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# Foreign languages education in international literary festival tourism: the case of Festivaletteratura in Italy.

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## Abstract

*Festivals have always represented a good opportunity on the economic front, but most importantly they have been perfect occasions for creating settings for social, cultural and inter-linguistic interaction. Nowadays, thanks to the globalisation process, intercultural and inter-lingual communications are increasingly important in the festivals domain, especially those focused on international literary events. According to the experiential learning theory, international book festivals can be environments for learning activities, and specifically for language development. Thus, these cultural events have provoked such questions as the following: attending international literary festivals can increase participants' language learning? In what ways do international literary festival managers invest in multilingual services in order to encourage language learning? This study aims to investigate if international literary festivals can develop adult visitors' language learning, taking Festivaletteratura of Mantua (Italy) as a case study. Firstly, I shall present the importance of interlingual communication in festival tourism and the experiential learning theory. Secondly, I will explore Festivaletteratura supply analysis, considering also its international projects as potential language training tools: Scritture Giovani and Vocabolario Europeo, and Festivaletteratura's international connection with other partners: the Hay Festival and the Berlin Internationales Literaturfestival. Then, I will investigate the role of foreign languages in the demand analysis of the festival, according to the questionnaire survey among 300 adult attendees during the 2015 Festivaletteratura edition. Finally, I intend to argue that even if the festival might provide a setting for language learning with lots of international guests, due to its target, who is not familiar with foreign languages, it cannot be described as an example of language learning environment.*

**Keywords:** Language Learning, Literary Festivals, Experiential Learning

## 1 Literary Festival Tourism and Interlingual Communication

Nowadays, thanks to the globalisation process, inter-lingual communications are increasingly important in the festivals domain, especially those focused on literary events. It is also true to say that the supply of arts and cultural tourism sites, has recently increased with many new arts festivals. Nowadays, more and more holiday-makers are interested in important cultural experiences and, even though, thanks to many new arts festivals and arts events, the supply of arts and cultural tourism sites has grown recently, there are still not enough studies concerning this touristic sector. Anyhow, festivals have always been perfect occasions for expressing and sharing a sense of belonging, ideas and cultural practices, as well as creating settings for social, cultural and interlinguistic interaction (Quinn, 2009; Getz, 2008). These practices date back over centuries.

Traditionally, festivals were first religious celebrations involving ritualistic activities. For example, in Ancient Greece, festivals provided an opportunity to worship and revere deities. In

late-medieval times until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, public festivities used to have an important role across Western Europe to celebrate cultural identity. Therefore, the historical origins of these public celebrations can be traced back to the European carnival. Carnival-like events could incorporate festivals and market fairs. The term ‘*carnival*’ comes from the Latin word ‘*carnivale*’, which means ‘farewell to the flesh’ (Quinn, 2005). Arcodia and Whitford (2006) wrote that carnival essentially refers to “(...) a period of celebration of the body, of physical abandon where licentiousness, hedonism and sexual excess are expressed to music, dancing, masquerading and feasting”. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, interest in cultural development was closely linked to the growth of cities and, at the same time, to the rise of urban élites. The word ‘*festival*’ derives from the classical Latin word ‘*festum*’ meaning ‘*feast*’ (Quinn, 2005). Nevertheless, defining festivals is not easy. It was the South Australian Tourism Commission in 1997 that offered a more comprehensive definition of festival.

“Festivals are celebrations of something the local community wishes to share and which involve the public as participants in the experience. Festivals must have as a prime objective a maximum amount of people participation, which must be an experience that is different and broader than day to day living. It is not necessary to extend hands-on experience by more than one day, though it is often economically desirable.”<sup>1</sup>

By the beginning of the 1980s, festivals and urban policy had evolved radically with an increase in the consumption of mass media products in different cultural forms, as well as leisure and tourism. Nowadays, festivals are no longer isolated events, but are extremely well produced and managed by experienced, bureaucratic organizations whose aim is to revitalize tourism and make profits.

