery concerning exclusively physicality, recent studies in the field of linguistics have highlighted their parallel importance and activation when listening to an oral message and being able to reproduce some aspects of the language whether required to do so.

Therefore, considering the content of a tv show is both auditive (voice of the actors) and visual (e.g. culture-bound gesturing), their role in the linguistic

education linked to audiovisuals is easily inferable, producing a two-sided benefit, namely helping and enabling the spectators to reproduce either what they can hear and what they can see when watching the episodes.



1.1.1 Implications in linguistic education

As stated above, mirror neurons do have a primary role in the field of linguistic education. Imagining the path of learning of a foreign language as something that begins first of all with a *passive* activity, namely listening, reading or watching, after having clarified what is the functioning of this cluster of neurons it is easily understandable how fundamental they are in this process, which foresees a latter step of production of language, namely an *active* role of the student.

Introducing the topic of mirror neurons in the field of foreign language learning, dealing at the same time with bilingualism and translation, researcher M. Mariani, citing the work of Rizzolatti (1992), as in every paper concerning mirror neurons, highlights the following observation concerning the concept of *imitation*, the animal and human behavior proper of mirror neurons:

“Questo sistema di osservazione/esecuzione non presiederebbe solo all’apprendimento motorio, ma anche ad ogni altro tipo di apprendimento umano. Infatti, ed è una scoperta davvero significativa, durante l’ecuzione/osservazione di compiti che coinvolgono la mano, si attivano anche i neuroni presenti nell’area di Broca, tradizionalmente considerata unicamente deputata alla produzione del linguaggio.”² (Salmon L., Mariani M., 2012: 39)

In a following passage, the author M. Mariani adds further interesting specifications about the implication of mirror neurons in the field of linguistics and their localization in the human brain:

“L’attivazione dell’area di Broca durante l’osservazione di azioni svolte da una mano riflette dunque un vero e proprio “fenomeno a specchio”. Gli autori avanzano l’ipotesi estremamente interessante che tale attivazione segnali un processo di “ripasso/mediazione” verbale dell’azione, per cui una stessa classe di neuroni sarebbe stata “riciclata” per forme sempre più sofisticatamente simboliche e astratte di comprensione e imitazione. Questo processo di esadattamento spiegherebbe così la contiguità, in termini di rappresentazione neurofunzionale, tra l’area di Broca e la Corteccia Supplementare Motoria, in cui appunto sono stati individuati i neuroni specchio. Uno stesso sistema, dunque, sarebbe alla base dell’apprendimento di tutte le funzioni, sensomotorie ma anche cognitive e persino linguistiche.”³ (Salmon L., Mariani M., 2012: 40)

² The following translation is by the author of this thesis.

“This system of observation/execution seems to preside not only over motoric learning, but also over any other kind of human learning. Indeed, and it is a hugely significant discovery, while executing/observing tasks which involve the use of the hand, also neurons present in Broca’s Area activate, area which has traditionally been considered only designated to the production of language.” (L. Salmon, M. Mariani, 2012: 39)

³ The following translation is by the author of this thesis.

“The activation of Broca’s Area while observing actions carried by a hand reflects indeed a proper “mirror phenomenon”. The authors make the extremely interesting hypothesis that this activation indicates a process of verbal “review/mediation” of the action, for which a same class of neurons would have been “recycled” for more and more sophisticatedly symbolic and abstract forms of comprehension and imitation. This process of esadaptation would explain so the contiguity, in terms of neurofunctional representation, between Broca’s Area and the Supplementary Motor Area, in which indeed mirror neurons have been spotted. A same system, consequently, would be at the basis of the learning of all functions, sensorimotor but also cognitive and even linguistic.” (L. Salmon, M. Mariani, 2012: 40)

Further information on the role played by the mirror neurons in the field of linguistics are given by researcher F. Fabbro, who integrates this topic discussing about the innate ability of children to produce at least very simple phrases and sounds. He stresses the importance of the *imitative behavior* which is fundamental either for physical actions and to build a “mental grammar”. This process is not only restricted to the tender age, but a similar brain activity linked to the firing of the mirror neurons can be spotted also during the years of adulthood, in subjects willing to learn a foreign language:

“Alcuni studi di linguistica sperimentale alla fine degli anni Sessanta hanno scoperto che l'imitazione motoria subliminale gioca un ruolo determinante nella comprensione del linguaggio. Per riconoscere l'invarianza dei suoni - ad esempio che il fonema /d/ è lo stesso suono nella sillaba 'di' e nella sillaba 'du' - il cervello di un ascoltatore deve simulare internamente i processi motori coinvolti nella produzione dei suoni che sta ascoltando. Questa modalità di comprensione del linguaggio è conosciuta come “teoria motoria della decodificazione del linguaggio”, e suggerisce che durante l'ascolto di un parlante il soggetto ripeta internamente a livello motorio quanto sta ascoltando.” (Fabbro F., 2004: 41)⁴

Besides, to conclude his statement about the implication of the mirror neurons in linguistics, he adds:

“Queste fondamentali scoperte delle neuroscienze indicano dunque che i processi di percezione e comprensione si attuano mediante una riproduzione interiore di quanto viene osservato o ascoltato e che tale riproduzione

⁴ The following translation is by the author of this thesis.

“Some studies of experimental linguistics at the end of the Sixties discovered that subliminal motoric imitation plays a determinant role in the comprehension of language. To recognise the invariance of sounds - for example that the phoneme /d/ is the same sound either in the syllable 'di' and in the syllable 'du' - the listener's brain must simulate internally motoric processes involved in the production of the sounds the subject is listening to. This modality of comprehension of the language is known as “motor theory of speech perception”, and it suggests that when listening to a speaker the subject internally repeats at a motoric level what listening to.” (F. Fabbro, 2004: 41)

interiore si basa probabilmente su meccanismi imitativi.” (Fabbro F., 2004: 41)⁵

As far as scientific experiments have discovered about the functioning of mirror neurons, it is therefore crystal clear the amount of help they can give the subject, not only to *register* a specific action - be it physical or linguistic - in the brain, but also to *imitate* it after a while.

At this point, a crucial question spontaneously arises, in the field of foreign language learning: which can be the benefits derived from the activation of this category of neurons inside the brain of FL students, whenever they are exposed to a movie or a tv show or any kind of audiovisual representation?

Of course, it is easily inferable that an auditive and visual representation allows the student to register in the brain and then be able to recall and imitate either the physical acts (e.g. gestures linked to the target culture, see *Part Two*) and the linguistic ones (e.g. a foreign accent, trying for instance to discriminate between the one of US and the one of UK, for students willing to speak English preferring to sound American or British).

Nevertheless, the role of mirror neurons in linguistic education - and in particular for what concerns the importance of taking advantage of audiovisuals in this field - does not seem to end at this point.

There is in fact a further element that is linked to the activation of mirror neurons and that captivates the spectator/student of foreign languages when watching a movie or a tv show, making the subject unconsciously more interested and mentally active - and consequently more likely to learn - especially in the course of scenes full of *pathos*, where the sentimental side is stressed a lot, especially during dramatic scenes or even hilarious ones: it is the rage of *emotions* and, in particular, the ability of empathy.

⁵ The following translation is by the author of this thesis.

“These fundamental discoveries of neurosciences indicate indeed that the processes of perception and comprehension activate through an interior reproduction of what is being observed and that this interior reproduction is probably based on imitative mechanisms.” (F. Fabbro, 2004: 41)

1.2 Emotions and empathy

The fascinating area of interest concerning mirror neurons seems to provide evidence not only for the human ability to reproduce *physically* an action after having seen somebody else executing it - be it verbal or gestural - but also, and this is bewildering, to reproduce it somehow *psychologically*, in an unconscious process, anytime we see someone else showing a particular emotion. This deals with the fact of experiencing that peculiar emotion first-hand or, as it is commonly expressed with an idiomatic expression, to "step into somebody else's shoes".

When we see something happening around us, for instance we are sitting on a chair not moving a finger and maybe a friend is cooking for us, we should probably say that we are "at rest", namely in a *passive* state. Actually, this does not seem to be exactly the case. Or, maybe, only from a physical point of view. Indeed, as seen before, mentally our mirror neurons fire exactly like when we accomplish the action of cooking.

The same happens with emotions. If we are sitting on the same chair and we look at our friend crying, instead of cooking, we are still not moving a finger, but our friend, like before, is doing something. Just like cooking, but in this case the action is the one of crying, namely not an act on purpose but the evidence or instinctive consequence of an interior state of profound sadness or upset. Maybe we could resist some minutes looking at our friend, but often it occurs that we happen to cry too after a while, especially if our friend is in a profound state of despair. What is happening then, in this case?

We are experiencing what is called *empathy*. Namely, the interior state in which we find ourselves sharing a feeling with the person in front of us and often we are not even able to explain why, if required to do so. It seems to be an unconscious process. After all, the problem does not concern our life, still we feel ill, in some way. And it is again because of the involvement of our mirror neurons, which reflect in our brain the feeling of the person in front of us.

Citing back the example above, maybe in some cases we do not really reach the condition of crying - that depends also on the different personalities - in any case

we share with our friend the same deep sad feelings under our skin, and if we were cheerful some minutes before, then our mood happens to change abruptly. What is really interesting about all this is that we are likely to experience the same condition of empathic feelings when exposed to audiovisual material, for instance, the most common case, is crying in front of a drama, just like laughing when watching a comedy. But there is more: the principal reason why tv shows such as "*Friends*", the one this thesis deals with, are built with background laughter, is just because of our mirror neurons, which not only react to amusing sketches, but receive furthermore the impulse to laugh because they *hear* laughter and they are consequently very likely to reproduce them. This puts the spectator in a state of cheerfulness, sometimes without him even being conscious of the reason why he is laughing. Indeed, the spectator sometimes finds himself giggling and after a while, when he consciously reflects on the content of the scene he has just watched, he does not find anything funny in it, maybe.

Subsequently, when we find ourselves in front of a movie or an episode from a tv series, sometimes we identify ourselves with the characters involved in the scenes, experiencing what they feel just as if we were the ones to live directly those facts narrated in the show. It is all unconscious, but it is just like real life, because of the involvement and firing of our mirror neurons.

The following is a precise explanation of what happens in these cases cited above:

"Remember, also, that our brain does not know the difference between something that is vividly imagined, and something that is real, and will react and reprogram accordingly. We also have something called mirror neurons in our brain that, if we are deeply engaged, will fire as if another's experience is ours. In other words, there are parts of our brain that will believe, and react as if what we are watching is our own experience. Thus, the content of media, T.V. shows, movies, etc., especially when it is emotionally involving or manipulative, has a profound effect on our body's adaptation and transformation process, and ultimately our ability to ground ourselves in states of heartfelt awareness. And most of the time we are unaware."
(Daugherty A., 2014: 240-241)

A similar concept is maintained by Alberto N. García in the following passage, which concerns exactly the firing of mirror neurons when being exposed to tv shows. First of all, he cites the famous primary work by the team of Gallese, Keysers and Rizzolatti (1992), afterwards he provides for an example of what happens to our neuronal system when watching a movie scene full of *pathos*:

“They hold that the brain directly links the first person and third person perspective of the phenomena we observe, “I do and I feel” with “he does and he feels”

[...]

Watching the movie scene in which a tarantula crawls on James Bond’s chest can make us literally shiver - as if the spider crawled on our own chest.”

(García A. N., 2016: 210)

Naturally, in the case cited above from the movie “*Dr. No*” (1962) in which someone tries to kill with a tarantula the James Bond character played by Sean Connery, not only the audience is able to experience the unpleasant physical feeling of the enormous arachnid climbing the actor’s body, but what is more fundamental the spectators are able to feel the consequent psychological *thrill*, namely in that precise moment they are not living anymore their reality but they utterly slide in James Bond’s shoes at least for some seconds, because of their mirror neurons. They are being *empathic* with his feelings, either from a physical and from a psychological point of view.

Linked to the brain process of mirror neurons firing also when we are attending at someone else’s emotions or social behaviors, also on tv, is a reference on a scientific article in this field which appeared on the *New York Times* in 2006:

“Nevertheless, a study in the January 2006 issue of *Media Psychology* found that when children watched violent television programs, mirror neurons, as well as several brain regions involved in aggression were activated, increasing the probability that the children would behave violently.”

(Blakeslee S., 2006)

As it has been stated different times in the course of the last decades in appropriate scientific research papers, some of which are listed above, in conclusion it seems that mirror neurons are involved in *learning* and *reproducing* afterwards movements, aspects of language and even *emotions*. To finally make the issue clearer and add further information, Gallese, from the research team of Rizzolatti, wrote an essay in 2005 called “*Being like me’: Self-Other Identity, Mirror Neurons, and Empathy*”. The conclusion he reaches in his paper is the following:

“There is preliminary evidence that the same neural structures that are active during sensations and emotions are also active when the same sensations and emotions are detected in others. It appears therefore that a whole range of different mirror matching mechanisms may be present in our brain. This mechanism, originally discovered and described in the domain of actions, is most likely a basic organisational feature of our brain.

One of the mechanisms enabling emotional feelings to emerge is the activation of neural “*as if* body loops” (Damasio, 1999). These automatic, implicit and nonreflexive simulation mechanisms, bypassing the body proper through the internal activation of sensory body maps, create a representation of emotion-driven, body-related changes. It is likely that the activation of these “*as if* body loops” can not only be internally driven but can also be triggered by observation of other individuals.” (Gallese V., 2005: 117)

Gallese then adds something more specific about the role of mirror neurons in the brain of human beings, more specifically:

“The discovery of mirror neurons in the premotor cortex of monkeys and humans has unveiled a neuron matching mechanism that, in the light of more recent findings, appears to be present also in a variety of non-motor related human brain structures. Much of what we ascribe to the mind of others when witnessing their behavior depends on the “resonance mechanisms” (see Rizzolatti, vol. 1, ch. 1) that their behavior triggers in us. The detection of intentions that we ascribe to observed agents and that we assume to underpin their behavior is constrained by the necessity for an intersubjective

link to be established. Early imitation is but one example of the intersubjective link in action. The shared manifold I have described here is a good candidate for determining and shaping this intersubjective link.” (Gallese V., 2005: 117)

At the light of the abundant data collected above, it is more than likely to believe that, when exposed to the video, the student of foreign languages is not only able to “register” in his brain structural information about language and gesture but, since he is able to see characters in the video showing emotions, he is furthermore able to *empathize* with them. This is true when in the video human beings are present, for instance in a tv show, with the everyday lives of the characters and the audience identifying with them in some ways, for instance recalling personal experiences or finding similarities with episodes of their own life. That is the reason why in this chapter reference has been made especially to scenes where the level of *pathos* is high, because the more emotional the spectator gets, the higher the attention peaks.

What does all of this mean in terms of linguistic education? It can be maintained that, empathizing a lot with the characters, the learner grows fond of them, consequently, when the activity of learning based on the video is happening, the student is not only putting into action an *explicit* kind of attention, like when listening for instance to a lesson of grammar, rather, he is entering the situation, getting captivated and involved in the story.

The “rule of forgetting” by Krashen (1983) comes here into play. The attention on the linguistic commitment, in this case, can be defined more *implicit* compared to a classic lesson at school, even if the student knows he is engaging to learn something, since it is a natural consequence of the psychological involvement in the story and the willing to comprehend its meaning.

Getting fond of the show and sharing some feelings with the characters, in a perspective of empathy, is therefore a fundamental element that contributes to enhance and speed up the process of learning. Emotions, empathy and affection seem in fact to concern an implicit and automatic “area” of ourselves. We do not empathize or internally reproduce an emotion or share a feeling on purpose, it simply happens. When we learn something “getting into the matter”, becoming

excited and thrilled, we learn better, since we are more *motivated* and *interested*. The concept of *motivation*, in this case, is primary.

Next chapter will analyze in depth which benefits and specific positive consequences this can represent in the field of foreign language learning.

1.3 *The theory of embodiment*

To conclude this section, a specific reference should be made to the so-called “*Theory of embodiment*”.

What is fundamental during the path of learning is the actual use of the language, the fact of concretely get in touch with it. To learn new words, to enhance a vocabulary in a FL what is necessary is to actually *experience* a word the student is learning. In this sense, he must “embody” that word, namely have a clear idea, also through a physical experience of the word in question. TV shows are perfect for that: not only a person can easily get in touch with the word, but she has a physical representation of it in a specific *context*. When, for example, a character asks another to do something and he uses a specific verb for that, he will immediately see the other carrying that action, in that case linking the meaning to the action represented, or a feeling to a specific gesture or facial expression, which often is not the same for every culture.

