FOSTERING MULTILINGUAL COMPETENCE IN A MONTESSORI ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CONTEXT

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INTRODUCTION

The study investigates the second language learning and teaching practices in some European Montessori elementary schools located in Italy and Austria. This ongoing research project aims to create a theoretical and practical model, one which integrates the Montessorian language program with a specific proposal for the acquisition of non-native tongues, in children in the Second Plane of Development.

METHOD

Design: Grounded Theory qualitative research

Participants: Theoretical Sample (Glaser & Strauss, 1967): second-language teachers from 7 elementary Montessori European schools (2 in Austria and 5 in Italy). Both private and public schools, 2 bilingual schools, one a trilingual school, 4 schools with disciplinary teaching of second language (second language as a separate subject).

Instruments and data collection procedures: focus group, questionnaires, ethnographic observations, semi-structured interviews, documents and textual analysis.

Data analysis methods:
- Grounded Theory: analysis of data according to levels of increasing theoretical abstraction (open, focused and theoretical coding)
- Focus groups and questionnaires as preliminary investigation
- Transcription of interviews and analysis of observation protocols and documents
- Labelling phenomena (Strauss & Corbin, 1998)
- Axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998): creating categories and relating them
- Identification of the "Core category"
- Integration and limitation of the theory

Validity issues and limitations:
- Initial analysis
- Small sample
- Lack of literature
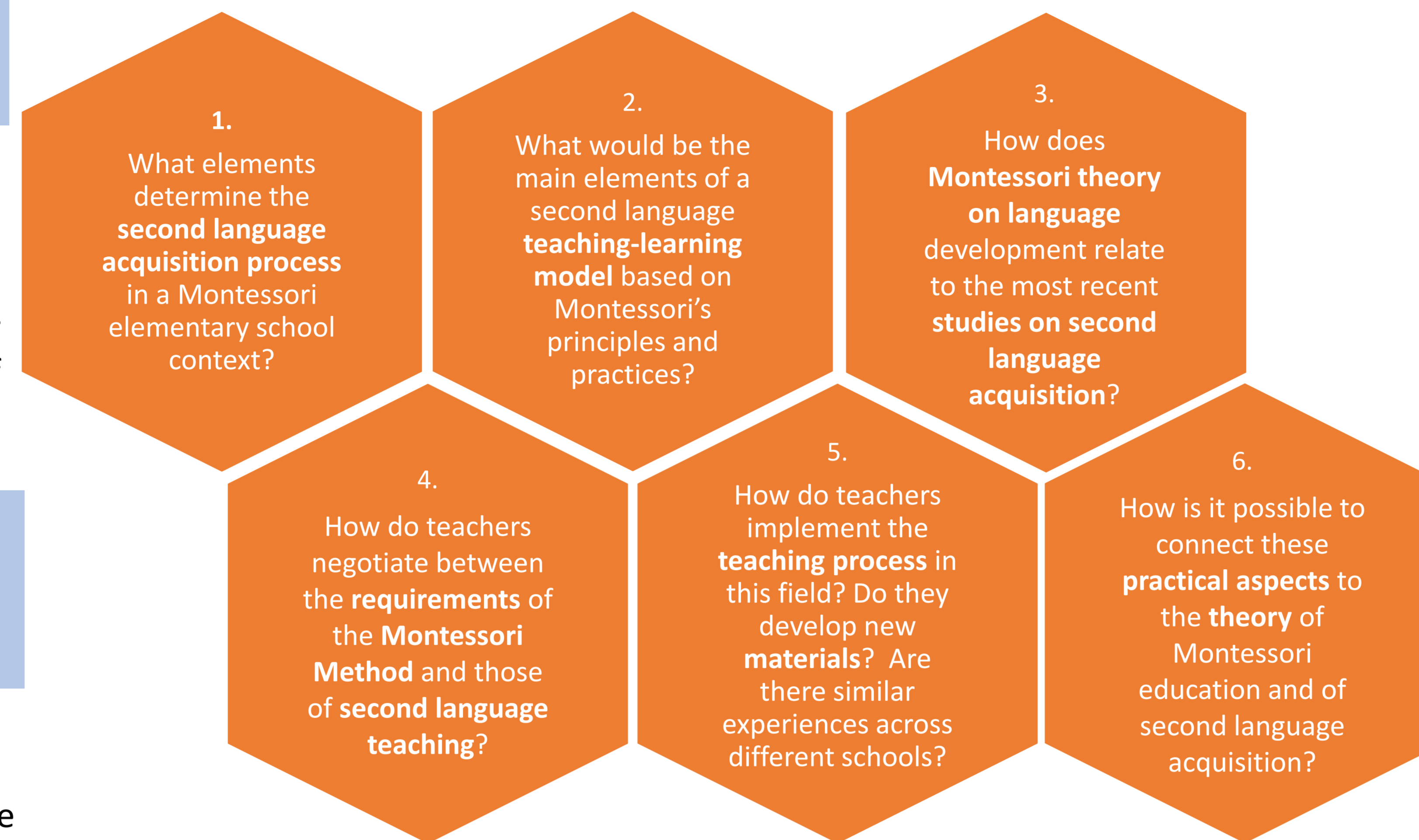- Scarce resources (no funding, only one researcher)
- Different language models

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RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What elements determine the **second language acquisition process** in a Montessori elementary school context?