## 2 Learning Through Festivals

According to Honey and Mumford (1992), people learn in two ways. The first is through teaching, and the second is through experience. The process of learning through festivals can be described analyzing the concept of experiential learning, which is “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience” (Kolb, 1984). Thus, learning is most effective when it is based on experience and when there is an “active engagement between the inner world of the person and the outer world of the environment” (Beard and Wilson, 2010). Experience and learning are closely intertwined and almost inseparable. Since experience is a stimulus for learning, festivals are possible scenarios for knowledge acquisition (Kolb, 1984; Lamb, 2015; Beard and Wilson, 2010). David Kolb was the first to introduce an experiential learning theory and to provide a model for its application in schools and organizations. Nevertheless, he did not take into account festivals as experiential learning environments. Many studies focused on experiential learning in the work or school field, while, on the other hand, to date no research explored experiential learning at festivals. It is, therefore, necessary to broaden the research by including festivals as settings for experiential learning activities. In other words, there is a need to develop a clear and appropriate approach towards experiential learning in festivals. This exploratory study, which seeks to bring significant contribution to knowledge and academic literature, understands if international literary festival attendees develop their language knowledge and skills attending the event.

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<sup>1</sup>Arcodia, C. and Whitford, M. (2006) ‘Festival Attendance and the Development of Social Capital’, *Journals of Convention & Event Tourism*, 8 (2): 1-18, p. 3.

Since international literary festivals bring together different cultures and different languages, they prompt such questions as the following: *Attending international literary festivals can increase participants' language learning? In what ways do international literary festival managers invest in multilingual services in order to encourage language learning?* In order to answer these questions, I will focus on one of the most important Italian international book festival: Festivaletteratura.

### **3 Mantua Festivaletteratura (Italy)**

The birth of the Italian festival, with its first edition in 1997, was only possible thanks to international relations and inter-cultural communications between Mantua and Hay-on-Wye. Mantua, a town of about 50,000 people living in a territory, covering 63.97 square kilometres, has a great historical and artistic heritage which makes it a tourist destination of absolute charm. While, Hay-on-Wye is a small Welsh town of 1,500 inhabitants on the border with England.

The idea of Festivaletteratura grew from a survey conducted in 1995 by the English consulting firm, COMEDIA, on behalf of the Lombardy Region to verify the potential revival of tourism and cultural cities in Lombardy. The conclusions of the research offered to Mantua the possibility of becoming a city of books and reading, based on the established model of other European countries, particularly in the Anglo-Saxon region.<sup>2</sup> In 1994, after a detailed study of the cultural resources in Mantua, COMEDIA, in its final version highlighted several weak and strong points, according to a SWOT<sup>3</sup> analysis. Following that, some of the people involved in the research decided to try to expand on the idea of creating a literary festival, taking as examples the initial festival in Hay-on-Wye in Wales, one of the greatest international literary festivals, which today has branch offices from Beirut to the Maldives. The Mantua working group, which is now the Organizing Committee, has managed to develop a festival model adapted to the urban and historical reality of Mantua. Paolo Poletini, the main organizer, met Peter Florence, director of the Hay Festival, in Hay-on-Wye to get advice about setting up a literary festival in Mantua. Mr. Florence recommended to Festivaletteratura the author who would launch the first edition: Salman Rushdie. Note that Rushdie has been living under police protection since 1989 because of a death sentence (*fatwa*) issued by Ayatollah Khomeini, so that airlines refused to take him to Italy. However, he made it to Mantua in 1997 eventually, and even managed to elude his escort to go to *Cortile della Cavallerizza* in *Palazzo Ducale* to listen to his friend Ian McEwan. This anecdote is indicative of the spirit with which the festival started.

### **4 International Literary Festivals as Experiential Language Learning Environments**

It is important to point out that Festivaletteratura is not a language festival, such as *Encuentro* or the *Festival de la Fiction Française*. *Encuentro* is a festival of literature in Spanish that had its second edition in 2015. The event is sponsored by the City of Perugia in collaboration with the Region and with the support of the University for Foreigners. It is “a celebration of literature in

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<sup>2</sup>Ravelli, M. (2011) Thesis *Non solo libri. L'impatto dell'evento Festivaletteratura sul territorio mantovano*. Bologna, Università di Bologna Press.

