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WORKPLACE LEARNING: HOW IT IS EXPERIENCED BY INTERNATIONAL EMPLOYEES IN A SWEDISH CONTEXT

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Abstract

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- Aim:** The purpose of this study is to explore the workplace learning that international employees experienced in Sweden (Gothenburg). The personal narratives of international employees aim to first understand what the role of international identity in workplace learning is. Second to identify which were the meaningful strategies or factors that empowered the international employees and support the workplace learning process.
- Theory:** The theoretical frameworks that are used in this study are learning from a socio-cultural perspective, the holistic model for learning in working life from Illeris (2004) as an approach that relates to socio-cultural theory and Dewey's theory of experience.
- Method:** A narrative study is conducted to collect the empirical data, based on semi-structured interviews with international employees who live and work in Gothenburg.
- Results:** In this research, it was found that international identity had a key role in the process of workplace learning. There were cases where international identity created some obstacles in the engagement to the workplace but on the other hand, it contributed to the bidirectional relationship that was established between the presence of international employees and the Swedish workplace culture. Secondly, it is indicated that the learning process in the working environment, was mostly informal, authentic and was occurred through participation in work practices. The meaningful strategies or factors for workplace learning were mentoring, asking questions, testing different ideas and the significance of a supportive working environment. The third emerged category of findings showed that young international employees value workplace learning as one of the important reasons that keep them in the same job and prevent them withdraw and search for a new job option.

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Introduction

Even though, the use of the learning concept traditionally is linked to formal education (schools and universities), since the beginning of the 1990s learning as a concept has expanded in the context of work. Nowadays workplace learning has gain popularity and it is a field that has drawn attention to wide-ranged and interdisciplinary research (Tynjälä, 2008).

The reasons behind the growing interest in workplace learning, are the rapid changes that have taken place to society and working life due to globalization, the development of information and communications technology and the increased production of knowledge in the economy. In another words, as Lam (2006, p.214) argued ‘Globalization has become an umbrella term for what is taken place around the world in association with global integration of economies, rapid media, and information flow facilitated by new communication technologies, international migration of labor, the rise of transnational and pan-regional organizations, and resultant cultural transformations challenging traditional social structures’. Overall workplace learning, and continuous learning has become important and necessary because of the concerns (social and economic) about being attractive in the international labour market, being effective and competitive workforce, which maintains occupational competence and is adequately skilled and how workers can learn to handle continuous changes and new requirements in workplace (Billett, Harteis & Etelapelto, 2008; Nilsson & Ellström, 2012; Sennett, 2006;).

Another timely phenomenon that has affected workplaces is the immense movement of people around the globe. In today’s world, people move across country borders, around 250 billion people worldwide are living in countries other than their countries of origin (United Nations, 2015) and migration is becoming more intense than the previous years (OECD, 2016; United Nations, 2015). The reasons for this international mobility differ, some are economical and work-related like seasonal work, intra-company transferees, posted workers and other reasons refer to migration, asylum applications, refugee inflows, collective agreements between countries (e.g. the EU treaty) and international education/studies. As a consequence, of the international mobility is the great number of international employees in different societies. Thus, the population of international employees can be characterized as salient to study from both an empirical and a theoretical perspective (Bozionelos at all, 2017).

What is more, it is useful to present some statistics from Sweden (Statistiska centralbyrån, SCB) which show that the number of foreign-born employees in the Swedish market is quite big. Also, this information is interesting since the research is exploring the learning experience in the workplace of eight international employees who live in Sweden (Gothenburg). According to SCB in the third quarter of 2018, the labor force was 5 183 000 persons aged 15-74. More precisely, the 1/5 of the employed population was foreign-born persons (1 033 000) and 4 150 000 Swedish born persons. More precisely, the participants of this research are international employees in Gothenburg region. Gothenburg was chosen because it is Sweden's second-biggest city, it has always been international being the Scandinavian centre for global trade since the 1700s. Also, many companies in the region have seen success on global markets and

have expanded as a result (Volvo Cars, Volvo Trucks, Chalmers University of Technology, Ericsson AB, SKF, Stena Metal International AB ext.). More than 210,000 foreign-born people were living in Gothenburg in 2018, according to agency Statistics Sweden (Statistiska centralbyrån, SCB), including 91,000 foreign nationals who did not have Swedish citizenship.

It is also worth mentioning the Swedish Work Environment Authority (Arbetsmiljö Verket) which has the mandate from the government and the Riksdag to see that the work environment fulfills the demand in the Work Environment Act that everyone should have a good and developing work environment. So, in the Swedish context developing and maintaining a good workplace for the employees from a holistic perspective is of great value. Thus, this study will try to explore a key issue for the workplace, which is learning and how it is experienced from the perspective of international employees.

Having Hammersley's (2004) words as a point of departure, 'research should be aimed at producing knowledge that contributes to the problem-solving capacities of some group of people' (p. 244), investigating how all these international employees are experiencing the learning process in their new workplaces would be significant, since continuous learning is crucial for organizations to remain competitive in international markets and for individuals operating in the learning society (Tynjälä, 2008).

Thus, this research aims **to investigate the experiences of workplace learning which international employees had in the different working environments in Sweden (Gothenburg)**. Certainly, a great amount of research has occurred in the field of workplace learning (e.g., Ashton, 2004; Billett, 2004; Fuller, Hodkinson, Hodkinson, & Unwin, 2005; Ribeiro, 2019; Toiviainen, 2015; Tynjälä, 2008) but the aspect of international employees who join new working environments and their learning experiences is still neglected. Moreover, because international mobility is a timely phenomenon and a lot of workplaces hire international employees the value that this research will add to the existing literature, will be first a deeper understanding of what worked in the process of workplace learning for the international employees. Second, this study will add to the production of knowledge about what factors can improve and influence workplace learning in order to benefit employees from diverse background and the goals of organizations/businesses.

The research questions are:

1. What is the role of employee's international identity, in their learning experience and engagement in the workplace?
2. Which strategies or factors are meaningful for the learning process of international workers?

The theoretical frameworks which are used to support, analyze and make sense of the empirical data are learning from a sociocultural perspective which is the broader theory, Illeris' (2004) approach of workplace learning and Dewey's theory of experience. As for the methodology, a narrative approach with semi-structured interviews is chosen to explore in-depth the workplace learning of the international employees by getting thick descriptions of their experiences.

The overall structure of the thesis is the following: **chapter one** provides a summary of the **theoretical framework** which the study is based on and explains other key concepts (like experience, Swedish workplace culture, and identity) which are used. **Chapter two** is a **review of the existing literature** about workplace learning and presents a variety of studies, their findings, arguments, and conclusions. This chapter aims to acquire a more holistic and informed view about what is written in academia about the field of workplace learning, how it is conceptualized, what factors affect workplace learning and what concepts-strategies can be identified even in different workplaces. **Chapter three** presents the **methodology** of the study which includes justifications about the choice of the narrative approach, the role of the researcher, explanations about the use of semi-structured interviews, purposive sampling, ethical considerations, and trustworthiness. **Chapter four** consists of the **data analysis** where there is a detailed presentation of participants and the empirical data are categorized based on the research questions. In **chapter five** the **findings** of the study are presented in a descriptive way that answers the research questions. **Chapter six** refers to the **discussion** where the results of the study are critically discussed and examined concerning the theoretical framework and some existing arguments in the literature. Finally, **chapter seven** consists of the **conclusion** and limitations of the research and also suggestions for future research are mentioned.

Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework

In the last two decades, an increase in theories about workplace learning has taken place. A variety of theories have contributed to the evaluating process, which is affected by the work in cognitive and organizational psychology, social anthropology, sociology, and management theory. The theoretical framework, which will help in understanding, making sense and evaluating the data and the progress of this research, is rooted in the sociocultural theory.

Sociocultural theory supports that society has a salient contribution to an individual's development and learning. The theory was developed by the work of psychologist Lev Vygotsky, who believed that community, cultural context and social interactions should be carefully examined since they have a fundamental role in the cognitive development of children (Vygotsky, 1978). This approach views learning as a social process which occurs from interactions with more knowledgeable others. In other words, a dialogue with skillful people (like teachers, parents, peers) is cooperative and collaborative. Also, it is suggested that human development and learning across the world have unique differences because of the variations in cultures (beliefs, values, realities), so they are determined socio-culturally.

Vygotsky wrote 'Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (interpsychological) and then inside the child (intrapsychological). This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, and the formation of concepts. All the higher functions originate as actual relationships between individuals' (Vygotsky, 1978, p.57). It is stated that social learning comes before cognitive development.

For Newman, Griffin, and Cole (1989) Vygotsky's greatest contribution was not only the connection between the external and internal but the emphasis on the dialectic between the inter- and intra-psychological. The traditional view about learning belongs to the field of cognitive psychology, where learning is considered as an inner psychological process of acquiring knowledge, skills, opinions, and attitudes within the individual. So, Vygotsky (1978) highlighted the concept of interaction between intermental and intramental processes. Intermental refers to processes where abilities have occurred in relationship with the social suggestions and intramental refers to processes where abilities exist or develop within the individual (an inner psychological plane). This concept is used as a point of departure in the theoretical framework of the current research which means that 'Human learning always involves both elements at the same time: through the social interaction between the individual and his or her environment, the individual receives many influences or impulses which he or she may absorb through inner psychological interpretation and acquisition processes' (Illeris, 2004, p. 4).

So, even though Vygotsky's work refers to children's development and learning, in this study his approach is applied to adults' learning in the workplace, because it is viewed as the foundation of understanding learning and the role of social interactions and cultural contexts in

this process. Thus, learning is perceived from a sociocultural perspective and it is enriched with Illeris' (2004) specific workplace learning concept.

Approaches which are placing workplace learning within the framework of socio-cultural theory, support certain assumptions and perspectives about the learning process and reject previous claims of theories influenced by psychology. Firstly, the focus of analysis is not only the individual learner but also the social learning, since all learning is social in some significant sense, with examples of both individual and group or community learning (Malloch et al.,2011). Lave and Wenger (1991) also argued that the 'proper unit of analysis of skilled human activity is a community of practice rather than an isolated individual' (ibid., p. 147). Secondly, the primacy of learning as a product is rejected because learning is viewed as an ongoing process of participation, where learners develop by actively engaging in suitable activities (Malloch et al.,2011). Thirdly, the independence of learning from context is rejected, because contextuality shapes workplace learning (Malloch et al.,2011). According to Malloch et al. (2011), three more perspectives about learning can be included when talking about socio-culturally theory:

- A recognition that workplace learning, and performance are embodied phenomena. (Thus, they reject mind-body dualism and related dichotomies).
- A recognition that workplace learning, and performance seamlessly integrate a range of human attributes that is much wider than just rationality. So, context becomes the causal background of the learning.
- A tendency to problematize the concept of learning and to seek to re-theorize it. As such they pose a challenge to mainstream understandings of learning. (Malloch et al.,2011, p.9)

Certainly, in this research, the assumptions and perspectives which socio-cultural theory has about learning are supported because international employees' workplace learning will be explored in relation to the context and social interactions. Also, the role of an individual's participation and engagement in the working environment will be examined, with the intention of understanding their contribution to the ongoing process of workplace learning.

Moving on, before we explain the holistic model for learning in working life which was created by Illeris (2004) and is the key theory of this study, we will present a small introduction about his previous work which is the foundation of the holistic model. For Illeris (2009) learning indicates 'the integration of two very different processes, namely an external interaction process between the learner and his or her social, cultural or material environment, and an internal psychological process of elaboration and acquisition' (p.8). He constructed a model (figure 1,2) that shows the three dimensions (angles) of learning, the environment, the content and the incentive (the last two are equal psychological functions of the individual). This model (figure 1,2) shows the external interaction process between the individual (learner) and the environment and the psychological acquisition process that is an internal process of the learner. So, according to Illeris (2009) the individual (learner) with the internal process of interaction

that takes place between his/her content (the cognitive) and incentive (the emotional) is a key factor for learning.

