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**What Multiple Intelligences theory has to offer language teachers**

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**Abstract**

This paper will open with a summary of the theory of multiple intelligences as expounded by Howard Gardner. The middle section of the paper will deal with the challenge this kind of thinking offers us language teachers. The final section of the paper will look at a sample of practical exercises which language teachers need to implement Gardner's ideas.

**1. A summary of MI theory**

There are many different views of intelligence and each view feels itself to be unquestioned and unquestionable. In UK popular TV culture "intelligence" is equated with wide acquaintance with disparate facts from across a great many domains and an ability to get them to leap out one's memory store in double quick time. This is the type of intelligence required to win a competition like Brain of Britain, 2007.

If you talk to ministry of education officials from across the globe they will agree with Jean Piaget and focus exclusively on logical-mathematical and linguistic ways of thinking. A student wishing to get into a US university has to take an Academic Aptitude Test that deals with the logical-mathematical, the linguistic and, in a minor way, the spatial intelligences.

In the politically conservative areas of UK where there is academic selection at the age of 11+, the children are faced with a test that follows the same lines as the US Academic Aptitude Test but at an appropriately lower level.

When Howard Gardner presents us with 8 main intelligences he is breaking with a fiercely held orthodoxy espoused by educational systems around the globe. He is challenging ideas that are deeply entrenched in the political and linguistic thinking of most nations.

Let me take you through the 8 intelligences proposed by Gardner in Frames of Mind:

*The Intra-personal intelligence*

If you take yourself for a solitary walk in the woods and if you give yourself a good time you are enjoying your intra-personal intelligence. Your meta-cognitive awareness ( cogito ergo sum) and your inner monologue and dialogue are part of this intelligence.

When a person afflicted with positive schizophrenia experiences auditory or visual hallucinations these are scary malfunctions of their Intra-personal intelligence.

*The inter-personal intelligence*

Empathy with others, the ability to use phrases like "if I were in your shoes" are central to the inter-personal intelligence. Maybe we see this intelligence in its highest form in the brilliance of some mothering and in the work of deeply intuitive therapists. Autism seems to be a situation in which this intelligences in lacking.

*The spatial intelligence*

Gardner chooses Picasso, who could not stop drawing, sculpting and painting, as a major thinker in this area. My feeling is that the spatial way of thinking is central to many of our mental activities. When I read a novel I begin to "spatialise" it right from page one.....Why is it that so many people are disappointed by the film of the book? My guess is that they found their own inner film so much more satisfying. In most daily conversation we spatialise as we listen to our interlocutor.

*The musical intelligence*

Isn't it amazing that Binet, the inventor of the "intelligence test", never thought he might need to measure Mozartian talent? Stand up anybody in Europe who does not find high sophistication in the work of master musicians! Yet show me the education ministries that include music in the core curriculum for 16 year olds. One notable exception to the exclusion of music from the core curriculum is to be found in the Steiner or Waldorf movement which gives both music and movement a central place in the learning day.

*The kinaesthetic intelligence*

A ballerina, a judo master, an Olympic horse rider all show this intelligence developed to a high level. A colleague told me " It was brilliant

the way the surgeon manoeuvred the stent into position in my artery" and here he was commenting on the doctor's kinaesthetic vision and actuation.

### The naturalistic intelligence

On a sunny day a fisherman looks at the sky and at the colour of the water and knows that a storm will be brewing in a couple of hours time. This intelligence is, in a way, like the inter-personal intelligence; it is a question of empathy, but here not with another person but with nature. The expert gardener is using this intelligence as he plans his next actions in among the flowers and vegetables.

### The linguistic intelligence

This is maybe the most formal of the intelligences as it focuses on the symbolic codes called language. The linguistic intelligence is maybe best observed in the work of literary translators or of magpie poets like T S Eliot (Gardner chooses Eliot is a genius thinker in this intelligence mode). It delights in puns, in ambiguity and appreciation of shades of meaning...things that may leave your structural engineer cold.

### The logical-mathematical intelligence

This is the major intelligence that underpins Western natural science thinking. It concerns itself with sequencing, with typologies, with pattern abstraction and clarity of proof.

