Second part

A casy study

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Methodological aspects in Permit Project: the Italian experience

abstract

The definition of what is a good *research methodology* varies according to initial assumptions, theories, and philosophical approaches shared by the researchers and based on the intended uses of the results of a research. In the Permit project the methodological approach adopted by the Italian research group has involved both quantitative and qualitative methods. More than that, studies using mixed-method have shown that integration of these traditions within the same study can be seen as complementary to each other[1].
In this paper, progressively, will be examined both the study and the choices of the Permit Project research methodology positioned within a mixed-method approach.

La definizione di cosa può considerarsi come una buona metodologia di ricerca varia secondo le iniziali assunzioni, le teorie e gli approcci filosofici condivisi dai ricercatori e basati sulle intezioni circa l'uso dei risultati di una ricerca. Nel progetto Permit l'approccio metodologico assunto dal gruppo di ricerca italiano ha riguardato gli aspetti metodologici sia qualitativi sia quantitativi . In particolare è stata assunta come riferimento la metodologia mista che complementa e integra i metodi dei due diversi approcci. In questo articolo, progressivamente, si esamina la metodologia scelta che comprende sia lo studio/survey sia le scelte di disegno della ricerca. Tali metodologia può considerarsi come esemplificazione della metodologia mista.

Key Words: Methodology, Research design, Interculture

1. Introduction

The definition of what is a good *research methodology* varies according to initial assumptions, theories, and philosophical approaches shared by the researchers and based on the intended uses of the results of a research.

One dimension that unites all researchers, however, is the particular concern regarding the *quality* of their work. In some sense, this explains why research methodology is an important topic to which Italian researchers paid so close attention and even struggled for assuring it in the PERMIT Project.

Within the so-called *quantitative* methodology *tradition*, quality standards have

1 See Greene and Caracelli, 1979; Caracelli and Greene, 1997.

been defined using the concept of *validity*[2]. This concept can be (is) considered as a cumulative process with, almost, four steps. The initial steps are (first step) to assess whether a relationship exists between two variables (*conclusion validity*) and (second step) to determine if this relationship is causal (*internal validity*). The third step examines if the theoretical model is well depicted by the means through which it was operationalized (*construct validity*). Finally, the fourth step, examines if, and to what extent, findings can be generalized to other groups, places, and times (*external validity*).

This conceptualization of validity, like quality, has been very influential even within the so-called *qualitative methodology tradition*, wherein a solid approach to assess the quality of interpretative inquiry is the *truthworthiness criteria*[3]. Besides the critiques to the classical approach of validity, these criteria include the notions of *credibility* and *transferability* comparable with the concepts of internal validity and external validity.

These initial correspondences suggest that the Italian methodological approach has involved both quantitative and qualitative methods. More than that, studies using mixed-method have shown that integration of these traditions within the same study can be seen as complementary to each other[4].

In this paper, progressively, will be examined both the study and the choices of the Permit Project research methodology positioned within a mixed-method approach.

2. The PERMIT survey

The first phase of PERMIT project was devoted to study cultural values influencing the school system. The main purpose of this activity was gaining insight on cultural identities and problems within participant schools, in order to address teachers' professional development programs and for the experimentation of intercultural education units among the several involved schools. The main focus of the above mentioned research phase, is a comparative analysis on different values, opinions, and attitudes of teachers and students, that influence teaching practices and learning outcomes. A particular attention was given to languages and dialects spoken and learned, since they were considered to play a key role within the intercultural competence. This exploration action was clearly addressed by the idea of analyzing the relevant values and elements influencing the school system in partner countries and in particular whether intercultural values are utilized and how (hypothesis research).

The assumption lying behind these ideas is that intercultural dialogue between the partners have to be achieved through a process of knowing and sharing own and others' cultural values. This statement, as easy as it is to be understood, isn't easy to realize. PERMIT project was entirely devoted to provide roots to achieve this complex aim.

2 See also Cook and Campbell, 1972)
3 See also Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Guba and Lincoln, 1989.
4 See Greene and Caracelli, 1979; Caracelli and Greene, 1997.