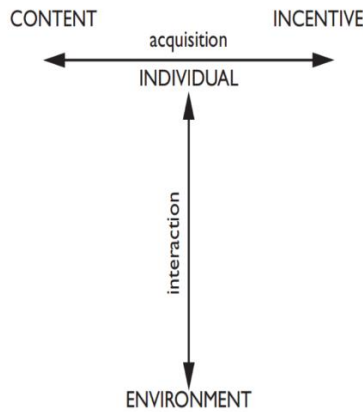


Figure 1. The fundamental processes of learning

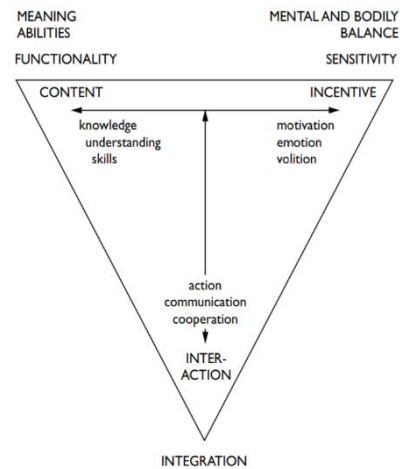


Figure 2. Three dimensions of learning and competence development

The holistic model for learning in working life was based on the above figures and at the individual level it emphasizes the identity of individual. Identity also refers to psychological aspects since it is a part of the individual level where the interaction of the cognitive and the emotional exists.

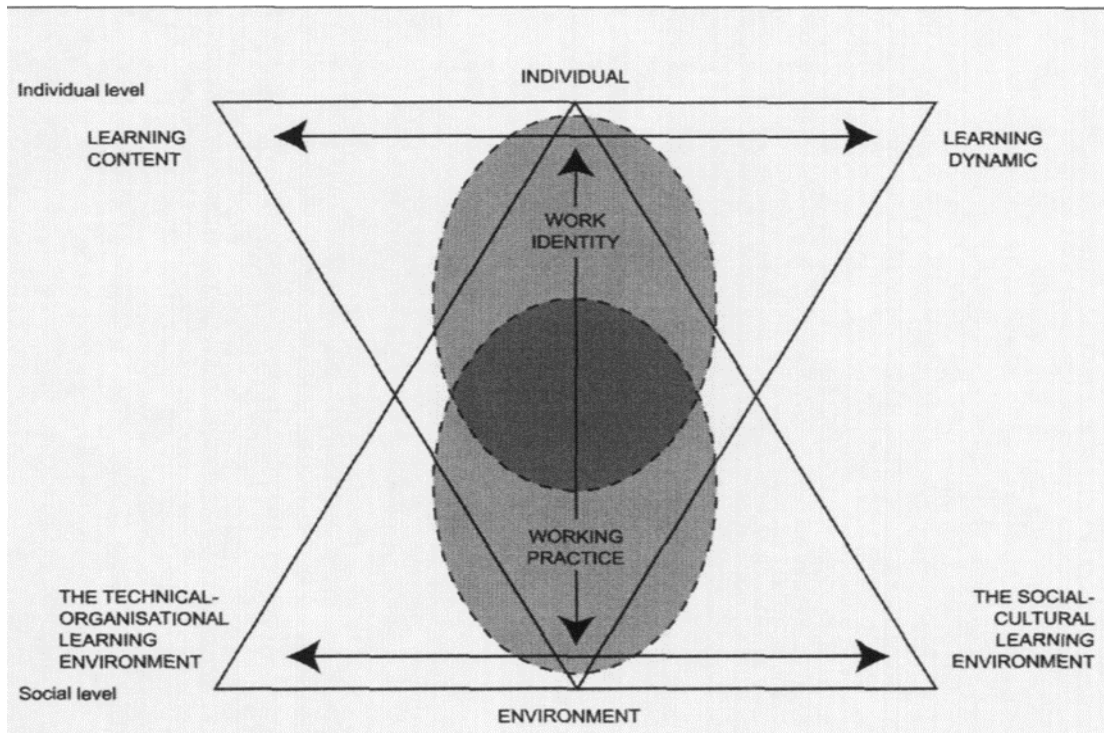


Figure 1. A model for learning in working life (Illeris, 2004)

According to Illeris (2004), the technical-organizational learning environment refers to technological conditions that affect the learning process like division of labor and work content, autonomy, and application of qualifications. The social-cultural learning environment refers to social and cultural factors that are salient for learning opportunities like communities of work, cultural and political communities. Learning content refers to knowledge, understanding, skills and learning dynamic refers to motivation, emotion, volition.

In this holistic model are presented the basic elements and relationships of workplace learning and their mutual connections (Illeris 2004). There are two triangular which are connected, one represents the social and environmental level and the second the individual level. The dialectical interaction between the individual and the social level is shown with the use of the horizontal double arrow. The uppermost vertical double arrow and the one at the bottom refer to the existing interactions between the content side (cognition) and the dynamic side (emotion) of individual, and the interaction between the technical-organizational and socialcultural sides of the working life learning environment, respectively (Illeris 2004).

Illeris (2004), emphasized the dialectical whole between the subjective and the objective, the interaction of the connected individual with the social level of learning in working life. The objective environment is influenced and marked by employees' identities, perceptions and actions but also the personal identities are formed by the objective environment which means the conditions that working life has for learning and the community's practices. So, it is suggested that the most important learning takes part in the central overlap between working practice and working identity. However, the author claims that peripheral learning can also occur which is not related so much to work in nature and is general. For instance, an employee can acquire technical-practical skills and understandings which are not specifically connected with the work practice and working identities.

Finally, it can be understood that Illeris's model for learning in working life has its roots in socio-cultural theory, as it indicates the value of interaction between the social (working environment) and the individual (identity) level during the process of workplace learning.

Experience

Since the concept of experience plays an important role in this research is relevant and necessary to briefly present the work of one of the most recognized and influential educational theorists of the 20th century, John Dewey who wrote about educational experiences. Dewey's (1938) work relates to this study not only because he values experiences but because he highlights the interaction of internal and external conditions 'The conceptions of situation and interaction are inseparable from each other. An experience is always what it is because of transaction taking

place between an individual and what, at the time, constitutes his environment... The environment, in other words, is whatever conditions interact with personal needs, desires, purposes, and capacities to create the experience which is had' (p. 43-44). So, Dewey (1938) argued for the importance of empirical and experimental philosophy when he talked about the new philosophy of education. He insisted on knowing the meaning of empiricism by understanding what experience is and which experiences are educative.

'The belief that all genuine education comes about through experience does not mean that all experiences are genuinely or equally educative. Experience and education cannot be directly equated with each other. For some experiences are mis-educative. Any experience is mis-educative that has the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience. Experience may be such as to engender callousness; it may produce lack of sensitivity and responsiveness. Then the possibilities of having a richer experience in the future are restricted' (1938, p. 25).

According to Dewey, the quality of experience must have two aspects, agreeableness and influence on later experiences. Both aspects, are necessary for an experience to be educative, so when an experience has only one aspect, it is not educative. For instance, experience could be agreeable or pleasurable in itself and not have a positive effect on future experiences (Dewey 1938, p. 27).

Besides, the author mentioned two criteria of his theory of experience that can discriminate between experiences that are educative and those that are not: a) principle of continuity, b) principle of interaction. The principle of continuity means that in every experience there is a kind of continuity since an experience that occurred built on the previous one and will affect the quality of the next experiences. It is important though, the quality of experiences and to be directed to the aim of growth and develop. The principle of interaction means that the interaction of objective and internal aspects of experience form a situation (Dewey, 1938, p. 42). The two principles interact and unite to form the "longitudinal and lateral aspects of experience" (Dewey, 1938, p. 44). "As an individual passes from one situation to another, his world, his environment, expands or contracts. He does not find himself living in another world but in a different part or aspect of one and the same world. What he has learned in the way of knowledge and skill in one situation becomes an instrument of understanding and dealing effectively with the situations which follow. The process goes on as long as life and learning continue" (Dewey, 1938, p. 44).

Although Dewey's approach supports that learning can arise from educative experiences, nothing is mentioned about the negative experiences which might also be educative and contribute to the individual's learning process. Thus, in this research, it will be considered and discussed later, the issue of learning from negative experiences/situations relating to the empirical data from the interviews.

In conclusion, Dewey's theory of experience is relevant to this study because here it is investigated the learning experiences that different international workers had in their current

workplace. Thus, it will be probed if the criteria of his theory of experience could also be applied to the findings of this research and might be of help in the interpretation process.

Identity

Another keyword or a concept which belongs to the theoretical framework of this thesis and is key element of Illeris' (2004) holistic model of learning in working life is identity. Identity refers to the question 'who am I' and it is a concept that has been approached from a psychological, sociological and anthropological point of view. The different formations about identity were mostly influenced by the work of the developmental psychologist and psychoanalyst Erik Erikson. Even though his work highlighted eight interrelated stages of psychosocial development, the identity stage is the most popular. Erikson (1980) pointed out the psychological, personal and social dimensions of identity and three interrelated aspects of it: a) ego identity which describes a sense of self that is learned and is 'developing into a defined ego within a social reality' (p. 22), b) personal identity which is the behaviors and characteristics (idiosyncrasies) of an individual that distinguishes him/her from the others, c) group identity which means the different social roles that an individual might have within a community.

Weinreich and Saunderson (2005) argued that 'a person's identity is defined as the totality of one's self-construal, in which how one construes oneself in the present expresses the continuity between how one construes oneself as one was in the past and how one construes oneself as one aspires to be in the future' (p.80) and that 'one's ethnic identity is defined as that part of the totality of one's self-construal made up of those dimensions that express the continuity between one's construal of past ancestry and one's future aspirations in relation to ethnicity' (p.80).

According to Illeris (2004) 'identity is always an individual, biographical identity: an experience of a coherent individuality and a coherent life course, and at the same time a social, societal identity: an experience of a certain position in the social community' (p.436). Thus, a sociological approach can be presented 'identity is not the exclusive property of the individual but rather is something that is realized strategically and circumstantially' (Weigert et al, 1986, p. 23) from an individual's interactions with others. So, although identity is perceived as a subjective construction of individuals, it mostly relates to external circumstances that happen during everyday interactions, to social structures and cultural institutions (Côté, J. E.,1996). Also, a recent approach sees the formulation of identity in modern society as involving a 'life-long reflexive project of self' (Giddens, 1991, p.32-33) because of the constant social changes. For Gecas and Burke (1995) 'identity refers to who or what one is to the various meanings attached to oneself by self and others. In sociology, the concept of identity refers both to self-characterizations individuals make in terms of the structural features of group memberships,

such as various social roles, memberships, and categories...and to the various character traits an individual displays and others attribute to an actor on the basis of his/her conduct' (p.12).

While discussing the concept of identity and because this research is relevant to the workplace, it is meaningful to mention the concept of professional identity too. According to Paterson et al. (2002), professional identity is 'the sense of being a professional' (p.6) and 'internalized expectations and behaviors that arise from a role or distinct network of relationships' (Stryker and Burke 2000, 286). Nadelson et al. (2015) added that 'the extent to which an individual has internalized the elements of a profession reflects the level to which she/he has developed her/his professional identity' (5).

What is more, another term that appears in this study is international identity and we can adapt the words from Coe & Neumann (2011) to offer a conception of that term 'International identity, then, emphasizes that most nations and their citizens learn something about who they are and where they belong by positioning themselves in relation to other nations and its citizens' (p.143). Likewise, in this research international employees learned something about who they were from the communicative process/interaction with individuals from a different nation in their workplace. Coe & Neumann (2011) also present four features of international identity distinct, relational, contextual, and stratified. Distinct means that international identity can operate distinctly from national identity. However, in this study the rest 3 feature relate more to the term international identity as it is used. International identity is relational since relations between nations play a key role, 'the construction of international identity in discourse depends on a speaker making explicit reference to a foreign entity' (p.144). It is contextual as 'the construction of identity occurs in the context of existing international circumstances' (p.144) and stratified as 'the construction of international identity depends on a speaker referencing a foreign entity. Given that foreign entities are often large and multifaceted, the speaker might discuss just one part of the entity' (p.144).

