

# AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVE AND INTERCULTURAL AWARENESS

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The currency of intercultural education has risen worldwide in response to increased diversity within societies resulting from migration and global flows of populations. As intercultural education becomes a core responsibility of schooling, the attention to developing students' intercultural capabilities grows even faster. The school and all the educational agencies must find the most suitable tools to adequately address the complex multiculturalism of the third millennium, so to promote the students' ability to understand one another across and beyond all types of cultural barriers. This paper offers a reflexive analysis of the efficacy of using autobiographical narratives for enhancing students' intercultural awareness. Autobiographical narratives have a productive potential as a strategy for stimulating reflexivity about cultural identities and intercultural relations. The Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters (AIE), published by the Council of Europe (2009), is proposed and analyzed as a framework that can help students reflect

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critically on specific intercultural encounters and promote intercultural communication situations. 'Intercultural communication' is today a model that allows all children and young people to recognize and being aware of each other's identity, as it is oriented towards fostering interaction, dialogue, mutual recognition and enrichment of any individual, in respect of the different identities of the other; it is an approach that offers a forward-looking model for managing cultural and language diversity.

## 1 Introduction

Managing Europe's increasing cultural and language diversity in a democratic manner has become a priority in recent years. European countries have become a destination for a constantly growing migratory flow, which has questioned the collective imagination related to one's own cultural identity; this has meant adverse reactions of reluctance, distrust, disorientation, sometimes fear. Today's society, in its multiethnic complexity, is now living a continuous process of transformation that sees the interweaving of different cultural models and which creates the need to guide the young, apparently stuck to their reassuring identity patterns, in order to open them up to a social evolution as active citizens in a system based on solidarity. It is extremely necessary to study and face the variegated and renewed framework of the world of migrants, to establish a set of shared cultural and educational orientations in order to promote integration and educational success for any foreign student worldwide. Respect for, and promotion of, cultural and language diversity are essential conditions for the development of societies based on social cohesion.

## 2 Cultural identities: interaction and awareness

*How shall we respond as educators to language and cultural diversity?*

Promoting the development of intercultural competence is a main concern of mainstream education.

The school and all the educational agencies must find the most suitable tools to adequately address the complex multiculturalism of the third millennium, so to promote the students' ability to understand one another across and beyond all types of cultural barriers. Mutual understanding and intercultural competence are more important than ever today because through them we can address some of the most serious problems of contemporary societies.

"A plurality of languages and cultures characterizes the Italian school nowadays" (MIUR, 2012)<sup>1</sup> "and "the analysis of the students' linguistic biographies testifies that different forms of bilingualism and diverse ways of being bilingual are now widespread in our classes".

The task of any educational system is to intervene to guide and help those

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<sup>1</sup> *Indicazioni nazionali per il curricolo della scuola dell'infanzia e del primo ciclo d'istruzione*, MIUR, 2012

who grow up in a culture, different from their original one, to find an identity within a new context and to guarantee that those who already live in that culture welcome the newcomers. The school and the educational centers have the duty to take the challenge that the new society poses and face daily educational paths with intercultural goals. ‘Intercultural communication’ is today a model that allows all children and young people to recognize and being aware of each other’s identity, as it is oriented towards fostering interaction, dialogue, mutual recognition and enrichment of any individual, in respect of the different identities of the other; it is an approach that offers a forward-looking model for managing cultural and language diversity.

According to what we read in the document “*Diversi da chi?*”, issued by the National Observatory for the Integration of Foreign Students and for the Intercultural Development (MIUR, 2015), the universalist approach of our school today must measure and combine with the specificities and the stories of those who live in our country and with the transformations of the school population that have taken place during these years. One of these transformations, perhaps the most relevant one, concerns the growing presence in the classrooms of children and young people who have a history, either personal or family, of migration. Global migration processes have also changed schools and are calling for new educational tasks. The speed and depth of such an integration also depend on the school. It is in the school that students with migration backgrounds can learn a co-citizenship anchored to the national context and open to an increasingly large, interdependent, interconnected world. All these children constantly “train” to live in a widespread variety. Finally, it is also in the school that families and communities with different histories can learn to know each other, overcome mutual distrust, feel responsible for a common future. Intercultural education can be the background on which to activate specific training and educational courses aimed at integrating foreign students, in order to transmit the essential knowledge and skills the future generations should be equipped with to actively participate in an increasingly global and complex environment.

