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THE ROLE OF INTERCULTURAL ENCOUNTERS IN RAISING STUDENTS' LANGUAGE AWARENESS AND LANGUAGE SENSITIVITY

Intercultural encounters, among many values, serve as critical incidents that promote understanding, noticing and observing particular cultural as well as linguistic phenomena. Additionally, narrating intercultural encounters may activate the processes commonly associated with LA methodology, i.e.: description, exploration, languaging (understood as making meaning and shaping knowledge and experience through language use; Swain 2010), engagement and reflection. The aim of this paper is to analyze Ss' narratives of intercultural encounters and present the impact that these encounters had on students' language awareness, language sensitivity and language use.

1. Background to the study

Language Awareness (LA) is a concept that has been rediscussed recently. Studies prove that awareness of language can enhance L2 learning (Schmidt 1995; Simard and Wong 2004). Additionally, the development of language awareness positively affects learners' language competence and their sociocultural tolerance (Simard and Wong 2004). From teacher's perspective, Teacher Language Awareness (a term introduced by Andrews) leads to more effective grammar instruction and language teaching (Andrews 2007).

Various definitions of language awareness capture different meanings of the term (for details see tab. 1). They tend to stress the role of consciousness and sensitivity about the language and its features. This, in turn, facilitates the use of language and understanding its function.

Tab. 1. An overview of various definitions of language awareness

An overview of definitions on language awareness
• "language awareness is a person's sensitivity to and conscious awareness of the nature of language use and its role in human life." Donmall (1985: 7). Her definition included: "a developing awareness of the pattern, contrast, system, units, categories and rules of language use together with the ability of the individual to reflect upon these aspects of language form and function." Donmall (1985: 7).
• „an understanding of the human faculty of language and its role in thinking, learning and social life. It includes awareness of power and control through language, and of the intricate relationships between language and culture" (van Lier 1995: xi).
• „Language awareness – EXPLICIT KNOWLEDGE ABOUT LANGUAGE, AND CONSCIOUS PERCEPTION, AND SENSITIVITY IN LANGUAGE LEARNING, LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LANGUAGE USE" (ALA definition).
• Language awareness – the development in learners of an enhanced consciousness of and sensitivity to the forms and functions of language (Carter 2003: 64).
• LA – linguistic problem-solving (Bourke 1992, in Bourke 2008: 13).
• LA – consciousness-raising (Rutherford 1987; Schmidt 1990; Fotos 1993; Sharwood Smith 1993 in Bourke 2008: 13).
• LA – focus on form (Long 1991; Doughty and Williams 1998 in Bourke 2008: 13).
• LA – grammar interpretation tasks (Ellis 1995 in Bourke 2008: 13).
• LA – form-focused instruction (Ellis 2001 in Bourke 2008: 13; Hinkel and Fotos 2002) .

Some definitions tend to narrow down the term just to grammar and form-focused instruction. Some others (e.g. Bourke 2008; Svalberg 2007) treat language awareness as a multi-faceted concept which includes all the linguistic components. Thus, language awareness (LA) is not a body of established facts about grammar. Currently, LA is rather perceived as the sum of enabling strategies one uses to deal with the language system. The strategies involve cognitive strategies, such as noticing, hypothesis testing, problem-solving and restructuring.

As a concept, language awareness is said to incorporate several dimensions. Here, the authors also vary in the number and types of its subcomponents. For Donmall (1985), language awareness encompasses three domains:
– affective – referring to attention, curiosity and forming attitudes,
– cognitive – sensitivity to linguistic patterns,
– social – it influences students' performance as communicators (Donmall 1985).

In contrast, James and Garret (1992) claim that language awareness is a much broader construct, which includes several other dimensions, such as: language proficiency, confidence as well as attitude, motivation and actual usage. Consequently, they enumerate 5 domains of LA, namely: affective domain, social domain, power domain, cognitive domain and performance domain (James and Garrett 1992 in Svalberg 2007: 287).