To sum up, this study will be explored how the concept of identity which is described above (especially international identity), can be a salient part of the learning that takes place in working life. How being an international employee and carrying all these different dimensions of identity (psychological, personal and social/cultural) can impact the way you engage and participate in the working environment and the learning process.

Chapter 2: Literature review

Workplaces have been an important learning environment, since ancient times. Workers learn through work practice the occupational skills which were required. In ancient Babylon and Greece, the impressive and colossal cathedrals, artifacts, structures and buildings, in general, were the product of learning through practice-based experiences. Hundreds of generations of workers developed the skills that were needed in construction solely in workplaces, by apprenticeship experiences and by engaging in work activities relevant to the construction of these buildings (Gimpel, 1961 seen at Billett, S. at all 2008).

Plato also refers that the learning process of becoming artisans and artists is through practice and imitation, association, beginning with play inside the family of artisans and artists and in the context of practice. Lodge (Lodge, 1947 seen at Billett, S. et al. 2008) reports ... at first, the imitation would be playful and childish, carried out with such toy tools as a child could handle. Later, it would become more deliberately purposive. Practice produced technical proficiency in detail and the growing boy would act first as his father's 'helper', then as his associate, and would eventually himself become the head of the family, and the center from which further training in the family craft would radiate (p.17).

1. How workplace learning is conceptualized and discussed?

Workplace learning has been approached, theorized and investigated by different research disciplines like adult education, higher education, management studies, innovation studies, cultural anthropology, vocational education, organizational theory, industrial economics. Hicks et al. 2007 gave an authentic definition about workplace learning 'is a process whereby people, as a function of completing their organizational tasks and roles, acquire knowledge, skills, and attitudes that enhance individual and organizational performance' (p.64). However, this approach is oriented to the goal of performance. According to Handley et al. (2006), workplace learning "is not simply about developing one's knowledge and practice, it also involves the process of understanding who we are and in which communities of practice we belong and are accepted" (p. 644). So, this research will approach the concept of workplace learning from an educational- learning perspective, based on sociocultural theory and from employees' point of view.

Lave and Wenger (1991) offer a different conceptualization of learning from the traditional learning theories which were influenced by the organizational and cognitive psychology theory and they viewed learning as a cognitive process (just inside the mind). Lave and Wenger's *Situated learning: legitimate peripheral participation* (1991) provides a comprehensive theory of learning as a social practice and their work was a starting point for changing the way academics thought about the field of workplace learning. They support that learning occurs in a framework of participation in a social world with a network of relations. The workplace is seen as a community of practice and the legitimate peripheral participation as a learning

process, which is social, that newcomers experience to become full members of the community of practice. Their research was ethnographic about craft apprenticeship and based on five case studies (5 communities of practice) Vai and Gola tailors, Yucatec midwives, meat cutters, nondrinking alcoholics (AA) and naval quartermasters.

Fuller, Hodkinson, Hodkinson, & Unwin, (2005) study critiques and highlights the limitations and strengths of Lave and Wenger's work. The weaknesses that the authors indicate are strong as they are based on qualitative empirical data, which were drawn from wide research projects in different and complex working environments and a variety of methods like interviews, observations, learning logs and company documentation were included. Thus, issues of conflict, power, and inequality are not investigated enough in Lave and Wenger's theory. Also, the prior learning and how learner identities are constructed because of social relationships and the existing processes outside of a particular community of practice is neglected. Finally, two more issues are overlooked according to Fuller et al (2005), the role of 'teaching', or the role of formal education inside the workplace and how employees with full participation continue learning.

Workplaces are conceptualized and discussed as "informal", "unstructured" learning environments and they are often seen as inferior in comparison to the learning process which takes place in the educational institutions (Collins et al, 1989; Ericsson and Lehmann, 1996; Evans, 1993; Prawat, 1993). However, Van der Heijden et al. (2009), indicated that a combination of formal and informal learning opportunities should be used in people's development. What is more, Billett (2002) in his article "Critiquing workplace learning discourses: Participation and continuity at work" argues that describing workplace as informal is incorrect, negative and unhelpful as it doesn't aid in understanding its characteristics, qualities and to have a good bases to conceptualize and discuss workplace learning experiences.

Unlike other academics who justify why "informal learning" is more important, effective and thus 'superior' from the formal classroom-based learning (Colley et al, 2002), Billett (2002) claims that are highly structure environments for learning and that the practices and goals of workplace define the activities and tasks which individuals will engage. Moreover, the values and norms of the workplace structure the learning process through a pathway of activities. Hicks et al. (2007) in a study of accountants, found that informal learning was utilized more than formal learning.

2. What are the factors that affect workplace learning?

Billett (2004) highlights two concepts for a better understanding of the workplace as learning environments, workplace affordance and the individual agency/engagement which influenced the learning process. Workplace affordance stands for the opportunities that the workplace provides to employees for participating and engaging in activities-tasks and the support that is available to them. This readiness of the workplace, which includes the tools, norms, procedures, values, goals and work practices, is salient for the learning process that employees will

experience. On the other hand, individual agency/engagement stands for the choice that individuals make to engage with the workplace activities that are afforded to them. So, workplace learning involves a relational interdependence between an individual's participation/engagement and workplace affordance (social practices) (Billett, 2006a).

It is also clear that individual's personal agency plays a key role in the process of learning because the individual based on his/her intentions, subjectivities and capacities, which arise from their socially- derived life histories or ontogeneses (Billett, Smith and Barker, 2005), will choose how she/he will participate to workplace learning opportunities.

In addition to this, Hökkä, Rasku-Puttonen, & Eteläpelto, (2008) qualitative research about teacher educators' workplace learning, explored the interdependence between the social context of a teacher education department in Finland and individual agency of the educators. Their findings showed that there was no boundary-crossing between different communities of practice in the department and the most important community for teachers was their subject matter group. Since the work culture provided autonomy to educators' teaching and learning process, a more collaborative model between different subject matter groups was hard to exist because 'there is neither enough individual willingness nor enough social pressure to change the dominating culture' (p.12). The research concludes that 'individual learning at work does not necessarily promote organizational development if the social context does not afford enough opportunities for individuals to share the meanings with each other, to work together and to collaborate' (p.13).

Continuing with the factors that can have an impact on workplace learning, Ashton (2004) base on his empirical findings supports that organizational structures influence and shape learning. His case study is a large and multinational company in South-East Asia and, the interviews are conducted with staff from across all grades within the organization. More precisely, he argues that the organizational structures like the hierarchical structuring of relationships, the design of jobs, and movement of employees, organizational decisions about learning and its importance, and decisions about the system of rewards determine the access to learning opportunities and the support that is available for the learners. There was uneven access to knowledge and learning between senior staff and the clerical and more junior staff. Senior staff was encouraged to learn, their jobs were designed in a way to benefit the learning process which was facilitated within the organization. On the other hand, the clerical and more junior staff were given tasks which provided them fewer opportunities for knowledge and skills. Furthermore, attention is given to employee agency and the formal and informal interpersonal relations between staff which could influence the learning process.

It is also important to present different factors that could affect negatively the efficacy and the value of workplace learning. Billett (1995) argued that not all learning that occurs in workplaces is positive and desirable. Employees can learn inappropriate work practices or negative attitudes if this is the culture of practice. Also, the reluctance of experts to share their knowledge, provide guidance and support can inhibit the learning process. Another case is the absence of expertise,

which may be needed to offer a modeling, coaching and guidance role. Barriers in accessing and engaging with authentic activities and instructional media which may have limitations as people 'have to transfer the knowledge from the context of acquisition to their application in the workplace' (Billett, 1995, p.7).

Different studies added more factors that could have a negative impact on workplace learning. Some of them are resources/financial limitations, lack of time, a lot of requirements to be learned (Doyle et al. 2008), not enough meaningful rewards for learning, lack of access to training opportunities and learning resources, increased multi-tasking (Hicks et al. 2007), lack of access to computers (Lohman, 2005), the absence of management commitment to learning (Ellinger 2005), a culture that does not support learning and lack of understanding the role of HRD (Sambrook and Stewart 2000).

3. What kind of learning concept-strategies can be identified even if the workplaces are different?

Researchers have been interested in examining the strategies/factors/methods that can support an individual's workplace learning. To begin with, Eraut et al. (2001) broad qualitative inquiry about learning in business, engineering and healthcare enterprises reported that 'learning from other people and the challenge of work itself proved to be the most important dimensions of learning for the people we interviewed. Although some reported significant learning from formal education and training, this was by no means universal, and often only of secondary importance' (Eraut et al., 2001: 37). Collin, & Paloniemi (2008) with their inquiry from two different workplaces (a horticultural nursery and a design company) where they interview 19 workers, supported that experience sharing is an important informal way for many workers no matter the age, experience or position to learn in the working environment. Moving on, Lewis (2008) in his research where he used experimental procedures and 4 interviews from 4 professional truck drivers (from the same company), argued about the effectiveness of guided learning (coaching and mentoring) in the development of conceptual knowledge in road transport.

Moreover, two studies that examine health care workplaces shared the same opinion about interactions with other co-workers. First, Margit Saskia et al. (2015) a study about the learning opportunities in rheumatology practice found 'that relationships with professional peers, patients, and practitioners from other professions were perceived as important learning opportunities and enablers for learning at work. Peer discussions were perceived by most participants as an opportunity for learning and feedback on professional performance' (p.12). Olsen et al. (2018) a study that investigates whether the formal and informal learning patterns of 9 female experienced nurses changed after a reform that altered their work, found that a traditional learning pattern between the participants was the transfer of knowledge from experienced nurses to novices. However, even when nurses created new learning patterns across

organizational boundaries, informal relations based on trust were important for knowledge sharing.

Mavin and Roth (2015) and Cavanagh (2008) had something in common in their research. Both researchers pointed out the concept of learning by doing your job. More precisely, in Mavin and Roth (2015) case study from aviation, findings showed that shorter simulator sessions followed by extended self-directed debriefing were extremely effective for the pilots. In Cavanagh (2008) ethnographic study was indicated that female auxiliary workers mostly learned their job by doing it. Thus, participating to work practices tasks and engaging in authentic workplace situations are viewed as very supportive and developing strategies for the learning process.

Mornata and Cassar (2018) were interesting in finding the main learning strategies of newcomers and which interpersonal characteristics of insiders could support the newcomers' proactive behaviours. Their findings show that newcomers perceived the existence of a formal induction training as crucial for their adjustment in the new working role. However, when there is a lack of this organizational support newcomers "newcomers regulate their proactive behaviours by seeking indirect guidance, and more precisely, by engaging in informal interactions with insiders likely to help them socialize" (p.10). What is more, psychological safety is a factor that newcomers, value for their learning process and thus, insider should have characteristics (such as being available, accommodating, accepting mistakes, happy to share information) which support newcomers' perception of psychological safety.

Furthermore, Govaerts and Baert (2011) study aimed to explore if the creation of a typology of learning patterns from different organizations/communities of practice, is possible. The findings indicated that some basic learning patterns were distinguished a) an agora learning pattern, where predominant is the social working environment and key factors are 'the mutual consultation and working out potential problems with colleagues' (p.552), b) an Olympic learning pattern is about formal learning activities that the management controls and aim to 'socialization and internal branding of the employees, according to the original and demanding mission of the founding fathers of the organization' (p.550), c) a job performance learning pattern where the learning opportunities are determined by the job characteristics, d) a helpdesk learning pattern where 'employees are held in a fairly tight work structure, and experience a high work rate' (p.551), e) an entrepreneurial learning pattern where the main learning activities are the formal and this pattern is found in small enterprises with self-employed entrepreneurs, whose motivation and interest will determine the kind of learning activities that they will choose. However, this typology was just an instance and did not represent all possible patterns and variations existing.

