

A number of recent studies have shown that social contacts (friends, family, etc.) determine our behaviours more than previously thought. Studies have shown that the network of contacts has more impact on whether an individual is going to smoke, be overweight, or get in conflict with the law than individual variables such as e.g. mother's education. Going back in history, it was thanks to the skilful use of contacts that the influence of the Florentine Medici family spanned over half of Europe.

The role of social networks has also been proven in linguistics. William Labov showed that the language of the members of a Harlem street gang had more in common with the slang of a competing gang from another district, than with the language of neighbours from the same block. Labov ascribed this to shared systems of values and norms of behaviour between the two mobs.

However, until now there has been no research that would rigorously analyse students' interactions among one another and with others, and the influence of this communication on progress in second/foreign language acquisition. This is the aim we are going to realise in our project.

Our analyses will employ the innovative methodology of social network analysis, borrowed from the interdisciplinary battery of tools used in complexity science. Thanks to this we will be able to investigate the impact of peer interactions on language acquisition and academic success. Community detection algorithms will in turn allow us to monitor the formation of subgroups among students and how this influences study results (e.g., whether one can observe the formation of elitist 'clubs of knowledge'). The project will be carried out in universities across different continents in order to additionally compare the influence of cultural differences such as openness, egalitarianism, divergent academic traditions and class sizes on mutual communication among the students and with 'outsiders'. We will also answer questions such as:

- does position in the social network influence foreign language proficiency?
- does the role of interaction networks change along with progress?
- do the best-motivated students engage in denser contact networks?
- does the interaction network allow predicting which students are going to have problems?

Our project will fill the key gap in second/foreign language acquisition research and will lead to a better understanding of the mechanisms and role of social contacts in the learning process, particularly in the Study Abroad context. The results will have practical import for education, allowing reducing the rate of college drop-outs (up to 48% depending on the major; according to latest research a college dropout gets into trouble with the law and lands in prison 20 times more often than a graduate) and fostering the learning process across the board.