Finally, it is essential to mention 5 main features of LA methodology, which indicate how learner can develop his/ her language awareness (Borg 1994: 62 in Svalberg 2007). LA is said to be data-driven (students are to explore a set of data and infer the rule or generalization). This, in turn, implies certain activity on the part of the language learner who must be involved in description (not prescription), exploration, languaging (defined as using language- Ishikava 2012 or making meaning and shaping knowledge and experience through language use- Swain 2010), engagement and reflection. Borg (ibid.) provides a detailed characteristics of particular activities, which are enumerated below:

– It (Language awareness methodology) involves an ONGOING INVESTI-GATION of language as a dynamic phenomenon rather than awareness of a fixed body of established facts.
– It involves learners in TALKING ANALYTICALLY about language, often to each other.
– It considers essential the INVOLVEMENT of learners in exploration and discovery.
– It aims to develop not only the learners' knowledge about and understanding of language but also their LEARNING SKILLS, thus promoting learner independence.
– The aim is to involve learners on both a COGNITIVE and an AFFECTIVE level.

As this article focuses on developing language awareness in the L2 learners by means of critical incidents technique, a closer look would be given to the social dimension of language awareness, particularly to language sensitivity, perception of language features and language use.

2. Critical incident theory – a catalyst for metalinguistic reflection

Critical incidents theory is based on the assumption that people are "story-telling organisms" (Connelly and Clandinin 1990: 2, as cited in Wajnryb 2003: 2; MacIntyre, as cited in Flyvbjerg 2005: 63; Trahar 2009). They make sense of random experience by the imposition of story structures (Clandinin and Connelly 2006; Rossiter 2002; Sinclair Bell, 2002: 207; Trahar, 2009; Tsui 2001). Telling the story, i.e. recalling and narrating the memorable event, is significant as it organizes the past experience and prepares for future action. The word 'critical' in the critical incident theory is synonymous with important, significant and

thought- provoking. Critical incidents are produced by the way we look at a situation: a critical incident is a description and an interpretation of the significance of an event. (Tripp 1993: 8). Certainly, the significance ascribed to the situation varies from observer to observer. This, however, enhances the individual and unique character of the experience.

In the educational context, a critical incident is an experience identified by the learner as significant and from which learning is achieved (Cammilieri 2002; Finch 2010; Gabrys-Barker 2012; Gade 2011; Mitton-Skükner et al. 2010; Montalbano and Ige 2011; Pavlenko 2002 and 2007; Tripp 1993; Tsui 2001; Xu and Connelly 2009). Critical incidents trigger reflection, processing and understanding of a particular situation. This links critical incident theory with LA methodology. Thus, the 'critical' occurrence is the 'noticing', which Schmidt (1995: 29) refers to as "the conscious registration of the occurrence of some event" (p. 29). Any stage of constructing- reconstructing the critical incidents has a particular function which is presented below:

– Telling / Narrating the event (storying)/ description – > noticing,
– Retelling / destorying / interpretation / – > understanding .

3. The study

3.1. The study: aims and objectives

The study conducted was supposed to provide the answer to the following questions:

1. What are the most common issues, topics or situations presented in the narratives of intercultural encounters?
2. To what an extent does the fact of meeting native- or non- native speakers sharpen learner's perception and contributes to the development of language awareness?
3. What value/ benefit do students see in the event? In what way have intercultural encounters contributed to students' overall linguistic and cultural development?

The study involved 94 students of English Philology Department (University of Silesia, Poland), aged 24. All of them were completing MA programmes. They mostly specialized in ELT methodology. Throughout their BA and MA studies they covered some courses in ELT, SLA theory, psychology, linguistics and applied linguistics. The gender distribution of the sample was: 89 females and 5 males, respectively.

The students were requested to write a narrative describing the most memorable encounter with the foreigners.