Ribeiro (2019) with his narrative research approach among urban workers in São Paulo, Brazil points out three workplace learning modes a) formal workplace learning mode, which was offered by training and development organizational system, b) formal workplace learning mode, which was offered by specialized educational institutions, c) informal and relational

workplace learning mode. He continues with four patterns of working identity that participants constructed a) an organizational identity where they ‘preferred to use formal workplace learning narrative patterns offered by training and development organizational system’ (p.44), b) a professional and occupational identity where they needed continuous learning for their professional development and they seek for training outside of the working context, c) a networking identity constructed mostly from informal and relational modes of learning, d) transitory identity ‘as a pattern of contingency and transition, in general, had no learning models’ (p.44), e) hybrid identity where they used both formal and informal learning modes. Finally, it is mentioning the movement of searching for stability ‘generated demand for formal learning modes constructed by formal workplace learning narrative patterns from the participants (organizational, professional and occupational identity narrative patterns)’ (p.45), and the movement of searching for flexibility ‘generated the demand for informal and relational learning modes constructed by informal and relational workplace learning narrative patterns from the participants (networking identity narrative patterns)’ (p.45).

Swedish workplace context

Since this research is based on narratives of international employees from different workplaces in Sweden (Gothenburg), it would be useful to present what is written about the characteristics of the Swedish workplace culture. Information from this part of the literature review will be used in the analysis of the research data as well as in discussion, to examine if those characteristics can be identified in the empirical data and if they have a salient role in the findings. To start with, the world economy has faced a lot of changes due to globalization. However, the Swedish, industrialized nation has managed to have businesses that are successful and competitive in many global industries. A key role to this accomplishment has played the Swedish culture in the workplace which is characterized as meritocratic, autonomous and anti-hierarchical, biased for the team approach, reluctant to glorify star performers, non-confrontational and conflict-avoidant, action-oriented (Isaksson, 2008).

More precisely, according to Holmberg & Åkerblom (2012), the Swedish management style and leadership have as a central value egalitarianism and equality just like the Swedish economic model, which tries to balance socialism and capitalism to make a society where people’s differences are limited, and they have equal opportunities. Also, Swedish management culture is more collectively oriented rather than individualistic and it is suspicious with employees that seek star status and want to standouts (Holmberg & Åkerblom, 2012).

Managers’ work is to focus on the big-picture goals, give general suggestions, set directions, and support (Isaksson, 2008). Employees’ teams usually handle the details and the execution of the goals and the process of decision making is participative, something that was also supported by Bialas (2009) “one of the most emphasized characteristics of the Swedish management is high-level employee participation” (p. 108). Even if employees in the Swedish workplace culture are members of teams and value cooperation, they still work autonomously

with little supervision, in a non-confrontational or conflict-avoiding atmosphere. The structure of most of the companies is flat and decentralized without strong hierarchies. Isaksson (2008) explains the decentralization progress as “responsibility, authority and control systems are extensively delegated” (p.18).

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter will be presented the methodology of the study. A qualitative approach was used in order to examine in detail and in-depth how international employees experienced the learning process in their workplace, an issue that has not been explored yet. More precisely, a narrative study was conducted with semi-structured interviews based on open-ended questions, so there were no right or wrong answers.

Narrative research is the study of how human beings experience the world, and narrative researchers collect these stories and write narratives of experience (Gudmundsdottir, 2001). Or According to Polkinghorne (1988) narrative is “the primary scheme by which human existence is rendered meaningful” (p.1). This method and phenomenon were chosen as the most appropriate for the purpose of the research and as Connelly and Clandinin (1990) wrote “The main claim for the use of narrative in educational research is that humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives. The study of narrative, therefore, is the study of the way humans experience the world. (p. 2)

Since this research aims to investigate the learning process which international employees had in their workplace, narrative as a research approach is the most suitable because humans construct meaning through their engagement and the dialogic interaction with the world and they produce narratives of their experiences to make sense of behaviors and life events. Also, this research places narratives within the framework of sociocultural theory, which supports that human learning and development takes place when individuals participate and interact with social activities. A mutual process between society and the individual, which negates the dualism between the human and his/her social world (the mind-world problem) (Prawat, 1996). When telling their stories humans are not isolated or independent from their context, the interlinking between the individual and his/her social, cultural and institutional context is crucial. Thus, narratives are the method, which is used to capture and examine how individuals’ actions are related or shaped by the social and cultural context.

According to Ricoeur (1981) as an outcome of the dialogic collaboration process between the researcher and the participants, is one or more stories that are written down and become fixed in a text. Next, when the narrative turns into a text it becomes “autonomized”: it is no longer attached to the moment it occurred and has undertaken consequences of its own. Thus, the narrative is able to take up importance that goes beyond the existing situation and become relevant to other contexts. Eventually, the narrative which is fixed in a text is an “open work” where the meaning is addressed to those who read and hear about it. By way of explanation, when a narrative is seen as an open work, which is liberated from its origin, others who read or hear about the report can a wide range of interpretations (Ricoeur, 1981).

The role of the researcher

In social science research, the role of the researcher and his/her experience is important. Warnes is made about researcher “over-involvement” and “identification” of themselves with the respondents (May 2001). Dressel & Langreiter (2003) supported their objectivity in social science studies without carrying cultural and emotional meanings. A total detachment of researchers from respondents is unrealistic, though. Constructivists do not believe in the existence of objective reality (Guba & Lincoln 1994). The subjective interrelationship between the researcher and the respondents is admitted. In this case, being the researcher of the study is worthwhile to note some information about my background in Sweden, which can be relevant to the topic. During my studies in Sweden (2years), I have been also a part-time international employee (substitute pre-school teacher), so I have personally experienced and observed some workplaces. Also, in the past, I have been working in the same workplace as one of the participants (Stefan) and collaborated with him. My social interactions in Sweden are mostly with international employees, so I knew seven of the participants.

This fact was an advantage for the interview process since a good relationship based on trust and caring was already established between the researcher and the participants. Most of the participants felt familiar and comfortable talking to the researcher and sharing their workplace learning experiences. A collaborative, dialogic relationship with a sense of a nonjudgmental attitude was achieved (Fetterman, 1998).

Next, be aware that my role as a researcher in this study can be a key factor for the interpretation and analysis of the empirical data, lead me to the decision of reading articles which refer to the Swedish workplace culture before I conducted the interviews. The intention behind this action was my determination to acquire in advance a background knowledge and understanding of the Swedish workplace from academic sources, so I would be competent to identify or not, relative themes in my empirical data and examine if my participants confirm or not the Swedish workplace culture.

Besides this, as a researcher, I investigated the topic of this study by examining it through theory and creating an interactive relationship between theory and empirical data. The sociocultural perspective combined with the narratives of international workers allowed me to obtain further understanding and insight of how individuals learn and develop. Therefore, the theory was utilized in systematic ways, such as when the field was approached and when the reasons for interpretation were given (Gudmundsdottir, 1997). In other words, the stories of this narrative approach are told and interpreted within a theoretical framework (Gudmundsdottir, 2001).

Semi-structured interviews

Interview is the method that is used to collect the empirical data for this study and to examine the learning experiences in the workplace that internationals had. McNamara (1999) stressed that interviews can get the story behind a participant's experience, in-depth information around the topic can occur and with interviews, a further investigation of response is possible with follow-up questions. More precisely, with personal interviews, the researcher is able to explore attitudes, values, beliefs, and motives (Richardson et al. 1965, Smith 1975). Also, the evaluation of the validity of the respondent's answers is easier, since the researcher can observe non-verbal indicators, which are helpful when discussing sensitive issues (Gordon 1975). Bailey (1987) pointed out that during personal interviews the respondent cannot receive help from others while formulating a response.

Empirical data consist of 8 face to face semi-structured interviews which were audio-recorded and the duration of them was approximately between 40minutes to 1hour. Using semi-structured interviews means that the researcher does not conduct the research to test a specific hypothesis (David & Sutton 2004). Semi-structured interviews are non-standardized, which means that the researcher has some key themes or questions that he/she wants to cover (thematic interviews). However, emergent ideas that are introduced by the participants as a part of the discussion, are always followed and as a result, more freedom and flexibility are given than structured interviews or questionnaires (Rowe, 2009). According to Corbetta (2003):

The order in which the various topics are dealt with and the wording of the questions are left to the interviewer's discretion. Within each topic, the interviewer is free to conduct the conversation as he thinks fit, to ask the questions he deems appropriate in the words he considers best, to give explanation and ask for clarification if the answer is not clear, to prompt the respondent to elucidate further if necessary, and to establish his own style of conversation. (p. 270)

The questions for the semi-structured interviews were created based on the research questions and all were open-ended with the purpose of providing enough space to informants to share their personal background information, their learning experiences in the different workplaces and what perspectives and opinions were created after these experiences.

A pilot interview with one of the Greek participants was first conducted and the language of the interview was Greek. The use of a pilot study can be as a "small scale version or trial run in preparation for a major study" (Polit et al. 2001, p.467). Therefore, the purpose of the pilot study is "to try out the research approach to identify potential problems that may affect the quality and validity of the results" (Blessing & Chakrabarti 2009, p.114). The pilot interview was included in the final group of interviews and assisted in structuring and adjusting the questions of the interview, in a way that will add a natural flow in the conversation. After the pilot interview questions were categorized/thematized in sections like a) background experience (studies and work), c) current job, d) their learning process. This change improved the order of questions, as eventually questions were built on each other and support participants

to give more explanations and details about their experiences and thoughts. All participants received the questions before the day of the interview. They were not asked to prepare their answers, just to be familiar with the questions, as the intent behind this action was a future flow in their stories during the interview, which most of the time was accomplished.

Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, it is well known the emphasis that is given in the issue of ensuring specific criteria that can evaluate the quality of research. Smith (1990) wrote 'the problem of criteria seems to me one of the most difficult and important problems facing social and educational research' (p. 167). Garratt and Hodkinson (1998) noted that '(a)ny prespecification of universal criteria is in danger of foisting on research artificial categories of judgment, and a framework of a priori conditions that may be impossible or inappropriate to meet ...' (p. 533). Nevertheless, as Elliott, Fischer, and Rennie (1999) concluded 'some form of widely-recognized evaluative guidelines for qualitative research are necessary in order to win wider recognition and acceptability for qualitative approaches' (p. 225).

Additionally, the aim of this thesis is to contribute to the development of knowledge about workplace learning from an international worker's perspective and its findings to be accepted as quality and worth paying attention to and taking account of. Thus, is necessary for acquiring this acknowledgment for the research to establish the trustworthiness, which is an alternative term given from Lincoln and Guba (1985) to replace the terms validity, reliability, and generalizability. Trustworthiness is establishing when the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are met.

In this research, credibility is achieved by having a prolonged engagement with the participants and the Swedish workplace. According to Lincoln and Guba (1981, p. 4) 'when an anthropologist has become so like the group he is studying that he ceases to consider himself a part of the profession-or ceases to consider either his cultural or professional subgroup as his dominant reference group-he is contributing to the research and begins a "performance-understanding" role (Kolaja, 1956, p. 161) within the studied group'. In this case, as it is mention above the researcher is also an international part-time employee, who before conducting the interviews studied about the Swedish workplace culture and personally knew seven of the eight participants. Therefore, the researcher was familiar and experienced some of the workplace (context) issues that are addressed from participants and a prior adequate trust and rapport were existing in the interaction between the researcher and participants. Furthermore, a peer review which will take place during the defense of the thesis, will support the credibility, because it will be an opportunity for exploring new aspects of the research which might have been neglected and as Lincoln and Guba (1981, p. 308) indicated 'the inquirer's biases will probe, meanings will be explored, the basis for interpretations will be clarified'.

The establishment of transferability is succeeded by providing for every assumption and judgment that is made supportive, thick descriptions (relevant and sufficient quotations) of what different informants said. Also, the use of purposeful sampling which is presented in detail, is another key factor for transferability because the informants were selected based on the different characteristics that they have (nationality, current workplace, gender, professions, and previous experience) in order to gain a wide variety of the international population, contexts, situations and circumstances. The issue of dependability is ensured by keeping records of all the processes of the inquiry (audio records of the interviews, transcripts of interviews and personal notes of the researcher) which are accessible for auditing processes.

