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“The people who come to us bring us their stories. They hope we know how to interpret their stories correctly. We have to remember that what we hear is *their story*”.

(Coles, 1989: 7)

5 The narrative approach: The individual perspective in intercultural meetings

1. Introduction

This chapter owes much to Bakhtin’s opposition to universalizing rules and definitions, and to intentions to build systems or patterns. Instead, applying Bakhtinian course of thought, it is my intention or preference rather to focus on context and interpret events and language meaning from the position of the other, which means for Bakhtin understanding of our interlocutor, the situation, the occurrence, or even landscape, by being close to it, yet not fusing with it. In this interpretation, understandings achieved by two different persons or by the same person but corroborated at different time-spaces will never be identical but convergent at best. Additionally, as Bakhtin wrote, words are never neutral, but bear traces of their histories, infecting speech with the accents of other voices from other times and places (Bakhtin, 1986 in Minks, 2010: 497). Hence, Bakhtin calls for accepting the wealth of experiential and interpretative possibilities life brings to us. Finally, Bakhtin also privileged the place, or to be more precise *locus*, from which something is perceived or observed, thus expressing his strong support for Einstein’s theory of relativity explaining the physical world. Bakhtin’s attempt was to do the same with the world of cultural, artistic and linguistic meanings (Folch-Serra, 1990: 256-264).

Bakhtinian arguments are reinforced and applied to a different area in *Zen and the art of motorcycle maintenance*, which will constitute our starting point for a brief summary of differences between qualitative and quantitative approaches to research. Pirsig (1977: 233) writes, “Quality is not a thing, it is an event. [...] Quality is the event at which awareness of both subjects

¹ This project has been funded with support from the European Commission, Grundtvig Assistantship Program, project number: 2010-1-PL1-GRU11-11903. This publication reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

and objects is made possible". In this perspective quality is elusive and peripheral, which is a direct result of the fact that reality or truth are ever changing, ultimately unknowable in any kind of fixed, ultimate way (*ibidem*: 373). Thus, it is almost impossible to present the reality in a systematic, cut into clear categories scheme.

2. Sources of the narrative approach

We could trace back the narrative approach to studying communication to ideas of Garfinkel (1967), i.e., the originator of the ethnomethodological approach to studying societies, especially to his explanation of how people make sense of and bring order to their social world through the documentary method. The documentary method consists in setting apart from a social situation some facts that create a pattern or conform to a rule. This pattern is later used to make sense of the facts themselves. According to Garfinkel, people constantly extract such patterns or rules and use and adapt the existing ones to provide an explanation to new events or facts. This innovative view portended the rise of the social constructionist approach.

Garfinkel was also very distrustful of quantitative research methods, thus recommending paying a special attention to analyzing people's accounts. He was concerned with the subjective nature of human experience, including communication with language defined as a tool for interpreting and clarifying social interactions. Continuators of Garfinkel's theory, e.g. Zimmerman, Poller and Wieder, were concerned with how members of society see, describe, and explain social behavior. All in all, ethnomethodological research contributed greatly to understanding what methods people employ to make sense of the surrounding world and social interactions. The knowledge interlocutors have is not isolated or decontextualized but linked to actions. As a result, ethnomethodological studies avoid idealizations and abstractions.

3. Quantitative vs. qualitative research

To be able to appropriately locate the narrative approach within research methodologies, we need to start from differentiating between the qualitative and quantitative approaches to study social and cultural phenomena.

Quantitative research begins with an intensive study of the phenomenon to be investigated and consequently in most cases before a proper research begins, the researcher knows much about it. For example, if the subject of the research was intercultural competence, much effort would be put into understanding what has already been discovered about this competence. For the research purposes it would also be customary not only to assign compo-

nents of such a competence, e.g. openness, tolerance, readiness to negotiate meaning, but also to propose whether these would be measured at their extreme values or presented as gradable entities instead. In this particular case the researcher would most probably concentrate on constructing questions, breaking the abstract concepts into specific narrowly defined components, which would be later used in an interview or questionnaire. To illustrate, the narrow components could be for tolerance: eagerness to have a neighbor/coworker that comes from a different culture, positive experience/encounters with other cultures, longer stays abroad. The natural tendency would be for a researcher to generate also a repertoire of answers from which the research participant would choose, as qualitatively oriented methodology encourages closed questions. The next step would be testing the questions in a pilot study, reformulating the questions which appeared not clear to the respondents or which did not give conclusive results and finally establishing criteria for selecting the appropriate sample, i.e., respondents who are representational of the population studied. Here these would be people who interact with foreigners in a foreign language or work/study abroad. Much attention is paid to selecting the informants as only a representational sample enables us to conclude that the research results we have obtained are externally valid, i.e., generalizable to the entire population studied. For a more thorough discussion of the notions see Dörnyei (2007: 48-64).

After sampling the proper research is conducted. From this point on the research process usually becomes faster as at this stage the obtained results are scaled into numerical values, calculated, often using sophisticated software, and presented in a report in the form of both verbal and graphical representation with the aim of generating the picture of the competence, or its components that exert a more or less decisive influence on one's effective performance in contacts with foreigners.

All in all, the greatest challenge of quantitative study is always how to break abstract notions like competence or success into measurable subcomponents and what scales to apply to convert notions into numbers. However, the great number of recognized research projects proves that when conducted expertly, e.g. following the tight principles of participant sampling and data collection, the undertaking can bring very insightful, reliable and valid results.

Quantitative methodology, relying heavily on statistics, intends to achieve as a final product a proven in repeated studies theory or law. This pursuit of scientific and statistical evidence for theories or concepts studied within social, psychological, educational and later linguistic studies lasted throughout the last century, leading to the actual hegemony of quantitative research in applied linguistics and sociolinguistics well into the 1980s. Then more and more voices of distrust were heard, pointing to weakness of quantitative research. That would be for example neglecting "the subjective variety of an individual life", being not "sensitive in uncovering the

reasons for particular observations” (Dörnyei, 2007: 35) and analyzing data disregarding socio-cultural context. This distrust coincided with the growth of ethnomethodological perspective in sociological research.

4. Early qualitative methodologies in applied linguistics

Eventually, ethnomethodology, in which Conversation Analysis has its roots, gave rise to a new orientation in sociolinguistics, i.e., through the application of Conversation Analysis. It developed almost simultaneously with another research orientation, Grounded Theory, which also exerted an immense impact on ensuring qualitative approach its right place among linguistic methodologies.

Research that can be considered qualitative has been conducted for more than a century, initially in social sciences and anthropology, for example works of Boas or Malinowski. Its continuators were researchers representing the school of British contextualism, i.e., Firth, Halliday. Also American ethnography, started by Dell Hymes and John Gumperz, sparked off an increased interest in analyzing language and text in the context of social or ethnic groups and regarding communicative patterns as a part of cultural knowledge and behavior. However, the first text that tried to define “qualitative methodology” was the seminal work of Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, published in 1967, *The discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for qualitative research* (Dörnyei, 2007: 36).