This is important especially in the case the action is culture-bound: if the student is not able to travel in the country where people use a specific word to design a concept, or in the case he has not done it yet, then watching actors play and at the same time hearing linguistic expressions referred to that action or behavior can make the task of comprehension easier, and enrich the student’s “cultural dictionary” (see Part Two).

For instance, there is plenty of specific linguistic expressions, which design actions or attitudes, that just cannot be translated. This happens because the culture of the student does not have that feeling or action represented through a linguistic expression in the roots of his culture. An example is the Portuguese concept for “*saudade*”: not only it is the concept of missing something from the

past, namely being nostalgic, it is also the idea of “missing something which has actually never happened.” For a foreign person, this is very hard to comprehend, but actions, gesture, physical representation could help her in the task of *empathizing*. And this word comes back again, another time.

As N.T. Thang brilliantly explains, about the role of foreign language teachers with respect to his learners, in this regard:

“Language learners would not be able to comprehend the meanings of the target language unless they possess a frame, i.e. background knowledge, which enables them to understand the target language.

To achieve the goal of providing language learners of a “frame”, language teachers should be able to build a network of the language in their lesson planning so that there is a logical correlation between the exposed language and their learners’ knowledge, i.e. learners’ embodied experience, either by real life experience or through careful explanation by the teachers.” (Thang N.T., 2009: 255)

This explanation could be carried with words or with physical representation through a circumstance, in this case TV shows come into play. What could be, actually, a better way to represent everyday life in another country, with real embodiments of the words spoken by the actors through their actions? N.T. Thang also adds, in this regard:

“Language teachers should be able to clarify the language, especially examples, in textbooks, which often cause difficulties for learners, not by the individual meanings of the words in isolation, but the frame semantics of those words as a whole. For example, in the book by Soars [16] entitled *New Headway*, which is a popular textbook in language centers in Vietnam, we would find the sentence “How would you like your tea?”. It is no doubt that in order to comprehend the sentence, one must be able to understand the practice of tea drinking of English people, which is very much different from that of Vietnamese, in terms of the ritual and the materials to make tea.” (Thang N.T., 2009: 255)

The case cited above is brilliant to make the reader understand why audiovisuals could play a fundamental role in this sense. A person who does not only read something about the ritual of tea at five o'clock in the afternoon, in England, could try to understand it better through a scene from a movie. It is easier because it implies the use of multiple physical *senses*, an excellent way to embody learnings on one's skin: not only reading a scene, but also hearing the tone of the actors, the possible surrounding sounds, watching the specific gesture for it, facial expressions, considering the context, and so on. The student could think about himself in that specific situation and, again, *step into the actor's shoes*.

Of course, a final and complete incarnation of the *theory of embodiment* is experienced by the student when he finds himself in a specific situation where not only he observes or hears other people talking about the referent, but *he* is the one to physically get in touch with it.

Coming back to the example concerning Portuguese "saudade", which is linked to the music of *fado*: there is a huge difference between reading a description of what kind of melody has *fado* and actually hearing the melody through ears, perceiving and experiencing physical and psychological emotions coming from it. The physical experience often causes a further physical reaction, a response: a person could not be moved by a literal description of *fado* and after, when listening to it, start to cry, instead.

Transposing this to a real situation in classroom, a teacher should always consider the *theory of embodiment* as a pillar to support linguistic learning: a concept, before being translated, should really be crystal clear for students. A second phase is the one of translating it, if a corresponding word in L1 exists.

As Buccino and Mezzadri maintain, in this sense:

"Ciò che appare centrale nell'approccio incarnato al linguaggio è l'esperienza sensorimotoria a cui fanno riferimento specifici elementi linguistici come i nomi, i verbi e gli aggettivi. L'esperienza è centrale sia nella comprensione che nella produzione linguistica. A nostro avviso, questo concetto è

particolarmente rilevante nell'apprendimento e nell'insegnamento di una lingua seconda o straniera: quando si insegna e si apprende un elemento linguistico in una lingua seconda o straniera, esso deve fare riferimento a qualcosa che sia già stato oggetto di esperienza sensoriale e motoria dell'apprendente [...]” (Buccino G., Mezzadri M., 2013: 14-15)⁶

They then add, furthermore, with specific reference to the step before teaching a specific word, expression or any kind of linguistic enrichment, addressing to the teacher of a FL:

“Praticamente, quando l'apprendente viene esposto a un testo, l'insegnante dovrebbe verificare la conoscenza pregressa sull'argomento durante la cosiddetta fase della motivazione di una tipica unità didattica o di acquisizione, per poi procedere a capitalizzare pienamente e a sviluppare sia i nuovi contenuti e i significati (l'esperienza), sia le relative etichette linguistiche.

Ad esempio: quando si parla della colazione inglese a un bambino italiano, l'insegnante deve assicurarsi che il bambino sappia che con colazione si intende ciò che si mangia al mattino, che nei diversi paesi la colazione potrebbe variare, ecc.; solo a questo punto (quando l'esperienza' della colazione è stata verificata o, in alternativa, acquisita) intervengono i nomi, i verbi e le altre parti del discorso, oltre alla sintassi.” (Buccino G., Mezzadri M., 2013: 15)⁷

⁶ The following translation is by the author of this thesis.

“What seems fundamental in the embodied approach to language is the sensomotor experience to which specific linguistic elements make reference, such as nouns, verbs and adjectives. Experience is fundamental both in the comprehension and in the linguistic production. In our opinion, this concept is especially relevant in learning and teaching a FL or a L2, it must make reference to something which has already been object of motoric and sensorial experience of the learner [...] (Buccino G., Mezzadri M., 2013, “La teoria dell'embodiment e il processo di apprendimento e insegnamento di una lingua”, *Enthymema*)

⁷ The following translation is by the author of this thesis.

“Practically, when the learner is exposed to a text, the teacher should verify the already existing knowledge of the topic during the so-called phase of motivation concerning a typical didactic unit, to proceed further to fully capitalize and develop both new contents and meanings (the experience), and the corresponding linguistic labels.

For instance: when talking about English breakfast to an Italian child, the teacher must make sure that the student knows that breakfast means the morning meal, that in different countries it could vary, etc; only at this point (when the experience of breakfast has been verified or, in alternative, acquired), names, verbs and other parts of the speech come into play, along with syntax.” (Buccino G., Mezzadri M., 2013, “La teoria dell'embodiment e il processo di apprendimento e insegnamento di una lingua”, *Enthymema*)

Starting from these premises and above all from the concept supported by the *theory of embodiment*, it will be easier for the reader to understand what fundamental role is played in FL education by the so-called methodology of *“learning by doing”*.

Chapter two: “*learning by doing*” and “*learning by being told*”, how human memory works through two opposite didactic approaches

In the second following chapter, the focus will be put on the side of foreign language learning linked to the role of empathy, emotions and *affection*, more broadly.

As it has been previously stated and proved, when students become fond of something or someone, be it a person or also a fictional character or the unfolding of their stories, they turn to be more receptive and their attention suddenly reaches high peaks. Consequently, in a perspective of education, this can support and hugely help both the work of the professor and the process of learning of the students, who add almost unconsciously a further key element to their commitment, namely an implicit strong *motivation*. This is true in the field of foreign language learning as well as in other areas of interest.

As researcher M. Mariani maintains, in this respect (2012):

“In tal senso appare chiaro che l’apprendimento di una L2 dovrebbe somigliare il più possibile all’acquisizione della L1, cioè generarsi in diretto rapporto all’esperienza, agli affetti, alle reali necessità comunicative. Per questa ragione, come osserva Fabbro (2004,75) (e come ognuno di noi ha empiricamente verificato), c’è una bella differenza se impariamo una lingua con un fidanzato o se la studiamo con un professore che costringe a memorizzare regole astratte. E questa differenza, oggi lo sappiamo con certezza, è registrata nel nostro cervello.” (Salmon L., Mariani M., 2012: 53)⁸

Moreover, researcher F. Fabbro adds, first-hand:

⁸ The following translation is by the author of this thesis.

“In this sense it is clear that the acquisition of a L2 should resemble as much as possible to the one of the L1, namely being generated in direct relationship with the experience, affections and real communicative needs. For this reason, as Fabbro notices (2004, 75) (and as each of us has empirically verified), there is a huge difference between learning a language with a boyfriend or studying it with a professor who forces us to memorise abstract rules. And this difference, nowadays we safely know it, is recorded in our brain.” (L. Salmon, M. Mariani, 2012: 53)

“L’insieme delle memorie emozionali che si legano agli automatismi di una lingua è quindi molto diverso se la lingua è stata acquisita da piccoli e con modalità naturali piuttosto che appresa a scuola per regole. Si immagini ad esempio un ragazzo che abbia appreso il francese durante l’interazione con la sua fidanzata a Parigi, rispetto a un seminarista della stessa età che sta imparando il latino attraverso la memorizzazione di regole grammaticali. L’impatto emozionale delle due lingue sui due cervelli, a parità di altre condizioni, è sicuramente molto diverso.” (Fabbro F., 2004: 75)⁹

To highlight furthermore and add details to the fundamental role played by emotions and by the affective involvement in foreign language education, Fabbro later returns on the subject, briefly mentioning information about brain structures involved in these processes:

“Come già accennato (cfr. 3.6), se l’apprendimento di una lingua si associa a situazioni affettive positive, l’entità delle informazioni memorizzate migliora notevolmente. Ciò dipende dalla realizzazione di collegamenti fra le strutture corticali e sottocorticali coinvolte nell’immagazzinamento delle informazioni linguistiche e affettive. Inoltre le situazioni affettive positive si associano a una maggiore attivazione dei sistemi dopaminergici e noradrenergici, i quali facilitano in maniera rilevante l’apprendimento e i comportamenti comunicativi.” (Fabbro F., 2004: 105)¹⁰

But what happens exactly when an emotional component rages in the brain of the students and feelings very close to affection towards a particular addressee come into action?

⁹ The following translation is by the author of this thesis.

“The set of emotional memories bound to the automatisms of a language is therefore very different whether the idiom has been acquired during childhood and through natural manners rather than at school through rules. It is the case of a boy who learns French during the interaction with his girlfriend in Paris, rather than a seminarian equal in age who is learning Latin through the memorisation of grammar rules. The emotional impact of the two idioms on the two brains, on other equal terms, is surely very different.” (F. Fabbro, 2004: 75)

¹⁰ The following translation is by the author of this thesis.

“As already mentioned (cf. 3.6), if the acquisition of a language is associated to positive emotional situations, the entity of information memorised considerably improves. This depends by the realisation of links between cortical and subcortical structures involved in the storage of linguistic and emotional information. Besides, positive emotional situations are associated to a greater activation of dopaminergic and noradrenergic systems, which significantly ease acquisition and communicative behaviours.” (F. Fabbro, 2004: 105)

It is clear that emotions involved in the framework of the exposition to audiovisuals can be defined as *positive* ones, since the student is not required to fulfil a task in front of a classroom, which would rage in his brain a series of emotional inputs that, in some ways, can be considered inhibitory, on the other hand, and slow down the abilities of the student.

Rather, watching a tv show, the student finds himself in a *passive* situation, be he in a classroom or at home, and he is sometimes even allowed to laugh or cry or to any kind of psychological reaction without being exposed to judgements consequent to personal *active* involvement, such as in a public linguistic task. In other words, he experiences a situation of mental relax. On the other hand, during classroom activities the student often feels the weight of judgement, by the other students and, unfortunately, often by too harsh professors who, moreover, are also the ones to decide upon the final marks.

In this sense, the emotions linked to the two different situations above (of *activeness* and *passiveness*, namely of *anxiety* and *relax*) are totally opposite. As P. Balboni maintains about the hypothesis of the so-called "*affective filter*":

"L'ipotesi afferma che affinché ci sia acquisizione è necessario che non sia inserito il filtro affettivo, altrimenti ciò che si comprende viene collocato nella memoria a breve o medio termine ma non passa ai centri dell'acquisizione stabile e definitiva.

La metafora del filtro, utile per comprendere il principio, corrisponde a stimoli chimici ben precisi: in stato di serenità l'adrenalina si trasforma in noradrenalina, un neurotrasmettitore che facilita la memorizzazione, mentre in stati di paura e stress si produce uno steroide che blocca la noradrenalina e fa andare in conflitto l'amigdala (ghiandola "emotiva" che vuole difendere la mente da eventi spiacevoli) e l'ippocampo, la ghiandola che invece ha un ruolo attivo nell'attivare i lobi frontali e iniziare la memorizzazione (Cardona, 2001). Il filtro affettivo è dunque un preciso meccanismo di autodifesa [...]" (Balboni P., 2013: 24)¹¹

¹¹ The following translation is by the author of this thesis.

"The hypothesis states that in order to provide acquisition it is necessary not to have the affective filter inserted, otherwise what is understood is collocated in the short-term memory or in the medium-term one but it does not pass to the centres of stable and definitive acquisition.

Nevertheless, this last example deals mainly with *production*, while this chapter concerns *comprehension* as a central theme. The topic of *production*, instead, will be resumed in *Part Three*, concerning linguistic tasks secondary to the audiovisuals, in a perspective of individual and collective activities.

Stated that the feelings which come into play when the student is exposed to the audiovisuals are quite good ones, and that the student is primarily interested in the global comprehension of the tv show he becomes fond of, it must be remembered that, in these cases, *implicit* memory and attention have a fundamental role in these circumstances. When students undergo the task of listening to the scenes and watching at the same time spontaneously, almost forgetting their educational commitment, the “rule of forgetting” stated by Krashen (1983) is unconsciously applied. They are able to put it into practice even before knowing about its existence in theoretical terms.

This particular description of what happens in the brain when foreign language acquisition is not primarily founded on explicit tasks, such as grammar exercises or memorization of linguistic rules, is efficaciously described by Krashen himself:

“In fact, the “forgetting hypothesis” requires that the messages be not only interesting, but compelling, with all attention focused on the message to such an extent that thoughts of anxiety do not occur.

The Forgetting Hypothesis is influenced by the concept of “flow,” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993). Flow is the state people reach when they are deeply but effortlessly involved in an activity. In flow, the concerns of everyday life and even the sense of self disappear - our sense of time is altered and nothing but the activity itself seems to matter.” (Krashen S., 2013: 103)

The metaphor of the filter, useful to comprehend the principle, corresponds to very precise chemical stimuli: in a state of serenity adrenaline changes into noradrenaline, a neurotransmitter that eases memorisation, while states of fear and stress produce a steroid which blocks noradrenaline and troubles amygdala (“emotional” gland which defends mind from unpleasant events) and hippocampus, the gland that, instead, has an active role in activating frontal lobes and get the memorisation started (Cardona, 2001). Affective filter is indeed a precise mechanism of self-defence [...]” (P. Balboni, 2013: 24)

It is therefore clear that the *explicit* memory, namely the *declarative* one, based on consciousness, awareness, will and attentive focus; has only a side role, to pass the baton to the *implicit* one.

Still, in a perspective of foreign language education, especially dealing with classrooms of adults, it must be remembered that it is fundamental to expose the students to tasks linked to the activation of the *explicit* memory, since it is, in a context of learning unrolled during the period of adulthood, the most active and “available” one. Consequently, the *implicit* memory can come into play only in a parallel scenario.

2.1 *Implicit memory and language*

A good description of how implicit memory works, concerning the field of language learning, is given in multiple points by researcher F. Fabbro. As stated before, as a person grows older, implicit mechanisms of memory are less and less active, still they play a fundamental role in the process of acquisition of a FL or L2. Fabbro mainly defines this type of memory, the *non-declarative* one, as a storage of random and accidental knowledges, which are moreover unconscious, automatic and improvable with practice:

“La memoria implicita, detta anche memoria non-dichiarativa, presenta alcune caratteristiche distintive:

- a) L'*acquisizione* di conoscenze implicite *avviene casualmente* (senza necessità di fare attenzione o di concentrarsi) [...]
- b) Le conoscenze memorizzate *non sono accessibili all'introspezione verbale*, cioè non possono essere descritte consapevolmente. Nessuno è infatti capace di andare in bicicletta dopo aver seguito soltanto delle lezioni teoriche. Ciò significa che non è possibile acquisire le conoscenze procedurali necessarie per guidare una bicicletta attraverso delle istruzioni verbali ma bisogna farne esperienza; questo vale anche per imparare a parlare fluentemente una lingua.