Next, the audit trail of the research can strengthen confirmability. The chapter of data analysis and discussion play that role. The chapter of data analysis shows how the empirical data are structured, synthesized into categories according to the two research questions and how rational reasoning is being followed based on the authentic answers of participants. A prove that the findings portray informants' responses and avoid potential bias of the researcher is the emerged issue that was not considered in the making of the research. Also, the chapter of discussion supports the current findings and interpretations with existing theory, to confirm that the outcome of the research can add value to the ongoing academic dialogue about the process of workplace learning of international employees.

To sum up, the trustworthiness of a narrative study is a salient methodological issue which lacks acceptance within the qualitative field, as it is supported in the article of Loh (2013, p.3). Therefore, as it can be viewed above the current study acknowledging this issue, addresses rigorously the criteria which establish trustworthiness in order to ensure the quality of findings.

Participants-Sample

Purposive sampling (Bryman, 2012; Cohen et al., 2007) was used to produce more variation in order to have as wide a variety of international workers' experiences as possible. Thus, the eight informants were selected for their different nationalities, gender, profession, and different workplace. The age of informants is between 25-32, so the sample refers to quite young international employees. It is also worth mentioning, that most of the participants come from countries of Southern Europe. Finally, a balance research relationship based on trust and good collaboration was established, as the researcher had a previous interaction and knew almost all the participants.

Saturation of data

Saturation has its origins in grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967) but has attained general acceptance as a methodological element within qualitative research. Saturation is used as a criterion for discontinuing data collection and/or analysis. Saturation of data is achieved in

this research since data collection provided same themes and additional data did not lead to any new emergent themes. Using Grady's (1998) words 'New data tend to be redundant of data already collected. In interviews, when the researcher begins to hear the same comments again and again, data saturation is being reached... It is then time to stop collecting information and to start analyzing what has been collected' (p.26). Also, every assumption/category that is identified in the data analysis is supported with enough examples, a key claim that was pointed out by Morse (2015). Lastly, the empirical data are adequate to illustrate the theories that are used or using Starks and Trinidad (2007) statement saturation occurs 'when the complete range of constructs that make up the theory is fully represented by the data' (p. 1375).

Research questions

1. What is the role of employee's international identity, in their learning experience and engagement in the workplace?
2. Which strategies or factors are meaningful for the learning process of international workers?

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were taken into account during "all steps of the research process, from planning, research conduct, publication, and dissemination" (Markham and Buchanan 2012). All participants were approached individually and were fully informed about the purpose and the process of the inquiry by the researcher. It was explained to them, that participation in the research was voluntary and they had the right to freely express their opinions and withdraw at any time during the interview. Confidentiality of both participants and workplaces and was guaranteed. In this spirit, all participants are given pseudonymous. In the end, the study's results will be provided to informants if they want to have a holistic view of the study.

In addition, it is highlighted as an essential part of the ethical considerations in the narrative approach the establishment of a good trusting and caring relationship between the researcher and the participants. In this study, a trusting and respectful relationship was achieved since as the researcher I knew the participants before, and we had previous discussions about their workplaces. So, it was easier for the participants to engage in this research and share their experiences. While also, in some cases I could empathize with the stories and the values of international employees because I was also a part-time international employee here in Sweden, and I experienced common workplace issues. Thus, having a sense of self-knowledge and self-reflection is clear to conclude that this study describes workplace learning from a perspective of international employees in a dialogue with the theoretical framework. As a consequence, a dialogue or a critical viewpoint from employers or Swedes is missing, because the focus and

the aim of this particular research did not suit with those viewpoints. Lastly, my intention as a narrative researcher was to understand, make sense and present the authentic experiences of participants and then relate and critically discuss the empirical data to wider theoretical frameworks.

The analysis of the data uses an inductive process. Firstly, the results/answers from the interviews are presented and discussed in broader categories, so that the reader is well-informed, understands the participant's answers and he/she is able to follow the rationality of the research process. In that part, every claim that is made has a sufficient justification which are participants' authentic words. Secondly, the findings are presented concisely, and the main points are highlighted. In the discussion part, the theory is used to interpret and support the findings, to strengthen the research's arguments. It is of great importance, to clarify that the analysis is not limited to anticipated themes, which are answering the research questions. Emergent issues that are raised by the informants are taken into account and are analyzed properly.

Chapter 4: Data analysis

In this section of the thesis, the international employees' profiles and the answers/results from the interviews with the international employees, which are categorized and discussed based on the research questions, are presented. The researcher listened to the interview recordings carefully and created transcripts with which she familiarized herself and she reflected on the information/stories that there were given. The researcher tried to understand the commonalities and differences which were captured across individual experiences and identified similar themes that could relate to the research questions. Also, italics are used when participants' authentic words are presented to show the change in the speech and to justify the assumptions that are made.

Presentation of participants

Stefan (28) is a Greek preschool teacher who works in a preschool in Gothenburg and he has been working abroad for 1,5years. He moved to Sweden as he was accepted for a master's program at the University of Gothenburg. However, he quit his master after he was offered his current job position. His previous education was in Early Childhood Education at a Greek University and his current job is his first experience as a preschool teacher. He had working experience with kids but in an informal context (babysitting, an educator in a playing center for kids and summer camps) and an irrelevant to his field working experience. He accepted this job not only because it was relevant to his studies but also because he was very motivated to teach and put his own ideas into practice as a preschool teacher.

Liza (25) is a Greek teacher/assistant teacher who works in a school in Gothenburg and she has been working abroad for 1,5 years. She has a bachelor's in Education in Primary School from a Greek University and she also participated in seminar classes about autism, children with ADHD, first aid kit and a degree in Braille, a tactile writing system that is used by people who are visually impaired. She moved to Sweden to study for a master's degree and at the same time she was working part-time at an educational institute. After she was offered a full-time contract at the school, she quitted her studies because her main professional goal was to start teaching in primary schools. In the past, she worked as a preschool teacher, as an educator in play centers and summer camps and as a waitress.

Suzan (26) is a French Material Planner for an automotive international company and she has been working abroad for 1,5 years. She went to business school for 5 years and studied marketing, business development, and logistics and later had her master's in purchasing and self-development. The reason for her moving to Sweden was the fact that she was demotivated from her life in France and she had a strong will to change her life and experience new things. Moreover, during her studies she was traveling a lot abroad, so she missed that. Before her current job, she was working for 2years as a buyer in a French automotive company, which is a part of the international automotive company that she is now working. She chose this job

position because she was already a part of the international automotive company and it was easier for her, as she was familiar with the Swedish system.

Max (25) is a French purchasing controller for an automotive international company and he has been working abroad for 1 year. His education is in International Business and his previous working experience was two internships one as a buyer for a French Energy Company and the second one as a plant controller in a factory of Automotive Company. He wanted to move abroad, and he was looking for an international contract. His current 1 year contract allows him to work for a French company outside France. He accepted this job position because it is mixed of what he had previously worked on and he felt that he was quite skilled.

Armando (25) is a Spanish financial controller for an automotive international company and he has been working abroad for 9 months. His bachelor's degree is in business administration from a Spanish University. His previous working experience was 1 year of work for Walt Disney Company in Madrid, in a rotational finance program and 2 years of work as an accountant/consultant in Volvo Cars Madrid. He moved to Sweden since his previous work was repetitive, his motivation dropped, he felt that he was not learning and that his period there came to an end as they were not able to offer him what he needed for his professional development. Also, an important factor that influenced his decision, was his will to move and live abroad.

Victor (30) is a Spanish research microbiologist working in a public University Hospital and at the same time, he is doing his Ph.D. Victor has been working abroad for 4,5 years. He studied biology and he has a master's in microbiology. His previous working experience varies widely from lifeguard, mystery shopper to the flying coordinator. He moved to Sweden because of a grant that he got to work in a lab for 6 months and later he was offered a contract for the same position. For him Spain was a country in crisis where he could not have many opportunities to do research, it was so difficult and almost impossible. Also, for many years he wanted to move abroad and experience life in a new country.

Kevin (27) is a Bulgarian engineer in an automotive global company who has been working there for seven months. More precisely, he is hired by a consulting company, that found him a temporary project as an engineer in an automotive international company. He is raised in Turkey and had a bachelor's degree in Electrical Engineering there. He moved to Sweden for educational reasons, a master's in Electric Power Engineering. He did not have working experience related to his field in the past, but he worked as a waiter in Turkey and the UK (1 year).

John (32) is an English service technician and he has been working abroad for 6 years. He has a bachelor's degree in construction management from the UK. His previous working experience is not relevant to his studies, but he has a broad range of experiences in different workplaces. He has worked as a bartender, as customer service for an online fashion company, for a logistic company, as a caretaker at a school and as a service technician for a ventilation company. He moved to Sweden for personal reasons.

1. The role of employee's international identity in their learning experience and engagement in the workplace

The narratives of international employees raised some emergent issues that should be considered even though the research questions do not focus on the barriers that international employees experienced. Some of participants reported stories where they faced obstacles.

To start with, Armando before moving to Sweden and work for the international automotive company was working for the same company in Madrid. He explained that Spain had a bad reputation for Swedish people, and they had stereotypes. Thus, when they were suggesting things, or they wanted to change a process Swedes were a bit hesitant, as they did not trust them so much. *It was general at the office, I was not the only one who felt it. Even my managers observe it and the senior managers (who was Swedish) tried to change this but of course, is the mindset of Swedish that needs to be changed... However, when they came and visit the offices in Madrid, they were quite impressed by how far we went.* Also, Armando comment that even now he has still heard people saying, *I do not understand why we have the office in Madrid, they do not add value.*

Liza, on the other hand, reported an incident that took place in her workplace and they had to call the union since it was a matter of discrimination. More precisely, most of the foreigner staff (including her) of the school that she is working, was not invited to the Christmas dinner that the workplace organized. It can be clarified that it was not a Swedish school but an English one and that the native English employees and Swedish were all invited. Liza stated that the responsibility of that action was one of the two principals. The other principal refused to attend the dinner and apologized to employees for the event. Another issue that the participant faced was the use of the English language since she is not a native speaker like the other teachers. Liza commented that she was the first non-native English speaker (qualified though) who was given the chance to teach as the main teacher in the school (swedes are also teaching but they have the legitimation). So, she described incidents where some teachers made fun of her English accent and a comment from one of her colleagues, who underestimated her good job with an autistic kid by saying *he is listening to you because maybe he doesn't understand our English as they are too advance and your English sound like Italian (which is his mother tongue).* Although, she admitted that she is also sometimes sarcastic about her accent and she accepts jokes because she understands when it is a matter of sense of humor, in the context of workplace those 'jokes' can be tricky and underrate someone's professionalism.

Suzan shared that in her workplace the young, newcomers' international employees are working with more systems compare to older Swedish employees, which means that their workload is bigger. As she and her colleagues are being upset with this situation, they decided to take action towards these working circumstances, have meetings with their manager and complain.