Grounded Theory (GT) originated from Charles Peirce’s and William James’s American pragmatism, which emphasized the importance of usefulness, value, and success. This approach sees the researchers’ major task in bringing to light what really happens in linguistic practice. The central significance in so oriented research is attributed to text as data source and each individual case is treated as an independent unit of investigation. Thus, GT encourages formulating concepts, or theoretical explanations, on the basis of a particular study case which involves also relevant contextual circumstances.

An analysis according to the principles of GT concentrates mostly on finding markers of particular ideas and expanding these ideas into categories and then finding evidence for the categories in further data. This may take a few recursive cycles. The idea that data analysis should be organized into categories is the major assumption of the approach, its breakthrough achievement which also enabled establishing qualitatively oriented research as a match for quantitative methods.

Researchers who analyze texts using the Grounded Theory approach look for concept indicators in them. Then they are advised to compare them with others and, finally, to classify particular indicators as representatives of a class of events. Grounded Theory (GT) relies strongly on developing,

categorizing, and dimensionalizing concepts as well as enriching them with indicators which are defined as textual examples. The basis for the coding is provided by coding families. The method which Glaser (1978) suggests is looking for indicators of provisional concepts in the data using questions organized around *coding families*. They are the following (Titscher *et al.*, 2000: 77-78):

- ☐ c-families: causes, consequences, correlations, constraints;
- ☐ process family: stages, phrases, durations, passages, sequences;
- ☐ degree family: measure, degree, intensity, critical value;
- ☐ type-family: classes, genres, classifications;
- ☐ strategy family: tactics, techniques, mechanisms;
- ☐ interaction family: relations, symmetry, rituals;
- ☐ identity family: self-image, change of identity, alien images;
- ☐ culture family: norms, values, socially shared attitudes;
- ☐ consensus family: consensus, agreement, definition of situation, conformity, homogeneity;
- ☐ mainline family: social control, agreement, socialization, organization, and institution.

Glaser's original approach was by some, including also in later years Strauss, considered too intricate to be easily followed, and thus Strauss and Corbin (1990) put forward a slightly simplified coding procedure. Among others, the researchers proposed a number of successive coding procedures, which became almost canonical. Their initial *Open coding* begins the conceptual analysis by attempting to answer the following questions (Titscher *et al.* 2000: 79):

- ☐ What actually happens in the text?
- ☐ What category does the textual passage suggest?

During this phase, the researcher must concentrate on examining, comparing, and categorizing data, and looking for instances of traditional categories of age, gender, or social position. Then *axial coding* phase proceeds during which the results of the open coding are arranged anew, creating new relationships between them. At that stage the already available concepts are refined and differentiated. Additionally, here a researcher learns whether a particular concept constitutes a condition, a strategy, or a consequence. Coded events are ordered systematically as members of a chain of actions. The following questions appear to be very useful at this stage of analysis (Strauss and Corbin, 1990: 99; Titscher *et al.*, 2000: 79):

- ☐ What are the conditions for the events comprised in the concept?
- ☐ How can the interaction between actors be described?
- ☐ What strategies and tactics can be determined?
- ☐ What are the consequences of the events?

Finally, *selective coding* takes place during which the core category is selected and other categories are related to it. A *core category* is the central phenomenon around which all other categories are integrated (Strauss and Corbin, 1990: 116). Additionally, Strauss and Corbin suggest examining the passage trying to extract the “story” behind the data. Its essential events become visible thanks to answering the below questions (*ibidem*):

- ☐ What is the most striking feature of the field of investigation?
- ☐ What do I consider to be the main problem?
- ☐ What is the central theme of the story?
- ☐ Which phenomena are represented again and again in the data?

Thus Strauss and Corbin, drawing on Glaser’s (1978) and Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) theory, worked out a coding procedure which relies on allocating a code to every event at the outset of an analysis and then summarizing these codes on the basis of comparison with categories. This approach can be suitable for studying new ideas, contexts, and consequences. Furthermore, GT stresses that texts should not be approached using ready-made concepts. Instead concepts should be developed on the basis of the examined material itself. It is worth emphasizing that while Grounded Theory attempts to discover theoretical concepts and explanations of which the interlocutors are not aware, ethnomethodological approaches strive to reconstruct the explanatory and meaning pattern of the actors (Titscher *et al.*, 2000: 84-85).

A major flaw of this approach may be found in its basic assumption. Since this approach is bound to work out a theory or better an abstract interpretation of the data instead of their simple description, we are not able to test it during the research process itself. As a result, we must evaluate it by using some other methods. In most cases, that means that the results of so oriented research, i.e., a theory, must be evaluated “against the existing literature to enrich understanding and explanatory power” (Dörnyei, 2007: 261).

Despite this obvious weakness, the approach has become so popular and widely used that for some researchers it was almost synonymous with qualitative research in general and as Dörnyei (2007: 258) writes, “Grounded Theory has thus become a banner under which qualitative researchers could join forces, [...], with almost every qualitative researcher using –knowingly or unknowingly– some of its elements”.

The other orientation mentioned above, i.e. Conversation Analysis (CA), classified as an ethnomethodologically oriented research method, is generally based on the assumption that each interlocutor participating in a conversation operates contextually and is bound to recognize its conversational content and intention in spite of their varying surface shapes. It seeks to discover the methods by which members of society produce a sense of social order

or reconstruct reality, and how language both creates and is created by social context. CA focuses on the organization and structure of conversation, rather than on its correctness. Generally, CA is related to the ethnography of communication through its concern with communicative competence and interest in any instance of language use.

The focus of CA on conversation stems from the ethnomethodological distrust of idealizations. The main ideas of this approach are presented in works of Harvey Sacks and his colleagues Emanuel Schegloff and Gail Jefferson. They postulate that most idealizations in social sciences produce general concepts that have only a vague relationship to specific real-world phenomena. Hence, it deals with the details of actual events and avoids positing any categories whether social or linguistic. To them, discourse events are to reflect and realize practical knowledge. This approach is best summarized in Harvey Sacks' (1985: 15-16) words:

A first rule of procedure in doing analysis, a rule that you absolutely must use or you can't do the work, is this: In setting up what it is that seems to have happened, preparatory to solving the problem, do not let your notion of what could conceivably happen decide for you what must have happened.

Another approach that inscribes into the mainstream qualitative studies is ethnographic research. Again some theoreticians of methodology would consider, due to its unclear bounders, it is difficult to distinguish between ethnography and other types of qualitative research (Dörnyei, 2007: 130). This is so partly because all of them draw from the same pool of research techniques. Nevertheless, most commonly ethnography is defined as a study of human experience using "firsthand participant observation in a natural setting" (*ibidem*: 131), coupled by interviews, text collection, field notes, images. An ethnographer accompanies, observes or even lives with the studied group in their natural place of living for an extensive period of time in order to understand their "subjective interpretation of their own behaviors and customs [...] looking through the eyes of an insider" (*ibidem*: 131). Ethnographic study by its nature will always have an emergent character, i.e., one's knowledge and meaning making abilities will constantly grow and adjust as the investigation evolves.