Intercultural encounters can be regarded as critical incidents as they bear most of the characteristics of these events. First of all, they are memorable and

thought- provoking. They make the participants think and analyze particular moves long after they have finished. Secondly, intercultural interactions bring ambiguity and uncertainty about the background rules by which the interaction will occur and the meaning of signals (Gudygunst and Nishida 2001, cited after Matsumoto et al. 2005; Alagic et al 2009). Another troublesome issue relates to intrinsic uncertainty in the meaning of the words. Thirdly, the inevitability of conflict and misunderstandings is quite high. Intercultural interactions are likely to bring about the patterns of behaviour that do not conform to our expectations. This, in turn, produces negative emotions which are upsetting to our self-concepts (Matsumoto et al. 2005).

The study was part of the larger project. The process of narrative writing was preceded by a series of lectures and training sessions in the area of intercultural competence. The overall training included some techniques applied to develop cultural competence and stages to become interculturally competent. To enhance the process of narrativization the subjects of the research were asked a series of questions (e.g. What happened? When? And why? Why is this situation significant for you? What have you learned from this situation?). The students were given ample time to write their narratives (they were to be produced at home). The data were collected over the period of December 2011- January 2012.

The subjects described both direct meetings with foreigners as well as indirect ones, during which they were only observing and listening to the foreigners instead of interacting with them. Indicative is the fact that indirect contacts concerned mostly native speakers of English. For some of the respondents the very encounter meant a series of meetings including first few contacts with native or non- native speakers of English. In their cases, the narratives took the form of retrospection and contained a number of short, loosely related reflections. Other respondents concentrated solely on a single situation and provided a lengthy and detailed comment.

Questions facilitating the process of narrativization imposed a certain structure, yet they were treated by the students as hints rather than essential points to follow. That is why, some of the authors approached the questions seriously, and provided brief answers to them. For others, the questions served as a trigger and catalyst for reflection. Although their stories were structured around the questions, the authors did not provide a straightforward reply to them.

The word limit was 250, however, some of the respondents slightly exceeded the limit. The narratives also differ in form (some are dialogic, whereas others are purely descriptive, containing some observations and remarks) as well as in the depth of the analysis (some pieces of work evaluate the situation from different angles, whereas the others present one dimension of the event only).

The narratives focused on two types of meetings, namely the encounters with native speakers of English and the encounters with foreigners, where English served as a common means of communication. The former concerned mostly Englishmen (10), Americans (10) and Australian (1). The latter involved a wide

spectrum of interlocutors coming from various parts of the world. European countries prevail (Holland, Italy, Germany, France, Belgium, Bulgary, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Turkey). The narratives also concern representatives of so called exotic countries, which are culturally and linguistically distant from the Polish context, i.e. Arabia, Egypt, Morocco, China, Nigeria, Iraq. Two pieces of work described meeting a multicultural group and a multilingual person (a Japanese with English roots).

The authors of two narratives did not specify the background of their interlocutors. The detailed presentation of the data is included in tab. 2.

Tab. 2. Native vs. non- native speakers of English -background information

Interlocutor	Nationality (type of country) and number
Native speakers of English	English 53 (5 in other than English context, e.g. Tenerif, Holland); American – 10, Australian – 1 = 64 altogether
Non- native speakers	Dutch – 4, Italian – 3, German – 2, French – 2, multicultural group (English lessons, international project) – 2, Arabic – 2, , Belgic – 1, Bulgarian – 1, Brazilian – 1, Chinese – 1, Egyptian – 1, Nigerian – 1, Moroccan – 1, Japanese with English origin/ roots – 1, Portugese – 1, Spanish – 1, Swede – 1, Iraqi – 1, Turkish – 1 = 28 altogether
No answer	1
Not clear, no precise info	1

4. The results – The benefits of meeting a foreigner – the analysis of students' reports: Language awareness

One of the approaches to discuss narratives is based on qualitative content analysis. The procedures involve reading narratives, identifying themes or patterns and topic analysis (Alasuutari 1995). In this particular study, the narratives concerning the encounters with native speakers and non-native speakers are discussed separately. The order of topics is dependent on the frequency of occurrence. The quoted narratives are in the original form, that is why they may contain erroneous language.