- c) Le conoscenze memorizzate nella memoria implicita vengono *utilizzate in forma automatica*. [...]
- d) Le conoscenze implicite *migliorano con la pratica*. [...]” (Fabbro F., 2004: 58)¹²

Moreover, Fabbro adds an important piece of information about the implicit memory, in particular he highlights the role of the *procedural* memory in the field of linguistics, a subtype of implicit memory:

“Le basi neuroanatomiche della *memoria procedurale*, un tipo di memoria implicita che è responsabile dell’acquisizione della fonologia e della sintassi, sono rappresentate in alcune strutture sottocorticali (gangli della base dell’emisfero sinistro, nuclei dentati del cervelletto) e in alcune aree specifiche della corteccia cerebrale coinvolte nella percezione (somatica e uditiva) e nel movimento (area di Broca, area motoria supplementare).” (Fabbro F., 2004: 59)¹³

Therefore, the passage above stresses the fact that implicit memory, in particular the *procedural* one, is hugely involved in linguistics for what concerns the storage in the human brain of phonology and syntax. This occurs, for instance, when we listen to the voice of actors speaking in the original foreign language (*phonology*, for the pronunciation and the accent).

As Fabbro maintains, the area of Broca comes into play in these circumstances, the same which is involved in the brain processes of imitation both in the physical

¹² The following translation is by the author of this thesis.

“Implicit memory, also called non-declarative memory, presents some distinguishing features:

- a) The *acquisition* of implicit knowledges *occurs accidentally* (without the need to pay attention or to focus) [...]
- b) Memorised knowledges *are not accessible to the verbal introspection*, namely they cannot be described consciously. As a matter of fact, no one is able to ride a bike after having followed only theoretical lessons. This means that it is not possible to acquire procedural knowledges to ride a bike through verbal instructions but there is the need to make the actual experience; this is also true to learn to speak fluently a language.
- c) Memorised knowledges are used in an *automatic modality*. [...]
- d) Implicit knowledges *enhance with practice*. [...]” (F. Fabbro, 2004: 58)

¹³ The following translation is by the author of this thesis.

“Neuroanatomic bases of *procedural memory*, a type of implicit memory which is responsible for the acquisition of phonology and syntax, are represented in some of the subcortical structures (basal ganglia of the left hemisphere, dentate nucleus of the cerebellum) and in some specific areas of the cerebral cortex involved in perception (somatic and auditive) and in movement (Broca’s area, supplementary motor area).” (F. Fabbro, 2004: 59)

movements and in the ability to reproduce items of linguistics, thanks to the activation of mirror neurons (c.f. Part One, *Chapter One*).

But how is all this amount of information about the implicit functioning of human memory able to concretely help in the field of foreign language learning and education? Here comes the essential distinction between the *implicit* and *explicit abilities*, which are respectively prerogative of the two approaches *bottom-up* and *top-down* and, most of all, of the two broad manners of learning, namely the “*learning by doing*” and “*learning by being told*”.

2.2 *Implicit abilities through the bottom-up approach: the “learning by doing” methodology*

In an essay about learning a L2 according to the two broad different approaches, psychologist Metz-Göckel makes a point about the fundamental role played by *implicit* memory, although supported by the *explicit* one. In spite of the many viewpoints according to which it is almost only possible to learn a L2, during the period of adulthood, conducting tasks that only depend on *explicit* attention and memory, Metz-Göckel highlights the central role played by *implicit* mechanisms (2014):

“Both explicit and implicit processes play a role in the acquisition of language skills in L2 (second language). Explicit and implicit learning are dynamically and interactionally involved in language learning. There is also some overlap with the declarative and nondeclarative memory system but we must remember that procedural competence, which is normally implicit and automatic, may at least be partially explicit if it is originally the result of proceduralization of declarative knowledge. And sometimes implicit knowledge may be explicitly expressed when the need arises for learners to make it consciously available, if, for instance, one asks himself, what the underlying rule of a sentence construction may be while writing a letter or an article. But implicit learning should be the default method of adult language

learning, because adult learners mostly miss the opportunities of acquiring the language competence in communication with their partners as do children. So we see many interactions between both forms of learning or knowledge, but for analytical purposes they have to be separated.” (Metz-Göckel, H., 2014: 3)

As it is easily inferable from the passage above, for one of the first times, in the field of linguistics, a psychologist maintains that, even during the period of adulthood, implicit memory plays a central role, not only marginal.

In her essay, Metz-Göckel cites furthermore the words of Doughty (2003), whose researches always concern the implication of implicit mechanisms in the process of linguistic education. Here, Doughty directly states that the *implicit* memory assumes the most important role during the acquisition of a second language:

“Doughty (2003) emphasized that the default processing mode in second language acquisition is implicit, but this need not rule out the occasional explicit procedures which seem necessary to overcome the disabling influence of primary language knowledge.

Nevertheless one observation may be emphasized: information which is processed unaware or in the implicit mode is more sophisticated than that which is processed explicitly (Doughty, 2003). These are the results of the classical studies (Reber, 1993, Berry & Broadbent, 1988), which also have shown that the improvements in performance always appear before participants are able to verbalize to any degree of completeness.” (Metz-Göckel, H., 2014: 7)

In the field of foreign language education, the main and broader distinction which must be highlighted, according to the two different memory circuits available to human brain, is the one between the two main approaches in didactics, namely the *“learning by doing”* and *“learning by being told”*.

The two approaches can be defined one the opposite of the other, as explains researcher and professor L. Salmon.

The former is based on the exposition of the student first-hand to the FL or L2, without any mediation made of rules or explanations unrolled by the professor, it rather consists of “spontaneous” activities, such as, for instance, watching a movie or listening to a song without knowing well the language, or even being asked to improvise a conversation when the language skills of the student are not so mature yet. It is undeniable that, in this way, the student does not get bored and is instead very stimulated, since he is concretely *doing* something, namely he is *active* in different ways and at different degrees. The *explicit* phase, the one when he will be exposed to grammatical rules and linguistic theories in general comes only at a second time, or, if it is parallel, it requires a fewer amount of time.

The latter, on the other hand, can be easily figured and summarized with the image of the professor in front of the blackboard, explaining the rules point by point to the students, who listen in a psychologically *passive* state. Actually, they are being told theoretical information about the language they are engaging to study. At a second time, they may then be asked to unfold grammatical exercises. According to elder theories, this was the best approach since, to unroll complex tasks such as listening to original voices of actors, the student should be prepared, first of all, undergoing a long period of explicit educational methodologies.

In particular, as L. Salmon maintains in the field of foreign language education:

“Un docente che abbia le idee piuttosto chiare su ciò che vuole fare, su ciò che sa fare e su come il suo operato potrà interagire con il “sistema intelligente” cui la didattica è indirizzata (la mente dello studente) dovrebbe in primo luogo chiedersi se la propria azione sia coerente:

A) al principio *learning by being told* (imparare perché ti spiegano), che agisce quasi esclusivamente sui circuiti della memoria esplicita di tipo semantico; oppure, viceversa,

B) al principio *learning by doing* (imparare facendo), che mira all'automazione di produzione e comprensione in contesti linguistici reali, addestrando l'orecchio interno e i circuiti delle memorie procedurali (Widdowson 1978, Danesi 1988, Krashen 1981; Dulay, Burt, Krashen 1982, Reber 1993, Fabbro 2004, Salmon 2005b)" (Salmon L., Mariani M., 2012: 137-138)¹⁴

The exposition of students to audiovisuals, in particular, can be bivalent for what concerns the involvement of memory.

Indeed, when a student watches and listens at the same time, spontaneously trying to comprehend the scene he is looking at, in a context of quietness, he carries an *implicit* task, but if he consciously focuses on the structure of the sentences, if he tries moreover to force himself to understand words as much as possible, then he is accomplishing an *explicit* task, because he is realizing he has to do something, it does not come spontaneously anymore. In circumstances like these, the two memories support each other and kind of intersect.

In any case, when the learner carries an implicit task primarily based on *doing* (be it *blithely* listening to actors playing a scene or artists singing a song, for instance), the *procedural* memory (a subtype of *implicit* memory) activates and he is likely to storage the new knowledges in the *long-term* memory. This is the reason why, often, the methodology of the "*learning by doing*" is preferred, or anticipates, in terms of time, the opposite one of the "*learning by being told*".

For instance, teachers could ask the students to simply try to watch a scene and listen and then, in a second time, they can watch it again and try to focus *explicitly* on some grammatical, lexical elements etc. and try to summarize what they have

¹⁴The following translation is by the author of this thesis.

"A teacher having rather clear ideas about what he wants to do, about what he is able to do and how his action will be able to interact with the "intelligent system" which didactics is addressed to (student's mind) should firstly wonder whether his action is coherent:

A) to the principle *learning by being told* (learning because someone explains), which operates almost exclusively on the circuits of the explicit memory, the semantic one; or, vice versa,
B) to the principle *learning by doing* (learning through actions), which aims at the automation of production and comprehension in real linguistic contexts, training the inner ear and procedural memory circuits (Widdowson 1978, Danesi 1988, Krashen 1981; Dulay, Burt, Krashen 1982, Reber 1993, Fabbro 2004, Salmon 2005b)" (L. Salmon, M. Mariani, 2012: 137, 138)

understood. These new knowledges will surely be stored in the brain and remembered by the student after a while since there is, in this case, the involvement of *implicit* processes, although the student makes use of course of the explicit memory at the same time. After all, the primary activity, namely the one of watching a movie or a tv show, is based on entertainment and amusement, therefore on positive emotions, and subsequently the activities presented afterwards will be better “welcomed” by the brain.

What is more, acquiring new knowledges in a foreign language or a L2, thanks to positive and amusing situations such as watching audiovisuals, creates brain associations, which are going to last and be connected to the original situation of learning, in this case the video. In other words, the student, when in need of a particular word or expression, will be, first unconsciously and then consciously, likely to refer to that particular scene where he learned something new in the target language. In a certain sense, that particular circumstance of learning will be able to fill a gap in a more efficient and rapid way compared to mere *explicit* methodologies of learning, such as having a list of words with the corresponding translated linguistic items.

As Metz-Göckel maintains furthermore, in the essay already cited above:

“Implicit learning is assumed to rest on the incremental extraction of invariant or recurring patterns from a large number of single exemplars or processing episodes, it is thus based mainly on contingencies and associations. Connectionist models provide the indication of how contingencies could be computed in a plausible way.” (Metz-Göckel H., 2014: 7)

When the students, in particular, try to *guess* words from a specific scene, trying to understand the meaning according to the context (they have the syntactic frame, sounds and especially images available, to help their comprehension, for instance through the use of gesture, c.f. *Part Two*), they are undergoing a process of *inference*, which is handled by implicit brain procedures and, subsequently, makes the learning more effective and lasting.

All these processes based on implicit procedures, in the first place, can be spotted on the basis of the so-called *bottom-up* skill learning, namely a methodology of teaching that goes from implicit to explicit knowledge. The opposite of this approach, which can be taken into consideration isolated or in parallel with the bottom-up approach is the *top-down* one, concerning learning that goes from explicit to implicit knowledge.

In conclusion, what interests foreign language teachers willing to introduce tv shows or movies in their education methodology, is how the intersection of *implicit* and *explicit* procedures can take place in the brain of their students.

In this sense, a key element that requires both the use of implicit mechanisms (trying to figure out what is happening by watching and reading fast at the same time) and of explicit ones (trying to focus the attention on sentence structures, morphosyntax and lexicon of the captions) is the use of *subtitles*, a classical routine followed by students of a foreign language the very first times they are presented audiovisuals in the target idiom. There is a whole procedure in this regard, which aims, when the foreign language has reached high levels, at finally doing without the use of subtitles, being able to understand the meaning of the story simply listening to the original voices of the actors, obviously helped in the global comprehension by images and further paraverbal elements.

This will be the subject of study of the following Third Chapter.

Chapter three: Subtitling. Importance in foreign language learning and the issue of *cognitive overload*

Introducing movies and tv shows or, more generally, audiovisual materials in the course of a path of foreign language education has always been a very fascinating and yearned step for all age groups.

Presenting this new activity, in fact, not only amuses students but, what is more, it also provides for a litmus test of their raised level and improved competences in the target language, since, if it was not so, the teacher would never propose this new task. Consequently, the student, when exposed to videos, feels already more *motivated* compared to when he undergoes classic linguistic exercises, both because he is entertained and amused and because he can prove himself his competences are effectively improved.

Being exposed for the first time to videos, in any case, requires from students a high level of attention - both *implicit* and *explicit* - and a real commitment, namely the willing and the psychological motivation to be able, in a future time, to utterly understand at least the meaning and the plot of single scenes and afterwards of whole movies, in the target language of interest.

Nevertheless, since this task is one of the hardest, considering that movies in original language are thought for mother tongue audiences, how can this process begin in a soft manner, without discouraging the students when they necessarily meet the former and latter many difficulties and numerous misunderstanding of the scenes? It often occurs, indeed, that students do not feel like watching anymore the audiovisuals since a feeling of annoy and helplessness takes hold of them when they state they "*are not able to understand a single word*". This especially happens the very first times.

It is exactly in these circumstances that the help of *subtitles* comes into play, as pointed out in a scientific paper about their use in educational contexts of EFL learners by professors G. Ching and W. Tchong, dealing mainly with tv shows:

“Subtitles can effectively be used as EFL students’ learning materials. Looking at the wide genre of films (including TV shows), such as CSI, Friends, Gossip Girl, and many others. These TV series have a wide range of vocabularies, terminologies that are suited for English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses. King (2002) points out that films provide more pedagogical options and are a rich resource of intrinsically motivating materials for learners.” (Ching G., Tchung W., 2015: 48)

Before describing the multiple manners in which the option of subtitling can be put into practice, an efficient and practical description of their effective use in a context of classroom education is given by P. Balboni, who illustrates a typical situation concerning students of an almost upper-intermediate level, when being exposed to specific scenes of a movie. According to his vision, it is impossible to undergo the complete vision of a movie in the context of a classroom, first of all for matters of time:

“Il percorso può essere simile a quello visto per le canzoni: un primo ascolto della scena in lingua originale, mirato alla comprensione globale, da condividere poi tra i vari studenti della classe; un riascolto sempre in originale per verificare le ipotesi emerse e migliorare il livello di comprensione; una terza fase di comprensione sostenuta/verificata dai sottotitoli in lingua originale, seguito da un ascolto conclusivo della sequenza doppiata, in funzione di verifica.” (Balboni P., 2013: 114)¹⁵

In the method described above, students are not exposed to the *explicit* stimulus primarily, namely the one of reading the subtitles, indeed the activity is based on a rather spontaneous task of listening and watching at the same time, trying to catch as much elements as possible for the scene to “make sense”. Captions only come at a second time.

¹⁵ The following translation is by the author of this thesis.

“The path could be similar to the one considered with respect to the songs: a very first listening of the scene in the original idiom, aiming at the global comprehension, to share afterwards among the various students in the classroom; a second listening always in the original language to verify the emerged hypotheses and improve the level of comprehension; a third phase of comprehension supported/verified by subtitles in the original language, followed by a conclusive listening of the dubbed sequence, as an ultimate verification.” (P. Balboni, 2013: 114)

Actually, there are many different manners of using subtitles when watching a movie, which correspond each to different requests and educational goals of the students.

3.1 Different subtitling settings

The following uses of subtitles can be employed both in the circumstance of a classroom or at home, whether a student finds himself in need to further fortify his knowledges through a “domestic” individual commitment.

When the student watches a movie or a tv show to enhance comprehension in the foreign language object of his studies, subtitles can be employed:

3.1.1 In the students’ L1 (native language) with original soundtrack: Standard

For what concerns this first option, what occurs during the phase of watching the movie or tv show in the original language is that, while the actors speak their native language, the student reads the captions in his own mother tongue.

This first possibility presents pros and cons.

A study carried by researchers M. Bisson, W. J. B. Van Heuven, K. Conklin, and R. J. Tunney underlines what follows (2011):

“An increasing number of films are imported from abroad and broadcast in the original foreign language (FL) soundtrack with subtitles added in the native language. This is called standard subtitling, and it is often preferred to dubbing as it is cheaper and keeps the original voice of the actors, thus avoiding the issue of lip synchronicity (Koolstra, Peeters, & Spinhof, 2002). Nowadays, it is often possible to add subtitles in different languages to films or television programs at the press of a button. When watching a film with subtitles, a viewer has to process not only three sources of information (the soundtrack, the subtitles, and the dynamic images in the film), but also the

multilingual situation with both FL and native language. Furthermore, the information coming from these different sources may be redundant, which can render the reading of the subtitles less compelling.” (Bisson M., Van Heuven W. J. B., Conklin K., Tunney R. J., 2011: 399)

What works in favor of this first option is, first of all, that the student is able to understand quite everything, since he is allowed to read sentences in his own idiom.

