“Stories from Abroad” – Students’ Narratives about Intercultural Encounters

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to analyze the narrative inquiries produced by proficient students of English (n=40) who described and reflected upon their encounters with foreigners (native and non-native speakers of English). Narrative approach views individuals as ‘story-telling organisms’ who by narrating a story reflect upon and understand their experience. Narrating stories based on intercultural encounters brings a variety of benefits (both educational and personal). It helps to derive the meaning from a particular, single, context-specific situation; build the knowledge about culture-bound behaviour, gradually develop students’ intercultural competence, and finally increase their self-knowledge. As students reported, it was also a memorable and personally significant experience, however not always positive.

Keywords: narrative inquiry, intercultural competence, intercultural encounters, cultural awareness

Introduction

Current tendencies in educational and social sciences stress the role of internal cognitive and reflective processes in determining individual’s perception and action. In the view of narrative approach human beings are described as “story-telling organisms” (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, p. 2, as cited in Wajnyrb, 2003, p. 2; MacIntyre, as cited in Flyvbjerg, 2005, p. 63; Trahar, 2009). Wajnyrb (2003) perceives an individual as “the reservoir of countless micro-episodes of experience constituted of recollections of previous (long past and recent past) engagements with people and events” (p. 14).

The major principle behind narrative analysis is that human beings make sense of random experience by the imposition of story structures (Sinclair Bell, 2002, p. 207; Trahar, 2009). Telling the story is significant as it organizes the past experience and prepares for future action. Clandinin and Connelly (1989, p. 2) summarize it by saying that “the storied quality of experience is both unconsciously restoried in life, and consciously restoried, retold and relived through processes of reflection. Narratives are as essential as the action itself.” Thus, according to Clandinin and Connelly (2006, p. 375), narrative inquiry is the study of experience as story. And as such, it is the first and foremost way of thinking about experience. Similar view is expressed by Wajnyrb (2003, p. 8) who perceives experience as the raw material of story, which itself is the raw material of narrative text. For Wajnyrb, the experience is the event or incident, moment or a slice of life that is encountered as it happens, whereas the story is a person’s reflection on the experience, which can be defined as the individual or introspective or subjective recollection of the human experience.
Narrative inquiries may serve a variety of functions. However, Wajnryb (2003, p. 14) points out that the value of narratives lies in the fact that they combine two elements, i.e. the individual/biographical aspect and the collective/shared experience. Consequently, first and the most important function of the narratives lies in how they help individuals to structure and understand their experience. As Connelly and Clandinin (1989, p. 4) say, stories provide a narrative thread that people draw on to make sense of their experience and themselves. If additionally, the experience is connected with the situation culturally or linguistically different from participants’ backgrounds, narrative inquiry provides shaped windows where participants could restory their understandings of diversity (Mitton-Kükner, Nelson, Desrochers 2010, p. 1162). Secondly, by sharing with others, narratives or stories provide a common ground for discussion and ideas sharing.

Beijaard et al. (2004, p. 121 as cited in Tsui, 2007) adds that stories may serve as a catalyst for reflection as “through storytelling, teachers (or people in a general sense) engage in narrative theorizing” (p. 659).

And finally, narrative inquiry serves as a mediation between the past and the future, thus promoting another, future story (or forward looking story Mitton-Kükner, Nelson, Desrochers, 2010, p. 1168). Thinking narratively individuals consider who they are in the present while creating beginnings to who they might be in the future (Mitton-Kükner, Nelson, Desrochers, 2010, p. 1168).

Narrative – History and Current Applications

Narrative inquiry has been known from the Ancient Times as a basic way to derive meaning from experience (Flyvbjerg, 2005, p. 63). It, however, regained its popularity in the 20th century. Sinclair Bell (2002, p. 208) enumerates some areas in which narrative inquiry found its place, namely:

- teacher education (teacher professional development) - narratives in teacher education shed some light on how teachers construct their professional identity and how they shape their practice. Connelly and Clandinin (1989, p. 4) talk about “stories to live by”, i.e. a narrative inquiry of teacher’s professional identity, which allow teachers to discover their professional identity or their behavioural patterns. They may result in new or different stories (Beijaard et al, 2004, p. 121 as cited in Tsui, 2007, p. 659);
- language education - narratives provided by learners or language users indicate what and how patterns of language use are established;
- learner training (preparing learners for autonomy) - learner autobiography, diary studies and case studies; learner portfolio. Narratives inform the learners and enable them to get insight into their motivation, strategies and goals of language learning;
- narratives from language educators, allowing for explicit analysis and reflection.