<sup>3</sup> “SWOT stands for strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. Completing a SWOT analysis helps you identify ways to minimize the affect of weaknesses in your business while maximizing your strengths. Ideally, you will match your strengths against market opportunities that result from voids in your competitors' products and/or services”. Kyle, B. *SWOT Analysis – Beyond the text book*, [www.websitemarketingplan.com](http://www.websitemarketingplan.com) (accessed 02 September 2012).

Spanish that aims to strengthen the friendship and culture of Italian readers with the great Spanish-American literature.”<sup>4</sup> Likewise, *Festival de la Fiction Française* (Festival of French fiction) is organized by the French Embassy and the Institut Français, in Italy. This is an itinerant event which moves from place to place, from the north to the south of the peninsula, touching on cities such as Bari, Bergamo, Bologna, Florence, Genoa, Mantua, Milan, Naples, Padua, Palermo, Pisa, Rome, Turin and Venice. The goal of this festival is the promotion of French literature in Italy<sup>5</sup>. On the contrary, Festivaletteratura is an international book festival with almost half of foreign authors in each edition. The festival was selected because, even if language learning is not the main focus of the event -as it could be for language festivals-, it provides a selection of several foreign guests, and the target involved is mostly well-educated and in search for cultural experience, not just taking part incidentally (Smith, 2009). Thus, this study aims to investigate if even international literary festivals, which are not specific language events, can develop visitors’ language learning.

## **5 The Role of Foreign Languages in Festivaletteratura**

In order to give an appropriate response to the research questions about the role of multilingual services and the role of international literary festival attendance in language acquisition, firstly, I have analysed the supply, then, I have examined the demand. Briefly, I explored how little Festivaletteratura has invested, and still continues to invest, in multilingual services and international projects because of its main target. I have to say that this kind of research has never been done before, it is, in this sense, innovative, since there were no data. Indeed there is both a lack of theory and a scarcity of research conducted in this field.

## **6 Methods**

This paper is based on my masters thesis, which I developed through a study on Festival Tourism. My thesis focused on two international literary festivals: Festivaletteratura in Mantua and the Hay Festival of Literature and the Arts in Wales, analyzed and compared in order to investigate the weaknesses of the Italian festival and how to strive to improve on them. Through SWOT analysis, face-to-face interviews conducted with the main organizers, and questionnaire surveys during the Italian festival, I evaluated and compared the two events. The relevant findings were grouped under five headings, taken from the so-called 7Ps, which are the marketing mix factors applied to the tourism industry. This study involves a desk research for the supply analysis and two data set for the demand analysis: (1) the onsite questionnaire survey conducted in 2012 for my masters thesis; (2) the onsite questionnaire survey I conducted among 300 adult visitors, during the 2015 Festivaletteratura edition (9-13<sup>th</sup> September 2015).

## **7 Festivaletteratura’s Foreign Languages Education and Services - Supply Analysis**

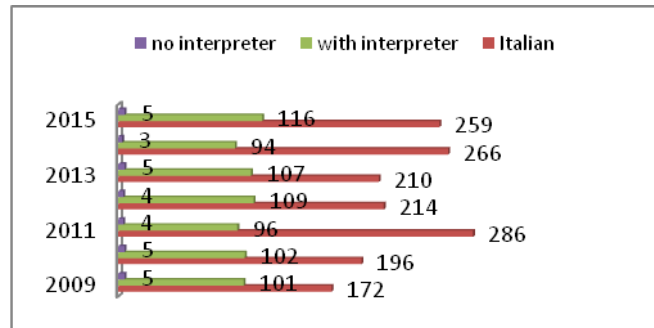
To analyse the supply of Festivaletteratura, I will focus on the foreign authors and the interpreters. The data were collected in the online and off line archive of Festivaletteratura. As the graph below shows, the majority of authors is of Italian origin, even if nearly half of them are foreigners: 96/224 in 2014, 115/185 in 2013, 87/207 in 2012, 80/230 in 2011, and 74/204 in 2010. As regards the interpreters, they are very few in every edition (e.g. 16 in 2014, 19 in 2013

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<sup>4</sup> [www.encuentroperugia.it](http://www.encuentroperugia.it)