But this is not, of course, the main aim of the use of audiovisuals for foreign language education goals.

An observation about a negative aspect must be highlighted: reading the subtitles in his mother tongue, the student is sometimes not likely to pay much attention to the sound, namely the words pronounced by the actors, even if the *implicit* attention linked to the task of listening is always at work. Original soundtrack, however, is fundamental to pay attention at, since it deals with the acknowledgment of important aspects of language learning, such as *phonological* ones (prosody, accent, pronunciation more generally).

This lack of attention is due to *cognitive overload*, that is to say a psychological situation of redundancy, as it is described in the passage of the essay above. In fact, as mentioned, the student must pay attention to images, sounds and the captions and, moreover, deal with *two different idioms* at the same time (L1 for the captions and L2/FL for the soundtrack). This excessive quantity of information makes the task of focusing on all the elements mentioned quite hard for the student.

Nevertheless, a scientific experiment cited ahead in the paper above shows that this methodology of employing subtitles has also a specific, fundamental positive side.

Namely, it is the *enrichment of the vocabulary* in the foreign language, since the student has the pronounced term in the FL and the translation in the L1 at hand:

“One of the particular advantages of subtitling over dubbing is the potential for incidental acquisition of FL vocabulary. In a study involving 246 primary schoolchildren watching a 15-min film with standard subtitles, Koolstra and

Been- tjes (1999) found that on a 28-item auditory vocabulary test, scores were higher in the group who had the FL soundtrack and the native language subtitles (20 correct answers) as opposed to the group with the FL soundtrack only (19 correct answers).” (Bisson M., Van Heuven W. J. B., Conklin K., Tunney R. J., 2011: 400)

3.1.2 In the FL (foreign language) with corresponding original soundtrack: Intralingual

Regarding this second option, the language of the sound, namely the lines pronounced by the actors, corresponds to its equivalent in the captions.

In this case, the situation is half different compared to the previous one: the student is utterly exposed to the foreign language he is engaging to study.

The attention of the student matches the audio with the captions: in this way, his ear will refine and become more and more sophisticated, since he can read and listen at the same time a univocal message in the FL and this enables him to link written words with phonological corresponding sounds.

These are the basis for being, in the future, able to finally get rid of the subtitles, given that, time after time, at a certain point the student will find more and more easy to understand the dialogues even without being in need to read the captions. This further methodology of employing subtitles is efficaciously described by the authors of the paper already mentioned above:

“Another method of subtitling presents both the soundtrack and subtitles in the same language, and this is referred to as intralingual subtitling. Originally intended to make films and TV programs accessible to the deaf and hearing-impaired community (Burnham et al., 2008; De Linde & Kay, 1999), intralingual subtitles are also used by language teachers and researchers because they have the potential to help the learner map the phonology to the written words. Written words in intralingual subtitling are not affected by intonation, accents, or background noise; thus, having access to both the soundtrack and subtitles allows for easier word segmentation by indicating

which words are being spoken (Bird & Williams, 2002; Mitterer & McQueen, 2009).” (Bisson M., Van Heuven W. J. B., Conklin K., Tunney R. J., 2011: 401)

Above, the positive sides of foreign language or L2 subtitles, combined with original soundtrack have been listed, nevertheless only one issue, in their use, can be spotted. Indeed, dynamic images always seem to play a central role. In this sense, the attention of the student unconsciously undergoes a process of *multitasking*, namely the stimuli received by the video are multiple, at the same time, and background images of the scenes could interfere when he tries to focus on reading the subtitles:

“Although studies of FL films with intralingual subtitles seem to show promising results in terms of improvement in speech performance (Borras & Lafayette, 1994), speech perception (Mitterer & McQueen, 2009), and word form-meaning associations (Sydorenko, 2010), indicating that both phonological and orthographic forms are processed, it is still necessary to investigate the reading of the subtitles when all three sources of information (FL soundtrack, FL subtitles, and dynamic images) are present.” (Bisson M., Van Heuven W. J. B., Conklin K., Tunney R. J., 2011: 402)

The main difference compared to the previous methodology, what can be defined as a “weakness” of this way of employing subtitles is that there is no way of having a direct *translation* in the student’s native language and this is not cheap in terms of time. Indeed, if his goal is also to learn new words or enrich his vocabulary in the FL, acknowledging the corresponding terms in the native language, the only option is to write down a list of unknown words and look for them on the dictionary, afterwards.

3.1.3 *In the FL (foreign language) with the students’ L1 (native language) soundtrack: Reversed*

This last option is again good to match the audio with the captions.

In this case, always from the point of view of the *enrichment of the vocabulary*, the student has the chance to directly copy the terms in the FL from the captions, as in the case before, but unlikely the previous option he can have the real-time translation of words, since, of course, he is allowed to listen to the dubbed voices of the actors, who speak in his native language or L1. This translation is naturally the correct one from the point of view of the *morphology*.

Of course, a real-time translation was also possible, as seen above, with the option of “*Standard Subtitling*”, however in this latter case the issue is that the student often does not know how to write down a term, even if he can guess it listening cautiously to the pronunciation. Indeed, from the point of view of saving time, whether a student is interested in enhancing his vocabulary through the translation of words that occur during the conversation of the actors, this seems to be the best option.

These results are showed through a scientific experiment in this field (2002):

“The *standard* condition is of course when the foreign language is in the soundtrack and the mother language in the subtitle; *reversed* subtitling refers to the condition where the mother language is in the soundtrack and the subtitles are in the foreign language. The adult participants were shown the subtitled cartoons for about 15 min long; immediately thereafter, foreign-language acquisition was tested. The findings established without any doubts that there is considerable incidental language acquisition simply by watching a short subtitled movie. Surprisingly, there was not necessarily less foreign language acquisition when the foreign and mother languages were vastly different. In fact, there was not much support for distinguishing the language families as a function of their acquisition (see also d’Ydewalle & Pavakanun, 1997). In agreement with other studies (d’Ydewalle & Pavakanun, 1995; Holobow et al., 1984; Lambert et al., 1981; Lambert & Holobow, 1984; Pavakanun & d’Ydewalle, 1992), reversed subtitling enhanced language acquisition even more than the standard subtitling. However, performance in all tests on syntax and grammar acquisition remained relatively poor; acquisition was clearly limited to vocabulary.” (d’Ydewalle G., 2002: 67)

The only negative side of this methodology, which seems overall brilliant for the aspect seen above, is the complete lack of *phonological* training for the ear of the student, since actors are dubbed in the native language of the listener. However, for what concerns foreign language learning more generally, this has been labeled as the best subtitling methodology:

“In studies on the language acquisition, the best results are obtained with reversed subtitling; that is, when the soundtrack contains the spoken message in the native language, and the foreign language is presented in the subtitles (d’Ydewalle & Pavakanun, 1995, Experiment 2; d’Ydewalle & Pavakanun, 1997; d’Ydewalle & Van de Poel, 1999; Holobow, Lambert, & Sayegh, 1984; Lambert, Boehler, & Sidoti, 1981; Lambert & Holobow, 1984; Pavakanun & d’Ydewalle, 1992; for an exception, see d’Ydewalle & Pavakanun, 1995, Experiment 1). As reading subtitles is almost mandatory, the foreign language with reversed subtitles is being processed; in standard subtitling, there is no guarantee that the foreign language in the soundtrack is being attended by children. In countries where most television programs are subtitled, young children have a preference for dubbed movies (the original soundtrack being replaced by a spoken translation in the native language), instead of watching the original movie with subtitles; adult viewers, on the other hand, strongly prefer subtitling of the original movie (d’Ydewalle, Muylle, & Van Rensbergen, 1985).” (d’Ydewalle G., 2002: 64)

3.2 Elimination of the captions, FL soundtrack

This last step is considered the final one.

Indeed, after having undergone a long period watching audiovisuals with the use of subtitles, either in the L1 or in the FL and with the modalities seen above, the student is finally able to do without them. This, of course, listening to the audiovisual materials in the original language (FL for the student).

A point, however, must be highlighted: even if the student can test his abilities in the *listening* tasks, proving himself that his skills finally allow him to understand

the content of the movies or tv shows he is exposed to, it is unlikely that he will be able to utterly understand the dialogues in every single part and shade of meaning.

This happens because of many factors, such as the *speed* of the speech, or the use of the so-called *slang*, peculiar linguistic expressions proper of languages and, especially, dialects, such as the use of contractions, abbreviations, acronyms, idiomatic expressions, culture-bound linguistic elements etc.

Moreover, doing without subtitles cannot help the student for what concerns the morphological side of language, that is to say seeing the written forms of words and learning how to write them down.

However, it is almost impossible to provide for a precise break moment when the student is finally able to watch the audiovisuals firing almost only his *implicit* attention, namely relaxing and watching the show almost like a mother tongue, without forcing himself to pay attention to the linguistic element in an *explicit* way, namely remembering that he is engaging to learn something before having fun.

This is a final craved step which requires years, more than months, of constant practice and engagement, to finally become an independent watcher and listener in the context of foreign language education.

Second part: Cultural aspects in “*Friends*”. An interlinguistic and intercultural scenario.

The second part of this dissertation will focus in particular on the cultural and linguistic aspects present in the tv show analyzed, “*Friends*”, in order to underline their importance in the path of learning of a FL, in this case American English.

In the specific, the following chapters will deal with linguistic peculiarities (slang, figures of speech, pitch), culture-bound expressions typical of American English, in comparison with British or Australian English.

Moreover, the chapters will especially point out cultural elements which stand out in the show, underlining their importance and role in the American culture and abroad, analyzing moreover all the elements present in the show which refer to foreign cultures and trying to seize the elements differing or converging with the culture of the USA. In this sense, many comparisons and similarities will be highlighted, underlining stereotypes, elements in common among different cultures or intercultural distances and problems they can cause, dealing consequently with verbal and non-verbal issues.

A specific model of communication will be presented in order to stress all the elements that are fundamental to be transmitted to an audience which is interested in understanding and handling the culture proper of the foreign language studied, in this case American English.

“*Friends*” (1994 – 2004) is an excellent travelling companion in this sense, since the entire tv series lasts ten years, corresponding to ten seasons. It has a peculiarity that distinguishes this tv shows from many others: the huge presence of culture-bound elements concerning linguistic aspects, gesture, lifestyle, habits, customs and traditions typical of the United States, being the tv show set in New York. As already stated, along the episodes many elements of other cultures can also be spotted, in particular belonging to the Italian one, being one of the characters half Italian (Joey Tribbiani).

The audience is therefore able to enter the tv show and the house of his beloved characters, in New York, Central Park, and more generally in the heart of the

American culture by observing the six main characters and listening to their conversations. He is presented the everyday life of the characters inside and outside the walls of their house, as if he were the seventh “friend”.

The situations concerning the lives of the six young people, both males and females, can really make the student-spectator identify with the characters and empathize with them, being keener on the story and consequently on the language and corresponding culture.

As already stated, in this exciting travel the spectator must always remember and take in account the fundamental and already mentioned “Rule of forgetting” by Krashen (1982): trying to comprehend what happens, the spectator forgets that, at the same time, he is training for his final aim, learning American English the best he can.

What is fundamental, in this case, even though the spectator forgets about it, is that there is someone to always remember it, no matter if unconsciously: his own brain.

Capitolo uno: Imparare a comprendersi tra culture

Il seguente capitolo analizzerà l'importanza attribuita agli aspetti culturali facenti capo alla lingua straniera oggetto di studio, ovvero ai paesi in cui l'idioma in questione è parlato, nel caso di questa dissertazione gli Stati Uniti d'America. Perché un messaggio in una lingua straniera venga trasmesso efficacemente all'interlocutore, specialmente nei casi in cui si tratti di un madrelingua nativo del Paese in cui è parlata la LS studiata, non è sufficiente conoscere soltanto gli aspetti linguistici e verbali della lingua di riferimento, ovvero come tradurre fedelmente un concetto da una lingua A ad una lingua B, ma entrano in gioco tutta una serie di elementi extra-verbali o paralinguistici.

L'argomento in questione risulta essere molto interessante in quanto distingue, ad esempio, un interprete a cui è richiesto di trasporre un messaggio da una lingua all'altra da un mediatore culturale, che invece è dato per scontato sia a conoscenza di tutto un repertorio culturale di riferimento.

Questo perché non può esistere *apprendimento linguistico* del tutto scevro da un *apprendimento culturale* parallelo:

“Imparare una lingua significa ‘portare’ e fare propria la cultura che essa veicola ed esprime. Grazie alle numerose interazioni e alle quotidiane situazioni di esposizione al nuovo codice, i bambini e i ragazzi immigrati interiorizzano – oltre alle strutture linguistiche, il lessico, la sintassi – anche modi di fare, gesti, forme del linguaggio non verbale, pragmatiche e comunicative, accenti e impronte.

La lingua è un elemento costituente della cultura e, allo stesso tempo, ne è vettore; promuove appartenenza e apertura, dal momento che, come scrive Wittgenstein, ‘i confini della mia lingua sono i confini del mio mondo’.”
(Favaro G., 2008: 35)

Con le parole citate sopra, Graziella Favaro sottolinea, in questo caso in una situazione di *interculturalità* diretta, forse meglio esprimibile con il termine *multiculturalità* in quanto trattasi in questo caso di una L2, il legame imprescindibile tra una lingua *altra* che si apprende e la sua corrispettiva cultura

in toto. Sono citati i bambini in questo ambito, ma il discorso che concerne un apprendimento parallelo di lingua e cultura straniera è valido a tutte le età se si vuole realmente entrare a far parte di un mondo esterno al proprio. Ecco perché, ad esempio, le facoltà di studi linguistici sono spesso denominate con la dicitura “Lingue e *culture* straniere”.

È necessario infatti, affinché la conversazione e lo scambio contenente elementi verbali (parole, suoni, intonazione, ecc.) e non verbali (gestemica, prossemica, cinesica, vestemica ecc.) abbia un buon esito, conoscere il “codice” culturale del Paese al quale lo studente si sta affacciando. Ciò appunto in una prospettiva di facilitazione dello scambio e per evitare il più possibile *misunderstanding*, problemi legati a elementi non conosciuti nella cultura oggetto di studio o che l'interlocutore non conosce della nostra, che possono risultare offensivi o ancora privi di significato:

“In accordo con Balboni (1999, 2007), posta la complessità di definire dei concetti che sono oggetto di studio di diverse discipline (antropologia, sociologia, linguistica, pedagogia, psicologia ecc.), ognuna con una specifica “lente” di osservazione, con comunicazione interculturale intendiamo in questa sede *scambiare messaggi efficaci* tra persone che hanno software mentali diversi (secondo la celebre metafora di Hofstede), legati non solo alle caratteristiche individuali, ma anche alle differenti lingue e culture di appartenenza. Più in particolare, il termine *scambiare* prevede un mettere in comune (radice etimologica di comunicare) dei *messaggi* (cioè insiemi complessi di lingua verbale e di linguaggi non verbali) e che risultino *efficaci* affinché ognuno raggiunga il suo scopo.” (Caon F., Spaliviero C., 2015: 50)

Una serie tv come “*Friends*”, colma di elementi culturali e multiculturali, risulta come già detto molto utile affinché lo studente di inglese americano apprenda allo stesso tempo una buona fetta di cultura americana. Ciò lo aiuterà a raggiungere lo *scopo* delle sue conversazioni citato qualche riga sopra, quando magari dovesse trovarsi faccia a faccia con un americano che già ricorderà di aver conosciuto, sebbene non in carne ed ossa.

Per fare questo sarà proposto preliminarmente il modello di competenza comunicativa interculturale definito da P. Balboni, facente riferimento anche alle abilità relazionali fondamentali per un interscambio efficace tra culture differenti. Sulla base di un canale come quello audiovisivo, nello specifico riguardante le serie-tv e in particolare *“Friends”* (1994 – 2004), tutti questi elementi specchio di una civiltà comprendenti anche peculiarità culturali come tradizioni, modi di fare, valori culturali ma anche problematiche interculturali come stereotipi e pregiudizi verranno analizzati.

Il focus sarà posto prima di tutto sulla cultura americana, che è insieme alla lingua inglese l’argomento di questa tesi e parallelamente, in misura più ristretta, anche su elementi culturali che spiccano in una serie come *“Friends”*, dai riferimenti e cenni anche ad altre culture, in particolare quella italiana.