Apart from ethnographic approach, researchers doing qualitative study often conduct interviews in order to "obtain descriptions of the life world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena (Kvale, 1996: 5-6; after Dörnyei, 2007: 134). For this description to be valid, the interviewer must formulate questions and behave in the way that would secure his or her neutral attitude to the interviewee and the content of their responses. Much attention in this approach to interviewing is paid to objectivity, unbiased, neutral formulation of questions, in

order to obtain uncontaminated, unadulterated facts and details (Holstein, Gubrium, 1995: 8).

Interviews differ in their format (e.g. one or more sessions with the same interviewee) and structure. Below the basic types of the interview are presented.

- ❑ Structured interviews follow very rigidly the order and content of earlier prepared questions. The interviewer does not enjoy much freedom in question formation or spontaneity in cases the interviewee does not know the answer or does not understand properly the question. However, this very little flexibility may be very fruitful when it comes to analyzing and interpreting the answers provided by respondents as then their repertoire may be less varied and thus easier to organize into patterns, allowing faster drawing of conclusions.
- ❑ Semi-structured interviews generally make use of a prepared interview guide including topics to be asked about but not necessarily formulated questions and precisely established order of questions. In this format it is also possible for the person conducting the interview to ask additional questions when the respondent mentions a fact, situation, person or comment which is of interest to the researcher. The interviewer is allowed to ask an additional question or reformulate the one already posed when the interviewee is confused or provides an answer that departs from the subject.
- ❑ Unstructured/ethnographic interviews assume that the interviewee is to talk on a certain topic, with the interviewer loosely controlling the content and form of the responses. To put it another way, this method of inquiry allows the maximum freedom to the interviewee in talking about a particular event, person, phenomenon and generally providing his or her account of his or her experience. The interviewer may ask occasional questions but mostly his or her role is to establish atmosphere that is conducive to the respondent's maximal openness and psychological comfort leading to an uninhibited flow of the communicated content.

The division and characteristic presented above by some researchers may be considered very orthodox or superficial. Instead for example Holstein and Gubrium (1995: 8) oppose to treating respondents as passive agents and consider interviews "interpretatively active, implicating meaning-making practices on both interviewers and respondents." In this view, all interview data are unavoidably collaborative, reality-constructing, meaning-making occasions, whether recognized or not. In a similar vein, Fontana and Frey (2005: 696; after Dörnyei, 2007: 141) see interviewing as something more than a series of questions and answers. They recommend assuming an empathetic stance, allowing the interviewee to express his or her judgments,

opinions or even approval as this may result in obtaining honest, and frequently also co-constructed meanings.

This would be actually the interpretation this particular chapter assumes. The present author is namely convinced that indeed humans are not repositories of facts or information only as most of what is learnt or experienced is stored wrapped with subjective interpretation, record of emotions which accompany a particular event and some afterthoughts, reconsiderations also gathered in discussion with others. This is why in order to reveal not only facts from their life but also emotions and interpretations, a more empathetic approach is necessary when interviewing. This can be achieved by incorporating elements of the narrative approach, presented in the following section.

5. The narrative approach as a research method

The narrative, sometimes also called life story or narrative interview, approach is a useful method for documenting to oneself and to the others, not only facts and happenings that may be significant for the phenomena studied but also their sense and meaning. These terms are used interchangeably in this chapter. Generally, this research orientation can be defined as “a spoken or written text giving an account of a series of events occurring over time and integrated into a plot” (Gersten, Söderberg, 2010: 247). In fact, the length of the narrated experience is of a lesser importance. Most narratives would fit into the continuum between a story told by a person without any interruptions on the side of the interviewer and an exchange of questions and responses building the account of the occurring events. As Bochner (1994: 29) suggests, storytelling has much to offer and is “a viable option to theorizing”, which enables researchers “analyzing processes of reality construction” (Lyndolf, 1995: 172).

The narrative approach has its roots in ethnographic life histories, in use already in the early years of the last century, e.g. the early classic of Polish and American sociology by Thomas and Znaniecki's (1927) *The Polish peasant in Europe and America*. In the late 20th it could be observed that the narrative approach was successfully used by historians, psychologists, psychiatrists, anthropologists, sociologists and business studies scholars to gain insight into an individual experience of a person with a frequent accompanying end goal “to transform negative stories of their troubles into stories pointing to alternative possibilities of interpretation and action” (Gersten, Söderberg, 2010: 249). Finally, the contemporary revival of this empirical technique within communication and linguistic studies can be traced back to Hymes's interest in Native American oral narratives, the concept of creative interviewing by Douglas (1985) and of active interviewing put forward by Holstein and Gubrium (1995).

The words of Coles, a psychiatric doctor, which serve as a motto for this chapter should draw our attention to the fact that too often in communication studies researchers tend to hide behind generalizing theories, factors and variables, losing this way from their eyes details of particular stories that people offer to them (Bochner, 1994: 28-29). However, there is no disagreement between what Bochner (*ibidem*) calls casual and interpretative inquiry as both serve good ends, and the differences between these two are not to be fought against but rather accepted.

As Holstein and Gubrium (1995: 9) write, in a more traditional, scientific or we could even say quantitative approach to interviewing, much attention was attached to reliability and validity of answers. Reliability would be understood as “the extent to which questioning yields the same answers whenever and wherever it is carried out, and validity, the extent to which inquiry yields the ‘correct’ answers”. Assuming the interview serves as an opportunity to create meaning and interpret experience, the notions of reliability and validity fade into the background, because the same questions could produce different answers with the same person at some time interval, let alone the same questions asked to other respondents. The answers provided by all of them must in this perspective be also considered valid as there are no better or worse or more adequate answers and the respondent can hardly “spoil” what he or she says. This is the vital point, almost crossroads, where the narrative or active approach to interviewing departs from the more time-honored view of interviewing.

The narrative approach is based on the idea of a person telling her entire life story or a story about some selected period or event, together with the feelings and interpretations attached to it. Also the life narrative approach is based on the concept that the events and emotions narrated must be understood from the perspective of the person who accounts it. The act itself may also be a “motivation and opportunity of self-recognition” (Klein, 2007: 75). Life story or narrative as an act of sharing one’s experience with others involves “mental activities such as intro and retrospection, [...] provoking balances of the past and the present, educating, developing unusual modes of thinking, and overcoming fears and shyness to relate life-stories about oneself” (Klein, *ibidem*). Hence, for the narrator it may serve educational, cognitive and even sometimes therapeutic purposes. The act of narration on frequent occasions also constitutes an opportunity to understand one’s cultural identity in the process of self or co-construction. As aptly captured by Gersten and S  derberg (2010: 250):

Aspects to focus on would include attempts at pinpointing the narrator’s own identity constructions and shifts in these as well as his/her images of other cultures. Here, narratological analysis is able to throw some light on cultural identifications, alliances, and oppositions in the stories told by expatriates.