Kevin stated that the company indeed is international *they will let you in*, but there are some complications. He pointed out that internationals cannot be promoted as easy as Swedes in higher positions and that Swedish employees are being hired as permanent employees. The promotion in the hierarchy will happen only if the people in charge are sure that internationals will stay in Sweden, as they think that potentially internationals will leave. *I was asked by my technical manager what do I think about Sweden. After my answer, he concluded you have a couple of years and then you will leave. I didn't say anything like that, but his reply was yeah, we know, we know internationals.* Kevin also talked about the communication and the relationship between his team, which is consisted of two internationals and 8 Swedes. *When they (Swedes) do something together they don't call you. We went for after-work a team of 10 people, I was sitting with the Greek guy and our Swedish colleagues next to us, but they didn't talk to us.* It is important to mention that this absence of interaction is visible in the workplace too and it has an impact on it. When it comes to testing (an important working procedure) Swedes communicate potential issues with the other Swedish software engineers, but not with Kevin (who is also a software engineer) and the other international employee. *In today's meeting, the tester guys told our technical manager about the delivery from suppliers which they tested and reported an issue in the software. My technical manager asked me why I didn't communicate that as I am responsible for it, but I didn't know the severity of the problem since I am not a tester and the tester guys didn't inform me about it. I just knew that there is an issue because it was in the system.*

For John, who was the only English-speaking person in his previous job, the issue of language was important. In his workplace, everybody was speaking Swedish and they did not change to English when they were talking to him *in the beginning, I was thrown to the deep, but I think they were doing it for my benefit to use Swedish, to make me learn. I wouldn't have learned as much Swedish as I have now if I could just swoop to English.* John explained that the managers of his workplace sometimes were avoiding speaking to him because they did not know how much Swedish he knew and sometimes they were finding difficult to understand his Swedish. What is more, *They knew English... I thought they knew English, but I remember when we were going out for after work and I use English they look clueless sometimes.* Finally, he believed that *when you live in Sweden is not easy to get a job if you do not know Swedish. So, you become a little bit insecure and you think that you should just stay at that job as you won't find anything better. If you want a good career here, you need to learn Swedish and that's why I forced myself to learn the language because I thought I was worth a lot more.*

Under other workplace conditions, Max who was also working for the same global automotive brand but in a different company and he had a different job position expressed a more positive experience in his workplace learning process. In his workplace he worked with a lot of people from India and his observations were about their different way of working, which is detail-oriented. *If we talk about a subject, they will instead of seeing the bigger picture or ask general questions first, they will focus on details and they will have specific scenarios, they have a lot of knowledge... I work differently, first I see the bigger picture and probably almost nothing about details.* He admitted that this could have been a reason to create conflicts and

disagreements at his workplace. However, they chose to acknowledge and discuss these differences in the way that they work and eventually they had an agreement *At some point we said we don't start at the same way, so we should talk about how we will work when we have these meetings, details are important, global picture is important as well....* This participant had an educational-theoretical background (master's in international business) in international business and cultural changes and he commented that *it helps to have this knowledge, at least you are aware of what can happen, and you are ready to deal with it. I knew from my studies that in a multicultural team you need to take into account that no one is better than someone else, everybody has a certain way of working and you need to consider the different cultures. But in this company, I learned all these things in practice.*

The bidirectional relationship: a) the presence of international employees changed/ influenced the working environment

The empirical data from the interviews shed light on the question about the role of employee's international identity in their learning experience and engagement in the workplace. As can be understood, there is a bidirectional relationship between the Swedish workplace culture and the presence of international workers. More accurately, while the Swedish workplace culture affected the internationals, their presence in the Swedish workplace also, influenced the environment and people in it. Participants described different experiences where each one of them had an impact or changed the workplace.

Stefan and Liza the two Greek educators are embodying in their teaching some Greek features like words, phrases, facial expressions, songs, and Greek dances. For instance, Stefan combines Greek words with specific actions that the kids should do when they listen to the word, during the preschool routines. Liza, on the other hand, introduced the older children to Greek dances and she also uses spontaneously some Greek phrases when she talks to them.

Suzan in her previous work in France was used to visit her suppliers in person, give a presentation and have conversations with them, so she is continuing to do that also in Sweden. However, she admitted that Swedish people were not familiar with visiting suppliers and because it was not mandatory for their job, they were avoiding that part. After seeing Suzan completing a series of visiting suppliers and receiving an acknowledgement from her manager, they also started to use this method and moreover they approached Suzan for advice.

In Max's case, the change that he wanted to bring in the workplace most probably will not happen. Nevertheless, is worth mentioning his experience since it was one of the factors that contribute to his decision to change his job. Max's responsibility is to measure performance, so he wanted to improve that by changing the indicator to one that will make more sense, will be easier to calculate and explain to people. He went into 'politics' (a phrase that participant used) which means that he tried to negotiate and convince his boss and the other senior staff why this change was needed and the future benefits for the company. However, he knows that getting a

complete agreement from everyone and moving to the changing process will be difficult and maybe impossible in this company. He admitted that *is too slow, how to make decisions and how to change...I am fighting a lot for things to change but I know that it won't happen because people don't really want change when they are used to something.*

Armando changed the atmosphere in his team as they are older, swedes and it was quite a cold environment, without a lot of speaking and laughs. *When I first joined the team, I was asking how your weekend was, etc. All this Spanish talk. At the beginning, I didn't know about this personality issue. I was pushing them and asking, and they were giving me answers of yes or no.* So, Armando by insisting on asking questions and getting to know more his colleagues, created a friendly atmosphere *Now they even ask you first.*

Victor also noticed that with his attitude during the last two months, he influenced his team to be more proactive and motivated in a new project that they were founded. He described the situation at work as very slow and that there was a need for presenting results and making publications. Although his team was demotivated and was complaining about their boss, Victor supported another way of viewing the problem *what we need to do is to be proactive and to ask ourselves what we can do to overcome this problem... we cannot just say ok this is his fault, if this doesn't happen is because of him...no you, yourself needs to try and solve the issue and make it better....*

Kevin reported that he does not have a close relationship with his Swedish teammates (he is isolated from them), as they do not appreciate him being open, straightforward and saying his opinion, so he has not influenced them. However, he noticed that his affection for the workplace was related to the relationship he created with the American costumers/suppliers. *Our American suppliers visited us twice and they liked me. They are chatty, and I am familiar with that culture as I used to live in the UK. So, they prefer to speak with me when it comes to meetings, the others are boring.*

John on the other hand, who is an international and he works in a Swedish context, explained that it is hard for him to affect the workplace speaking Swedish *I normally go there to do my job, I am not the same person as I am when I talk in English. I don't feel like I get my point across a lot more in another language. So even if I knew a way to fix a problem, I wouldn't say it because I don't know how to say it.*

The international identity of employees and their previous working experience were used by most of the employees in a way that they learned to improved/developed their working routines and at the same time, they added value in the workplace with their presence. For some employees, their engagement in the working environment changed the working atmosphere to a more positive one. Also, an important contribution to the issue of how international identity can affect the workplace has a supportive philosophy about internationalization. Most of the workplaces, that the participants are working, are international and some of them have a positive and supportive policy about being international. Thus, international employees who had strong backing from the international philosophy/ policy which exists in their workplace they were

able to bring aspects of their culture to their job, take initiatives, unfold their international personalities and influenced other people with their actions.

The bidirectional relationship: b) the Swedish workplace cultures affects international employees

Besides, as it was mentioned in the beginning there is a bidirectional relationship between Swedish workplace culture and the presence of international employees in that. In the first part of the analysis, it is explained how the presence of international employees changed or influenced the working environment. This part will be focused on the Swedish workplace culture and how it affected international workers.

The Swedish workplace can be characterized as focused on teamwork. However, Stefan cooperating with two more teachers in his new job, was a new situation *Here in Sweden they work in teams of 3 teachers in every classroom and we are used to the Greek educational system where you have only one teacher. In Greece we are not used to cooperative projects, we work individually, and we have our own goals.* When he was asked about the learning outcomes of this job, Stefan said *I learned how to communicate with the members of the team, how to be fair so every opinion can be expressed, have a balance in our environment and how to solve conflicts without the support of the management... You deal with those things with your team.*

Another important factor that participants pointed out is the good balance between working life and personal life. Suzan noticed *In France you have to be at work from 9 to 18, otherwise, people will look at you really bad, they will think that you are not working, they want you to have your working life first...In the beginning, I was socked like people here they are not working they are on holiday all the time but now I adopted...I am working like Swedish, in Sweden we are flexible, you can work from home, is something common to think about your personal life before work.*

I was not used to working hours, as in Madrid we had fix hours 8-6, but you knew that no one was leaving at 6, you needed to stay longer if you wanted to be progressing...Here staying longer is seen the opposite way, as unproductive because if your colleague can stay 8 hours or less and you are staying 10 hours and you are doing the same thing, what are you doing? One day my manager sent me an email saying you know that you can go home... here they understand the life-work balance. (Armando)

Most of the participants, when it comes to decision making, had to learn and adapted the Swedish way, which is slower and requires a lot of meetings.

It takes a lot of time until you reach a decision. If you have an issue and you want to decide on it, you have a lot of discussions and meetings, you need to bring a lot of information to drive the discussion. Is quite annoying sometimes but at the same time, the decision is more

informed...In France when you need to make a decision it goes faster but we might not have all the information, all the truth and then you see if you fall or not. (Max)

They like to put their “or” at the end, not a clear answer. This is frustrating as we can be 3 months with one issue. Just take a decision and if it is wrong, we will see. We are going back and forth a lot of meetings, we are missing quite a lot of efficiency. Even if you take the wrong path you will learn why was it too soon, you will reflect... To adopt you need to understand why are like this, the culture and why people are more reluctant to decide, it is also good as you need to take the initiative, to push... (Armando)

To sum up, the learning process of international workers that took part in the different workplaces includes not only skills acquisition which is relevant to job tasks but also understanding the characteristics of the workplace culture of the specific country. Engaging in everyday job activities and in interactions with colleagues. Learning and adapting to the working environment, not in a passive way where the individual just accepts a context for what it is but in an active way where he/she understands the essence of context (and the reasons behind it), he/she is critical about the advantages/disadvantages and has his/her own judgment and he/she adds value with his/her actions.

2. Strategies and factors that were more meaningful for the learning process

The analysis of the international employees' interview data indicates that the learning process in the workplace for almost all participants was mainly informal, authentic and was occurred at and through work. More precisely, international employees were not offered training courses-seminars relevant to their job position and working activities. However, the learning process was efficient and meaningful because of the guided learning strategies like mentoring, questioning, modeling, observation which they followed.

a. Examples of organized training offered from the workplace

To start with, the workplace of one participant is offering a type of training to employees. The participant reported that during the first period in his new job as a preschool teacher he had some “formal” seminars with the manager of human resources. The goal of those seminars/meetings, which took place 1hour between his working schedule (so he had to step out from the preschool classroom), was an introduction of the ideology of the school and an explanation of the educational programs that the school was using. Also, he was given a folder which includes all the information that he discussed with the manager of human resources and he had the opportunity during those meetings to ask any questions. Except from that the educational institute that the international employee (Stefan) is working organizes study days for the preschool teachers 1 per year. However, according to Stefan *study days are passive you just sit and listen about policies or educational ideas there is nothing practical.* The comment

that the employee made about those seminars/meetings were *the meetings were not meaningful for my learning...they were offering surface information about policies, preschool's ideology, pedagogical materials which we should use.*

The international employees who are working at the global automotive company mentioned that they had some e-learning courses or a general introduction seminar for newcomers or some system safety courses. It is noteworthy that all employees admitted that this workplace affordance was not useful to their learning how to do their work. There was general information about the company and market, software, the ethical part of doing business, policies and some of the insights were not relevant and useful for their job. Some of the comments that the international employees made about this workplace affordance were: *it was time wasted, it was not enough, it was boring, they create awareness to you, but it is not how you learn.*

b. Learning strategies: Mentoring

Data from the interviews show that mentoring is a learning strategy which is often provided from the workplaces to new employees for them to learn how to use specific software and how to accomplish everyday tasks and routines. Three of the participants stated that they had a mentor for the first weeks of their job, who was an important and efficient factor for their learning process. Both French employees who are working in the international automotive company (in different departments) were supposed to have as a mentor for the first week the person whom they will replace. However, in both cases, the person had left before their arrival so one of their colleagues undertook this responsibility.