Il punto focale di interesse sarà proprio incentrato sul mettere determinati elementi peculiari della cultura americana e di quelle citate nel telefilm a confronto, delineandone similitudini e diversità in una prospettiva di apprendimento linguistico, che mai potrà considerarsi scevro da una profonda comprensione interculturale.

1.1 Perché attraverso la serie-tv

Le fonti per coadiuvare l’apprendimento di una LS o di una L2 parallelamente al classico insegnamento in classe e sui manuali didattici possono essere molteplici, dalla canzone in lingua straniera a mezzi decisamente più bizzarri e inaspettati come ad esempio, di recente affermazione, le classi sportive in lingua. Rimane tuttavia da tenere in considerazione un mezzo che occupa una posizione di primo piano in questo senso, ovvero il materiale audiovisivo, o per esempio la rappresentazione del teatro in lingua. Si parla comunque di messa in scena di una trama recitata da attori.

La drammatizzazione risulta essere molto efficace in quanto riveste un ruolo biunivoco: da una parte, tramite l’uso dei sottotitoli (vedi Parte Prima) o l’ascolto delle voci degli attori in lingua originale lo studente ha l’opportunità di esercitarsi efficacemente sulla comprensione linguistica, dall’altra ha la possibilità di

assistere ad una serie di elementi sociolinguistici ed extra-linguistici con i quali altrimenti, con altre forme di comunicazione, non entrerebbe in contatto:

“L’educazione cinematografica è, insieme a quella musicale, la grande assente dalla scuola italiana – e poco conta che la quasi totalità delle esperienze estetiche degli adolescenti e dei giovani riguardino cinema e musica. Uno scopo ‘secondario’, ma solo sul piano glottodidattico, è quindi l’educazione cinematografica, insieme al contributo all’educazione letteraria laddove il film è basato su un racconto o un romanzo.

Ai fini dell’educazione linguistica, oltre a consentire esperienze di ascolto nelle lingue straniere, i film possono essere utili per condurre una riflessione:

1. Sociolinguistica [...];
2. Traduttologica, in collaborazione con il docente di lingua straniera che abbia presentato una sequenza di film [...]” (Balboni P., 2013: 113)

Un esempio, forse il più banale, sono i gesti compiuti dagli attori, spesso con forte connotazione culturale, ma anche una serie di elementi legati alla cultura di appartenenza del video che altrimenti difficilmente entrerebbero nella sfera di conoscenza dello studente. È ovvio che anche una canzone può parlare del giorno del Thanksgiving (Giorno del Ringraziamento), tipica festa celebrata in America per ringraziare Dio del raccolto dell’anno e più in generale dei doni ricevuti nel corso dell’anno solare, ma vi sono diverse differenze rispetto ad una rappresentazione video.

Punto primo, tramite una canzone spesso l’ascoltatore non è portato ad approfondire in quanto non ha anche un *canale visivo-gestuale* ad incuriosirlo e stimolarlo nell’apprendimento, punto secondo queste connotazioni fortemente culturali molto spesso emergono maggiormente in una rappresentazione video, in quanto più articolata e spesso *duratura nel tempo*.

È questo il motivo per cui, nello specifico, in questa dissertazione è stato scelto di analizzare una serie-tv, perché sull’arco di dieci stagioni, durata complessiva di “*Friends*”, in molti episodi vi è molto spesso la presenza, oltre che di espressioni con forte connotazione culturale a livello verbale, anche di ricorrenze riguardanti gesti, movimenti, mimica facciale; ma anche l’emergere di valori

culturali e occorrenze o tradizioni tipicamente americane. A ciò, di tanto in tanto, come già è stato detto, sono affiancati riferimenti ad altre culture.

Entrando nelle vite quotidiane dei personaggi è inevitabile che l'aspetto culturale del paese in cui vivono e addirittura della città, New York, emerga fortemente, rendendo la serie-tv in questione un prontuario culturale a tutti gli effetti per uno studente che sia interessato nell'apprendimento dell'inglese americano.

1.2 Il modello di competenza comunicativa interculturale

In questo breve paragrafo verrà riportato, ai fini di una migliore comprensione delle prossime parti di questa dissertazione, il *Modello di competenza comunicativa interculturale*, messo a punto sulla base del già preesistente Modello di competenza comunicativa classico (Balboni, Caon, 2015).



Figura 1. Il modello di competenza comunicativa interculturale

Come è possibile osservare, la freccia che collega la mente del comunicatore con il mondo circostante comprende anche alcune *abilità relazionali*, oltre che linguistiche. Esse stanno alla base, come già sostenuto, non solo di uno scambio biunivoco come una conversazione tra amici di culture differenti, ma anche di una comprensione a tutto tondo di elementi appartenenti a culture estranee con i quali il comunicatore/studente può entrare in contatto in altri modi.

Esse risultano fondamentali, infatti, anche al fine di cogliere elementi salienti durante l'osservazione di un telefilm americano, per esempio da parte di un europeo che non condivide determinati tratti caratteristici della cultura oggetto di studio. Immagazzinati gli elementi appresi nel proprio bagaglio di conoscenze interculturali, lo spettatore potrà poi metterle in pratica in futuro in prima persona, con il proprio interlocutore. All'osservatore è quindi richiesto di porsi in una condizione di apertura verso qualcosa che, talvolta, gli è del tutto estranea e che costituisce per lui un'assoluta novità.

Tali abilità di base verranno quindi sinteticamente elencate nel prossimo paragrafo insieme ad alcuni esempi facenti capo ad episodi del telefilm "*Friends*" (1994 – 2004), per meglio contestualizzare le teorie di seguito riportate, ovvero come lo spettatore si deve "abilmente" porre di fronte allo schermo per cogliere tutte le sfaccettature culturali della serie-tv analizzata, anche le meno comprensibili.

Si tratta quindi di un primo cenno ad una tecnica di apprendimento culturale, parte integrante in un quadro più generale di apprendimento linguistico.

1.3 Le abilità relazionali fondamentali

Come accennato poco sopra, in questo paragrafo ci si occuperà di illustrare le *abilità relazionali* (Caon, Spaliviero, 2015), fondamentali per comunicare e comprendere una cultura estranea alla propria.

Le abilità saranno appena accennate ed esplicate tanto da rendere il lettore consapevole del giusto atteggiamento psicologico da adottare nei confronti di elementi sconosciuti e atipici ad una prima esposizione. Saranno, a fianco di

ciascuna abilità, presentati brevi esempi tratti dal telefilm oggetto di studio di questa tesi, per fornire effettivi esempi al lettore.

- a) Saper *osservare* (decentrarsi e straniarsi): per fare ciò è primario non voler affermare qualcosa di preciso che riguarda la propria individualità ma, piuttosto, mettersi nei panni di colui che guarda e tace. Questa è l'abilità che costituisce il perno di tutte quelle a seguire:

“L’osservazione, però, può essere funzionale all’avvio di un processo di decentramento solo se viene seguita da un processo di ‘restituzione’ attraverso il quale l’osservatore rende esplicita la propria visione all’interlocutore con espressioni del tipo ‘io ho visto questo, a me è sembrato di vederti così’, ‘io ti ho visto fare così’. Tali espressioni, infatti, si limitano a restituire, come in uno specchio, quanto osservato sospendendo giudizi e permettono a entrambi gli interlocutori (osservatore e osservato) di relativizzare la propria visione.” (Caon F., Spaliviero C., 2015: 54)

Nell’ottica sovrastante, lo spettatore è chiamato a guardare ai *fatti culturali* come qualcosa di arricchente che mai dovrebbe porsi a confronto con la propria cultura d’origine, quantomeno non in un’accezione negativa. Quando ci si trova a tu per tu con un interlocutore si può parlare, quando si è posti di fronte ad uno schermo la situazione è più difficile.

In “*Friends*”, un esempio è la cosiddetta “Baby shower”: si tratta di una festività tipica di quando nasce un bambino, che viene celebrata nel telefilm in occasione della nascita della figlia di due dei protagonisti principali, Ross e Rachel. Probabilmente un italiano non si troverà mai a proprio agio nel considerare normale un’occorrenza di questo tipo, magari considerandola bizzarra o eccessiva, ma decentrandosi e straniandosi e cercando d’indossare i panni di un americano cresciuto con quel tipo di tradizione, probabilmente da quel momento in poi proporrà a tutti gli amici in attesa di un bambino una festività di questo tipo. Da questo esempio derivano altre capacità relazionali.

b) Saper *relativizzare*: In questo caso si tratta di conferire un valore relativo al proprio sistema di idee e, appunto, valori, e rendersi conto che spesso vale solo per la propria civiltà.

Nel caso di *"Friends"* questo non risulta essere eccessivamente un problema: la cultura americana condivide comunque molti valori della cultura occidentale europea, per cui non esistono particolari *gap* culturali come potrebbe verificarsi, per esempio, tra una civiltà europea ed una medio orientale.

c) Saper *sospendere il giudizio*: Questa è una delle abilità in assoluto più difficili. Tutti abbiamo opinioni più o meno solide, anche se non espresse a parole. Sospendere il giudizio significa empatizzare e calarsi totalmente nei panni di qualcun altro, pur, umanamente, non comprendendo forse da subito ma ponendosi comunque in una prospettiva di apertura opposta alla critica.

Joey che in *"Friends"* compone con il pollice e l'indice una L sulla fronte, come simbolo di "Loser" (Sfigato), potrebbe sembrare troppo oltraggioso e sgarbatamente diretto a noi europei, che nemmeno abbiamo un gesto per indicare quel tipo di concetto: dobbiamo imparare a sospendere il giudizio e capire che, tra amici, in America si tratta di un codice scherzoso.

d) Saper *ascoltare attivamente*: Questa abilità è più ardua per uno spettatore in una prospettiva di comunicazione univoca, ad ogni modo si tratta di prestare attenzione al proprio interlocutore chiarificando eventualmente concetti poco familiari. Si tratta di prestare attenzione ad un messaggio con un orecchio attivo, capace di elaborare nuovi significati che si discostano probabilmente da ciò che passivamente gli è sempre stato insegnato ed ha introiettato fin dai primi anni d'infanzia.

e) Saper *comprendere emotivamente (empatizzare ed exotopizzare)*: dell'empatia si è già parlato nella Parte prima, l'exotopia, invece, è il riconoscere la diversità dell'altro in maniera giusta e naturale.

In un telefilm come *"Friends"*, comprendere emotivamente significa capire perché, in determinate circostanze, alcuni personaggi presentano per esempio reazioni che sarebbero magari considerate esagerate per un italiano.

Un esempio è la *bugia* per gli americani: è qualcosa di inaccettabile per loro, che crea enormi sconvolgimenti interiori quasi incomprensibili per noi europei, che pure siamo benissimo a conoscenza del valore non benefico delle menzogne.

Nel corso della seconda stagione di *"Friends"*, Rachel non riesce a perdonare Ross per il suo tradimento con un'altra ragazza: svariati episodi dopo gli intimerà che non è tanto e solo per il fatto in sé, quanto perché lui, se lei non lo avesse scoperto per caso, non gliel'avrebbe mai confessato, mettendo quindi l'accento sul valore distruttivo, amorale e imperdonabile della *bugia* per gli americani, in sé e per sé.

- f) *Saper negoziare i significati*: Sulla base delle abilità sopra citate, è considerata la somma ultima di tutte le altre.

Tramite un'apertura a trecentosessanta gradi, potremo, attraverso le abilità sopra riportate, negoziare definitivamente i significati della nostra cultura e di quella di riferimento.

Un significato è comunque sempre un'interpretazione della realtà, qualcosa che si attribuisce ad un evento effettivo o astratto, e che può variare in base alle culture. E talvolta anche cambiare, o integrarsi vicendevolmente. È sempre un punto di vista, una diversa angolatura da cui si osserva uno stesso fenomeno.

Esempi molteplici e concreti all'interno di *"Friends"* di quest'ultima abilità e di tutte le altre sopra citate costituiranno il cuore dell'argomentazione del capitolo seguente.

Chapter two: Culture-bound elements in “*Friends*”, a comparison between USA and other cultures

As already mentioned, the following chapter can be considered as a proper manual or handbook of culture-bound elements present in “*Friends*” (1994 – 2004). It can be thought as a cultural appendix.

Therefore, the student/spectator can refer to the following pages as a micro dictionary of the American culture along the ten seasons, mixed with other elements belonging to other cultures and often cited in “*Friends*”.

Learning culture is part of learning language, therefore this chapter illustrates salient scenes containing typical verbal expressions but also gesture, the problems caused by intercultural distances such as stereotypes and prejudices and finally an overall look on the American traditions emerging in the show.

The student can really experiment a virtual “full immersion” in the New York’s Central Park of the Late Nineties, early Two Thousand, by listening and watching at the same time.

2.1 Salient scenes and related problems

The following subparagraphs contain a collection of *verbal expressions* and *gesture* (body language) typical of the American culture, put in parallel and compared with the other cultures mentioned in the show. Similarities and evident differences will be therefore underlined.

2.1.1 Verbal expressions: slang, figures of speech, differences US/UK and linguistic peculiarities

From this subparagraph up until the end of the chapter, this part of the thesis can be read and interpreted as a proper *cultural appendix*.

This first subparagraph is about linguistic peculiarities present in the show, which can constitute part of the cultural baggage of a student learning American English and, moreover, highlight once more the importance of audiovisual material.

Main linguistic occurrences:

a) **LOAN WORDS** or two identical words having different meaning in different cultures:

→ When the six friends attend the coffee house where Rachel Green, one of the main characters works, they often order a “**Latte**”.

This can constitute a cultural misunderstanding between American/English culture and the Italian one.

3. Latte (IT): the English “*milk*”;

4. Latte (EN): contraction of the Italian “*caffelatte*”.

This is an example of a same word which has a different meaning once it has passed in the other language (loan word).

If an Italian is not aware of this, he will find himself ordering a drink which was not what he expected (Intercultural problem).

→ In an episode, Ben, Ross Geller’s son, is waiting for “**Santa**” to come and bring him presents for Christmas.

For an Italian who never heard this word before out of his own language, the translation indicates the female figure of a “saint”, “*santa*” (IT).

Thanks to the video, he can contextualize the specific term and understand that it is an abbreviation of “*Santa Claus*”, namely the Italian “*Babbo Natale*”.

b) **WORDPLAYS** based on sound:

→ In an episode, one of the characters misunderstands the verb “**accept**” with the word “**except**”.

This stimulates the curiosity of a spectator who may want to understand what the critical situation is about and at the same time can enrich his vocabulary.

→ Phoebe Buffay, in an episode, pronounces two words sounding almost the same, written down as **“Potayto, potahto”**.

Again, this is a linguistic occurrence which catches for sure the attention of the spectator who, according to the context, may try to understand the corresponding expression in his own language, if existing, or could look for it, since the pun constitutes an *idiomatic expression*.

In Italian, the corresponding one is always about food, but it is not literal. It can be translated with **“Se non è zuppa è pan bagnato”**.

→ Joey Tribbiani makes a *rhyme* in an episode. He says: “Thanksgiving without turkey is like **Fourth of July with no apple pie.**”

This rhyme refers to a peculiar tradition of the American culture: Just like the turkey is the typical food for the day of the Thanksgiving, the apple pie is a typical cake eaten by the Americans for their cultural festivity of the 4th of July, Independence Day of the USA.

→ For a peculiar festivity born in the USA, Halloween, the characters along the ten seasons always pronounce the phrase **“Trick or treat?”**. This is another linguistic collocation of English language which can capture the attention of a spectator not aware of it. Once this festivity has become part of cultures abroad, the phrase has been translated often not literally. The Italians say **“Dolcetto o scherzetto?”**.

c) **ONOMATOPOEIAS** at the place of the intended concept:

In America people have the habit of using *onomatopoeias* to substitute often verbs but also longer concepts.

- ➔ The hugest onomatopoeia used in “*Friends*”, as in general in its respective culture, is the one which substitutes the verb “*to laugh*”, or adjectives and adverbs concerning hilarious circumstances. This onomatopoeia is “**ha-ha**”.

In the course of the Second Season, there is a specific scene in which Rachel, during her first date with Ross, starts laughing when he kisses her for one of the first times. In this sequence, she tells him that she is sorry and that her reaction is caused by the fact that for her that was a “*big thing*”. Consequently, Ross answers “*I know it is big, I just didn’t know it was **ha-ha** big*”, instead of saying “*hilariously big*”, for instance.

This is different, for example, from many other languages, especially the Romanian idioms, which do not have a big use of onomatopoeias during normal speeches, they can be found more often, for instance, in the genre of poetry. Therefore it can be defined as a linguistic peculiarity, in the spoken form, of English language, in particular the American one.