*How can we help those who have a migratory history to build their identity and find their place in a different context?*

The answer lies in the **narration** and in the **autobiographical narrative**, a real methodology of inclusion that promotes self-awareness and other-awareness. A personal and emotional narrative, full of real references, enhances thinking for inclusion purposes. Stories may be entertaining, educational, or cautionary, but Bruner (2002) also stresses their very important socializing and acculturating role. Story, he underlines, is a precondition for our collective life

in culture. The **Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters** (AIE, Council of Europe, 2009) points in this direction.

The *Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters*<sup>2</sup> (AIE) is a very useful tool that can represent a solution for an inclusive action in every educational context. It is a concrete response to the Recommendations of the Council of Europe's *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue* "Living together as equals in dignity"<sup>3</sup>.

"The learning and teaching of intercultural competence is essential for democratic culture and social cohesion ... Intercultural competences should be a part of citizenship and human-rights education ... "Complementary tools should be developed to encourage students to exercise independent critical faculties including to reflect critically on their own responses and attitudes to experiences of other cultures."<sup>4</sup>

The Council of Europe's mission is to guarantee democracy, human rights and justice in Europe. Today it serves 800 million people in 47 states and aims to build a greater Europe based on shared values, including tolerance and respect for cultural and linguistic diversity. The *White Paper* viewed intercultural competence as a crucial capability which needs to be developed by every individual to enable them to participate in intercultural dialogue. However, it also noted that intercultural competence is not acquired automatically, but instead needs to be learned, practiced and maintained throughout life. Educators at all levels and types of education play an essential role in facilitating the development of intercultural competence (Barret *et al.*, 2014).

"If there is a European identity to be realized, it will be based on shared fundamental values, respect for common heritage and cultural diversity as well as respect for the equal dignity of every individual", (COE, 2008)

### 3 The Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters

The *Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters* is (AIE) a resource designed to encourage people to think about and learn from intercultural encounters they have had; an intercultural encounter is an encounter with another person (or group of people) who is perceived to have different cultural affiliations from oneself. Such encounters may take place either face-to-face or virtually through, for example, social or communications media. They may involve people from

<sup>2</sup> The *Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters* (AIE, edited by the Council of Europe) and supporting documents were developed for the Language Policy Division of the Council of Europe. (Division for Language Policies, 2009)

<sup>3</sup> (<http://www.coe.int/dialogue>), Section 5.3 "Learning and teaching intercultural competences", (Section 5.3), p. 152

<sup>4</sup> AIE, p.152

different countries, people from different regional, linguistic, ethnic or religious backgrounds, or people who differ from each other because of their lifestyle, gender, social class, sexual orientation, age or generation, level of religious observance (Barrett *et al.*, 2009).

The AIE is a sort of personal diary that helps to reflect on experiences with ‘other people’ who have other ‘cultures’, whether they seem close or distant in time and space. It is also a tool that helps to decide how everyone can and should learn from an intercultural meeting, what actions to take, how one can deepen his/her knowledge and take advantage of an event that has been significant, and how to be part of the understanding of ‘others’ and their ‘cultures’. The discovery of the components underlying these meetings allows those who use the Autobiography to acquire greater awareness of their own experience and reactions, thus developing intercultural competences and awareness.

Those who use Autobiography improve their understanding and other useful skills for their future by critically reflecting on their experiences. They choose to describe specific intercultural encounters they have taken part in, analyze the experience individually and identify different aspects of the intercultural competences they already have, and which become a stimulus to develop others. The AIE is very useful for everyone: it can be used at school or in any other educational context that promotes lifelong learning. It is a tool for self-assessment and personal development in an informal context that can also be valid outside, in formal educational settings.

There are two versions of the AIE:

- a Standard Version - for use by older learners and adults
- a Version for Younger Learners - for use by children who need help from an adult in reading and writing and in thinking back over their encounter.