This is the intelligence that dominates some cultures in very overt ways....so you hear French people talking of the "Cartesian spirit". But how woefully inadequate it is without the other seven types of intelligence outlined above.

Gardner is not content to posit the existence of eight intelligences- he maintains that if these intelligences do not conform to what we know about the neurology of the brain then his hypothesis must be withdrawn.

Gardner suggests that the incidence of strokes that rob us of the working of one intelligence, while leaving others intact, justifies us in thinking of "an intelligence" as a neurological reality. I remember a case like this reported to me by a colleague in Denmark. Following a stroke, her uncle lost the ability to understand, speak, read or write Danish, English and German, his three languages. The rest of his mental faculties were left intact. Amazingly, he could sing Christmas carols in Danish and German and yet language in a normal sense was gone from his head and gone for ever.

A further neurological proof of the MI hypothesis is the existence of "idiots savants" or people with one outstanding area of ability surrounded by a sea of inability. There are cases of such people who are spatially brilliant, who draw and paint wonderfully and yet who are sub-normal in all other mental areas. The existence of cases like these justifies the picking out of an intelligence as a separate entity despite the obvious areas of overlap between the intelligences.

## 2. The challenge to us language teachers

Gardner's basic message to any subject teacher is this:

"Why confine yourself to working in the intelligence that is most obvious for your subject? Only a small proportion of your students will be naturally strong in this intelligence. Try and reach your students' minds using paths governed by as many other intelligences as possible."

Mark Wahl, in his book Math for humans, tells the story of girl of 6 who had a brilliant spatial intelligence but who simply did not understand arithmetical equations:

"I asked her to make a picture incorporating  $8+7=15$  and to do this on a large index card. I asked her to paint four more cards with other math facts on them. When she came back each card was a painting in which could be discerned the symbols of a math equation creating the outline of trees, person, beach towels etc. I looked at her first card and asked her:

"How much is  $8+7$ ?"

Silence.

Then I said: "it's the beach scene" and she immediately said; "15".

Wahl reports that after about three months of this picture work the girl began to be able to resolve arithmetical equations without resort to painting. He had been successful in helping her to move from her strong intelligence into the logical mathematical way of thinking, though he admits that he cannot work out how the miracle happened.

So Gardner's question to us is: "Why restrict yourself to teaching the L2 in purely linguistic ways?"

The question is pedagogically highly relevant because in any given class of 30 students not more than half a dozen will be linguistically talented and there will be another half dozen who think that everything to do with language is a bore.

The problem, then, is to find a variety of techniques that lead students towards linguistic goals but along paths that derive from other intelligences.

### 3. Practical exercises inspired by MI thinking

#### To invite students into their musical intelligences

Ask the group to stand up and use all the space in the classroom, if possible making sure each student has plenty space around them. Each student is to shut their eyes and imagine they are the lead performer in a piece of music, either a lead singer, the conductor, the first instrument etc.... They are to perform, silently, using their bodies, for three minutes. When the three performance minutes are up, ask the students to group in fours or fives and explain the experience they have had.

#### To invite students into their kinaesthetic intelligence

If you are teaching the present perfect have a pattern sentence ready. Designate students as a word or word ending. Ask those so designated to "become the sentence" by lining up in the right order, and then saying the sentence out loud to the class. The "becoming a word" exercise is a powerful way of reaching your more kinaesthetically intelligent students, the ones who often cause discipline problems.

#### To invite students into their intra-personal intelligence

Tell the students to take pen and a sheet of paper. They write "Dear" and their own name at the top and write a letter to themselves which they will receive in three weeks time. Specify that the letter needs to be one page long. Tell them the content is entirely up to them but that it should be interesting when they read it three weeks on. Tell them that there will be no correction of the letter and no one else will read it. Give each student an envelope. You collect in the sealed envelopes and give them back to the class three weeks later. Some students are amazed and delighted by what they wrote to themselves. (It is not by chance that half the female population in any European country kept some sort of spontaneous diary during teen-age)

In our book **Multiple Intelligences in EFL**, Herbert Puchta and I offer you 70 such exercises to set you on your way to devising many more multi-intelligent paths of your own into your students' minds. Have MI fun!

### References

- Howard Gardner. 1983. *Frames of Mind*. Basic Books. New York  
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Tarptautinė konferencija

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