There is also one more application of narratives I can think of, namely: a means for developing intercultural competence. Meeting a foreigner is always a unique experience of either positive or negative nature. Thinking about it, and consequently narrating it promotes reflection, understanding, and brings change. The value of narratives in fostering positive attitudes towards others is recognized by many authors. It is enough to mention the initiative of Council of Europe, namely: the Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters, the document prepared by a group of researchers, including:
The retrospective view of the intercultural encounter favours a critical analysis of the way the user acted at the time, how he or she sees the encounter now and how he or she might respond in the future.” The Autobiography has the potential to promote change in various aspects, namely: behaviour, knowledge and skills, attitudes and action.

The Nature of Narratives

Narrative inquiry is based on the assumption that observation, followed by description and interpretation of the events brings understanding. Labov (Flyvbjerg, 2005, p. 64) says that when a good narrative is finished, it is unlikely to ask a question “what is the point?”, because the narrative is an answer itself.

Narrative analysis is sometimes compared to critical incidents (or Critical Incident Technique), and indeed, both of them share some similarities. As Tripp (1993, p. 112) points out, in both approaches the past (understood as a past experience) is used to illuminate, articulate, understand and gain control over our professional development, judgement and practice.

Critical incidents refer to positive or negative situations/events that are experienced. According to Tripp (1993, p. 24), critical incidents are indicative of underlying trends, motives and structures; that’s why they significantly contribute to one’s understanding of some phenomena. Analysis and evaluation of critical incidents enable to reflect upon the nature of these phenomena. Camilleri (2002, p. 15) prefers to use the term “biographical approach based on anecdotal evidence” given by people sensitive to culture. This feature, however, is also partially characteristic for narrative inquiry.

Tripp (1993, p. 24-25) claims that “critical incidents appear to be ‘typical’ rather than critical at first sight, but are rendered critical through analysis”. He says that there are two important stages in the creation of critical incidents, namely: the production of an incident (observation, recall and description of what happened;) and analysis (finding more general meaning of the incident and its evaluation). This procedure can surely be followed in narrative inquiry.

The difference, however, lies in the purpose of using these two. Critical incidents may be the primary source of data, a departure point for reflection and understanding of certain values, judgements and practices. In contrast, when talking about narrative analysis, people work the other way round, from observations, narratives to some critical incidents that lie behind them. Both procedures can, however, reveal things unobservable in any other ways or challenge values that lie behind the incidents and narratives respectively.

The Study Proper

The study conducted among 40 students of English Philology Department (University of Silesia, Poland) aimed to shed the light on the following issues:

- What are the most common things, issues, topics covered in the narratives of intercultural encounters?
What emotions are reported by the students when they narrate the intercultural encounter? Is meeting “the Others” viewed as a positive nor negative experience? What feelings accompany students when they narrate the situation?

- What value/benefit do students see in the event? In what way have intercultural encounters contributed to students’ overall linguistic and cultural development?

The students attended the second year of MA programme. They mostly specialized in EFL teaching. Throughout their BA and MA studies they covered some courses in ELT, SLA theory, psychology, linguistics and applied linguistics. The gender distribution of the group was: 38 females and 2 males.

The study, conducted in March 2010, was preceded by a series of lectures concerning intercultural competence, techniques applied to develop cultural competence and stages of becoming interculturally competent. The students were requested to narrate, i.e. to describe and reflect upon the encounter with the foreigner. To enhance the process of narrativization the students 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 Study Results

The analysis of the students’ narratives showed that encounters with the foreigners evoked strong feelings on the part of the students. The vocabulary used in the narratives included a lot of emotionally loaded words. Additionally, the students provided a multitude of sincere comments and expressions denoting strong emotional engagement. Negative feelings prevail, namely:

- Surprise (due to something unpleasant, unexpected), bafflement (9),
- Discomfort, frustration (5),
- Shame (2),
- Stress, anxiety (2),
- Scepticism, disbelief (2),
- Fear of negative evaluation, fright, inability to concentrate, which usually accompanied their attempts to communicate,
- Nervousness,
- Disappointment (especially with their own verbal or non-verbal behaviour),
- Discouragement.

The students also reported some positive feelings, i.e.:

- Surprise (positive; great experience) (8),
- Amusement (2),
- Curiosity (interest).