4.1. Encounters with native speakers of English

The analysis of students' narratives proved that the encounters with native speakers contributed to better awareness of the communication process in general. The comments presented below best illustrate the point.

16: My impression was more or less: I mistook the plane and I am in China.
26: First visit to England. Surprisingly, my first contact with 'real English'
was 'shocking' (the narratives are in the original form).

The subjects admitted to gaining some awareness about various aspects of communication, namely: onomatopeic sounds, non-verbal language or the ways native speakers responded to animals (examples: 'She's a good girl", "He's a top boy" while addressing animals). Here, the subjects observed some context- specific rules and conversational routines that were typical for the target language country, but not for a native language one. The examples concern the following situations: the behaviour of an English dog which did not react to Polish comments or the act of patting child on its head, which was not welcome by the native speakers. The extract from the narrative presented below is important because it serves two functions. On the one hand, it increased language awareness of the study participant, but on the other, it had some impact on the native speakers of English, their language awareness and their perception of non-native language learners as well. Thus, the incident influenced both parties involved in the conversation.

60: The most interesting happened while we were having dinner at David's parents' house (Scotland) While I was laying the table, I paid attention to table mats, which represented farm animal – a cow, a duck, a dog, a pig, horse and a sheep – and noises that they make. I pointed out that in Poland a dog does not make "woof, woof" but 'hau, hau", a pig makes 'chrum, chrum", a horse makes "iiha", a duck makes "kwa, kwa". As I supposed, my Scottish friends burst out laughing because they thought that all animals in the world make the same noises. They tried to imagine what would happen if a Polish and a Scottish dog met and wanted to communicate, moreover, we had a heated discussion on which pig makes more realistic noise. In addition, they were so amused that they decided to call their friends and share the new discovery with them…… This situation made me realize that English native are not aware of the fact that learning a foreign language requires changing the way of perceiving the world. (narratives are in the original form).

The third category of topic dealt with situational cues that facilitate conversation as well as the awareness of barriers that may block communication. The subjects reported developing their awareness of how to use the environment for initiating and sustaining conversation. Some of the subjects mentioned difficulties in maintaining conversation with native speakers after the opening "How are you?" question. The example provided below indicates some negative social consequences that the student experienced as a result of not knowing particular, culture specific conversational rules.

76: At the beginning, Joanna used to ask me every time we met the question that later made me think, namely the question: "How are you?" At first, I used to answer that I'm ok regardless of how I really felt. Later, however, when we become closer friends, I answered how I really felt: that I'm not good, that I have problems with my boyfriend… After some time, when she asked me one more time… she said that it seemed that I was constantly unhappy. I replied that I was not but she asked so I wanted to tell her how I really felt…..I explained to Joanna that in Poland, contrary to Britain, if someone asks us how we feel, we tend to say how we really feel and that usually, we complain about our lives. ….She seemed to be surprised that Polish people describe their feelings so openly and that they are really interested in the state of feelings of other people. (narratives are in the original form).

In general, the encounters with native speakers were treated as a challenge as well as a test of the students' speaking skills. The extract from the narrative indicates emotional tension experienced by the subjects during the encounters.

41: The first two hours were the worst. It is difficult to describe the first two hours because there was no communication at all. Thus, she started to use the simplest words and I did the same….As a result we started to communicate and I started to feel English. I uncovered that it is not easy to talk and simultaneously think in a foreign language (narratives are in the original form).

As far as factors that block communication are concerned, they were related to the learners themselves, their self- concept, their attitudes and perceived language proficiency (e.g. one's unwillingness to learn about other cultures, lack of openness towards others; fear experienced before the conversation or apprehension felt at the very prospect of speaking English; paralyzing fear that affects language comprehension and reaction). Some of the barriers were connected with the very situation, namely: staying abroad (in Ireland) and having to work at the same time.