To the hearer-researcher the narrative approach enables gaining insight into a very individual experience and its interpretation, and also understanding paths to personal meaning and sense. This gives rise to obtaining an individual culture profile, a very demanded perspective in current research where the person and not nation is the target. Often narration sessions also become opportunities for mutual searches for understanding.

Narrative is a valuable research method as it enables capturing individual differences in cognition and interpretation. It fosters understanding things through the eyes of the respondent, so as to construct “internal focalization” (Potter, 1996: 164), a concept borrowed from literary critics. Although members of a speech community may draw on broadly shared conventions for the display of social identity, each individual will draw on these differently, in line with the way in which they wish to present themselves (Yeats, 2005: 68). This was also rightly captured by Goffman’s (1956) notion of demeanor. Or to be more precise, applying Bakhtian approach, to operate in some sociocultural context, we do not “don a range of masks or impersonate a repertoire of roles” instead we “declare oneself(s) situated among the existing languages of heteroglossia” (Klancher, 1998: 29). This interpretation needs clarification as not always we are able to make such declarations verbatim or we are aware of it. In fact, most frequently we make our heteroglossia visible in socially and culturally conditioned behavior, which is evident for the other, i.e., the researcher who interprets or tries to understand our performance. This is the stance strongly argued for in this writing.

Differences between ways in which individuals make use of these may relate to individual psychology, personal expression, relationship with particular groups, or the immediate interactive context. As Ochs (1993: 297) puts forward, even within the same gross social identity, such as parent, student, teacher, and so on, different speakers will construct their social identities in different ways. That is although speakers may draw on the same conventions, they will use them variably to project different social identities, even within the same general social role, as they struggle to change what is normally expected from a social identity, or challenge their social identity over time.

Moreover, individuals are not necessarily consistent across time or contexts; the same speakers may namely project themselves differently on different occasions and in different situations. Social identities are dynamic, and individuals belong to many different groupings in society. Therefore, they have multiple identities or “subjectivities” which vary across situations and time as they enact a variety of roles (Weedon, 1987). People build multiple, compatible social identities that may be blended or even blurred. The same applies to intercultural contact as “there are no simple social or linguistic formulae that spit out how to compose suitable identities for the occasion” (Ochs, 1993: 298). This means there are no golden means which we can

apply when in contact with persons representing a different socio-cultural profile. In other words, a routine that proved successful on some occasions may disappoint us on others.

The same applies to preconceived notions like seeing the other through the stereotype. Stereotype is always misleading because it is a generalization, and each generalization must neglect the fact that there is a great variation within members of a particular category to which it refers. In reality each individual is conditioned in their behavior by a whole range of factors and even in very similar sociocultural contexts they may behave differently.

Life stories as a qualitative research method recognize the importance of the issues mentioned above and constitute an alternative research approach which has the following attributes:

- ❑ **individualistic:** encouraging respondents to develop topics in ways relevant to their own experience (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995: 17) and taking into account not only typical sociocultural categories like social status, family role, gender or profession but allowing a truly personal, idiosyncratic reality to be captured as well (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995: 30-32);
- ❑ **interpretative:** meaning allowing alternative or so far unconscious considerations to be brought into play (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995: 17). This concerns especially content that is revealed in the dynamic interaction between the person telling the story and the interviewer;
- ❑ **language and meaning based:** the story teller's aim is not to "read from a fixed text" (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995: 28), but to improvise using resources languages makes available, after being prompted by the interviewer's questions or comments which point the respondent to particular topics. As Holstein and Gubrium (1995: 34) suggest, "far from merely reporting a chronicle of what is already present (hidden or obscured as it might be), the respondent actively composes meaning by way of situated, assisted inquiry";
- ❑ **subject-defined categories:** parameters of analysis of those first-person accounts are designed in a close relation to the person telling the story;
- ❑ **holistic:** not excluding, and as Holstein and Gubrium (1995: 17) put forward, "providing an environment conducive to the production of the range and complexity of meanings" plus enabling accounting the experience in its totality of details;
- ❑ **emergent:** the present author also would add that narratives show meanings not as fully completed construal but repository in an ongoing reflexive process of formulation. This is life story is not there to be discovered, it is to be created in the interactional context of the session. The narrator's meta-cognitive work may possibly translate into his or her improved operation in diverse intercultural settings.

These features then necessitate a change in the role of the interviewer. His or her role encompasses more than just asking questions and recording answers but also creating conditions fostering comfortable articulation by the respondent his or her answers and interpretations. This naturally imposes on the person conducting the session the task of creating a good rapport with the narrator and a simultaneous duty to provide guidance to maintain the research focus. Expression of genuine interest in the ongoing process is a prerequisite here. The role of the researcher may be twofold: 1) he or she can allow the person “free rein to tell his or her story”, or 2) the interviewer may enter into a dialogue with the respondent, if it is necessary (Lindolf, 1995: 174). Finally, for the occasion to become an interpretative, meaning-making act, the researcher may provide some input in the form of his or her knowledge or information about the context of research, including for example results of other research conducted in the same area of interest, in order to help the respondent understand his or her position or experience. A sound theoretical knowledge of the focus area and even own experience serve as enabling competences for engaging the respondent in a meaningful talk. As Holstein and Gubrium (1995: 51) assume, the interviewer

challenges the respondent to produce a coherent life narrative out of designated, limited stock of mutually relevant resources. The result is the respondent's artful but culturally grounded construction, assembled, in practice, out of the interpretative materials and orientations at hand.

Finally, the process of data analysis should be considered. As the narrative session is less rigorously structured and brings data of both factual and interpretative character, any analysis of such data is somewhat less “scientific” and mostly relies on qualitative grouping and systematizing processes, e.g. following the principles of Grounded Theory. This analysis may also concentrate on discovering the path which the respondent followed on his or her way to understanding (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995: 79-80). Finally, important elements on which data analysis can concentrate are those events that were presented by the expatriates as changes, turning-points, challenges or crises.

6. Sociocultural adaptation in intercultural perspective

Today short or long stays abroad for professional or educational reasons became a part of life of a growing number of people virtually from all corners of the world. From an individual perspective for the expatriate the stay abroad is a critical life experience. The same may apply to local persons in contact with the foreigner. In the majority of cases the greatest problems

come from the involved persons' inability to understand the value system, the worldview of the other or to apply a different perspective, i.e., from differences in cognitive aspects. Such an interpretation is becoming almost a cliché nowadays but despite the fact that the notions are so difficult to define, they appear in multiple studies as the ones which constitute the greatest barrier (*cf.* quantitative, longitudinal research results by Ward and Kennedy, 1999). Right after those come problems related to communication and daily functioning, e.g. organizing one's stay abroad, daily chores and dealing with matters in institutions, especially administrative, educational, health and financial ones (Klein, 2007).