<sup>5</sup> [institutfrancais-italia.com](http://institutfrancais-italia.com)

and in 2012, 15 in 2011, and 12 in 2010) but every single interpreter can speak more than one foreign language. They are all paid by Festivaletteratura according to their personal rates. The table shows that the majority of the talk events has always been in Italian (from the first edition up to the latest), and featured an Italian author, while the other half is in Italian, with a foreign author and an interpreter. By contrast, the talk events, held in a foreign language without an interpreter, have always been no more than 5 in each edition. Therefore, we can conclude that their presence has been quite flimsy. These data reflect the ISTAT (the Italian Institute for Statistic) trend: Italians are not ready to attend events in a foreign language without any translation.



Graph 1: The Supply: Book Presentations

According to my 2015 questionnaire analysis, the majority of the respondents are not willing to pay extra money for the use of headphones to listen to an interpreter offering a simultaneous translation. Moreover, it would be too expensive for the festival. 66% of the interviewees said that they would like to have all the events presented by an interpreter, since the interpreter is not a mere translation, but is part of the book presentation and helps to involve the audience. Somebody suggested that subtitles could be used. Probably they were referring to ‘Palentype’, which basically is an immediate transcription projected on the stage. Unfortunately, it is extremely expensive since that requires specially trained experts.

## 8 Festivaletteratura’s International Projects and Partnerships

Festivaletteratura takes part in two international projects: *Scritture Giovani* (“Young Writings”) and *Vocabolario Europeo* (“European Vocabulary”); and it has two main international partners: the Hay Festival of Literature and the Arts of Hay-on-Way (Wales) and the Berlin Internationales Literaturfestival (Germany).

### 8.1. Scritture Giovani

Through *Scritture Giovani*, Festivaletteratura, the Hay Festival and the Berlin International Literaturfestivals try to find new young talents in European literature. Since 2002 *Scritture Giovani* has been an exceptional showcase through which many young writers from various countries have had the opportunity to make themselves known outside their own country and meet an international audience. The project includes the selection of four young and well-known authors from three countries: Italy, Germany and England. They must write a story in their own language, and the winner is presented with an award at the festival. The stories of all four writers are included in an anthology.

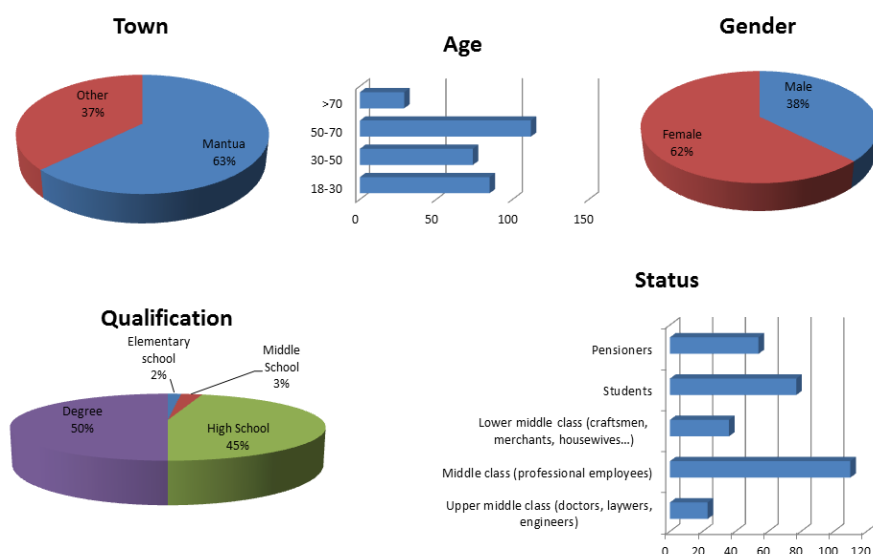
## 8.2. Vocabolario Europeo

"*The European lives in multilingualism*,<sup>6</sup>" the linguist Claude Hagège wrote, and Festivaletteratura wants to prove it. Since 2008, Festivaletteratura has asked some of its guests to indicate a particularly significant word in their languages to be included in a shared online vocabulary. The result is a unique, one-of-a-kind collection, which continues to be enriched in each edition. Nevertheless, during my questionnaire analysis I found that almost no visitor knows the online vocabulary, which could potentially be a language training tool.