Both versions of the Autobiography are structured according to a model of intercultural competence that includes four elements: Knowledge and skills; Behavior; Attitudes and feelings; Action.

Here follow the aims established for each element:

### *Knowledge and skills*

- Having knowledge about other people: knowing facts about people whom one meets, and knowing how and why they are what they are.
- Discovering knowledge: using certain skills to find out about people one meets, by asking questions, seeking out information, and using these skills in real-time encounters.
- Interpreting and relating: understanding people or places or things

by comparing them to familiar people, places, things in one's own environment, seeing similarities and differences.

- Being critical: noticing how other people think and act and distancing oneself from one's own ways of thinking and acting, and being able to explain one's judgements about both.
- Becoming aware of one's own assumptions, preconceptions, stereotypes and prejudices.

### *Behavior*

- Being flexible: adapting one's behavior to new situations and to what other people expect.
- Being sensitive to ways of communicating: recognizing different ways of speaking and other forms of communication that exist in other languages or other ways of using the same language.

### *Attitudes and feelings*

- Acknowledging the identities of others: noticing how others have different identities and accepting their values and insights.
- Respecting otherness: showing curiosity about others and being willing to question what is usually taken for granted and viewed as 'normal'.
- Having empathy: being able to take someone else's perspective, to imagine their thoughts and feelings.
- Identifying positive and negative emotions and relating them to attitudes and knowledge.
- Being tolerant for ambiguity: accepting that, because people who belong to different cultures have different beliefs and different values, there can be multiple perspectives on and interpretations of any given situation.

### *Action*

- Acting: as a consequence of everything else, be willing to and able to relate to other people to change things and make them better.
- Taking action: as a consequence of all the rest, being willing and able to become involved with other people in making things different and better.

In short, at the level of action, intercultural competence provides a foundation for being a global citizen. For this reason, intercultural competence

is a core competence which is required for democratic citizenship within a culturally diverse world. Intercultural competence is therefore a combination of attitudes, knowledge, understanding and skills applied through action which enables one, either singly or together with others, to:

- understand and respect people who are perceived to have different cultural affiliations from oneself;
- respond appropriately, effectively and respectfully when interacting and communicating with such people;
- establish positive and constructive relationships with such people;
- understand oneself and one's own multiple cultural affiliations through encounters with cultural difference" (Barret *et al.*, 2014).

The autobiographical narrative is a story about the self. Usually the subject is an important or key event within the writer's childhood or adolescence (Erdem Mete, 2018).

As with all writing, the parts of a good autobiographical narrative are the following:

1. Introduction - An engaging opening; Background information; Hints of meaning
2. Body - First event of experience; People details; Sensory details; Feelings; Dialogue
3. Second event of experience - Specific action with sensory details: use language that appeals to all five senses to bring people, places, and actions to life
4. Final event of experience - Specific movements: continue to describe the specific movements and gestures of characters to bring them to life for the readers; Dialogue; Interior monologue
5. Conclusion - A look back from the present; Significance of the experience

## 4 Components of the AIE

Below are the *Notes for facilitators* which show the components of the AIE and the main questions the learners are required to answer for each component. These components perfectly correspond to the standard scheme of the autobiographical narrative.