- d) **AMERICAN SLANG** (comparison with UK) and problems related to **BRITISH/AMERICAN accent**:

In the course of the ten seasons, several funny moments concern the **accent** which distinguishes American English from the British one.

The Americans care a lot about their own identity and sometimes the characters in the show make fun of English ones because their speech sounds more elegant and articulated, so the Americans stress what they consider the ‘snob’ side of British English.

This is a very interesting element concerning the relationship between USA and UK:

- ➔ When Emily, new Ross’ girlfriend enters the first time the house of the six friends, Phoebe, the sharpest of the group, makes a facial expression which immediately clarifies her exasperation and incapability of standing Emily’s way of speaking. She eventually pushes her around all the time.

- ➔ Another scene is always about Phoebe: she speaks at the telephone with the governess of Emily's place, and she argues with her, eventually she defines her rude and stresses between the lines the fact that she is British.
- ➔ The last example is the way Ross speaks at his own lectures at University, when he is hired as a professor. He must sound British, he is forced to because of the events which brought him at that position, and while he is practicing for British accent he makes a lot of funny faces which clarify his opinion of the accent he is trying to assume (*non-verbal code*).

Other intercultural problems, related to distances between USA and other cultures different from the British one, will be highlighted subsequently.

In this specific section of the dissertation below some differences in shades of meaning between the same word, occurring in American or in British English, will be presented, along with peculiarities of the American slang such as acronyms or figures of speech.

They all occur in the course of the ten seasons of "*Friends*" (1994 – 2004).

- ➔ Football; Soccer = Two words to designate the same sport. The first one is in standard/British English, the second in American English.
- ➔ Overalls = **UK**: Work outfit; **US**: Jeans dress
- ➔ Cheddar = Orange cheese typical of American and Anglo-saxon countries. Culture-bound element.
- ➔ Cranky = **UK**: Eccentric; **US**: Bad-tempered (Slang)
- ➔ Swell = **UK**: To grow, to inflate; **US**: Excellent! (Also, ironically; Slang)
- ➔ Bum = **UK**: Backside; **US**: Ragamuffin, Idler (Slang)
- ➔ Doofus = Only **US**: Fool (person; Slang)
- ➔ Touchdown = **UK**: Landing; **US**: Destination
- ➔ Rooster = Only **US**: Cock (Slang)
- ➔ Dude = Only **US**: Boy/An expression to show wonder towards something (Slang)
- ➔ Corny = **UK**: Stupid; **US**: Inane (Slang)

- Chippy = **UK** (Informal): Carpenter, fish and chips shop, irritable; **US**: Prostitute (Slang)
- Bucket = **UK**: Container for liquid, (to) travel quickly; **Aus, NZ**: Container for ice-cream; **US**: Rotor blade
- Slam = **UK**: Shutting noise; **US** (Informal, figurative): Verbal attack
- Lobby = **UK**: Entrance; **US**: Political interest group, press [sb] for something
- Dresser = **UK**: Sideboard; **US**: Chest of drawers
- Fluorite = Only **US** and **CA**: Type of mineral
- Beef = **UK**: Cow, steer meat; **US**: Complaint (Slang)
- Drapes = Mainly **US**: Curtains
- Grade = **UK**: Mark; **US**: School year level
- Napkin = **UK**: Table napkin for meal; **US**: Sanitary pad
- Hit on = Only **US**: Flirt with, try to seduce (Slang)
- Poop = Only **US**: Information (Slang)
- Windscreen = Only **US**: Vehicle's front window
- Blow off = **UK**: Be swept off by wind; **US**: Reject or ignore somebody, fail to meet an obligation (Slang)
- Braid = Only **US**: Woven hairstyle
- Blister (to) = **UK**: Form air pockets; **US**: Reprimand, criticize (Slang)
- Elevator = Only **US**: Lift for carrying people and goods
- "At the movies" = Only **US**: At the cinema
- Gallon = **UK**: Measure, 4.5 liters; **US**: Measure, 4 quarts

2.1.2 Gesture

In many sequences from "*Friends*" (1994 – 2004), actors often use also gesture, to accompany their speech, which is both typical of America and referring to other cultures.

In this sense, it can be considered a very interesting way of interacting among different cultures and learning culture-bound proxemics elements, since during a live interaction among people this is at the basis of communication.

In fact, being motionless in the course of a conversation is practically impossible and if a student has an interaction with a person belonging to another culture with a different code, it is of primary importance for him to have a catalogue of gestures together with a verbal one. It is fundamental for a better communication, to enter the target culture and avoid misunderstandings:

“It is clear that for these gestures to be successful there must be some implicit agreement between speaker and listener as to their meaning. This is part of the common ground between participants in an interaction, just like the common understanding of what words mean. It is often naively assumed by speakers that gestures are universal, and that they can use the same gesture when speaking a foreign language as they would use with their native language. However, there are cultural differences in the meanings that gestures have, not only between languages but also between varieties of a language used by different cultural groups. These differences can result in differences in interpretation.” (Warren P., 2013: 88)

Usually, what can happen with gesture when we use our culture-bound proxemics in other countries is divided in three cases:

- A. The gesture exists also in the other culture with the same meaning (*perfect interaction and interpretation*);
- B. The gesture exists also in the other culture but with a different meaning, in this case we must pay attention because in the worst cases a gesture with a different interpretation could be offensive for the target culture (*misinterpretation*);
- C. The gesture does not exist in the target culture (*failure of communication*).

Here are some examples:



This scene contains two main culture-bound gestures of the American culture.

- Chandler is **putting his two thumbs up**, the gesture made in USA to indicate *approval* towards something, shared also in many European cultures but considered very offensive in some Middle Eastern countries and in part of West Africa and South America (Morris *et al.*, 1979).
- Joey is **composing an “L” with his thumb and his index finger on his forehead**, and this stands for the word “*Loser*” in English, a wicked term to define someone who is considered extremely silly or a person only able to collect failures. It is particularly spread among young people in America.

The first gesture represents a case B for a person from a Middle Eastern country or from South Africa watching the show, but not for a European, for instance. The second gesture, instead, remains typically used in America, however, it has recently started to be understood also abroad. This especially thanks to the huge quantity of material from USA exported all over the world.



The scene above presents again a cultural problem concerning the meaning of this gesture in different countries (case B). The gesture is the same, the interpretation is different according to the country in which a person shows this particular position of the body.

Ross and Rachel are **joining their index and middle finger and leaning them towards their temple**: in many cultures, included the American one, this gesture indicates someone who could be in a specific bad state of mind and wants to express the concept of “*I would kill myself right now*”, simulating a gun with the fingers. Of course, speaking metaphorically.

The mélange of cultures in “*Friends*” is very interesting and apt for a student of foreign languages and respective cultures: in this case, in fact, Ross is explaining a concept typical of the Japanese culture, the “Unagi”, which defines a total state of awareness. It comes from the Japanese fighting style karate and it is indicated with this typical gesture. Rachel answers “*Salmon skin rolls*” because the same word has also many different other meanings in Japanese.

Watching this scene, the student learns to *disambiguate* this gesture and acknowledge the two different meanings, in the Western cultures the first one explained above and in the Asian ones the second referring to “Unagi”.

This is one of the many examples of how audiovisual material, words combined with images, can be excellent to fix intercultural problems.



This is again another scene in which an intercultural gesture is inserted, together with a quintessential exclamation referring to the same culture. The American spectators and all the other belonging to cultures which are not the Italian one lack both the gesture and the word accompanying it (case C).

In the Italian culture, the gesture of **putting the back of a hand under one's chin and then removing the hand the second after moving it forward**, in a gesture of “shaking off something”, means that someone kind of releases himself from something, in the sense that he is not interested in what the interlocutor has just stated. He is freeing himself from the content of the other person's speech, as if to say “*I'm not interested at all in what you're saying/I don't care at all*”.

Moreover, in this scene the gesture is accompanied by a “colorful way” of expressing the gestural concept: Rachel is saying, after having learned it from the friend on her right Joey Tribbiani, half Italian, “Vafanapoli!” which seems to be the invention of a polite word to pronounce an Italian swearword very similar to this one.



In this sequence, Phoebe's brother has just received a positive answer from her sister to a delicate issue he and his girlfriend had posed her: whether she was going to have their baby or not, since his woman could not get pregnant.

When he exults **he kind of raises a little bit from the ground and stretches his body and especially his arms towards the ceiling**: this is a typical example of a gesture that is shared in a lot of countries all over the world and means *victory* (case A).

It is executed in particular at the end of sport matches when a team wins, but it is in general the sign that a specific event occurred, and ended up, exactly like the person wished at the beginning.

Beyond the scenes cited before, there are some more concerning the diffusion of the same kind of gesture practically all over the world.

There is a scene when Ross is **rubbing his eyes**: this gesture is shared almost in every culture, meaning that the person doing it is *sad* and he or she is going to dry her own tears.

Another example of shared gesture is the **crossed fingers**: in many cultures it means to hope for *something to have the expected ending*. Nevertheless, people should pay attention with this gesture because, on the other hand, in Turkey and

Corfu it means “*I am breaking a friendship*” (Morris, Collet, Marsh & O’Shaughnessy, 1979), so this is again a case B.

A typical American gesture is the so-called “**fist bump**”, seen in “*Friends*” in many scenes between Joey and Chandler: it is a friendly gesture used especially between males which is the equivalent of *shaking hands or high five*. It consists in the action of giving a bump to each other with the hands or give it on the friend’s arm.



The last relevant gesture above which can be cited in this paragraph is a sort of body answer to a question which substitutes a verbal one. In a specific episode, Joey is asked by Monica how he could not care about something. He does not really answer, his words are “*Like this*” and **he raises his arms with elbows bent and showing his palms** in the direction of the interlocutor. Moreover, **the expression of his mouth, with lowered borders and eyes closed with raised eyebrows** contributes to convey the meaning he wants, namely “*I do not care at all*”.

This is a typical Italian gesture not shared in many other cultures (case C), but, contextualized, since Monica answers something to Joey, the audience can

understand and put the sentence in a frame, learning something new at a cultural level.

2.2 Intercultural distances: stereotypes and prejudices

Along with curiosities and peculiarities belonging to other cultures cited in the show, there are also some cultural features presented which are in some ways criticized. This happens when, between the culture of the speaker and the one he is referring to, a particular *intercultural distance* exists. The wider the length of this distance, in figurative terms, the harder it will be for a person to comprehend something she is not used to know and consequently, in some cases, these are the bases for the birth of *stereotypes* and *prejudices* towards a foreign culture, two elements strictly linked one another. Where a person can find one of the two, she will probably find the other as a natural consequence:

“Significativa, per il nostro discorso, è la connessione tra i due concetti che lo psicologo sociale (1997: 19) opera quando identifica ‘il pregiudizio come la tendenza a pensare (e agire) in modo sfavorevole nei confronti di un gruppo [...]. Tale disposizione sfavorevole poggia sulla convinzione che quel gruppo o categoria possieda in maniera abbastanza omogenea tratti che si giudicano negativi. È in questo senso che [...] lo stereotipo può essere concepito come il nucleo cognitivo del pregiudizio.” (Balboni P., Caon F., 2015: 141)¹⁶

These are two elements meant to protect, in some ways, the sphere of a person, her own values, towards something which can be primarily lived as a threat or simply as something too different to get in touch with. Actually, being victim of stereotypes and prejudices often limits lives and their possibilities and narrows minds instead of opening them:

¹⁶ The following translation is by the author of this thesis.

“Meaningful, in this field, is the connection between the two concepts that the social psychologist (1997: 19) operates when he identifies ‘prejudice as the inclination to think (and act) in a negative way towards a group [...]. This negative disposition is founded on the belief that this specific group or category has almost homogeneously treats that are considered negative. It is just in this sense that [...] stereotype can be conceived as the cognitive nucleus of prejudice.” (Balboni, Caon, 2015: 141)

“Ma c’è anche un rischio più profondo di immobilismo legato a questi concetti: i processi rigidi e immutabili di definizione culturale e di conseguente identificazione sono *limitanti* sia nella dimensione intra-personale sia in quella interpersonale. Come ricorda Bauman (2003: 67), ‘mentre farsi un’identità è un’esigenza fortemente sentita e un esercizio incoraggiato da ogni autorevole medium culturale, avere un’identità solidamente fondata e restarne in possesso ‘per tutta la vita’, si rivela un handicap piuttosto che un vantaggio poiché limita la possibilità di controllare in modo adeguato il proprio percorso esistenziale’ [...]” (Balboni, Caon, 2015: 138)¹⁷

For people not used to get in touch with other cultures, nevertheless, not being afraid is not a simple task. This is something a person can acquire in the course of time, knowing people first-hand or being really interested in the history of a civilization and the reasons why today some values are present in a specific country. If not, the creation of misunderstandings often takes place along with mockery, which seem to be a weapon to defend oneself. In the case of “*Friends*”, this last attitude has not to be taken seriously, in the sense that the whole show has sketches meant to provoke laughter, consequently stereotypes and prejudices presented along the ten seasons can simply be taken in a benevolent manner as something which can teach the student of foreign languages something more about the target culture.

An example in “*Friends*” is a scene in which Phoebe, half French, speaks in her L2 and Monica, one of her five friends, imitates her distorting the words and repeating them according to words which have a similar phonology in English but a different meaning, to make fun of her. Phoebe answers “*You Americans always butcher the French language*”.

¹⁷ The following translation is by the author of this thesis.

“But there is also a deeper risk of immobilism connected to these concepts: stiff and immutable processes of cultural definition and consequent identification are *restrictive* both in the intra-personal and in the inter-personal dimension. As Bauman reminds (2003: 67), ‘while building an identity is a very heart-felt necessity and something which is strongly encouraged by any cultural authority, having a solid identity and possessing it ‘all life long’, seems to be more a handicap rather than an advantage because it restricts the possibilities to adequately control one’s existential path’ [...]” (Balboni, Caon, 2015: 138)

2.2.1 *The Italian corner*

“*Friends*” is a peculiar tv show for containing many references to the Italian culture, above all the others.

One of the primary reasons for this characteristic could be that one of the six main characters, Joey Tribbiani, is half Italian, and many scenes featuring Italian culture-bound elements are linked to this. This is not surprising, though: Americans have always shown a particular love and fondness towards Italy, as the presence of the Italian community in New York can demonstrate.

Introducing the Italian culture in “*Friends*” is something which comes firstly with the appearance, at the very beginning of the show, the first season, of a character coming from Italy, in the specific from Turin, Paolo.

Starting from his introduction many stereotypes linked to the typical traits of the peninsula’s culture are presented.

The first one is, as already stated, linked to the character of Paolo. When Ross talks to Rachel about his way of behaving in front of the others when he finds himself in the group among the six friends, he makes a very relevant culture-bound reference to a typical trait of the Italians, or at least how they are perceived abroad.

Since he is totally jealous of Paolo dating Rachel, he criticizes him telling her that he is always “**blablabla**” (he uses again an onomatopoeia, as seen above). The onomatopoeia substitutes the idea Ross wants to express, namely that *Italians always speak a lot all the time*. They are often histrionic and they exaggerate, becoming annoying. This of course, from other cultures’ points of view, like the American one, which is a younger and consequently more “immediate” culture, can be a little too heavy to stand, making intercultural exchanges hard at some traits.

All the other scenes including elements linked to Italy involve almost constantly the character of Joey Tribbiani.

A peculiar sequence, in this sense, is when Joey tells the other friends, in the hall of their place, after his grandmother has just been visiting them: “**She’s my biggest fan**”. Not only he refers to the fact that his grandmother is really

supporting him along his career of aspiring actor, but this sentence holds something about the relationship between older woman inside an Italian family unit and younger boys, especially between mother and son or grandmother and grandson. In fact, in the Italian culture, males, especially younger ones, are always cuddled and put on a silver plate by the mother or the grandmother, or even aunts. Towards females, this fondness does not seem to be exactly the same. In this case Joey is supported by his grandmother who would probably approve any other choice of him since he is the family's "sweetheart", the only one male among a huge number of sisters.

Another culture-bound situation connected to Joey's family takes place when he introduces his friends his own family: it is a very big one, composed by **seven sisters**. This is again another typical trait of Italian families, at list the traditional ones, especially in the past and in the South of Italy, the fact of having a huge number of children, even if in this case the reference is a little overrated.