After the 1st Scientific Committee, an important hypothesis was considered, and explored further by the research group in its 1st meeting at Istanbul:

> *"Intercultural awareness among researchers, teachers and students involved in the project is supposed to be low. The processes of building a joint research framework, as much as innovations in teaching methodologies and materials, are expected to enhance all PERMIT participants' awareness of cultural diversity and understanding".*

Furthermore, the Scientific Committee assumed that the project's impact should be visible on the following dimensions:

- *"The new methodology and the innovative teaching materials is expected to enhance students' awareness of cultural diversity and understanding."*
- *"The projects activities and research findings contribute to build bridges among nations and minorities (in Italy, Turkey, and Slovenia) and promote awareness of the intercultural reality[5]."*

The Italian research team focused on these assumptions in order to define the specific methodology and to create the main tools utilized to explore the several realities. The aim was to achieve a comparative picture, and consequently help teachers to generate their own teaching materials, which, hopefully, should significantly concurr to change that picture in time.

> *"After piloting the innovative teaching materials the teachers can register heightened students' knowledge, understandings, cognitions; they are better informed on cultural variety, they can understand various believes and values and accept otherness, they accept differences among cultures, they can decenter, view their own attitudes towards intercultural reality."*

Moving forward, the Italian research team explored these assumptions in order to address conclusions on data gathered through the several phases of project development:

- At the First Residential Workshop (Istanbul, Turkey), was introduced a research on Autonomous/relational Self, addressing one of the main issues on cross-cultural psychology, and building on the idea that intercultural dialogue is to be achieved on the basis of similarities rather from than differences[6].
- At the Second Residential Workshop (Koper, Slovenia), a new debate on the theme of intercultural communicative competence was raised by the researchers of the Universities of Primorska, based on their research background[7].
- At the Third Residential Workshop, (Venice, Italy), the Permit model was quali-

5 Rationale: First Scientific Committee – Synthesis of the SC discussion prepared by Prof. Lucija ok, University of Primorska – 25 November 2008

6 The question posed was: How could teaching address the development of an A-R Self?

7 The main point was understanding in which extent the ongoing intercultural learning units taught by teachers' experimenters were having an impact on the generation of an intercultural competence.

fied according to the several research traditions, as presented in figure 1. The structure of the model will attempt to create common foundations of an original multicultural integrated teaching and teachers' training (see Figure 1).

The integrated model dimensions addressed, for Italian group, the whole case studies[8].

Intercultural Comunicative Competence Byram, 1997 (following Delors, 1996)	**Prof. Cok Model- (LABICUM) Primorska University**	**Venice Research Group(2nd Scientific Committee Venice)**
To Know better information on cultural variety, better information on its own culture	Discovery of Diversity and modulation of inputs- first level proposal-.	Cognition
Know to do integration of other knowledges into the use of foreign languages and intercultural interactions	Dynamic: Attitude, Disposition to cultural diversity	Emotional
Know to be understanding how an identity and a culture are socially constructed; setting aside ethnocentric attitudes and perceptions, openess and interest towards the others; intercultural mediation	Dynamic: Transfer of intercultural awareness to life.- dynamic-.	Social
Know to learn view their own attitudes towards intercultural reality understand various believes and values on the own person, accept otherness, accept differences among cultures.		Metacognition[9]

Figure 1: First conceptual model of PERMIT research

3. The PERMIT research methodology

In order to determine the research methodology for the PERMIT Project were considered two points: *main purpose and issues*; *research design*.

a) Purpose, and Issues

Essential methodological choice is the selection, made by the Italian research team, in terms of the purpose and issues to be addressed. In this particular case,

8 In term of Permit project is to say: moving from "exploratory study based on questionnaires about the several values, opinions and attitudes influencing teaching and learning" (or WP2 component), to "intercultural teachers' training" (or WP3 component) and "creation and experimentation of intercultural learning units (or WP4 component).

9 Review of the model after the Second Venice seminar (Treviso, 4-6 giugno 2009).

the main purpose of the methodology is to address the efficacy of the "Exploratory Study" in order to make decisions about its implementation.

Therefore the main issues set by the methodology are the following:

- ***Intercultural values***
  - What was/is the difference on intercultural sensitivity in each partner school before and after the project started?
  - What is the difference on cultural value changes of the teachers and students since the project started (among the partner schools)?
- ***Performance***
  - How does project teachers' performance on intercultural teaching compare at the beginning and at the conclusion of the project ?

b) Research Design

Research design refers to the strategy of integrating the different components of the research project PERMIT in a cohesive and coherent way. Rather than a "cookbook" from which you choose the best recipe, it is a means to structure a research project in order to address a defined set of questions[10]."
Permit project has been characterized by:

The Cutoff Criterion. Teachers and student were assigned to the project taking into account their scores on a defined scale (proposed by the partner researchers as element of their personal knowledge and tested research tools) , creating two distinct groups: a) teachers belonging to schools that had agreed to Permit project; b) students belonging to teacher's classes.