From the analysis of the narratives we can guess that encounters with foreigners are thought-provoking experiences, which put the students into the unknown, difficult to cope with situation. Quite a lot of the students confessed to the feelings of uncertainty, resulting from:

- Confusion (i.e. lack of knowledge, not knowing how to react) (6),
- Embarrassment (6), caused by unexpected situation or interlocutor’s response,
- Astonishment (5),
- Dissonance due to cultural or linguistic differences.
The narratives described mostly the encounters with native speakers of English (Englishmen, Americans or Australians). Some of them, however, pictured the meetings with the representative of other nationalities, namely: Turkish, Bulgarian, Brazilian, French, Nigerian, Marrocean, Portuguese.

As far as the topics of the encounters are concerned, they can be classified into four broad categories, namely: issues related to culture, language, attitude and situations increasing one’s self-knowledge. Cultural issues refer mostly to recognizing differences in norms, values and patterns of behaviour. Linguistic issues concentrate mostly on suprasegmentals (i.e. intonation), problems with adjusting language to various social situations and difficulties in conveying hidden and refined meanings (i.e. metaphoric language, language humour). Category of attitudes covers the situations that contribute to the change of perception of foreigners as well as the verification of stereotypes. And finally, self-knowledge category deals with personal benefits, including increased understanding of one’s own behaviour, emotions and expectations. The detailed enumeration of the issues that were tackled is presented in table 1.

**Table 1**

*Thematic Analysis of Students’ Narratives*

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Topics covered in students’ narratives</th>
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| Cultural issues | • Different interpretation of certain traditions students were accustomed to, unusual behavioural routines, everyday culture (e.g. buying sun cream for Xmas, celebrating Christmas on the beach in Portugal or in the streets in Nigeria, observing Lent, i.e. withdrawing from eating anything, different superstitions: unfolded umbrella brings bad luck in England);  
• Different values and norms of socially accepted behaviour, realizing different code of conduct and social norms (e.g. cheating, not locking doors; leaving tips, which is unwritten but essential rule to follow; differences in Polish, UK, and US educational systems; different meaning of non-verbal language—noding head denotes refusal in Bulgaria);  
• Different degrees of formality to certain procedures (application for a job, job references);  
• Observing certain rituals, celebrating traditions and events, e.g. American being serious and solemn towards folding the flag ceremony and demonstrating it with pride);  
• Noticing unacceptable behaviour of tourists, e.g. observing tourists in Turkey who did not bother to observe Turkish traditions and were unwilling learn new things about Turkish culture). |
| Linguistic issues | • Difficulties in recognizing language varieties and dialects (A.E./B.E; Geordie);  
• Difficulties in differentiating between formal and informal language; colloquial language; humorous use of language and metaphorical expressions;  
• Difficulties with conveying meaning, esp. with specific words or some nuances;  
• Problems to adjust and modify language to various people (esp. old people, children) and situational contexts (e.g. informal encounters in a pub);  
• Difficulties with the frequency of occurrence esp. of polite forms: high frequency of ‘thank you’, ‘please’ in English when compared
• Getting feedback on your English;
• Wrong pronunciation or mispronunciation of the words.

Attitudes
• Breaking stereotypes, realizing false stereotypes, changing attitudes (e.g. British believed to be rude and reserved, in fact turned out to be hospitable, polite and willing to offer help; 5 o’clock tea);
• Realizing negative stereotypes, experiencing hostile attitude from others (e.g. being refused to serve by a French shop assistant, because of a good command of English);
• Foreigner’s low level of knowledge about Polish culture, lack of basic factual, i.e. geographical information about Poland (the example of Germans and Americans, who located Poland next to the Mediterranean Sea or thought that Russian phrasebook would be suitable to communicate in Poland);
• Noticing certain prejudices, indifferent or negative attitudes (French and Turkish situations).

Self-knowledge
• Communication apprehension (fear of speaking with native speakers, lack of spontaneity), difficulties in initiating conversations or making phone calls;
• Problems with conducting conversation, understanding figurative, non-literal or implied meanings; problems with understanding non-verbal communication and cope with inadequate linguistic knowledge (e.g. “at first Americans are marveled at your command of English, later they start correcting you”);
• Learning from a native speaker, getting some additional content or cultural knowledge (i.e. exchanging ideas with native speakers about language e.g. onomatopoeic words, colloquial English); observing native speaker behaviour (e.g. noticing native speaker’s difficulty in explaining the word ‘plausible’ to his interlocutor).