Measuring multicultural effectiveness and factors, especially those related to personality, is even more complex than defining the notion of socio-cultural adaptation abroad. For example, Van der Zee and Oudenhoven (2001) conducted research investigating students' success abroad with a special focus on measuring personality dimension. Their Multicultural Personality Questionnaire has scales for: Cultural Empathy, Openmindedness, Emotional Stability, Social Initiative and Flexibility. In their view Cultural empathy, defined as the capacity to clearly project an interest in others as well as to obtain and to reflect a reasonably complete and accurate sense of another's thoughts, feelings, and/or experiences (Van der Zee and Oudenhoven, 2001: 279) becomes the fundamental factor contributing to a satisfying and effective stay abroad.

And some other studies do not divide the totality of the contributing factors, and instead concentrate on the overall ability to perform effectively in multicultural settings, called cultural intelligence. According to Gersten, Sørenberg (2010: 251) and Thomas (2006), cultural intelligence is a dynamic capability constructed by three, acting in synergy, dimensions:

- 1) cognitive and metacognitive - involving knowledge of cultural differences and effects of cultural diversity on interactions and undertakings conducted by multicultural partners. This dimension includes also the meta-level which refers to one's ability to reflect on how cultural diversity affects one's own and others' performance, cognition and reasoning.
- 2) emotional - concerns one's propensity to empathize with others, to be mindful of and open to the new and allowing other points of view, to be motivated to get engaged in and to learn from daily experience characterized by cultural diversity.
- 3) behavioral dimensions – standing for the capability to successfully communicate verbally and non-verbally in intercultural, real-time interactions. This would mean, for example, the ability to recognize, repair or come to terms with a misunderstanding and other aspects included in Intercultural Communicative Competence (*cf.* Byram, 1997; Byram *et al.*, 2001) and attention paid to respecting one's interlocutor

face and other politeness related concepts. Strategic communicative competence would come to the fore here as well.

Finally, the profile of our cultural adaptation in a foreign culture depends very much on our cultural identity profile. In general, from the constructivist point of view, it is the feeling shared across members of a group or culture and projected in contacts with other groups and cultures, often unconsciously, that they are influenced by their belonging to a social or ethnic group. Our cultural identity encompasses many elements out of which common habits, characteristic manners of interpretation and fixed ideas may be clear indicators of a shared cultural identity. However, essentially it is determined by difference. This is we define our identity always in opposition to some other group. By being exposed to information about a different/foreign culture. Individuals strengthen their feeling of cultural identity because it reveals itself through contacts with representatives of other cultures. However, there are numerous examples that prove that identity is born out of something more than mere contact with other groups. Frequently, it seems to stem, for example, from a sense of disadvantage, or subordination.

The concept of cultural identity, a person's membership and role in a group, is based on six components: vocation, class, geography, philosophy, language, and biology. They are subdivided in the following list.

Components of cultural identity

(Jameson, 2007: 211)

Vocation:

- Occupational field
- Profession or job category
- Employing organization
- Subunit of organization

Class

- Economic class
- Social class
- Educational class

Geography

- Nationality
- Region, state, province, or city identification
- Density identification (urban, suburban, small town, rural)
- Residence (if different from nationality)

Philosophy

- Religious identity
- Political identity
- Identity based on other philosophies

Language
First language
Dialect
Other languages

Biological traits with cultural aspects
Race²
Ethnicity
Gender
Sexual orientation
Health
Age

Most of the notions elaborated on above will be taken into account during the research conducted for the purposes of the present writing.

7. The research methodology

This chapter presents the intercultural experience and its meaning making as studied by applying a narrative approach to the study of two Dutch expatriate students' stories. The narrative interviews, conducted in English, lasted around one hour each and were recorded in the university office of the present researcher. The empirical material collection took place in winter and spring time of 2011. Despite the already good rapport between the students and the researcher, to increase the comfort and authenticity of the recorded sessions, the interviewees were assured that their identities would remain anonymous and the material would be used only for research purposes. The recordings were then transcribed verbatim and analyzed.

This research can be called ethnographic in nature as its intention is to provide a deep description and analysis of the daily intercultural experience that the two students from the Netherlands acquired for the period of three months in an Italian city located in Umbria, central Italy. They came to study at the local university within Erasmus LLP students exchange. It can be called so as the researcher herself, at the time of the study also an expatriate, accompanied them during their stay, interacted with and assisted them as a tutor on a regular basis. Thus, the study analyses the experience of the two students in the specific, authentic, firsthand and real-time settings.

Finally, the study due to its narrow scale and situated interpretation should be classified as a case study. The present author realizes that this

² The original version quoted after Jameson. The present author realizes that the concept of race, meaning groupings of people according to common origin associated with visible biological markers, no longer finds scientific evidence. According to understandingrace.org (IS 1), race is an obsolete term, which was coined to justify colonization, enslavement and social inequality.

may lessen its ethnographic character. The participating respondents were given all the necessary time to fully account of their experience abroad. The narrative sessions were audio and video recorded, but only the audio recordings were analyzed as the participants, in order to make them fully comfortable and natural during the recordings, were shot from the right side, with only part of their head visible on the tape. This proved very effective as the participants were truly not inhibited by the presence of the recording equipment.

The major intention of the author was to test whether the narrative approach may be relevant to investigate the students' intercultural experience. Naturally, the study had also some descriptive goal of portraying sufficiently their experience of living in the foreign country and studying at the Italian academia, i.e., to obtain a biographical account. These would mean paying a special attention to the students' accounted 1) strain due to the effort required to make necessary psychological adaptations abroad (Mumford, 1998: 198); and 2) difficulties related to a different system of teaching and learning (Liu, Chieh-Wen, 2009). Thus, two aspects of their adaptation process were studied: culture learning and academic/study shock. The following general research questions were posed:

Research question 1: How well were they prepared to their stay abroad?

1a) What were the students' expectations of their stay abroad?

1b) What was their level of the Italian language proficiency?

1c) What was their knowledge of Italy?

1d) What was the length and type of their previous stays abroad?

1e) What was their cultural identity profile?

Research question 2: Did the students face challenges in their foreign environment related to their daily functioning?

2a) If yes, in which areas were they visible, e.g. accommodation, transportation and orientation in the area, shopping, medical care, communication technology, pastime activities, contacts with the host nationals, other?

Research question 2b) If yes, what challenges were these?

Research question 2c) Were the challenges related to their language competence in Italian?

Research question 3: Did the students face challenges in their studies at the foreign university?

3a) If yes, were they related to their participation in lectures and tutorials, working of the students' or foreign exchange office, relations with other students, course requirements?

Research question 4: Which factors had the greatest influence on the final positive or negative outcome of their stay?