The next category of topics that were mentioned deals with vocabulary extension. The subjects reported that they became more aware about casual, informal expressions or phrases, which consequently aroused strong feelings.

30: (about a conversation with a native speaker receptionist in a hotel) *After a couple of minutes me and my friend were irritated because the woman was still using a slang even after our request to use normal English because we are from abroad.* (narratives are in the original form).

The respondents gained better understanding of the phrases concerning the use of vocabulary and subtle shades of its meaning.

72: There are some nice expressions and idioms that American people would never use such as "to give somebody a fright"- they consider them rather snobbish. And when I once said: "I'm not from this neck of woods" my American friends nearly fell off their chairs. ☺ (narratives are in the original form).

The subjects realized that language phrases are sometimes used metaphorically, not literally (examples reported include: "How come", "take a chair"). They observed difficulties in understanding language jokes or experienced problems with misinterpreting language and failing to get the right meaning ("5 o'clock tea" tradition). This, in turn, made the respondents more alert to language issues, which is best summarized by one of the respondents' comments: *"I should be more sensitive to language in general".*

The following set of issues relates to so called discourse awareness, understood as the awareness of how language is used and structured. The respondents noticed different degrees of language formality, especially when applying for a job. They also experienced difficulties in adjusting the language adequately to the social situation. They reported lack of language flexibility and inability to modify the language to suit the context. Consequently, they used too formal language. This resulted in surprise on the part of the interlocutor and discomfort on the part of the subjects. Some of the subjects realized that the frequency of use of polite expressions (hi, hello, thank you) was different in L2. As a result they experienced negative social consequences, namely: appearing rude.

Quite a few of the subjects increased awareness of the diversity of languages: identification of various accents, recognition of foreign or regional dialects (examples reported concern: Ireland, Newcastle, Edinburgh- Scotland). They became more sensitive to contextual or individual differences in pronunciation (example: problems with understanding the pronunciation of Fisherman). Some of the subjects realized differences between AE and BE, especially in terms of spelling conventions (example: "too"). Others reported problems that they experienced as a result of mispronunciation or wrong pronunciation (examples: mispronouncing the word "*canal*' or speaking British accent in USA or Canada and not being understood by the interlocutors).

In general, one of the benefits of meeting a native speaker concerned the recognition of the importance of pronunciation. This in turn resulted in the change of the respondents' teaching. The subjects declared the necessity to pay more attention to phonological component in their teaching.

The next category of issues relates to the awareness of individual's own language competence. Encounters with native speakers made the subjects realize their mistakes and errors. It also provided them with the feedback on their language. The sample of the narratives illustrates the point.

72: At first Americans marvelled at the fact that I actually learned English "so well" without living in an English- speaking country. However when

they get to know you better, they start to be more frank with you. They
correct your mistakes and laugh at them. At the beginning, I found it quite
annoying but then I got used to that, and I was grateful in the long run. You
have to be very careful about the choice of vocabulary. (narratives are in the
original form).

Meeting a native speaker changed the respondents' own perception of
themselves as language learners. The examples reported concern certain features
of character that a person has to develop, namely: the necessity to be open and
willing to absorb the knowledge. The subjects also realized "t*he constant need*
of being a learner", i.e. a person who is inquisitive and curious towards other
cultures. Meeting native speakers raised the respondents' awareness of hard work
that needed to be paid to learn a language and freed them from the assumption
that high level of proficiency guaranteed no problems in communication.
Successful conversation with native speakers often brought self-satisfaction and
self-confidence ("the devil is not as black as it is painted" as one of the students
commented) and broadened their horizons.