As far as the structure of the narratives is concerned, it varies depending on the author and the topic covered. Noticeable is the fact that there is a large discrepancy in terms of the length of particular parts (some narratives are elaborate, detailed and personal, whereas the others capture the most essential things). While analyzing the structure of the students’ narrative inquiries in details, 87% of them is divided into paragraphs, whereas the remaining 13% is not. Majority of them follow the pattern: description of the situation (background), analysis and conclusions. The final part (conclusions) includes both general remarks or reflections as well applications or references to one’s life.

The wording used in the narratives ranges from 340 (the minimum number of characters) to 788 (the maximum number), with 489, being the average number.

The narratives differ in form (some are dialogic, whereas others are purely descriptive, containing some observations and remarks) and in the depth of the analysis (some evaluate the situation from different angles, whereas others present one dimension of the event).

Quite interesting is this part of the narratives that tackles the relevance of the encounter to the life or present situation of the subjects. The analysis of the narratives
proved that meeting a foreigner is a memorable experience, providing a learning opportunity, which is significant for the learner. It can bring change in at least three areas: awareness of culture (both L1 and L2) and culturally-induced behaviour; language awareness and awareness of oneself as a learner and as a person. The benefits that the students drew from the narratives are enlisted in Table 2.

Table 2

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<tr>
<th>Areas of change</th>
<th>The benefits of meeting a foreigner - the analysis of students’ reports</th>
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| Awareness of culture and culturally-induced behaviour | • Awareness of the cultural differences, which results in greater sensitivity to cultural issues as well as the awareness of the impact of culture on people’s behaviour;
• Reflection about L1 and L2 differences and L1 and L2 culture, better knowledge and understanding of Polish culture;
• Awareness that each culture is unique (“every culture has its own climate” as one of the students said);
• Realizing the change of perception while learning English (it refers to initial conceptions to L2 culture which were verified in the process of individual’s contact with this culture), change in thinking and perception of others, realization that some stereotypes or opinions are not true;
• Awareness of how deeply rooted certain stereotypes are;
• Surprise at American negligence and disinterest in some contemporary issues. |
| Language awareness | • Increased language awareness, esp. for shared knowledge and culture specific linguistic features (e.g. idioms); broadening of linguistic knowledge, esp. concerning language variety, pronunciation, metaphorical or humorous use of language;
• Observation of how people react, awareness of differences in behaviour and some social as well as linguistic barriers that may affect communication; observation and reflection of how people (esp. Americans) react to one’s use of idioms or strange (incorrect or incomprehensible) language;
• Awareness of language is used in different situations. |
| Awareness of oneself as a person | • Self-observation, esp. in difficult to handle or stress-evoking situations;
• Better self-confidence thanks to some positive experience (“the devil is not as black as it is painted” as one of the students commented), broadening one’s horizons; satisfaction;
• Noticing the need to be inquisitive and curious towards other culture in order to extend one’s knowledge and develop appropriate attitudes. |
| Awareness of oneself as a learner | • Awareness of hard work that needs to be paid to learn a language;
• Realizing the need for better and more detailed preparation for each visit; |
Cont. Table 2

- Awareness of how to use the environment for initiating and sustaining conversation;
- Awareness of some barriers (e.g., one’s unwillingness to learn about other cultures, lack of openness towards others);
- Recognizing the importance of pronunciation, language and native speakers, which resulted in the change of one’s teaching;
- The need of being a learner (necessity to be open and willing to absorb the knowledge); freeing oneself from assumptions that high level of proficiency guarantees no problems in communication;
- Verification of one’s previous knowledge and opinions, change in thinking about native speakers and Polish people;
- Surprise at American negligence and disinterest in some contemporary issues.

Two samples of students’ narratives are included in Appendix.

Conclusions

Asking students to reflect and then report upon the intercultural encounters brings several benefits of the short-term and long-term relevance. First of all, the task combines cultural, linguistic and personal elements, and as such enables to handle real-life experience, which is later transformed into useful knowledge (and self-knowledge). As a result, it may gradually build intercultural competence. Camilleri (2002: 23) summarizes it by saying that as a means of fostering intercultural competence there is a need for:

a) developing cognitive complexity in responding to new environments
b) motivating affective co-orientation towards fresh encounters
c) directing behaviour to perform various interactions with additional social groups.

Narratives about intercultural encounters may also serve as a practical tool for helping individuals to make sense from intercultural encounters. The idea of multilingual and multicultural society, strongly supported by Council of Europe and ECML (2008 was proclaimed as a year of Intercultural Dialogue; www.coe.int; www.ecml.at) as well as UNESCO (2010 was declared as a Year for Rapprochement of Cultures; http://www.unesco.org, 15 March 2010), calls for the development of attitudes (e.g., understanding, sensitivity, tolerance, openness) and skills (e.g., observation, reflection) necessary to handle intercultural encounter.