Apart from the descriptive aim of the project, it was the author's intention to proceed from the purely traditional ethnographic view to gain also what the narrative approach to research assumes. This is through the whole process the students were naturally encouraged to talk about their foreign experience in order for the researcher to understand their motivations, meanings and beliefs, which would be in this sense an ethnographic activity. However, opportunities were also provided for them to discuss the events, activities and behaviors they experienced in order for themselves to be able to understand these in a different light, attach a new interpretation, accept or reject their previous meaning, become better prepared to coming events. Overall, the aim was also for them to "co-construct the meanings of their experiences for themselves", so oriented research being called narrative co-construction (Bochner, 1994: 35). Hence, they could understand themselves and their experience abroad better and in consequence perform in an improved manner.

Naturally, the whole process was recursive in its manner, and lasted for three months. The meaning making process took place through regular meetings with the students during which they could talk about their experience in an informal manner. Simultaneously counseling or information was provided for them by the researcher herself or the official supervisor of their abroad mission. The entire process enabled the author of this chapter to gain a substantial insight into the students' culture learning experience and their intensive culture intelligence development, in all its three dimensions.

Apart from the counseling sessions and the recorded narrative sessions, other data gathering tools were used on a regular basis. These were: 1) participant and nonparticipant observation of the lectures, conversations, procedures and research activities they took part in; 2) a post-narrative session including a follow-up interview and the students' report on their diaries; 3) a short structured interview with 25 item guide based on Ward and Kennedy's (1999: 662-663) Sociocultural Adaptation Scale, which was intended to measure "the amount of difficulty experienced in a number of areas by using a five-point scale" ranging from "no difficulty" to "extreme difficulty". Naturally, the given responses were not quantitatively analyzed but served as an explanatory tool for analysis of the other empirical material. The questionnaire was modified to provide information about the intercultural experience of the students taking part in the study, which actually follows the advice given by the authors of the measure.

8. Descriptive data analysis

First of all, the analysis results as to the students' culture learning and academic/study shock will be presented, including the preparatory stage.

The analysis will follow the sequence of research questions as presented in the previous section³.

RQ 1: How well were the students prepared to their stay abroad?

The participating students' accounts which refer to this research question will be presented jointly as there were not many individual differences found and thus their preparation was judged very similar, especially because some of the preparatory activities they did together.

1a: What were the students' expectations of their stay abroad?

Their expectations were generally very positive as they had already been to Italy and had exclusively good memories of their stays. Also, one of the students had not been to that particular region of Italy before so she wanted to discover something new, or even surprising as she said. They chose Italy, and especially that particular university, as it was known for very innovative projects in intercultural communication and training, including e-learning methodologies, so they thought they would profit also in terms of learning experience.

1b: What was their level of the Italian language proficiency?

Both students participated in a three-month one-to-one course in the Italian language prior their departure abroad. They were satisfied with the course at that time as it made them think that they would manage their daily functioning in Italy.

1c: What was their knowledge of Italy?

As they had already traveled to Italy on a couple of occasions, they had some cultural knowledge but mostly related to the first layer ritual, manifested culture, e.g. food, customs, social interactions, historical buildings and the unique character of Italian places of residence. They also read some guidebooks about Italian cities so they for example mentioned clichés about the importance of the family in Italian social life.

1d: What was the length and type of their previous stays abroad?

Both students had traveled extensively as tourists before mostly for short, holiday trips. However, one of the students had a greater experience with overseas placements as she participated in a voluntary work camp program

³ All exemplary sentences are provided in the original wording and form.

in Fiji serving as an instructor in a local orphanage for differently abled children. This experience, despite its great emotional burden, resulted in her strong conviction that she would like to participate in social work programs as she even wanted to return to Fiji to continue with the same job.

It needs to be stated that both of them were very much intrinsically motivated to go abroad and do a project related to intercultural communication in a social work perspective.

1e) What was their cultural identity profile?

The students come from the south of Holland. They reported that they had regular contacts with other nationalities in their everyday life back at home but they said the contacts were not very intensive. As mentioned above, one of the students worked as a volunteer in Fiji for a month, which gave her a very deep insight into sociocultural and interactional problems of staying abroad. The other student did her student internship in an assimilation center for immigrants in Holland. She taught a group of 12 women from Russia, Morocco and Turkey how to ride a bicycle. She portrayed it as a very positive experience. She enjoyed the lessons and interactions with the participants, especially the graduation party with foreign homemade food.

They admitted that generally their home region is populated by representatives of other, especially non-European, cultures. However, they both mentioned that they do not interact intensively with non-natives of the Netherlands, and one of them specified that she would judge that the percentage of non-natives in her area would be two percent. That would run counter the stereotypical picture of Holland as a very multicultural country and could support the argument strongly emphasized in this chapter that one's cultural profile has more to do with individual experience and knowledge rather than with patterns generalized at a national level, common to all representatives.

Generally, we can say they were moderately well prepared and predisposed to their Erasmus placement. However, due to the fact that it was not their first stay in a European country, they expected fewer problems and were not aware that they could face challenges. For example, in the narrative sessions and also during the sessions devoted to their diary accounts, they often reported that they had not expected any major problems and their awareness of future challenges had been very low. This was aptly captured by one student's words, "I knew a little bit how Italian people was but not like this". As a result, besides rudimentary logistic preparations, they neglected to attend to more cognitive, metacognitive and behavioral measures. For example, they did not take the advantage of an offer made by an acquaintance of theirs to meet and discuss her stay in Italy. She reminded them a few times about the possibility but they did not use it.

Also they reported they relied too much on the scripts typical of Holland, i.e., they thought a single email confirmation of accommodation, without any subsequent reply from the Italian administration, would be enough for them to have a guaranteed room in an Italian students' house. This led to their problems and distress with accommodation on the very first day of their stay as a room had not been booked for them.

Furthermore, they judged their preparation as low, meaning that they should read more about everyday life in Italy and participate in a more intensive Italian course. However, as one of them mentioned, they had not realized their preparation was insufficient. She reported, "Then I thought maybe we should have a more intensive course in Holland. But that's what I can say now but I could not say it at that time. Well, when I am preparing myself for three months, it should be enough but it isn't. You cannot make yourself clear."

Finally, they did not expect that the differences between their daily functioning in Holland and Italy would become so crucial. One of them accounted, "I did not really notice it that it could be so much different. But now, also when I am here, I say 'oh yeah, you can see a difference'. It is good when you think about it and you need to experience it and see and, yeah, it actually does make a difference between cultures".

Research question 2: Did the students face challenges in their foreign environment related to their daily functioning.

Both of the respondents reported numerous inconveniences they experienced during their stay, especially in the first two weeks of their placement. Due to their problems related to finding accommodation and enrolling at the university, their adaptation did not start with the typical honeymoon phase, but still the conducted data analysis confirms that sociocultural adaptation problems are greatest during the early stages of transition and that they decrease significantly over time.