2. What would be the main elements of a second language **teaching-learning model** based on Montessori's principles and practices?

3. How does **Montessori theory on language** development relate to the most recent **studies on second language acquisition**?

4. How do teachers negotiate between the **requirements** of the **Montessori Method** and those of **second language teaching**?

5. How do teachers implement the **teaching process** in this field? Do they develop new **materials**? Are there similar experiences across different schools?

6. How is it possible to connect these **practical aspects** to the **theory** of Montessori education and of second language acquisition?

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

- A substantial difference emerges between the "Bilingual Montessori Model" (which prevails in private schools) and that of a "Disciplinary Language Teaching" (mostly used in public schools).
- All respondents state that it is fundamental that a second language is taught consistently with the method. However, they declare that in their schools this doesn't happen consistently.
- They also show a general dissatisfaction with the quality of the Montessori training on this topic and declare that they need more specific training.
- Although there is no official and shared curriculum for the second language in Montessori schools, common features and practices emerge from observations in the different contexts.
- Differences emerge in the preparation of the Montessori environment for SL (bilingual classroom, specific classroom for SL, language area in the main classroom).
- The Montessori context shows some limits in relation to second language teaching and learning, but there are also numerous strengths such as: the ability to manage complexity (i.e. age, linguistic background, etc.), more spoken interaction (informal situations), every child has his time (for the language "intake"), the school environment does not have pre-defined cultural traits (Pesci, 2007), Cosmic Education for Second Plane of Development (second language as part of the whole).
- SL Montessori teachers declare that they have to prepare *ad hoc* materials for their teaching area. The criteria they use are: similar characteristics to Montessori traditional material (self-correction, isolation of difficulty, free choice, etc.); balancing of the 4 language skills (listening, reading, writing and speaking); attention to phonological, lexical and morphosyntactic development; consistency with the traditional Montessori curriculum.
- The way the SL materials are presented changes in comparison to traditional Montessori indications (more Teacher Talk Time, special attention to linguistic input that should not only be rich and comprehensible, but also "individualized").

BACKGROUND

- Montessori emphasized the natural human condition to be multilingual and multicultural (Rosanova, 1998). Language was for her a fundamental element of human and social development and she studied it, for a long time, from a scientific point of view. However, her thought and practices never referred to a multilingual learning perspective. She never proposed a method for non-native learners, and although much time has since passed, this is still a quasi experimental field in Montessori schools.

- There are Montessori schools all over the world, both public and private, in which children with very different backgrounds are enrolled, yet everyone has the same need: to learn to communicate in one or more languages different than their mother tongue. The curricula of these schools take into consideration the teaching of foreign or second languages, but how do they implement the teaching process in Montessori context? How do children learn languages? How do teachers negotiate between requirements of the Montessori Method and those of practical language teaching?

- There are many Montessori elementary schools in which second language teachers seek to promote a second language acquisition, consistent with the Montessori Method. However, these are mostly unsystematic *ad hoc* cases with undocumented practices.

- Literature about this topic is scarce and mainly concerns of specific and circumscribed didactic experiences, especially at the elementary school level (Second Plane of Development).

DISCUSSION

This study addresses the pedagogical and didactic field of linguistic practices and aims to create a **theoretical and practical model** in order to understand if and how the Montessori method and second language teaching methods are connected. The overall results highlight the importance of studying the particular context of the **elementary school**, as a formal policy for second language teaching is apparent only from this level. In addition, a child in the Second Plane of Development needs a specific educational pathway since he is at the end of the **Sensitive Period for Language** acquisition, is entering the **Period of Culture** (language not only as mechanism for communication but also a tool for exploration) and is beginning to explore the moral world and to associate with others. In the final stages of the study, in addition considering the extent of language acquisition in the research contexts, it would be useful to deepen the ethical and social implications of the Montessori educational project for **citizenship education**. Is it possible to develop citizens of the world ("*Language teaching as a political project*", Balboni, 2011) by analyzing the Montessorian concept of **cosmic education** and the role of language teaching within it?

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