Narrating about intercultural encounters sharpens participants’ perception as learners but also as future teachers. It makes them realize what to focus on in their teaching practice and what to emphasize in teaching to avoid embarrassing situations and minimize sociocultural transfer.

In this particular study narratives seem to affect four dimensions of an individual: me as a person (attitudes, emotions, self-knowledge, self-concept, self-belief or self-confidence), me as the participant of the intercultural encounter (feelings, sensitivity to cultural issues, etc.), me as a learner (deeper understanding, recognition of language issues previously neglected or missed) and me as a future teacher (a promise and rationale for changing one’s future teaching).
References


Webgraphy:
- [http://www.coe.int](http://www.coe.int), 15 March 2010
- [www.ecml.at](http://www.ecml.at), 15 March 2010
- [http://www.unesco.org](http://www.unesco.org), 15 March 2010
Appendix

Samples of students’ narratives.

Example 1

“I had an opportunity to spend some time among American and British native speakers of English, while staying in Canada and England. When it comes to cultural differences I did not notice many of them. In term of temperament, paradoxically, American people seem to be closer to Polish people than the British. They are easy-going and hospitable, just as Polish people. When I was in Canada, I could pay a visit without making an appointment in advance and it was not considered rude.(...) From what I experienced, American people are more sincere and authentic.

The thing that I really liked about American people is that they always try to be positive about everything, irrespectively of what happens. When I asked my American friends how it was going they often smiled and said that everything was fine. It is of course impossible that things were always fine, but try to ask a Polish person the same question and then you have them complaining at length about all the problems of the world...

There are also some obvious differences between the language we learn in the classroom and the authentic one. At first, everyone compliment you on your excellent command of English. Both American and British people seem to be glad about the fact that a foreigner speaks to them in their own language. One of my American friend marveled at the fact that I actually learned English “so well” without living in an English-speaking country. However, when they got 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 for that in the long run. You have to be very careful about the choice of vocabulary. I think rather British than American dialect is promoted in Polish schools, and this can mislead many Polish student of English, especially at an advanced level, as they are to talk to an American native speaker. Generally, American dialect, apart from slangish words, is simpler. American people do not use sophisticated words, because they do not think it is necessary. Communication is simple. Principle of minimum effort. Lots of abbreviations. 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 😁.

The problem that I experienced when I was in Canada was with the accent. I always learned British accent and I had only British phonetics and I always preferred British accent to the American one. But sometimes when I tried to talk to American people with the British accent, they did not understand me. I am not sure if they really did not understand me or they were just pretending. I learned somewhere that American people do not really like when someone talks with a fake British accent. Since that time, I always try to switch to American accent whenever I meet an American native speaker.”
Example 2
"Cross-cultural incident"

“The cross-cultural incident that most lingers in my memory took place in London where I was living for a year and a half during my gap year. I was twenty one. I was requested to sub my friend for a month. I consented to her proposal since it was a golden opportunity for me to get teaching experience in a multicultural classroom. I was teaching 2 groups of children. The group highly varied in terms of nationalities. In the third week I was called by the principal who wanted to have a talk with me. I remember that I got excited about it since it appeared to me that I was faring well in my work. It turned out that the parent of a Thai child come to the principal to lodge a complaint against me. The parent complained that I once patted his child’s head and that I tended to hand out papers over his child’s head. When I heard that I was extremely baffled and astonished. At first, I felt as someone played a joke on me. But the I realized that it was happening really. I learned from the principal that in Southeast Asia the head is considered to be the most sacred part of the human body and one should never touch anyone’s else’s head. Hence, in Southeast Asian countries it is exceptionally inappropriate to touch one’s head and passing an object over a person’s head is perceived as an insult.

What I learnt from this cross-cultural experience is that it is crucial indeed to get knowledge of various cultures, especially of these with which we are in touch on a regular basis. Furthermore, we should also make an attempt at understanding these cultures. In addition to this, one should also bear in mind what people form various cultures may feel or think since what we may be doing may actually make them feel uncomfortable, confused or they may even be piqued at our behaviour or words. It turns out, as it was my case that the gesture of patting someone else’s head has a totally different meaning in Western culture than in Asian, and that in turn may result in troublesome and unpleasant situations and might lead to miscommunication."

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