RQ 2a: If yes, in which areas were they visible, accommodation, transportation and orientation in the area, shopping, medical care, communication technology, pastime activities, contacts with the host nationals, other?

RQ 2b: If yes, what challenges were these?

As already mentioned, the students assumed that they had successfully booked accommodation for themselves through electronic mail. They received a reply to their email with a clerk's declaration that she would put them on the reservation list. However, due to unclear reasons, on their arrival day at the reception desk of the students' house such information was missing

and they were denied a room. Already then their language competence in Italian appeared too low to solve that problem on their own. The desk clerk did not know English and, despite help of some passing-by Italian student, intensive use of online translating software, and calling for the manager of the residence hall, they were unable to get the accommodation. Eventually they resorted to calling their Italian contact person at the university, who was finally able to place them in the dormitory. This proves the role and power of an intermediary in Italian culture, which actually could also be noticed later during their stay.

The students also reported other difficulties. These would be problems with the city orientation and finding the right destination, especially on foot. This was partly related to their low proficiency in Italian so even if they could ask for directions, they were unable to understand them in detail. Consequently, they were often lost in the city, even in later stages of their stay. They also found stressful the Internet infrastructure of the dormitory, e.g. the installation and maintenance of the network by the dormitory technical unit, disruptions in the service provided, reasons provided for malfunctioning service, e.g. the weather conditions.

Both of them mentioned problems related to the Italian bureaucracy, or to be more precise, the number of situations for which they needed documents or forms. We can see it in their saying, "Most of the time you need a paper. And if you do not have it, try to get paper".

However, they were satisfied with the number and quality of the social contacts they had. They established a network of new friends, which enabled them to achieve their goals both in terms of socializing, e.g. going out together and sightseeing, but also being successful in studying, e.g. an exchange scheme for learning Italian, a study group for their graduation project. Simultaneously both of them also realized that not all students they had contacts with are eager to interact with them, e.g. "A lot of other students who are in the same room but they look at you like 'ok you are from abroad' so they keep the distance". They seemed to accept it and explained that it must be related to their lack of common language or generally to the fact that people are attracted to one another due to various reasons.

Finally, for one of the students it was at first difficult to accept the standard of cleanliness and the way they were received in the dormitory and the other found it difficult to adjust to the schedule of their day, especially meal times.

RQ 2c: Were the challenges related to their language competence in Italian?

From the gathered material (narrative interviews, observations and diary notes) we can deduct the students gradually realized that most of their

initial problems were related to their language incompetence. They wrongly assumed already in their home place that they would be able to manage successfully with a very elementary knowledge of Italian. This was partly the result of their previous trips to Italy, during which they actually managed without knowing the language at all or with the use of English.

The scale of the language problem was clear for them very shortly after their arrival as even on their way to the final destination, they could not find the right platform at the railway station. This failure led them instantly to the conclusion, “We thought we would manage in Italian but we actually didn’t”, or “We attended a course for three months. But before I arrived I was like, ‘Yeah I can manage to speak some words and have like a little conversation’. But when we arrived here, it was like, ‘No, we cannot’”.

The first week of their stay brought more evidence of the impact of their low proficiency in Italian on their daily performance. They could not arrange the accommodation and their university placement. They had problems with following directions, they did not know which office to go, which documents to fill in. One of them put it this way, “If they knew a little bit English, they would help us”. Hence, initially they attributed their problems to the Italians not knowing English but soon it became evident for them that actually it was vice versa. As one of them said, “most of the problem for me was the language and it still is”.

RQ 3: Did the students face challenges in their studies at the foreign university?

The students reported some problems related to their education at the university. However, both of them admitted they were solved in the first two weeks of their stay and that they were satisfied with their studies abroad. For example, they liked the way the Italian students responded to the content of their lectures with questions, voiced own opinions and the way Italians work in groups. They described Italian lessons as more interactive and to a greater measure allowing students asking questions and gaining a deeper understanding of the subject matter.

RQ 3a: If yes, were they related to their participation in lectures and tutorials, working of the students’ or foreign exchange office, relations with other students, course requirements?

Generally, both students reported initial problems with the administrative issues related to their stay, this would mean the attitude of some officials at the students’ and Erasmus offices, lack of proper information about which bodies are responsible for particular activities or decisions and finally unclear

or missing information about the location of particular university offices. For example, “the second day we had to arrange a lot because some things from our school was not arranged very well. So then we had to go to an office but they sent us to another office. But we could not find the office so we searched really more than almost one and a half an hour to find the office because nobody could tell us where it is.”

The students were also overwhelmed by the number of forms they were asked to fill in and also by the fact that some forms they were asked to complete several times in the same office. Naturally it caused them a great distress, sometimes leading them to thinking that it was their fault or lack of preparation. This can be clearly portrayed by these words, “I was like ‘Oh my God, what did I do wrong?’” Finally, some part of their difficulties laid again in their proficiency in Italian. To illustrate, during their lectures they were mostly concentrated on understanding the content of the course as for them the tempo of the language was too fast to contribute to the ongoing discussions.

RQ 4: Which factors had the greatest influence on the final positive or negative outcome of their stay?

The students differed slightly in their evaluation of the outcomes of their stay abroad, which could be aptly revealed in the narrative sessions. This is one of them namely portrayed the stay as mostly a social event, “Definitely, the staying and the things you can do with other students”, whereas for the other the greatest advantage was the landscape, sightseeing and the slower pace of life. The other student also elaborated more on the value of getting an insight into the everyday life of the locals, or even, as she phrased it, being “almost a citizen of the city”. At the same time both of them, however to a varying measure, highlighted the educational value of the stay, mostly their participation in the Italian language course.

The students naturally voiced the obstacles they had to face. For both of them the greatest of those was their lack of proficiency in Italian. The remaining ones were different. One of them complained about the standard of cleanliness of the offered services in the students’ residence halls, however, she counterbalanced her opinion with saying that maybe it is her being very sensitive about those matters. The other student had initial problems with mealtimes.

All in all, both evaluated their foreign venture very positively and attributed its success to the daily pleasures of being abroad and the intensity of their Italian language learning. Finally, in their evaluations it could be noticed that already in 5th week of their stay they started to realize that they were learning very much also about themselves. This is going to be discussed later in this chapter.

9. Conclusions to data analysis

It can be easily deduced from the analysis presented above that the narrative approach, in conjunction with the other techniques applied, enabled a deep probe into the individual intercultural experience of its participants. That could not be achieved with the use of any other method. At the same time, the research enabled the present author not only to understand the students but also it appeared a very eye-opening experience for the participants themselves. Thanks to their involvement they were given a prod to autoanalyze the events, conversations and situations they found themselves in. They were also tutored some metalanguage to talk about it.