THE STANDARD A.N .SCHEME	THE AIE COMPONENTS
<b>Introduction:</b> An engaging opening	<b>Who I Am (Optional)</b> How would you define yourself?
<b>Introduction:</b> Background information	<b>The Encounter:</b> Title, description, time
<b>Introduction:</b> Hints of meaning	Location and importance of the encounter.
<b>Body:</b> First event of experience	Where did it happen? What were you doing there? Why have you chosen this experience?
<b>Body:</b> People details	<b>The Other Person</b> Who else was involved? (Acknowledgement of Identities)
<b>Body:</b> Sensory details	What was the first thing you noticed about them?
<b>Body:</b> Feelings	<b>Your Feelings</b> How did you feel at the time? What did you do when you had this feeling?
<b>Body:</b> Dialogue	<b>Talking to Each Other</b> When you think about how you spoke to or communicated with the other people, do you remember that you made adjustments in how you talked or wrote to them? (Communicative Awareness) Did you already have any knowledge or previous experience which helped you to communicate better? (Knowledge)
<b>Body:</b> Second event	<b>Finding Out More</b> Was there anything in the experience which puzzled you and which made you find out more at the time? If you tried to find out more, how did you do it? (Knowledge Discovery)
<b>Body:</b> Final event	<b>Using Comparisons to Understand</b> Did you compare things about the other culture with similar things in your own culture? Did it help you to understand what was happening? (Interpreting and Relating)
<b>Conclusion:</b> A look back from the present Significance of the experience	<b>Thinking Back and Looking Forward</b> What conclusions do you draw about the experience? (Critical Cultural Awareness) Do you think other people around you would have the same opinions as you? Did the experience change you? How? (Action Orientation) Did you decide to do something as a result of this experience? What did you do? Will you decide to do something as a result of doing this Autobiography?



## 5 A case study: a student's personal narrative

The case study which follows is mentioned as an example of the use of the AIE as a framework to write narratives of intercultural encounters within a school context.

The author of this paper, an English language teacher in an upper secondary school, was directly involved in the testing of the Framework as an innovative teaching strategy to develop both students' self-awareness and other-awareness, being a main concern of language and intercultural education.

Following the introduction of the AIE in the school program as part of the intercultural syllabus, content analysis was performed through a case study of one student's written contribution to have an in-depth understanding of the participant's shared reflections.

Bec (invented name) was a third-year student in a Technical Institute (chemistry as specialization) who had just returned from an Erasmus mobility program; she was asked to write a narrative of a specific intercultural encounter that was significant for her. She was 16 years old at the time of the study and she had been studying English as a foreign language for six years (CEFR level C1) at the time data were collected and it was her first foreign language. The narrative was thus written in English as the student felt more comfortable about expressing her thoughts and feelings in the foreign language.

The content analysis of her narrative revealed the following findings:

### **Who I Am**

Even if the section is optional in the autobiography, the student introduced herself:

“If asked to describe myself I usually start by describing my mind and my opinions. I usually define myself as an atheist, a feminist and an art lover.

I'm a sixteen years old girl, I was born in Italy, Naples and I can speak 3 languages (Italian, English and French), thought I hope to be able to learn one or two more, in the future. I travelled a lot throughout my life (I've been to Poland, Czech Republic and Turkey), thanks to the Erasmus projects, and I hope to be able to travel even more times. When I'm old I would like to be seen as someone who stood up for the other, who has taught a lot or just who did the right things in he life.”

This background information provides an opportunity for the reader to know the writer and gives contextual hints that reveal that Bec had had different experiences abroad and many intercultural encounters, which had probably contributed to her intercultural awareness and competence. The description

adds key clues on the participant's personality.

**The title (Give the encounter a name which says something about it...)**

The name B. gives the encounter says a lot about it: "*Language barriers*".

**Description**

The mixture of subjective and objective details highlights the intercultural aspect that crosses the communicative competence of the encounter: language and gestures help the involved people to know each other.

**What happened when you met this person / these people?**

"Me and Piotr, (or Piotruś for friends) were on a bench. He was a Polish guy, we couldn't communicate with each other. Through hand gestures and some little words, we got to understand each other. We were so happy that I called him Pierogi by mistake, and that's when we became friends, we were even closer than the ones I could manage to communicate with."

**Importance**

**Why have you chosen this experience?**

"I chose this experience because it always amazed me how totally strangers could get to become friends, even when speaking different languages, until it happened to me and it was very funny, but maybe a little embarrassing."

Certainly, the dichotomy between the 'totally strangers' who become 'friends' ... 'when speaking different languages' is strong to provide a dynamic of intercultural awareness.

**Who else was involved?**

"The whole group was kindly involved, because it was a very embarrassing situation at the beginning, and everyone was laughing at us!"

The attention here is not on the objective detail implied in the question, but on the feelings shown by the people that were there. The word 'involved' is interpreted by Bec as 'emotionally invested'.