Finally, encounters with native speakers increased learners' awareness of the
cultural differences between L1 and L2, which resulted in greater sensitivity
to cultural issues as well as the awareness of the impact of culture on people's
behaviour, language and way of thinking (examples concern: differences in the
approach to giving tips, locking houses, cheating, announcing a visit in advance/
attending English mass, giving presents for Christmas. As one of the subjects
said:

53: *When you hear Amanda [Australian girl] saying she got sun cream for*
Christmas it makes you think. (narratives are in the original form).

Contacts with native speakers brought about the recognition and verification
of stereotypes and students' previous knowledge or opinions. It changed the
subjects' thinking about native speakers and Polish people; their behaviour and
reactions.

59: *There was no need to panic. ...foreign people are not really that much of*
'monsters' we have imagined them.
5: *Americans are very helpful, NYC is not a dangerous place but a very*
big city where you can meet different people (narratives are in the original
form).

Encounters with native speakers also triggered reflection about L1 and L2
differences and L1 and L2 culture (example: superstitions – rolling up umbrella
can bring bad luck, which is not known in Poland). The subjects gained new
knowledge and realized that each culture is unique ("*every culture has its own*
climate" as one of the students said).

4.2. Encounters with non- native speakers

Similarly to the encounters with native speakers, contacts with non- native speakers also contributed to better awareness of the communication process. However, the emphasis was put on the learner himself/herself, his/her role in the communication as well as his/her awareness of the attitudes and feelings that communication evokes. Again, the conversation is treated as a challenge or a test of one's skills. However, the chances of succeeding and achieving success are bigger than in case of meeting native speakers. The samples below illustrate the point.

> *17: not everybody is a native speaker and it is easier to speak English with a learner than with a native speaker (...). I learned to use my English without hesitation.*

> *45: Luigi was quite sociable and straightforward but I did not feel comfortable with my English and I was afraid of making mistakes. Therefore, I was not able to start a conversation... After a while I was amazed by my skills and the sophisticated vocabulary that I used* (narratives are in the original form).

The second category of topics deals with discourse awareness and better knowledge on how to use language to convey meaning. The subjects declared that they increased awareness concerning the frequency of occurrence of some words (e.g. 'please' or some idiosyncratic features e.g. etcetera). They paid more attention to the role of non-verbal communication.

The third set of issues related to vocabulary extension (broadening lexical knowledge of words for historical monuments). Some of them realized that literal translation or free association is not always a good communication strategy in case of not knowing an English word. The example concerns the word 'fire machine' as an equivalent for *zapalniczka* (eng. lighter), which had some comical effect and made the interlocutor burst out laughing. Quite a few of the respondents observed that they lacked language sensitivity and awareness about figurative language, register, etc. They experienced problems with modifying their language in case of being misunderstood by the interlocutors (the situation described concerns the act of buying the ticket in Italy).

The subjects also reported to increasing language sensitivity and dependence of language on some contextual cues.

> *64: ...he wrote me back very quickly and it turned out that last time we were talking I offended him. I had no idea how, and he reminded me that I said something like: "Are you stupid or what?". Of course, I did not mean to offend him, I wanted to say that something which in   Polish would sound like: "Niemądry jesteś, czy jak?" What's more used it in a playful manner and was sure that I was not saying anything wrong or inappropriate, whereas*

he made me aware of the fact that everyone (from England) in his place would feel offended. Moreover, he explained that instead of 'stupid' I should use 'mad', which is acceptable and not offensive.

This situation embarrassed me very much and made me more aware of the code of conduct I should get to know, and stick to when talking to people of other nationalities. It made me realize that I should not translate Polish phrases literally into English, which Poles reportedly often do. Indeed, from that day on I started to pay more attention to what I was saying and took interest in what mistakes Poles make when speaking English.(narratives are in the original form).

The observed differences in shared knowledge, which was a surprise for them (the situation described deals with background and cultural knowledge of people in Poland in contrast to German). They also became aware of the diversity of languages, differences between oral and written codes. Additionally, they had opportunities to observe different types of messages.)