The first week she was sitting down with me for 8 hours every day, we were reading the emails together, working on the system together, she warned me about costumers and how they behave...Even now I reach out to her. (Suzan)

We spent a lot of time together, but it was more like "oh we have to work on that, let me teach you a little bit how it works" ...There was no plan he was teaching me when something came up during the day... I am still reaching out to him until today. (Max)

For a month you work with somebody who worked there for a long time, so you act like a shadow... you are not really doing so much work yourself, you are learning how they are doing it...You learn best when it is practical, and you see how the work is done. (John)

I had some preschool teachers as mentors, and I was observing things-routines in their groups that I wanted also to have in my classroom. (Stefan)

c. Learning strategies: Asking questions

Asking questions as learning strategy was also salient for participants learning even if they are working in different workplaces, everyone used this method. Stefan pointed out that he asked questions to his colleagues, for issues that he was struggling with like classroom manager. Suzan although she was positive about asking questions as a learning method in her workplace,

she was careful with her questions as she noticed that one of her colleagues commented for another employee, *she is here for 6 months and she is still asking questions*. Armando also indicated this issue by saying that *you cannot make other people teach you because they are busy, I was thinking when I should bother them and if I bother them, I need to have the right question*. However, he concluded that *you want to learn you are the one who is chasing and asking the questions is not like university...* On the other hand, Max did not seem to consider this issue *I am very curious and every time I had a question I was knocking on their door...and then something started, I was asking a lot and they (colleagues) noticed that I wanted to learn, I was curious, so they were coming to me first and explained stuff*. Even if two participants had some considerations about the use of questioning all of them used this method in their learning process and they admitted that it played a key role.

d. Learning strategies: Testing different ideas

The two educators mentioned one more learning strategy which they used which was testing different ideas in the workplace, to see which method-idea can solve problems, be more effective and successful. They applied to the new workplace methods-ideas that used to be efficient in their previous working experience and when those did not solve the educational problem, they started trying and inventing new methods-ideas.

I would like the school to provide me special training or further education if they really want me to support the kid with autism who I am responsible for because whatever I learned I learned it alone... I try something that in the past used to work for another kid with autism that I had, to browse books and magazines and I saw that he enjoys too. However, kids with autism differ so much from each other...Now I learned how to handle him because I tried alone so many things. (Liza)

I used my background knowledge from university and previous working experience and when I noticed that I couldn't solve the problems then I turned to observations. Self-criticism is important, to be honest with yourself and understand what you do well and what not and to be willing to ask help from others and try their methods... For example, I tried in my preschool classroom a trick-game that we used to do during the summer camp (where he was working in Greece) and it worked. I am saying 'papagali' a Greek word and they have to say shh and be quiet. (Stefan)

e. Key factor: Supportive working environment

Moreover, the supportive working environment seems to be a salient factor for the learning experience that international employees had. A workplace could be characterized as supportive when they have policies that allow international employees to express their individualities, take initiatives and have the freedom to act and take decisions based on their judgment. The concept of a supportive working environment extends to the relationships/ interactions which are taking place between colleagues and between employees and the members of higher positions in the hierarchy.

The policy supports the international identity...they want that, and they hire people from all over the world. You have the freedom to bring to your workplace feature from your culture, your ideas only religion is a limit". He also described an event where a colleague at the preschool encouraged him by saying "that you shouldn't worry about your English, because the language is just a tool that you will use to your teaching. (Stefan)

The support of the environment has a key role, they are supportive and that's how you continue speaking up. Even if something is wrong, they will give you feedback. My team will give me feedback on why the best question, comment or point of view is not good...I am improving right now, I am changing things to improve them, I don't just settle for what I know that's something important which I am learning. (Armando)

Victor emphasized in his interview about the support he got from his Swedish working environment which was very open and helpful and made him felt accepted as the transition period was soft, and the other employees did their best to intergrade him. He commented *They support me when I took Swedish, they were so grateful and helpful...whatever you learn in Swedish it will be a success and they always say thank you so much for trying.*

It is worth mentioning that participants noticed a difference in the interaction with people in a higher hierarchy in the Swedish workplace compares to their country. This difference was viewed positively for the learning process by international workers. Most of them commented that in their current workplace is easier to approach, discuss and generally have interactions with managers or other senior employees.

In Spain when the position is higher, usually people will be more reluctant to talk to you and busy...Here you can go to the director and ask. Your title is not a barrier. (Armando)

Hierarchy in France is very visible if you have a boss you need to address him in a certain way and probably to be more careful how you talk to him... Here it looks that it is easier to talk to hierarchy. (Max)

They are a lot more open and casual here in Sweden, you can talk to your manager like a friend in England you will rarely talk to your manager because of hierarchy. Workers hang out only with workers but in Sweden, workers hang out with their managers and can talk at the same level. (John)

Furthermore, findings also show that the individual agency of the international workers determines the learning process in the workplace. The personal factors such as values, motivation, subjectivities, capacities, and unique identities shape and contribute learning since base on the international workers choose to engage differently to the workplace activities. Participants indicated that their self-motivation, curiosity and their desire to learn, were key factors for their learning process. These factors drove the participants to continue asking questions, observe, imitate and adopt practices of other colleagues, work close to mentors and continue to be patient even when they faced challenges in the workplace.

3. Learning process: as an important factor that keeps international employees in the workplace

At this point, it is worth mentioning that even though at the beginning of the research there were no research questions about if the learning process might affect the decision of staying or leaving a workplace, the data from the interviews reveal new connections. Participants during the interview with the open ending questions were encouraged to reflect on their knowledge, experiences, and feelings and give wider and richer answers. Thus, they confirmed that an important reason which keeps them in a job position is the fact that they continue learning, developing and challenging themselves. In other words, they search for new workplaces and job positions, when they realize that no growth will occur in a personal and professional level in the current workplace.

I have a lot to learn here and that keeps me motivated and continuing living in Sweden and working. If I was feeling like ok from here, I am not going to learn anything I wouldn't continue. Every day, I am learning something. (Victor)

One of the reasons that I am quitting my job is that development is not good. I have a colleague who is been doing the same thing for 8 years, this is not what I want. Also, the training is a reason because is bad. No one ever offered me an opportunity to go for training. They don't inform us...you can probably find something hidden on the company's website, but you don't even know how to look at it if you have the right for training and how you can have access. The culture of the workplace is not into that, so I gave up... (Max)

I realized after being in my previous job for 1,5 years that it was super repetitive, and I came to a point that I was not learning that much. I wanted to move abroad, and I knew that my period there came to an end. My motivation to stay was not high and there they could not give me what I need to grow. (Armando)

During my development talk, where you talk about what areas you want to improve and how the company can help you, I asked for an educational course to learn new skills. They looked at the planning schedule for work, and they said I couldn't go, as I was busy working that week. It must suit them first before it will benefit you. I didn't have another chance to go on a course and that's why I left. I don't like to sit around and wait for chances, I am ambitious. (John)

To sum up, international employees valued workplace learning not only because they could acquire knowledge on how to accomplish work tasks and be productive, but because they perceived workplace learning as a salient factor that contributes to their wide development on a personal and professional level.

Chapter 5: Findings

The findings of this research are distinguished into three categories. The two categories are associated and answer the research questions, but the third category emerged after examining the different experiences of informants. A common issue kept appearing in the conversations with the international employees about their opinions in workplace learning.

To begin with, the first research question aimed to explore **the role of employee's international identity**, in their learning experience and engagement in the workplace. In some cases, the international identity of participants created some obstacles in their engagement in the workplace. For example, the existence of wrong and disempowering beliefs about the not effective work that takes place in Spain (Armando), the incidents which were described as discriminative like the Christmas dinner (Liza), the lack of communication about work practices between Swedes and internationals (Kevin) and the bigger workload that newcomer international employees undertake compare to Swedish, old employees (Suzan). It also seems that the matter of integration or adaptation via learning the Swedish language is necessary, when the working context is not international since alternatives like using the English language are not given (John). On the other hand, there was an example where learning and engagement between employees with different international identities were promoted by understanding and acknowledging the cultural differences in the way of working and by deciding together a common strategy for work (Max).

Next in the process of learning and engaging in the workplace was highlighted the bidirectional relationship between the Swedish workplace culture and the presence of international workers. This means that the presence of international employees caused some changes in the working environment but also the Swedish workplace culture influenced their work which led to new learning.

First, it needs to be clarified that in the subjective being of international workers are embedded the knowledge and skills, which were acquired in their previous working experience and the characteristics of their international identity. Thus, those two factors (previous working experience and characteristics of the international identity) were salient for the workplace learning, because by using them to their current job, international workers learned how to improve and develop their working requirements/routines, create a better or a friendlier working atmosphere or in other words had an impact on their working environment and the people in it. In this learning process, a key contribution was the supportive philosophy/policy about being international. Most of the workplaces, where the presence of international workers created a good impact on the workplace and important learning took place, had a positive and supportive policy about being international. This feature gave the freedom to international employees to bring aspects of their culture and language to their job (Stefan and Liza), take initiatives on how to handle work practices (Suzan and Max), unfold their international personalities and influenced other people with their actions (Armando and Kevin).

Furthermore, about the **bidirectional relationship** between the Swedish workplace culture and the presence of international employees, findings indicate how this workplace culture affected participants' learning and engagement. More precisely, in Swedish workplaces, there is a focus on teamwork, something which was new to Stefan, who had to learn how to collaborate inside the classroom with two more teachers. The existence of a good balance between working life and personal life was a reality to which the participants learned to adopt. However, some participants (Suzan, Armando) noticed a big difference, that in their countries working more hours was necessary for an employee to be viewed as someone who takes his/her job seriously. Likewise, participants commented on the way that decision making occurred in the Swedish workplace, which is a slow process that requires a lot of meetings before a final decision is taken. So, because the informants in their countries were used to a different way of working that refers to the decision making, had to understand the culture behind those meetings which lead to a decision, learn how to adapt to the Swedish way or how to take initiatives and move on with projects.

To sum up briefly the learning experience and the engagement with the working environment and the colleagues were influenced by the international identity of employees. Their learning process included not only skills acquisition and knowledge which were relevant to their job requirements but also an understanding of the Swedish workplace culture and its characteristics. Informants learned, adopted and were integrated to the new working environment in an active way, where they understood the essence of the working context, they were critical about the advantages and disadvantages of different strategies/routines that are being followed, they had their personal judgments and tried to add value to the working context.

Moving on, the purpose of the second research question was **to identify strategies and factors which were meaningful for the learning process of informants**. The findings show that the learning process was mostly informal, authentic and was occurred at and through work. There were some examples of organized training which was offered from the workplace, but the informants characterized them as not meaningful or efficient for their learning, *"it was time wasted"*, *"it was not enough"*, *"it was boring"*, *"they create an awareness to you, but it is not how you learn"*.

The learning strategies that were used by international employees were mentoring, asking questions and testing different ideas. Starting with **mentoring** it is worth mentioning that some of the workplaces provided to our participants a mentor for the first period. The word 'mentor' here refers to a skillful colleague, who has been in the workplace for a longer period and he/she introduced and informed the international workers for the job tasks, routines, and answers any questions that they have. Even if the workplace did not offer a mentor, participants like Stefan viewed some of his colleagues as mentors.

Asking questions was a popular method that helped the participants to learn a lot about their job requirements. Nevertheless, Suzan and Armando pointed out an issue to be considered about questions, which relates to asking good questions to your colleagues and approaching them

when they are not busy. Next, learning strategy was **testing different ideas**. A strategy that was used mostly by the two educators (Stefan and Liza) who tested a variety of methods/ideas having the intention to solve educational problems and be more effective in their teaching. They applied to their new workplace methods-ideas which used to be efficacious in their previous working experience or learned from during their university studies and when those did not solve the educational problem, they started trying and inventing new methods-ideas.

In addition, a key factor that contributed to the learning process of international workers was a **supportive working environment**. A supportive working environment for our participants was the existence of policies that allow international employees to express their individualities. Being able to have a proactive approach in their work and take initiatives, have the freedom to act and make decisions based on their judgments. The idea of a supportive working environment extends to the relationships/ interactions between colleagues and between employees and the members of higher positions in the hierarchy. The fact that in Sweden international employees experienced a positive and easier approach with the managers and other senior employees, benefited the learning process since they could reach out to them to discuss and interact.

Last but not least, findings show that **personal factors such as values**, motivation, subjectivities, capacities, and the unique identities shape and contribute learning since base on the international workers choose to engage differently in the workplace activities. Informants admitted that their self-motivation, curiosity and their desire to learn, were salient factors for their learning process. Those factors drove the informants to continue asking questions, observe, imitate and adapt practices of other colleagues, work close to mentors and continue to be patient even when they faced challenges in the workplace.