**What was the first thing you noticed about them?** What did they look like? What clothes were they wearing?

The narrator seems not to realize that the question was actually referring to other people, as the focus of her reflection is only on the ‘other’ who is felt and seen as being ‘alone’.

“I don’t remember what I noticed about him, but I do remember him wearing a grey sweater, some blue jeans and white shoes. He was just alone, and I went to talk with him.”

**Were they male/female, or older / younger than you, or did they belong to a different nationality or religion or region, or any other thing you think is important about them?**

“He was a boy, maybe younger than me, and he was Polish. I think he was a Christian, but I didn’t get to know him that much, we just had a strong bond.”

Bec describes the person in a few words that say nothing in particular: a boy, Polish, Christian (it should be noted that the first thing she says to describe herself was: I am an atheist); what emerges from this reflection is ‘the strong bond’ she feels they had.

**My feelings or emotions at the time were...**

“I felt half embarrassed and half amused about our accomplishment.”

**What I did at the time was...**

“He had nothing weird or strange about him, but I usually don’t care about that kind of things, if I want to know you, I’ll skip my dubiousness and I’ll talk to you. Weirdness shouldn’t get in our way when meeting new people.”

Respect for otherness, an important dimension in the Autobiography, is seen in Bec’s words when reflecting. However, the word ‘weird’ and its synonym ‘strange’ together with the weirdness can be felt, heavy in their denial.

**Imagine yourself in their position...**

“I think that for both of it was a very unusual experience, but for him it was even more difficult, because he didn’t know a word in Italian, while I got to learn some words in Polish and I tried to use them with him. At first, he would have been kind of confused and intimidated, but after a while it was just an overall nice experience.”

Apart from being ‘confused and intimidated’, the overall experience is nice’.

**When you think about how you spoke to or communicated with the other people**, do you remember that you made adjustments in how you talked or wrote to them?

### First thoughts

“I do remember adjusting my English to make it easier to understand for him. I added words in his own language (when I could) and I strengthened the concept with hand gestures. I slowed down my speech as much as I could.”

Because of the unusual nature of the encounter, the need to communicate makes them resort to using the sign language.

Unfortunately, Bec didn’t complete the whole report, she had been allowed to choose, but just her latest reflections close the circle of her insights: the ‘language barriers’ slowly fade away in the silence of a different communication.

The Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters facilitates the individuals’ exploration of their intercultural experiences from a number of different perspectives, language being one of these. Reflection on the role language plays in intercultural encounters, and how language is modified when individuals come from different linguistic backgrounds and adapt or ‘accommodate’ to each other in their use of language, is an important characteristic of the encounter. This may entail that one individual in the contact situation has reached a degree of competence in one foreign language. It may also entail that individuals speaking ‘the same’ language become aware of different varieties within the language. Both constitute a first step towards language awareness in intercultural contact situations. Intercultural competence therefore involves an awareness of the role of language competences in intercultural encounters.

The Autobiography version for younger learners uses the same intercultural competence model as the standard version, but the stresses posed by an intercultural encounter are explored at a cognitive, linguistic and emotional level suitable for younger children.

There are several materials that make up the Autobiography (Fig.1): the Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters: a standard version for older learners and adults;

- the Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters: a simplified version for younger learners who need help from an adult in reading and writing and thinking back over their encounter;
- notes for facilitators for both versions;

- a document presenting the contexts, the concepts and the theoretical assumptions of the project;
- a reduced version of the theoretical document to be used as a stimulus for discussion and debate with older students;
- text cards;
- picture cards.



Fig. 1 Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters<sup>5</sup>

The main document presents a series of questions and cues carefully designed in such a way as to guide the learner's reflection on a chosen event, represented by an encounter with a person from another cultural group. It provides the learner with a framework to analyze the event and reflect on what he/she has learned in that situation. It guides the user to gradually develop intercultural competences (See Appendix 1).

It is also vital that people's intercultural competence is developed in order to enable them to understand, appreciate and respect each other across cultural differences, and to enable them to contribute actively to societies that benefit from diversity.