Quite many topics related to non- linguistic issues, namely: sociocultural and sociolinguistic knowledge. This resulted in observing people's attitudes, behaviour and reactions in various communicative situations. Consequently, it brought the verification of stereotypes (e.g. getting help when unexpected). Encounters with non- native speakers made the subjects realize how deeply rooted the stereotypes were (example concerns using English in France and not being served by a shop assistant who responded rudely). Contacts with non-native speakers brought one more advantage, namely it served as a teaching lesson, it broadened students' horizons showing them some new knowledge and traditions of exotic countries (examples concern: celebrating Christmas in the streets, organizing parade/ celebrating lent, treating religion very seriously).

Finally, the encounters with non-native speakers had a comforting impact on the subjects. They became aware of mistakes they committed. This, however, did not paralyze them, but made them treat mistakes as a natural part of conversation. The comments provided below best illustrate the point.

7: Despite all the difficulties in communicating with her (Germna old lady), I felt comfortable and calm. I knew that her English is not flawless, just like mine. I wasn't nervous, I'd say I was rather relaxed and it didn't mind for me if I made mistakes (narratives are in the original form).

5. Conclusions and implications for further research

Bourke (2008) said that the personal exploration of the L2 helps the learner find out how language works and thereby enriches and extends one's knowledge of the language. The subjects participating in the study perceived encounters

with foreigners as a valuable experience, which played the role of catalyst, food for thought, eventually leading to 'aha' experience'. Encounters were also treated as a reference point used long after the encounter has finished. The subjects appreciated the educational, cultural and social values of the encounters despite the tension and discomfort that some of the encounters had on their participants. The analysis of the students' narratives shows that language awareness covers a variety of shades and meanings and is understood in the following way:

– Awareness as noticing, conscious perception of certain features (linguistic or cultural ones),
– Awareness as understanding a particular situation (and reacting appropriately),
– Awareness as sensitivity (and flexibility) to conditions and contexts,
– Awareness as gaining perspectives on learning and using the language,
– Awareness as self- awareness, realizing one's strengths and weaknesses as a language learner.

Certain themes reappeared in the topical analysis of the two categories of narratives. The difference however lies in the interpretive angle and emphasis put on particular issues. Encounters with native speakers were usually language- or situation- oriented and evoked strong feelings of surprise. This resulted in some changes in the behaviour of the subjects, namely: more intensive language exploration, language extension (esp. in the areas of vocabulary and pronunciation), language verification (improving and refining the knowledge about formality, styles and registers. The most frequently reported problems concerned linguistic identity, namely: self- concept and self- expression.

In contrast, encounters with non- native speakers were more culture- and attitude- oriented. In a sense, the encounters empowered the subjects as they brought some changes of perspectives, attitudes and enabled the subjects to gain conversational skills. The feelings reported concerned satisfaction with the outcome of the conversation. The benefits of meeting non- native speakers that were mentioned by the respondents concern the following: practicing communication, breaking initial barriers (about communication, about one's mistakes), gaining confidence, increasing self- efficacy, understanding one's own linguistic behaviour, gaining perspective on one's own linguistic behaviour (easing initial tensions, providing comfort about one's own linguistic behaviour.

All in all, the study proved that disclosing their own stories allows students to become more language aware, thus, gaining a new perspective on a language learning process and to understand other language learners. The author does realize the limitations of the study. The study was successful because of the subjects' willingness to share their experiences. Yet, some questions still remain unanswered, namely: to what an extent the reported situations concern problems relevant to particular people or just problems the subjects were ready to report? What is the correlation between narrating the events and changing the subjects' future behaviour? In other words, apart from declarative knowledge, what practical benefits can be obtained by means of narrating intercultural encounters?

Consequently, the issues of the subjects' attitudes and behaviour need further investigation.

Implications for further research would also concern extending the research period, and involving the subjects in more regular and systematic experience sharing.

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Webgraphy

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