The third category of findings appeared after a careful examination of all interviews, where a common theme was revealed. It is suggested that when a workplace offers opportunities for learning to employees, it affects their decision of staying or leaving their job. The empirical data from the interviews showed a new connection. International workers during the interview with the open ending questions were encouraged to reflect on their knowledge, experiences, and feelings and give wider and richer answers. As a result, they confirmed that if a working environment provides and motivates continuous learning, developing and a personal challenge to them, is most likely for them to keep their job position. In other words, they search for new workplaces and job positions, when learning (informal and formal) in the working environment is poor or is lacking and when they realize that no growth will occur in a personal and professional level in the current workplace.

Chapter 6: Discussion

In this section will critically discuss any connections between the research findings and theories or between the existing arguments in the literature. It is important to highlight again that this study investigates workplaces from a learning perspective “Looking at work from the perspective of its learning potential is fundamentally different from looking at it simply in terms of competencies needed in order to perform the job well.” (Cullen et al., 2002, p. 36)

To begin with, the concept of international identity refers to three dimensions, which were introduced by Erikson, personal, psychological and social. More precisely, carrying an international identity for this research is perceived as a total of personal idiosyncrasies which means one’s characteristics and behaviors, a sense of self which is ‘developing into a defined ego within a social reality’ (Erikson 1980, p. 22) and a group identity which is constructed by the different social roles that individual has in the community. What is more, findings correspond to theory as indeed the expression of internationals’ identity is a continuity between how they construed themselves in the past and how they construe themselves as they aspire to be in the future (Weinreich & Saunderson, 2005). So, International workers’ identity having this continuity carries features from their cultures, previous working experiences, general life experiences, unique personal characteristics and played a key role in the learning process in the working environment because those elements were revealed during their participation and engagement.

In addition, the findings of this narrative study can closely relate to two of the four features of international identity as it is described by Coe & Neumann (2011). The international identity of our participants was relational and contextual since the construction of it depended on the international and national context (e.g. working environment) and the relationships that were occurred. This assumption also connects with sociocultural theory where context and interactions are crucial for the learning process.

Moreover, the concept of individual’s identity is a key factor for Illeris’ (2004) holistic model of learning in working life. The individual’s identity with the internal psychological process of interaction that takes place between his/her content (the cognitive) and incentive (the emotional), influences and forms the object environment just like our participants did with their workplaces.

Moving on, all international employees reported educative experiences during their engagement in the workplace. A key factor that was identified in different educative/learning experiences of our participants was Dewey’s principle of continuity. The experiences which occurred in the new workplace, built on previous experiences that international workers had in the past. For example, Liza and Stefan used in their teaching methods, tools and ideas that were successful in the past and they evolved them in the needs of the new workplace. Suzan stood out and influenced her colleagues in the new job position, because of her previous working-educative experience (visiting suppliers in person, give a presentation) which she continued doing in the

current job even though it was not necessary. Dewey's (1938) words described this perfectly as he wrote that what individuals learn (knowledge, skills) in one situation turns into an instrument of understanding and dealing effectively in a future situation.

However, Dewey's theory of experience does not mention something about the negative experiences which could also be educative but only if the individual is critical and reflected on the learning outcome. The participants of this research indicated some negative experiences in their working life, but they managed to recognize learning outcomes that empowered them. For instance, Victor even though he was experiencing a negative experience in his workplace, wherein the beginning they did not present results of research and make publications, the team was demotivated and was complaining about their boss mistake, he managed by being critical about the situation, to become proactive, take his own responsibilities and influenced his colleagues to have the same empowering attitude. Max admitted that despite the fact that he will not manage to bring the change that he wanted to his workplace, from this experience he learned how to be more self-confident and less scared, how to support and fight for his ideas. Stefan concluded that having experienced lack of training and difficulties in the adaptation period, in the end when he had the chance, he became the mentor he wanted, but for the Erasmus students who conducted their practice in his classroom.

In addition, findings of the research indicate a bidirectional relationship between the presence of international workers which includes all the elements of their identity and the Swedish workplace culture. This correlates to Illeris (2004) holistic model of learning in working life, where he presents two triangles which are superimposed on each other. One stands for the individual level which could be replaced by 'the presence of international workers' and the social level (environment) which could replace the 'Swedish workplace culture'. The workplace learning model represents the distinction and the connection between the individual and social levels of workplace learning. The individual-level refers to the subjective being of employees and the social level to the objective environment (workplace) which includes socio-cultural aspects and technical-organizational aspects. According to Illeris (2004) 'in the world of reality, it is a matter of a dialectical whole between the subjective and the objective, i.e. an interaction between two connected levels that mutually contain and presuppose each other'. In other words, workplace learning arises when the employees' identities influence and evolve the practice of the community (the changes that our international employees brought) and when the community's practices or culture affects individuals (the affection of Swedish workplace culture on participants).

In a broader view, the findings of the bidirectional relationship and Illeris's (2004) concept of learning in working life could be included in the sociocultural theory of learning, because for sociocultural theory the contributions of the community, cultural context, and social interactions are essential for the learning process. Similarly, the experiences of the international employees indicate that the interaction with a supportive working environment, which refers to encouraging policies about being international and to good relationships with colleagues and

superior members of the workplace hierarchy, is an element that contributes to workplace learning.

It is worth mentioning that there are many discussions and different opinions that take place when it comes to the subject of viewing learning as a goal of workplaces. For instance, Fuller and Unwin (2005) highlighted that ‘that learning is not the primary goal of the workplace but a by-product of engagement in the activities and relationships involved in the production of goods or services’ (p.3). On the other hand, Toiviainen (2015) argued that ‘the wider analysis of an organizational context which in my terms belongs to object history reveals that learning increasingly forms an integral part of the primary goal of workplaces’. After conducting and analyzing the empirical data this research agrees with Fuller’s and Unwin’s statement of learning not being the primary goal of workplaces. None of the workplaces had learned as their primary goal, to which they will focus on, create strategies and organize training/ activities (formal learning) for achieving it. The primary goal of workplaces was the production of goods/services and profit for which they had strategies, methods, systems and designed programs on how to achieve them. However, learning has gained ground in this field and workplaces are considering it as an important part of working life, because the learning process of workers can benefit and improve the production of goods/services and increase profit. So, according to Vaughan’s (2008) statement, “workplace learning becomes a tool through which businesses may gain competitive advantage (recruitment and retention of workers, development of innovative practices, and the production of new knowledge)”. However, it needs to be explained that in this thesis learning is not viewed as a tool. It is in the contexts of business and organizations where learning is not the primary goal, that workplace learning is a medium (rather than as a tool) to achieve the primary goal of production of goods/services.

Even if learning is not the primary goal of workplaces, an important fact that should be considered is what Lave (1993) wrote about participation in work and learning, that they do not exist in separation. Workplaces are environments where employees participate in work activities, engage with colleagues, act and take initiatives, negotiate meanings and that is why learning occurs for them. The empirical data of this research accept Lave’s (1993) statement since answering the second research questions about the strategies and factors which are meaningful for the workplace learning, showed that the participation and engagement of international employees in the workplace were crucial for their learning. More precisely, participants pointed out that mentoring, having a more experienced co-worker next to you, asking questions and a supportive working environment were meaningful methods/factors for their learning. John during the first month was working in pair with an old worker of the company, Max and Suzan were offered a mentor for the first period who helped them with the work requirements. Stefan admitted that he was directly engaged with the work tasks *I entered the team and I felt like trying to catch up with their rhythm, they didn’t stop or wait for me. Something was in progress and I had to run to catch up with the program. I remember that they had some problems which they discussed with me and I was trying to help even if I didn’t know the kids so well.* So being influenced by Billet’s (2001) work it can be said that International employees’ learning process was strongly affected by the workplace affordance which means

the everyday opportunities for engagement in working activities, the direct guidance (mentoring) from more experienced colleagues and the indirect contributions provided by the physical and social environment. Nevertheless, informants' values, personal histories, and motivation determined their engagement to what was afforded to them and as a result their workplace learning process.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the learning experiences that international employees had in their workplaces, in order to acquire an understanding of the role of international identity in the learning experience and which were the meaningful strategies, methods or factors for the learning process.

Concerning the first research question, the findings indicated that the international identity of employees played a key role in workplace learning. Firstly, the narratives of international workers reveal that there were cases where their international identity created some obstacles in their engagement to the workplace, so issues of discrimination, stereotypes, lack of communication and necessity of learning the Swedish language were noticed. Secondly, the formation of a bidirectional relationship between the Swedish workplace culture and the presence of international employees, which carries all the features of their identity, influenced and determined the workplace learning of informants.

Concerning the second research question about the meaningful strategies, methods or factors, it is concluded that the process of workplace learning that international employees experienced, was mostly informal, authentic and was occurred through participation in work practices. The meaningful strategies/factors which strengthened the workplace learning were mentoring, asking questions, testing different ideas and the significance of a supportive working environment. However, personal factors such as the desire to learn, values, self-motivation, curiosity, subjectivities, capacities and general the unique identities shaped and contributed learning since base on the international workers choose how to engage in workplace activities. Lastly the emerged conclusion that this research came to, refers to the fact that the young international participants value workplace learning and are viewing it as an important reason/motivation to continue being in the same job position.

Limitations

Like every research, the current study meets several limitations. To begin with, the size of the sample is small, and the age of informants is between 25-32, so the study refers to quite young international employees who are mostly from countries of Southern Europe. Moreover, this narrative study is also being affected by the criticism which takes place in academia about qualitative research and trustworthiness. However, this issue was addressed explicitly in the chapter of methodology. It is also important to highlight, due to the limitations that narrative studies are facing, that narrative methods “are always exploratory, conversational, tentative, and indeterminate” (Hart, 1996, p. 141).

Recommendations for further research

Despite the limitations, this narrative study should be perceived as a cultural scaffold or a thinking 'tool' (Moen, 2006) for organizations and companies with international employees, in order to reflect on the importance of workplace learning and how they can achieve it. Also, this research could be a thinking 'tool' for researchers and inspire future research which can be built on these findings and extend the knowledge about the field. Further research could investigate a bigger sample with wider nationalities, ages and combine qualitative and quantitative methods to find out more elements about workplace learning in an international context and how it can be improved.

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Swedish Work Environment Authority.

<https://www.av.se/en/about-us/>

Appendix 1

Questions of the interview

- Studies/ Working Experience Background

1. What was your previous education?
2. Can you talk about your previous working experience and what skills do you think you acquire from them?

- Current Job

1. Why did you move to Sweden?
2. What were the reasons that you choose this job?
3. How was the adaptation (first) period in your work?
4. Did you have a trainee program/seminar in the beginning of your work? If yes, describe the process and what were the learning outcomes?
5. Do you feel that the organizational policy/culture supports the international identity of employees?

- Learning process

1. If you reflect on your learning process in this workplace which were the important factors/people that support, help and extend your learning?
2. Do you think that you affect your workplace in some way and how?
3. How did your previous working experience affect you?
4. What can you do now that you weren't able before (what did you learn? how did you grow/develop)?

Appendix 2

Interview Consent Form

Research project: Workplace learning: how is experienced by international employees, in a Swedish context.

Researcher: Sofije Shengjergji

Research participant name:

I agree to participate in the research project led by Sofije Shengjergji and to my interview being audio-recorded. The purpose of this document is to specify the terms of my participation in the project through being interviewed.

- 1. I have been sufficient informed about this research project. The purpose of my participation as an interviewee in this project has been explained to me and is clear.
- 2. I confirm that I have had the opportunity to ask questions and the researcher has answered any questions about the study to my satisfaction.
- 3. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.
- 4. I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially. In any report on the results of this research my identity will remain anonymous. This will be done by changing my name and not revealing the workplace name.
- 5. I consent to use of the data in research, publications, sharing and archiving.

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Name of participant

Date

Signature

.....

Researcher

.....

Date

.....

Signature