Having a narrative setting, the Autobiography has several functions:

- a community function: it enhances membership
- a cohesion function: it promotes shared experiences, emotions, values and meanings
- a playful function: it attracts and entertains

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.coe.int/en/web/autobiography-intercultural-encounters/autobiography-of-intercultural-encounters>

- a cognitive function: the plot creates models and suggests interpretations
- an identity function: builds a self / us
- a mnemonic function: it saves from oblivion (Amich, 2010)

Therefore, the choice to use the AIE in a classroom context has a double effect: on the one hand it allows to promote the narrator (learner)'s self-esteem - through self-recognition and interpersonal sharing; on the other hand, it helps to promote intercultural teaching, in a context with a strong presence of foreigners of different ethnic origins. The intercultural perspective has rightly established itself in these years in the direction of the knowledge and recognition of equal dignity, of the enhancement of the diversity of which the different ethnic groups, cultures and religions are bearers (Wallnöfer, 2000). As Demetrio (1996) says, "the word 'intercultural' already evokes narrative encounters, different cultures, in this case individualities that come from different nationalities, that tell stories to each other". Intercultural means "mixing up the voices, mixing up the languages, exchanging; it means going back to the ancient tradition of the *agorà*, the square, the market, where everyone goes to bring something and to receive something else. Bruner (1990) contends that cultures can only exist insofar as they have this extended capacity "for resolving conflicts, for explicating differences and renegotiating communal meanings"; and these processes, so "essential to the conduct of a culture," are achieved through narrative (p. 47).

We can use the word 'interculturality' and, even more, of 'intercultural pedagogy' whenever our educational work tends to promote this remixing, this mingling, this new wisdom between worlds, between experiences, between voices, between languages".

## Conclusion

Narration has always been used by human beings. Roland Barthes (1982) concurs that "narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society; it begins with the very history of mankind and there nowhere is nor has been a people without narrative... narrative is international, trans historical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself".

The autobiographical narrative is an important tool for interpreting reality and interacting with others; it is therefore a way to find out and understand. In Bruner's view (2002), then, a shared narrative is a source of mutual understanding. The importance of narrative for the cohesion of a culture is great. Bruner's assertions about the functions of narrative are intra-cultural; that is, he is primarily concerned with how stories provide cohesion *within* a culture by eliding diversity (Rose, 2011).

The AIE is an educational tool that, through the narration and the autobiographical narrative, provides the learners with the skills necessary for actively overcome any ‘barrier’ and promote social inclusion. Its use in class implies the adoption of a teaching / learning method that “should accompany the steps towards a plurilingual and intercultural education” (COE, 2016).

Using the AIE as a framework to write narratives of intercultural encounters would be especially useful for promoting intercultural communication situations. By reading such collected narratives, students can increase their awareness about intercultural conflict situations and develop their intercultural communicative competence.

## APPENDIX 1

### The competences required for interculturality (AIE, 2009)

Respect for otherness is manifested in curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend belief about (the ‘naturalness’ of) one’s own culture and to believe in (the ‘naturalness’ of) other cultures.

Acknowledgement of identities is the ability to take full notice of other people’s identities and to recognize them for what they are.

Empathy is the ability to project oneself into another person’s perspective and their opinions, motives, ways of thinking and feelings. Empathetic persons are able to relate and respond in appropriate ways to the feelings, preferences and ways of thinking of others.

Tolerance for ambiguity is the ability to accept ambiguity and lack of clarity and to be able to deal with this constructively.

Communicative awareness: an ability to recognize different linguistic conventions, different verbal and non-verbal communication conventions – especially in a foreign language – and their effects on discourse processes, and to negotiate rules appropriate for intercultural communication.

Critical cultural awareness: an ability to evaluate, critically and on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices and products in one’s own and other cultures and countries.

Knowledge has two major components: knowledge of social processes, and knowledge of illustrations of those processes and products; the latter includes knowledge about how other people see oneself as well as some knowledge about other people.

Skills of interpreting and relating: the ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents or events from one’s own.

Skills of discovery and interaction are the ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction.

Action orientation is the willingness to undertake some activity alone or with others as a consequence of reflection with the aim of making a contribution to the common good.

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