Again, linked to Joey's attitude, he always states "**Joey doesn't share food**", which is a sentence he repeats over and over again along the ten seasons of the show. Indeed, Italians are very keen on food and they consider it as something vital which plays a very important role in the quality of everyday life, having a proper cultural tradition in this field. In particular, "*Friends*" makes an incessant reference to **pizza** and **tiramisu**, being the first one of the two practically the only food the six friends have for dinner each night. They also frequently cite "**Mac and cheese**", which is an abbreviation of "*maccheroni and cheese*": this is a mix between a typical Italian pasta, maccheroni, and a recipe made in USA, which consists in the fact of flavoring this food with cheese.

The character of Joey, as already stated, is pictured as giving a lot of importance to food, as Italians usually do, and seems to be in a constant state of bliss and euphoria each time he tastes any kind of food.

Related to the topic of food, since the characters often love to eat Italian, some names of restaurants are cited during the seasons. Two of them, in particular, are called **Alessandro's** and **Sorrentino's**. This is a peculiarity of Italian restaurants all over the world: differently from other kind of names people can find in Italy,

abroad owners often call the restaurants with Italian names or surnames, just like Alessandro or Sorrentino.

2.3 Made in USA: traditions and attitudes

Beyond what has been already cited about elements belonging to the Italian culture and many others, this paragraph will deal in particular with culture-bound elements belonging to the American culture, object of "*Friends*".

In the course of the ten seasons, many sketches and sequences contain facts and events that are typically referring to the culture from the USA.

- In a scene from Season Three, Episode Seven, Rachel tries to introduce Ross to her father a second time, since the first one was not successful at all.
So, she proposes to Ross to have their father for a **brunch**: This is a typical tradition of America, and it is a meal which can be considered as a mix between breakfast and lunch, shortened with that final word. It is consumed when a person did not have breakfast early in the morning, but it is not yet time for lunch. It is therefore composed both of sweet and sour food.
- In many occasions along the ten seasons, the characters go to the restaurant and, at the end of the meal, together with the bill, they leave a little extra amount of money to the waiter: it is the **tip**. Of course, this treatment is present also in other cultures, but, even if it is not explicitly required, in the American one the client should always leave something. The opposite is usually considered a rude behavior.
- Each season, the characters celebrate a festivity which is peculiar of the American culture because of its history: it is the **Thanksgiving**. In this occasion people is used to reunite the whole family or friends and eat *turkey* as the main course. This anniversary takes place on the fourth Friday of November and it is meant to thank God for the annual harvest

and for any other thing received in the course of the year. It is a catholic celebration observed also in Canada.

- In Season Two, Episode Fourteen, the group of six friends watches a VHS at home with the recording of a day during their years of high school when they prepare for the **Prom**. This occasion consists in the high school students' dance to celebrate the end of the schoolyear and it is present also in Canada and in the UK.
- In the last season, Rachel gets pregnant and, when Emma, Rachel and Ross's daughter is born, they celebrate the event with the so-called **Baby shower**. This is a party organized mainly by the family and friends of the new parents, which starts in the moment the parents arrive home with the baby, to celebrate the newborn.
- During the ten seasons, the main characters are depicted several moments having breakfast or a snack during the afternoon. In the first case, they always eat **milk and cheerios** pouring the milk in a *soup plate*, which, instead, in other cultures is only used for the first course. Moreover, during the afternoon they often have **milk and cookies**, which is a typical food break made in USA.
- In more than one episode along the ten seasons, Rachel wears a particular outfit, which is the one of the **cheerleader**. In the American culture, the cheerleader is a girl who can even practice a sport which consists in dances and moves to encourage a sport team which is playing when she attends the match. Usually she holds pompons during her exhibition, while she supports one of the two teams.
- In addition to the elements already cited, "*Friends*" can be considered a "manual of the USA" since along the episodes many references and quotes to artists and celebrities who are part of the American culture are present. In this way the student can really enter the culture both in the most fundamental things to know, such as values and traditions, to the curiosities. Some examples are the fact of citing the photographer Anne Geddes, the singers Lionel Richie and Britney Spears, the actor Pierce

- Brosnan with the movie 007, the tv shows “Baywatch” (1989 – 2001) and “Days of our lives” (1965 – present), the movie “Jurassic Park” (1993).
- In a scene, one of the characters asks “What shoe is yours?”. In this way, a spectator not born in the USA can acknowledge the different **metric of units** used in America (for example in Italy the measurements are almost from 35 up to 52 with half measures, while in America they are expressed from 5 to 18 again with half measures, according to measurements for adults, males and females).
 - In Season Six, Episode Nineteen, a former student who attended Ross’ lectures at University dates him afterwards for few time, and during that period she leaves some days for the **Spring break**. In the USA and some other countries such as UK but also Japan or France it is a one-week holiday which is named after the period in which it takes place, generally the beginning of springtime. It is allowed to University students, who generally organize travels or parties in that brief period.
 - In a scene, the main characters call the **911**. This is the emergency number for the USA.
 - In Season Three, Episode Sixteen, Rachel discovers that Ross betrayed her with another girl. She does not want to hear any apologize from him and, after a long and painful conversation, she decides to break with him. This is surely likely to happen in many circumstances similar to the one that involves Ross and Rachel, but in the specific many people knew that secret hours before Rachel, because Ross had asked them before to keep the mouth shut. In this affair, what really makes the difference for the seriousness that this represents, is the *value* that Americans confer to the concept of **truth** and the opposite negative disvalue they confer to **lies and falsehood**. Since truth for the Americans is a culture-bound value even before being a general moral priority all over the world, what can be inferred is that a situation which is yet unpleasable like the one between Ross and Rachel is worsened by the fact that Ross, being conscious of his guilt, tries to omit this truth with Rachel, which she lives as a huge lie. Since lie is something not accepted at all in the American

culture, the whole situation, contextualized, is far more serious than in other cultures.

Third part: After watching the show. Didactic activities in the framework of FL learning.

The benefits of watching audiovisuals, especially TV shows, in the framework of foreign language learning, does not finish with the ending of the single movie or of the last episode of a season.

The act of looking at the screen and listening at the same time can surely, as already stated, accompany the student along his path of learning, however, given the fact that the student needs a linguistic past experience to try to understand the content of the dialogues and interactions between actors (*moment preceding the view*) there is also a subsequent moment, after the view. It is when the teacher first introduces to the classroom the *didactic activities* linked to the content of the tv show (*moment after the view*).

There is plenty of scientific literary works available which describe the activities that can be proposed to a classroom after watching the content of an audiovisual. This because these kinds of activity seem to ease the flow of new acquired information, in this case the new elements recorded in the students' mind after the view. As already stated, in this phase the student not only will use his *implicit memory*, but he will also make appeal to the use of its *explicit memory*, when the teacher will ask him to carry out a specific linguistic task based on the view of the show. Indeed, he will have to reflect upon the matter, which involves the use of explicit circuits of memory.

The first chapter will deal with the psychological reasons why didactic activities based on audiovisuals can be brilliant, with the experimental example of the so-called "*scenario*", while the second one will expose to the reader which can be in the specific the techniques of teaching and the linguistic games based on audiovisuals.

Chapter one: Reasons for choosing activities based on video and acting

Activities in classroom founded on the use of video can be multiple and activate the *implicit memory* of the students, who experiment another moment of fun after watching the video and unconsciously put into practice the “Rule of forgetting” by Krashen (1983), already cited in the chapters above, together with moments of commitment which fire *explicit* circuits.

This is the main *first reason* why such linguistic tasks should be unrolled in classroom, alternating them to classic linguistic exercises on textbooks.

1.1 The “scenario”: an experiment in classroom

An excellent way to push students to talk in the FL they are committed to learn is to put on stage, in the context of the classroom, the so-called “scenario”, dramatizing a scene that could possibly happen in everyday life.

As professor and linguist P. Balboni describes it:

“Si definisce una situazione potenzialmente conflittuale, ad esempio un processo per un divorzio, un dibattito sulla pena di morte o sulla liberalizzazione degli spinelli, e così via. [...]

La fase della discussione, soprattutto se condotta sulla base di una videoregistrazione, serve a far vedere quali sono stati i punti in cui una parte ha prevalso sull'altra, dove le strategie previste sono state perdenti, dove l'espressione linguistica non è stata all'altezza oppure è stata eccellente.”

(Balboni, P., 2013: 136)¹⁸

¹⁸ The following translation is by the author of this thesis.

“A potentially conflictual situation is defined, for instance a process or a divorce, a debate about sentence to death or about liberalization of joints, and so on. [...]

The phase of the discussion, above all if conducted on the basis of a video record, has the aim to show which have been the points where a part has prevailed on the other, where expected strategies have lost, where the linguistic expression has not reached the goals set or has been excellent.” (Balboni, P., 2013: 136)

Naturally, to help the students in this task they can be exposed to a video where they watch a similar scene. In this sense, TV shows are brilliant to be used as an example, since often they depict ordinary scenes, day by day, just like “*Friends*” does.

An example of how this mechanism works in the brain of students has been experimented with a classroom of adults attending an upper-intermediate course of French at Centro Civico Vallesturla in Genova, in the framework of an internship in the study program of University Ca’ Foscari, year 2017/2018.

They had been exposed to a video where the characters involved argued.

After, the teacher asked them to put into scene a similar case. The scenario was an accident in the street, and the aim was to improve their vocabulary.

The topic of the lesson was “bad words” in French, and the context of traffic jam was considered excellent to inflame the situation.

The lesson was unrolled in the following way, which can be considered and used as an example to unroll similar dramatizations in classroom:

- 1) The teacher gave the students little fold pieces of paper where the student found a bad word in French, one for each student. They had the French expression with the corresponding translation on the piece of paper.
- 2) The unrolling of the scene was completely left to their responsibility. In the initial situation, each of them was a different driver stuck in a row on a highway and had to try to get out of it as soon as possible, since he was in a hurry. In this “*scenario*”, they were asked to use the bad word in French which occurred to them on the little piece of paper.
- 3) At this point, the “*scenario*” was complete: students were given a background situation, they really felt like they were mad and irritated drivers on a highway, who accused the ones surrounding them to be the cause of the traffic jam and of their subsequent delay. The students started to offend one another, perfectly using the new words they were engaging to learn and, at the same time, improvising a situation which not only allowed them to use new vocabulary items, but let them speak fluently and without hesitation in the FL they were learning, even if, in some points,

they made grammatical mistakes. The teacher only limited her task to correct them with a low tone of voice, not to interrupt the flow of conversation between the students.

And the last one is exactly the point of the “*scenario*”.

What happened in the brain of the students when they argued? How is it possible that, when the teacher asked them to take the floor about current topics only few of them raised their hand to talk, instead during the scene they were interpreting they were so outgoing?

The reasons are mainly two.

The first one deals with *having fun*, which is a powerful engine in the process of learning a FL. Naturally, interpreting a scene as if the students were actors was for them far more amusing and entertaining than simply commenting something about politics or economics or even culture, as when they were asked to talk about Euroflora and advantages or disadvantages coming from that event.

But fun is not the core reason why students took the floor during the scene and hesitated in the ordinary class conversation.

The main reason deals with the *psychological fall of inhibitions*. In the specific moment the “*scenario*” involved them as if they were there, they started to get more and more emotional about their cause and they did not reflect anymore upon the fact that they were acting for a linguistic task. They just forgot about it (“Rule of forgetting”, Krashen, 1983).

When students quarrel, the *emotional brain* takes the place of the *rational one*, consequently they get fond of their cause, which is to get rid of people around them and emotions such as rage cause the fall of inhibitions, even if the price to pay is often a poor-quality performance from the point of view of grammar. However, if the final goal is, at the very beginning, to overcome their shyness, then the intervention of emotions linked to anger can be excellent:

“L’emozione umana è direttamente connessa alle esperienze di piacere, curiosità, frustrazione, gioia, vergogna. Uno studente che prova piacere dal proprio addestramento – la fisiologia lo conferma – memorizza meglio. Il rilassamento, cioè la fiducia, il **rallentamento dei freni inibitori**, rende più

fluente la produzione in L2 (l'effetto fisiologico può essere stimolato con una blanda assunzione di alcolici)." (Salmon L., Mariani M., 2012: 146)¹⁹

From the point of view of the teacher, it was amusing watching them involved in that situation, since it was the first time they gave it a try, without being afraid of their performance in front of the professor.

As it is easily inferable, the scenario seems to be an excellent opportunity for what concerns the development of the *speaking abilities*, namely the conversation, far more than simply proposing to students the ordinary discussion of a topic, be it also interesting or catching.

1.2 The “*dramatization*”: a variation of the “*scenario*”

In the paragraph above, an activity in classroom based on playing a part has been described from an experimental point of view. Nevertheless, a variation of this task can even be more fitting to the first step cited, which is the one of watching the audiovisual, and it is the so-called activity of “*dramatization*”.

This second activity, very close to the first one, does not provide for imagination, namely it does not require to students, before performing, to invent their dialogues, as illustrated in the example of the “*scenario*” above.

It is rather the task of performing a scene between students which can be read at the same time on a paper with lines written on it, or, as some teachers require especially in the public school, to study and then play in front of the classroom.

The “*scenario*” perfectly conforms to the teaching methodology which includes the use of audiovisuals.

In a first moment the classroom, in this case, is exposed to the movie or the episode of the tv show and is required to attentively follow the development of

¹⁹ The following translation is by the author of this thesis.

“Human emotion is directly connected to the experiences of pleasure, curiosity, frustration, joy, shame. A student who feels pleasure with its training – physiology confirms it – better memorizes notions. Relax, namely trust, slackening of inhibitory circuits, makes L2 production more fluent (this physiological effect can be simulated through a mild assumption of alcohol.)

the plot, included the expressions and the paraverbal communication of the actors.

Indeed, in a second moment, the student will be asked to interpret a specific scene drawn from the video. What is important, above all, is to pay attention to phonological linguistic elements such as *intonation* and *pronunciation*, which are, together with the fact of enlarging the vocabulary, the aim of this kind of educational exercise. The global aim is related to improve the *fluency* in the FL studied.

As P. Balboni describes this task:

“La drammatizzazione consiste nella ‘recita’, a memoria o leggendo il copione, di un testo dialogico; i giovanissimi l’accettano facilmente, gli adolescenti e i giovani adulti assai meno, a meno che non tratti di un testo significativo sul piano del contenuto, una piccola *pièce* teatrale – ma questa significatività è difficile da ottenere lavorando con studenti di ridotta padronanza linguistica.” (Balboni P., 2013: 133)²⁰

Afterwards, Balboni focuses on the advantages and disadvantages of such a task, underlining the linguistic aspects which can be effectively improved, but also defining the limits of it, basically due to the emotional filters:

“I vantaggi sono molti: memorizzazione di materiale linguistico, attenzione all’intonazione, alla velocità dell’eloquio – ma il vantaggio maggiore sta nella oggettivazione della propria performance in sede di visione critica della videoregistrazione.

A fronte di questi vantaggi va considerato il fatto che a seconda delle caratteristiche personali l’esibirsi di fronte alla classe può attivare filtri affettivi, produrre incidenti relazionali tra compagni, scatenare reazioni negative superiori al vantaggio linguistico. Inoltre, per il tempo che richiede

²⁰ The following translation is by the author of this thesis.

“Dramatization consists in the ‘act’, by heart or reading a script, of a dialogic text; very young people accept it easily, adolescents and adults not so much, unless it is a significant text from the point of view of the content, a little theatrical *pièce* – but this significance is hard to obtain when working with students with a poor linguistic competence.” (Balboni P., 2013: 133)

preparare, eseguire e visionare le registrazioni, si tratta di un'attività che può essere proposta pochissime volte in un anno di lavoro." (Balboni P., 2013: 133)²¹

As it has been demonstrated also through an experimental situation in classroom, besides with a group of adults who could possibly make the task harder, instead the main gasoline was amusement, the possibility of learning through fun.

The core point for considering such a teaching methodology brilliant is linked to the factor *context*.

Usually, through the only reading of a paragraph contained in a textbook, or even whether the student finds articles linked to a specific culture, it is not easy for him to understand and command in real life what he is leaning. This refers back to the *theory of embodiment* (Part One, Chapter One, 1.3).

Through watching an audiovisual and then re-interpreting some scenes, the student is able to live on his own skin the language he is practicing, identifying himself with the part he is playing, which replays scenes unrolled in the foreign country, in the course of the audiovisual. It is a completely different way of dealing with language. It is about a full immersion both from the linguistic and from the cultural point of view, which is the driving force in FL learning.

The second chapter of this section will deal with other activities based on the video and can be considered as a handbook of tasks founded on audiovisuales.