The students participated in numerous critical incidents, for example orienting themselves in the city, problems with obtaining the room in the dormitory, getting enrolled into the course, almost getting robbed in Pizza and finally, being locked in an unknown room in an outpatient center for psychiatric patients, which they mistook for a language center. They reported that in most cases their afterthought was “If only I knew it earlier”, which taught them a great lesson on what daily functioning in a foreign country is. One of them concluded, when you go abroad, “prepare yourself, you have to prepare yourself for the worst cases you could imagine because then when you have prepared to it and it happens, maybe you already have a solution for it”. For them it became an especially valid experience as they plan to work as social workers with foreigners coming to the Netherlands. One of them also provided evidence that she already started to realize that things should be interpreted depending on the circumstances and that one’s present construal will not be valid for other, even similar situations. This was visible in her modular utterances, “I really do not know. At this moment for me it is yes.”

The narrative approach served also as a very effective tool for detecting individual differences in the students’ self-recognition process. For example, the narrative session enabled one of the students to learn more about her performance in critical incidents. To illustrate, both of them accounted on their behavior when they were locked in the mentioned above outpatient center. The doors were locked and they could not enter the elevator as it could be operated only by the servicemen of the place, naturally for safety measures introduced to control the mentally sick patients of the place. She said that then she realized that the only way for them to get out of the trap was to bang on the door and she added that she realized afterwards that in such situations, under pressure, she can react very fast, e.g. “in such situations where you have not much time, you have to decide quick, I am always like really quick”. The other student reported the same facts, in a slightly more jocular way, but without the cognitive autoanalysis mentioned by her friend.

The data also enable us to posit that communication competence, in this case intercultural communicative competence, should indeed be considered as a tool for conversation control. This is communication is strategic and goal-oriented and as Kellermann (1992 in Parks, 1994 : 592) aptly postulates, “there would be no reason to communicate if we were not dependent on others for the fulfillment of our wishes and these wishes or needs are fulfilled by influencing or controlling others’ responses to us”. This research then subscribes greatly to seeing language competence as a means of mastering the daily life. In other words, thanks to gathered experience, in conjunction with the linguistic and sociocultural knowledge accumulated, people become more effective in influencing others, as Parks postulates (1994: 593).

The same applies to the critical life experience over a prolonged stay abroad. The participants were not able to bring it to their metacognition at the time of the research but it was evident in their utterances and also the constantly growing intrinsic motivation to participate in the Italian language course. We can notice some metacognitive evaluation only in their answers given to questions asked in the follow-up semi structured interview aiming at measuring their sociocultural adaptation scale (Ward, Kennedy, 1999). This is they judged most of their problems were related to their Italian language competence. The issues they described as difficult or moderately difficult were those related to language proficiency, i.e., making yourself understood in Italian and English, understanding jokes and humor, dealing with someone aggressive and cross, expressing your ideas in class.

Additionally from the narrative sessions and their diary entries it is evident that from the beginning of their stay they realized that they were greatly dependent on the people surrounding them, and that in order to manage everyday life, they needed their support, advice or at least their favor, something that in most cases could be achieved only in the Italian language. Very quickly and rightly they attributed the causes of their initial failures to their language competence and unconsciously sensed that its mastery would enable them a more comfortable and peaceful life by controlling the events and people around them. This validates the rightness of the definition of interpersonal competence put forward by Wiemann and Kelly (1981: 292), i.e., “Interpersonal competence is essentially found in relational contexts in which individuals have sufficient power over their own actions and the actions of others that they may set, pursue, and achieve the interpersonal objectives deemed necessary for a mutually satisfying exchange with their social environment”.

The level of their distress with their incapability to control their immediate environment abroad with their initial language competence in Italian led them to a strong inclination to improve it. That was also conducted against some odds. For example, they were not properly informed about the way they should enroll into the course, they got lost on their way to the actual

place and found themselves in the already mentioned outpatient center and then it appeared that the course was of a mixed proficiency type, so they were put together with students already at level B1. This made them even more frustrated because they could not catch up with the tempo and content of the course, and as one of them said they were all the time lagging behind others, “We couldn’t explain ourselves in Italian. We couldn’t ask her, ‘Could you please, explain it again?’”. Their strong inclination to improve their existence and daily performance can be seen in the below quotations. They in unison describe their course with negative connotation words, e.g. “hard”, “frustrating”, “fast”. One of them reports, “I learnt more but it is really *hard* and sometimes really *frustrating* when I get such a big head out of the class”. And the other adds,

I am not always enjoying this because it is very *hard* because I am at like level A1. But because there was not enough students for A1 and A2 so they mix all the people together so we are with people from level B1. And that is really *hard* because they know more than us. And for me it is like when we get new grammar, it is really *hard* because for me always to understand grammar I need more time. So when he asks me, I need to do a lot of practices and for me it is going too *fast* like for one practice you have five minutes to fill in and it goes really *fast*. A lot of things I do not understand or they speak very *fast* and I do not get it.

10. Concluding remarks

It has been demonstrated in this chapter how the narrative approach can be used to provide insight into expatriates’ cultural encounters, their process of culture learning and cultural intelligence development. This should be done always with a word of caution, i.e., as researchers we can never be sure to what extent narration we have been told has been modified or rationalized, consciously or unconsciously.

In the present study the participating students’ cognitive development proved to be the most salient piece of their cultural intelligence development. That was visible in those accounts of the students where they reported they learnt something about Italian culture. Also some emotional and metacognitive nuances could be recognized, which seems to be the greatest advantage of the narrative method. Additionally, thanks to the non-participant observation the present author could spot how the behavior of the students’ adjusted as a consequence of their intensive cross-cultural encounters.

The present author realizes that she is not entitled to put forward any definite or generalizing conclusions to the research basing on the limited empirical material gathered. This is probably the greatest weakness of the presented methodological practice. The data obtained are very individual

in character and prohibit drawing inferences or speculations how much common the cases studied are typical of greater populations. Part of this lack of authorization lies in the nature of the narrative as a research study. This is narratives will always be concentrated on a unique experience of an individual, which will always escape easy categorizations. However, the narrative approach stood the test and proved it can provide a very deep insight into ongoing human experience, which cannot be rightly measured or portrayed by the more traditional scientific method.

The data obtained in this study support the negative evaluation of the drawbacks of the scientific method when applied in humanistic research which was presented by Pirsig (1977: 273). The scientific method in his view is “good for seeing where you’ve been. It’s good for testing the truth of what you think you know, but it can’t tell you where you *ought* to go, unless where you ought to go is a continuation of where you were going in the past. Creativity, originality, inventiveness, intuition, imagination [...] are completely outside its domain”. Instead, the narrative, by encouraging the researcher to approach the object of study without any starting hypotheses, proves a very effective tool for discovering truths or regularities or simply matters that are significant for the individual case, which might have been neglected in other approaches or classified as nonstandard. The perspective strongly advocated by the present author is that in real life we perceive, evaluate and react in an idiosyncratic manner and not in the idealized, average way.

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