## 9 Festivaletteratura's Foreign Languages Education and Services - Demand Analysis

As anticipated, the resulting data have been analysed according to the questionnaire survey I conducted among 300 adult visitors, during the 2015 Festivaletteratura edition (9-13<sup>th</sup> September 2015).

The majority of the respondents came from the province of Mantua. Taking into account my masters thesis questionnaire analysis (2012), we can affirm that most participants in the festival have always been mainly Italians. Concerning the age of the people who filled out the questionnaire the majority were adults aged between 50 and 70. Furthermore, most of those who compiled the questionnaire were women (62%). As for the qualifications of the respondents, exactly half of them had a university degree (50%). Out of the overall number of the respondents, 36% belonged to the middle class, 26% were students. Thus, the festival's target visitor is an Italian elite with a medium-high level of education.



Graph 2: The Respondents

The table below shows that the vast majority could not speak either Spanish or German, but a few were able to speak French and a little English. This reflects the ISTAT (the Italian Statistical Institute) data: in Italy the knowledge of foreign languages is quite elementary. As a matter of fact, according to 2014 ISTAT report, the knowledge of a second language is most prevalent among 18-24 year olds (85%), and decreases as the age increases, so that the proportion of those

<sup>6</sup> [www.festivaletteratura.it](http://www.festivaletteratura.it)

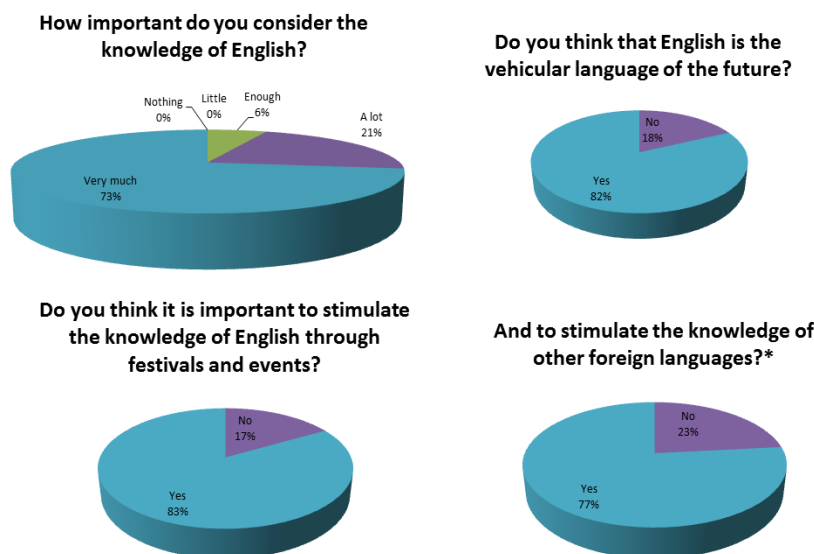
who know another language between 64-75 is only 28 %. In 2013/2014, 43.7% of the population (aged 18-74 years) spoke English, while another share of people spoke French (21.7%), German (4.8%), Spanish (4.5 %) or other languages (2.1%). So, the knowledge of English is mainly widespread among the younger generation.

	Do you speak English?	Do you speak French?	Do you speak Spanish?	Do you speak German?
Very good	11	7	2	0
Good	61	20	3	6
Enough	93	77	20	14
Few	73	107	29	32
No	62	89	246	248

Graph 3: Respondents' Knowledge of Foreign Languages

In reply to the survey question: “How important do you consider the knowledge of English?” 73% answered “Very”. This means that almost everyone thinks the knowledge of English is very important nowadays and that it is also the vehicular language of the future generation (82%), as shown in the graph below. In fact, according to the 2014 ISTAT report, important differences are found considering the employment and professional status. Almost all of the students (96.7%) say they know one or more languages. While, 67.6% of the employed know another language, only 64.4% of the unemployed say that they do. In addition, qualification has a fundamental influence in the knowledge of foreign languages. 95.3% of the people aged 25-44 years, holding a university degree, say they know at least a second language; and 89% of university graduates aged 65 and over know at least one foreign language.