²¹ The following translation is by the author of this thesis.

"Advantages are many: memorization of linguistic material, attention to the intonation, to the speed of eloquence – but the biggest advantage is in the objectification of one's performance through a critic vision of the recording.

Along with these advantages it must be considered that, according to personal peculiarities, exhibiting in front of the classroom can activate affective filters, cause relationship accidents between classmates, trigger negative reactions which overcome the linguistic advantage. Moreover, because of the time which requires preparing, executing and watching the recordings, it is an activity which can be proposed very few times in a year of work." (Balboni P., 2013: 133)

Chapter two: Varied activities based on audiovisuals

This last chapter of the last section is a list, an appendix of activities which can be unfolded in the course of the episode or at the end, in the context of the classroom or as homework.

Activities below can be taken as a handbook, a map of tasks to adopt with students. Age is usually not a problem. When an adult or an adolescent is committed and fond of a task which is useful and amusing at the same time, he generally accepts it, maybe hesitating only at the beginning. The activities proposed vary according to the different levels of commanding of foreign language.

For each activity a *theoretical* explanation will be always provided, while a *practical* one (example) only when needed, in case of activities which need a didactic form or a proper simulation to be clear to the reader.

Activity 1: Explain the scene through the picture.

In this first activity, the student is given one or more pictures depicting a specific scene just watched on the video, a fragment of the episode. This task tests his commitment and attention he dedicated to the audiovisual material, together with a first reaction to this methodology.

Through the picture, the teacher will ask him to recall some specific points, based on the 5W which are also used in journalistic language: *Who*, *What*, *When*, *Where*, *Why*, and maybe *How*, or any other questions concerning the specific point.

The aim of this exercise is to test the attention of the student, how he deals with the use of audiovisual material and reacts to it and can be presented in two different ways: *written* or *oral*. In the case of oral discussion, it can be an excellent way to improve conversation tasks, without making the student feel under pressure. While watching the show, the student is generally allowed the activity of *note-taking*, which will help him to better retrieve the content of the scene.

The level of students must anyway be an *intermediate*, at least.

It is a task of *comprehension*, just like the ones based on a literary work.

Of course, the more the student is willing to explain the scene with his proper words, the better it is.

Example:

The student is first exposed to the episode of “*Friends*” titled “*The one with the ball*”, season 5, number 21 (1999).

He is required to watch attentively the whole episode, then a specific point of the video is depicted on the capture he finds on the paper delivered by the professor.

The picture is the following, framing a very interesting and catching moment of the episode, to facilitate the student in the task of recalling:



Answer to the following questions (5W):

- *Who* are the characters involved in the following scene?
- *What* happens in the scene? (Contextualize).
- *When* does the scene happen? (Precise moment or before and after etc.)
- *Where* does the scene take place?
- *Why* does this specific fact happen?

- (*How*) did it happen? (It can simply be substituted by the question above).

Of course, the information required to students is not totally and specifically referred to the frame they find on the paper. Rather, it is a way to recall him the whole scene, from which the student can (and is encouraged to) cite also the surrounding characters who take part to the conversation, even if they are not present in the frame, for instance. The aim is to create links of *cause-effects* and product a rich comment of the scene.

The more the students explain about the scene, the better it is, even adding not required information which describes in further details what is going on in the specific fragment of the episode.

In this way, from a former step of comprehension, the student *produces* a brief and concise speech, or essay.

Activity 2: Fill in the blanks.

This second task is very similar to a parallel one executed through the listening of songs in the FL of interest. In that case, in the course of the song students are required to write down the words they hear in the blanks they find in the lyrics of the song.

With the video, the task is almost the same, but with some important peculiarities. The first characteristic of the "*Fill in the blanks*" task is that, as during the song, it must be unfolded *during* the vision of the episode, not after. The teacher can possibly decide to allow students to watch (and hear) two times the same scene, to be more confident, sure of what they write down.

A script of the lines played by the actors in the specific scene is delivered to students, containing of course blanks to be filled in. Then the teacher plays the scene and, naturally, there is no use of subtitles. It is an excellent exercise for the development of comprehension tasks based on *listening*.

This task can be unfolded at two levels, depending on the command of students upon language:

- a) *By hear*, namely only trying to catch the words pronounced by the actors by listening to them (advanced);
- b) *With a list of words*, in this case the student is asked to choose the right term he hears during the conversation from a list at the end of the page and decide which is the correct one to insert in the various blanks (intermediate).

Example:

The student watches the episode from “*Friends*” titled “*The one with the Holiday Armadillo*” (Season 7, Episode 10; 2000).

At the same time, he is asked to fill the blanks in the script he is given by the teacher, and often he is allowed to read it some minutes before the beginning of the vision, to try to first contextualize the scene. Usually the professor allows students to watch two times the same scene.

In the case of the episode cited above, part of the script is the following, with respective blanks in it. It refers to a point of the episode where Ben, Ross’ son, receives presents both from him in an Armadillo costume (he did not find the right one to be disguised as Santa Claus) and Chandler, who, instead, arrives introducing himself in Santa Claus’ costume and making Ross sad and disappointed about it (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VH-6u-3qgIY>, 1:12 – 4:44):

Ross: That's right, Ben. I'm Santa's _____ for all the southern states. And, Mexico! But, Santa sent me here to _____ you these presents, Ben.

(He tries to bend down to pick up the bag with the presents, but can't because of the costume).

Maybe the _____ will help me with these presents.

[Monica picks up the bag, while Ross closes the door and hits Monica with his tail. They walk into the living room, and Monica empties the bag.]

Ben: Wow! _____!

Ross: You're welcome, Ben. Merry Christmas, ooh, and, Happy Hanukkah!

Ben: Are you for Hanukkah too? Because I'm part-Jewish.

Ross (gasps): You are? Me too!

Monica: Because Armadillos also wandered in the _____?

Ross (to Monica): You wanna wander in the _____?

(to Ben) Ooh, hey Ben, what if the Holiday Armadillo told you all about the festival of lights?

Ben: Cool!

Ross: Yeah!

Monica: Come on Ben.

[Monica and Ben sit down on the couch.]

Ross: Years and years ago, there were these _____ called the _____...

Chandler (entering in a Santa costume): Ho, ho, ho! Merry Christmas!

Ben: Santa! (Runs to Chandler and hugs him)

Chandler: Hey! (Grunts as Ben hits him at full speed.)

Ross: What're you doing here, Santa?

Chandler: Well, I'm here to see my old _____ Ben. What're you doing here, weird... turtle-man?

Ross: I'm the Holiday Armadillo, your part-Jewish _____. You sent me here to give Ben some presents. _____?

Chandler: What?

Ben: Did you bring me any _____, Santa?

Chandler: You _____ I did, Ben, put it there! (He shakes Ben's hand, but the money falls out of his hands) (to Monica) Well, it would've worked this time, if his hands weren't so damn small! (Realizes, that Ben is standing right there) Ho, ho, ho!

Monica: Ok Ben, why don't you come _____ some more presents, and Santa, the Armadillo, and I will have a little talk in the _____? There's a sentence I never thought I'd say.

Presents – kitchen – give – buddy – people – thanks – desert – friend – bet – lady – open – Macabees – hall – representative – remember

Activity 3: Act through *dramatization* and “*scenario*”.

The activities of the *dramatization* and the “*scenario*” are based on the task of acting in front of the classroom.

This subparagraph will not dwell too much on those tasks, since they have already been described in detail in Chapter One of this section, as an example of what happens psychologically when the student is involved in tasks based on acting.

To summarize what has been already illustrated, the *dramatization* is directly linked with the episode of the tv show, since it consists in the act of a scene with a script. Instead, the “*scenario*” takes inspiration from a similar scene watched on the video to formulate, create and finally play a new one.

For all the other peculiarities of these two methodologies see Part Three, *Chapter One*.

Activity 4: Translate the script.

This is a rather simple task, which can be assigned as homework even to students attending the middle school. It is based on the *translation* of part of the original script after watching an episode of the show.

The professor plays the show in classroom and then he delivers his students the script. At home, with *bilingual dictionaries* allowed, students will translate the lines of the script.

This is an exercise which aims at improving vocabulary, namely enlarging it, allowing the student to store new words in FL after having searched on the dictionary. It is also excellent for processes linked to the development of FL *syntax*, namely realizing how sentences are generally composed in the FL, the

position of the linguistic items (which is often different from the L1), the links between different categories of words. The student must engage himself to re-create corresponding sentences using the grammar of his L1 and its proper structures.

This task is always unfolded as a *passive* translation (FL/L2 – L1).

Activity 5: Give your opinion about a key scene and the attitudes of characters involved.

This is the hardest task based on audiovisuals which can be proposed to students. To be unfolded, it needs an *upper-intermediate/advanced* level of commanding of the FL.

This exercise can be considered as a second step, a development of Activity 1 “*Explain the scene through the pictures*”. It is always based on *comprehension*, but in this case the elaboration of what happens in a specific scene is not the goal, it is the precondition to unfold this further task. It can be considered as a second phase, an elaboration of Activity 1, which is a sort of *conditio sine qua non* to unfold this task.

In this case, indeed, the student does not simply have to express, as in an ordinary storytelling, what happens during the course of the scene, but on the basis of that - which is not required, it is given for granted - he must elaborate and express a personal opinion or judgement about a core scene of the show. The 5W of Activity 1 are already crystal clear in his mind and he is asked to elaborate something more than that.

Usually, to undergo this task, the teacher chooses a scene full of *pathos*, where the intentions, the deeds cause-effects coming from the behavior of the characters create a turning point in the whole plot and in the evolution of the story. It is a sort of psychological and moral debate on the different points of view of the characters, their emotions, why they acted in a way rather than in another, integrated with a global judgement of the scene. In this particular activity it is

central and fundamental the *role of empathy*, as explained in Part One (Chapter One, 1.2).

Even in this case, some standard questions can be formulated, even if, considered the average level of students, the more they are allowed to be free the better it is for the development of their *expressive skills*, either this task is conducted through the *written* channel or the *oral* one.

Again, as in Activity 1, pictures are presented to students to comment upon them, for instance to detect specific feelings of the characters linked to the emotions their facial expressions communicate. It is done, again, to retrieve the whole scene. Starting on the description of what they see on the frame, they express a global and personal judgement of the watershed event narrated in the specific scene.

Example:

Next frame is taken from the episode “*The one with Ross’ new girlfriend*” (Season 2, Episode 1; 1995).



In the frame above, while Ross is talking at the telephone, Rachel turns her face on the other side.

Answer the following questions:

- 1) *Which feelings* does the expression on Rachel's face communicate?
- 2) After the events happened in the previous episodes, the global situation and Ross' role, do you think her feelings are justified or inappropriate? Why?
- 3) Explain your appreciation. Did you like the scene or not? Why? Which feelings did the scene raise in you?
- 4) If you were Rachel, would you react in the same way? Explain.

The exercise above can also be presented with variations to make it easier, in a perspective of students with a lower command of American English.

The task is almost the same, the only variation is that, instead of having *open questions*, the test is presented with *multiple choice questions*. In this case, the task should be presented in a written form.

The positive aim is to facilitate the student, the negative side is that there is less chance of free expression, however this could not be required or expected from students under an *intermediate/upper-intermediate/advanced* level.

Anyway, the aim of *improving and enlarging vocabulary*.

Example:

The picture below is taken from the episode "*The one where Joey moves out*" (Season 2, Episode 16; 1996).



Answer the following questions:

1) Through Joey's facial expression and gesture, which of the following emotions can you detect?

A) *Sadness* B) *Anger* C) *Shame* D) *Fear* E) *Anxiety*

2) According to the facts happened before the scene framed, how do you consider Joey's behavior towards his best friend Chandler?

A) *He is overreacting, but right in some ways*

B) *He is totally right*

C) *He is totally wrong and has no point in behaving like that*

Bonus question: Try to write two lines motivating your answer (Question 2).

3) Which was the main emotion the episode made you arise?

A) *Irritability* B) *Rage* C) *Disappointment* D) *Fear* E) *Sadness*

Activity 6: Play as if you were one of the characters.

This final activity is based on *role play*. Each student, after having watched the show, receives a little crib sheet on which he finds the name of one of the characters.

This type of activity is apt for adults, for example in private schools, as for young students attending the middle school, and is usually addressed to *intermediate* levels or also to *beginners* (in this last case the descriptions created will be, of course, less detailed, and the expectation of the teacher must be appropriate).

After the professor delivers the crib sheet, the student opens it without anyone else looking at it. He must remember the peculiarities of that specific character and, in the lapse of time he is given, write down some of them (they can be physical, psychological, attitudinal characteristics). The piece of paper will be a

sort of “memorandum” to use during the brief act. He is allowed the bilingual dictionary during the preparation of the memorandum.

At a last stage, the student is asked to represent in front of the others the character he was assigned.

This exercise needs a prerequisite: the characters involved in the video must be a lot, included major and minor ones, to allow all the students to take part to the game.

The others must guess the identity of the character played by their classmate. Usually, each time a student guesses right, then it is his turn to play.

All these activities usually have the power, no matter the age, to add a touch of spice to ordinary classroom lessons. Often, at the end of such amusing activities, students come back home enriched and satisfied, which should be the final aim, beyond the more classic educational one, of every foreign language teacher.

Conclusion

The overall and final aim of this dissertation is to analyze and give to professors of a FL the notions and instruments to master and apply in the course of their lesson alternative methodologies of learning.

Through a first illustration of how linguistic processes work inside the brain, topic treated in the first part of the thesis with a focus on the role of *mirror neurons*, the second part explores and probes the fundamental role played by *cultural* aspects of the FL the students are engaging to study, in this case American English. The methodologies proposed in this dissertation do not have the presumption to overcome the classic ones on handbooks. Rather, they wish to integrate them, in a perspective of an amusing kind of learning for students.

In this process, culture is a central and nuclear element to reach the aims of a foreign language teacher. Often culture summons emotions which summon, in their turn, a better way of learning based on implicit mechanisms. Emotions are a central object of this dissertation, along with their role in FL learning. Without “being fond of something”, there cannot be any kind of learning, or a sterile and unproductive one, which is not going to last, since it does not recall real *motivation*.

For what concerns the third and last part, the intention was the one of proving the effective psychological benefits of activities coming from watching tv shows or movies and then working on them through linguistic tasks.

In the first place an experiment in classroom has been exposed, to prove the real application and effectiveness of such techniques. In a second moment, in the last chapter, the goal was to summarize the main activities which can be proposed to students after watching the audiovisual material, in a classroom environment which, of course, allows the activities proposed to be conducted in the best possible way, with technologies and, over all, the right atmosphere.

The last point is considered fundamental by the author of this dissertation, the pivot of a teacher’s methodology on which every other technical ability lays the foundations.

The right trigger for positive emotions in the atmosphere of a classroom seems to be empathy between students and towards the teacher and vice versa, trust towards the professor, who has the delicate task of making his students fond of the subject he teaches, almost forgetting about the final mark, which will come naturally, as a spontaneous consequence of a good methodology. It is about the feeling of dealing with the foreign language not only to acquire new competences useful in a future time, for work or to travel abroad, but because this can open one's mind and create relationships and connections all over the world.

Broadening ourselves learning a new language and, over all, the corresponding culture, gives us the shiver of living in different places at the same time, of being ourselves and someone else at the same time, someone we start to gradually know as long as we improve the language we engaged to study.

This sincere motivation will always be the best engine for foreign language learning.

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Further quotes

A special quote must be made to the group of students who made possible the experiment of the “*scenario*” in classroom, during the activity of internship in the framework of the Master’s Degree in Language Sciences at University Ca’ Foscari.

The internship was unfolded in a headquarters of the Municipality of Genoa, “Centro Civico Vallesturla”, from October 2017 to May 2018.

The two classrooms were composed of fifteen students each who collaborated and were always enthusiastic and passionate about the linguistic games and exercises proposed, embodying the fundamental principles of this thesis. This is a prime example considered the age of the students, which was likely to make them resistant and stubborn in front of such activities (60-65 years old on average).

At a first moment the experimental part of this dissertation was not planned, however the students were given an exercise which was the application of the one cited in the last part, the didactic activity of the “*scenario*”, and were amazing at it. For this reason the experiment has been put on paper.

Thanks to my group of students it was possible for me to witness unbelievable and stunning progresses within a school year.

For that, I am happy to say, in my turn, “Thanks” to the exciting and unique incentives that only cheerfulness and trust can bring.

I would also like, for this reason, to dedicate another “Thanks” to the ones who have firstly decided to give me, as a student, these educational treasures.