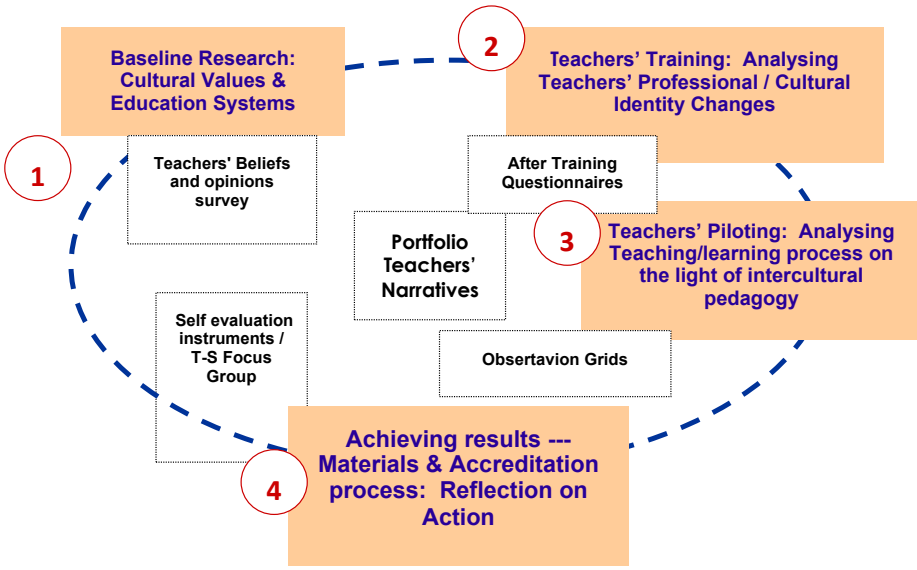
The Pre-Postprogram Measures. The major sources of information for both issues – teachers' and students' intercultural values— were level school records. Regarding these issues, two dimensions were considered before and after the project implementation, as well as during seminaries of the project.

Statistical Issues. We assumed that the requirements regarding the statistical model were fully met, including statistical power.

Program Implementation. We assumed the project was implemented according to the Project plan and there is no major delivery discrepancy.

This way, the Research Framework was composed over a number of Research Activities, Methodology, Purpose and Expected Participants, as it is illustrated in figure 2.

10 Creswell, J. (2004), Educational Research: Planning, Conducting, and Evaluating Quantitative and Qualitative Research, Prentice Hall.



4. Methodology implemented

The first operative research strategy within PERMIT project have been characterized by two main steps: the elaboration of the questionnaires[11] and the analysis of the gathering data (figure 2); the agreement among research groups of Slovenia, Italy and Turkey in order to build the several categories of data interpretation, both at First and Second Level of data analysis. The final presentation took into account the data collected among the three partner countries, allowing some confrontation of data; in any case, we cannot speak about a comparative analysis, given the small number of respondents and the partial representation of the chosen schools by comparison with regional and national realities. Therefore, PERMIT findings have to be considered an initial input to reflect on inter-culture, but in no way, a definitive picture of the inter-culture reality.

The sampling procedures (the way in which the group characteristics of participants to this research were selected) doesn't allow generalizations, but they delineate a particular and situated picture of opinions, perceptions and imaginary on intercultural dialogue among the intervening teachers and students.

The analysis of questionnaire results allow in-depth examination of ideas and theories about how intercultural dialogue is conceived and furthermore the detailed description of teaching and learning practices present in the schools participating to PERMIT experience.

11 Given the theoretical assumptions introduced in the first part of this article, the questionnaires were organized according to the following conceptual categories that were explored through the survey: **Students**: Demographic Information; Intercultural Learning; Contact with other cultures; Considerations on values, beliefs, opinions about intercultural dialogue. **Teachers:** Demographic Information; Teaching Methods; Contact with other cultures; Considerations on values, beliefs, opinions about intercultural dialogue.

Findings could address reflections about the congruence between intercultural education conceptions in the participants schools and considerations included in international literature and/or European policy documents.