Nevertheless, 82% of the respondents said it was important to stimulate the knowledge of English through festivals and events. The question: “And to stimulate the knowledge of other foreign languages?” got a 77% “Yes”. This means that the vast majority of Italians think it is important to promote the learning of foreign languages<sup>7</sup>.



Graph 4: the Knowledge of English and Other Foreign Languages

<sup>7</sup> Ceramella, N. (2012) ‘Is English a Killer Language or an International Auxiliary? Its Use and Function in a Globalised World’, *International Journal of Language, Translation and International Communication*, Epirus Institute of Technology, Special Issue n. 1, 8-23.



To sum up, the typical visitor of the festival is an Italian graduate, from 40 to 60 years of age with a great passion for Italian and international literatures. This profile identifies a very specific niche that claims not to be very familiar with foreign languages. Even if the best known is English, the majority of the respondents admitted to understand it only “Enough”. So, on the one hand, visitors are not willing to attend talk events in a foreign language without interpreters. On the other hand, they think that English will be the vehicular language of the future generations and, for this reason, it is important to stimulate and promote it and along with other foreign languages considering the possible participation in festivals and events. It follows that visitors do admit to consider language learning very important, especially the knowledge of English, but unfortunately, the main target (40-60 years-old) are not interested and the level of language knowledge remains elementary.

## Conclusions

According to the experiential learning theory of Kolb (1984), a learner can develop his/her knowledge attending and reflecting on an experience. Thus, international literary festivals could be experiential learning environments for attendees. Nevertheless, the review of literature indicates that there has been limited investigation into adult experiential learning during festivals and book events. This study is an exploratory investigation into language learning of international literary festival adult visitors. International literary festivals can be perfect case studies since they provide the participation of several foreign guests and well-educated attendees willing to learn.

In order to answer to the two research questions (*Attending international literary festivals can increase participants' language learning? In what ways do international literary festival managers invest in multilingual services in order to encourage language learning?*) this study explored Festivaletteratura foreign language supply and demand. Results showed that the festival is very international, with about half of the authors being foreigners in each edition, but there has always been a demand for Italian. Thus, the talk events held in a foreign language without an interpreter have always been no more than 5 in each edition. This reveals that adult attendees are not ready to attend events in a foreign language without any translation, and the knowledge of foreign language remains elementary among adult visitors. Indeed, Festivaletteratura has already started to create a network with other international literary festivals, such as the Hay Festival and the Berlin Internationales Literaturfestival, creating occasions for language learning, such as the *Vocabolario Europeo*. Unfortunately, Festivaletteratura has not made the most of its chance to create an effective language learning environment, probably because of its main target (Italian 40-60 years-old attendees). In fact, even if the main target recognises the importance of promoting foreign languages through events, it is not interested in developing it. This research is, therefore, intended to argue that even if the festival might provide a setting for language learning with lots of international guests, due to its target, who is not familiar with foreign languages, it is not investing efficiently in multilingual services. Thus, it cannot be described as an example of language learning environment.

Although this research provides valuable findings for the role of inter-lingual communication in festival tourism and how stakeholders invest in multilingual services for encouraging language learning, it has some limitations. The sample may not be representative of the whole festival target and it is only a preliminary investigation, thus the result of the study may not be applied to all international literary festivals. However, it may reflect a reasonably range of

attendees (also according to the 2012 Festivaletteratura analysis). It is further recommended that this type of research be done on other festivals in order to compare the results.

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## About the Author

**Giulia ROSSETTI** holds a First Class Honours MA in Science in Planning and Management of Tourism Systems (University of Trento) -Master Thesis: *Festival tourism: a comparative analysis between Festivaletteratura in Mantua and the Hay festival of literature and the arts in Hay-on-Wye, Wales-*; a MA in Non-Conventional Marketing and Social-media Marketing (Europe CUBE, Innovation Business School, Bologna); and a BA in European Languages and Cultures (University of Modena and Reggio Emilia) -Thesis in Applied Linguistics: *Code-switching: analysis of multi-lingual conversations among Erasmus students in Finland-*. Her research interests include literary festivals, cultural and social capital, situated learning, and learning in festivals.