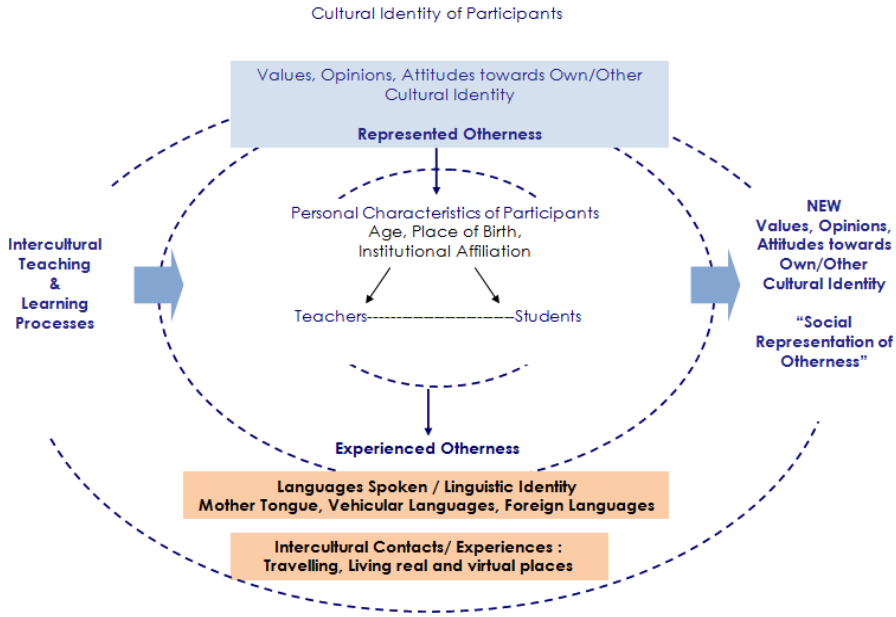


Figure 2. Structure Model of the questionnaires contents[12]

5. General methodological findings

Methodology, developed by Italian research team in the PERMIT Project, must definitely be considered positive taking into account the findings, impacts and outcomes on intercultural teaching and learning attainment. The Permit Project Program generally allowed an improvement of teacher methodologies and management strategies, that were determinant in enabling students to achieve the expected results and maximize satisfaction regardingd intercultural matter.

The results obtained through the research actions, were determinant to indentifyi the positive factors characterizing the PERMIT project and also to define the critical aspects that emerged; both these group of elements are reported below in order to provide "new blood" to future European Projects about interculture.

12 Research Report: "An exploratory Study on Cultural Values Influencing Schooling System" PERMIT Research Group. The scheme was developed by Juliana Raffaghelli and Roberto Melchiori.

Critical issues

- In PERMIT Project the information and communication procedure, carried out using technological tools, was frequent and this reduced the dissemination in particular of intermediate results.
- Relationships with the school organizations were often weak and started up only at the project-development phase. During the initiative this has meant that experiment did not always guaranteed mutual strengthening and motivational processes between teachers and their host school organizations in order to assure a positive conclusion of the experience.
- The breadth and multi-sector nature of the inter-culture projects led to difficulties in handling the agreements among the various partners and the work-group network. The promoters, sometimes, were unable to maintain solid bonds and control over other members.
- Even after the project development the practices and the products were, in some way, short-lived, and this contributed to weaken the partnership and also the actions carried out without further opportunities for valorization determined an effectiveness loss for the initiative.
- The normal concern for the obtainment of a product and/or the final elaboration of research findings often led to a lack of attention to the ongoing processes.

Positive Issues

- The cooperation between the PERMIT Partner concerning intercultural education was designed and validate by setting up the steering committee and helped to deepen the knowledge about the partner school systems;
- The networks set up and consolidated through the PERMIT Project can become the context for promoting and starting many further initiatives.
- Taking part in the LdV Program was the starting point for participating in other Inter-culture European programs.
- The PERMIT Project was considered an opportunity to improve the education and training offer of the schools and an occasion for experimenting innovative teaching methods and procedures.
- The glossary definition was an opportunity to for share a common terminology and to promote comprehension on language learning.
- The discussion and debate about European interest in intercultural matters, between partner researchers and project involved teachers, was also facilitated by the seminars organized by partners between institutions and organizations belonging to the same sector (Universities).
- A better ability in designing of teaching learning unit is the result of the activities of support and assistance, led by the partner researcher teams, in the project drafting phase as in the project development phase.

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