

A study on advanced EFL learners' intercultural encounters

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Abstract

There is an increasing conviction that foreign language teaching should focus not only on making students achieve native-like proficiency but on enabling them to function as competent communicators in situations involving speakers of diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Real-life experiences are of utmost importance in forming language learners' intercultural awareness and competences. This study explores advanced Hungarian EFL learners' accounts of their intercultural encounters and their opportunities for meeting speakers of other languages. The study follows the qualitative research paradigm, the detailed, contextualized quotes aim to provide thick description of participants' experiences. Data were collected through a short background questionnaire and a qualitative data collection instrument employing stimulated recall: students were requested to write narrative accounts of their previous intercultural encounters. Findings reveal that although participants had limited opportunities for meeting native speakers of English, the language of intercultural interactions was almost exclusively English, even if only non-native speakers were involved. Results also show that there are enormous differences between students' opportunities to acquaint with members of different cultures, which highlights the influence of learners' socioeconomic backgrounds on their studies.

Keywords: *intercultural communicative competence, EFL, advanced learners, intercultural encounters, intercultural contact*

Introduction

The current interest in teaching culture through language is the inevitable result of political, societal and educational factors on both sides of the Atlantic. As Kramsch (1995) argues, there is a fear that the mere acquisition of linguistic codes does not guarantee peace and real understanding between individuals of different backgrounds (p. 83). This recent trend coincides with the awareness that foreign language teaching is misguided if it aims at making students achieve native-like proficiency (Seidlhofer 2004; Widdowson 1994). Instead, it should endow students with knowledge, skills and attitudes (Byram 1997) necessary to function in diverse cultural contexts (Byram 1997; Byram & Fleming 1998; Jaeger 2001; Kramsch 2001).

This paper focuses on a special group of advanced EFL learners: Hungarian university students majoring in English Studies. Many BA programs in English Studies across Hungary have recently introduced a curricular development: they offer intercultural communication courses to students. The knowledge students gain in these courses is extensive; however, anyone ever involved in intercultural encounters is aware that no matter how much one knows about them, real-life experiences shape one's ideas, skills, attitudes, and eventually, personality in ways classroom education may never do. For this reason, it is necessary to map and understand students' opportunities for intercultural encounters, since these allow them to acquaint themselves with other cultures and to develop their language proficiency and intercultural communicative competence in interaction with other speakers.

This paper explores what opportunities students have for meeting people of other languages and cultures, how they cope with challenges in such situations as language learners and what ideas and feelings they associate with these encounters.

Background to study

Intercultural orientation in foreign language teaching

Foreign language teachers have been engaged in teaching culture of the target language for decades; this is traditionally the cultural component of the curriculum. The various topics that were taught as cultural – literature, arts, civilization, geography, history, customs, practices – are defined along the little-c culture vs. big-C Culture dichotomy (Kramsch 1993, 1998a). Teaching cultural content in the foreign language classroom became widespread albeit inconsistent in the whats and hows (Omaggio-Hadley 1993). Despite its insubstantial and accidental presence in formal education, acquiring cultural content is rather popular with students, helping them better understand the mentality and daily practices of the speech community whose language they study.

In Scarino's argumentation (2010), the cultural knowledge students acquire does indeed broaden their understanding of the target language, however, the acquired body of knowledge remains separated from their knowledge and understanding of their first language and culture (Scarino 2010:324). This means that the cultural information students get about the target language does not influence their own identities and the ways in which they formulate ideas about their own language and culture.

An intercultural orientation in foreign language teaching (FLT), Scarino claims, seeks to transform students' identities in the process of language learning so that they would understand that culture is not merely information about different people, but a framework that these people use to exchange ideas, negotiate meanings and understand social reality. This assumption echoes Kramsch's (2008) point casting light on the intercultural approach, suggesting that it has to do with the circulation of values and identities across cultures (Kramsch 2008:15). Thus, an intercultural approach, as opposed to a merely cultural one, intends to make students familiar with the peculiarities of the target culture, and in doing so it also attempts to make students think differently about their own culture, re-shape their identities, and re-negotiate their understandings of diversity.

A major problem FLT has to face in connection with the cultural/intercultural dimension of teaching, as Kearney (2010) observes, stems from the common and persisting belief that authentic cultural forms may only be acquired through direct contact with native speakers of the target language while residing in the target country. Kearney cites research confirming that study abroad is not the sole source of cultural knowledge, arguing that the home environment is just as suitable for providing students with opportunities to understand frameworks through which physically distant communities regulate their practices (Kearney 2010:332-333).

In sum, an intercultural approach in FLT not only helps students to better understand other cultures, but it also makes them aware of the distinctness of their own. Constant and conscious reflections on culture and cultural differences make students think about their own culture and view it in relation to different cultures, thus broadening their scope of understanding. The intercultural approach helps not only in reaching the desired goals of making students broad-minded and sensitive to cultural differences, but through emphasizing the importance of meaning making in communication it also helps them cope with language use in intercultural situations.

Intercultural Communicative Competence and the Intercultural Speaker

One way of describing to what extent an individual is competent in intercultural situations is to refer to their intercultural communicative competence (ICC). Byram (1997) defines ICC as the 'individual's ability to communicate and interact across cultural boundaries' (p. 7). Byram (2008) defines the intercultural speaker (IS) as someone who, being aware of cultural differences and similarities can

function as a mediator between distinct cultures and diverse sets of beliefs, values and behaviors (p³78). As Jaeger (2008:8) concludes, the IS (1) mediates between culturally different groups in multiple contexts, (2) learns via interaction with others and via acquaintance with diverse cultural contexts, and (3) is constantly engaged in reflection. The literature suggests that adapting the IS role-model as the ultimately preferred outcome of FLT is both appropriate and timely (Byram 1997, 2003; Byram & Fleming 1998; Jaeger 2001; Kramsch 1998b, Medgyes 1983, 2001; Reeves & Medgyes 1994).

Intercultural Encounters

In this study I will use the term intercultural encounters to refer to occasions in which participants have a chance to interact with members of a different culture. There is an abundance of research published on the development of intercultural communicative competence both in classroom context (Korzilius et al. 2008; Olk 2009; Lázár 2011) and through real-life interactions (Faubl 2009; Gao 2008; Patterson 2006; Szentpáliné Újlaki 2010; Xiao & Petraki 2007). In what follows I present studies discussing intercultural encounters focusing on (1) the language used by interactants, (2) the context of the encounter and (3) the interlocutors.

When thinking about intercultural encounters, an important consideration is the language used in the interaction. In a Hungarian context, with English being the most widely spoken foreign language, it is reasonable to assume that participants in an intercultural situation are likely to exchange ideas in English. There is an increasing conviction that English is becoming a *lingua franca* in intercultural communication: Meierkord (2000) analyses small talks between interlocutors for whom English was a FL and she argues that these intercultural communication acts are characterized by cooperation rather than misunderstanding, as interlocutors wish to assure one another of their positive attitudes. Kankaanranta (2009) presents findings of two research projects at the Helsinki School of Economics, and argues that in companies with both Swedish and Finnish employees English is used as a primary means of communication both on the individual and the corporate level, even if Swedish is spoken by both parties. Similarly, Nickerson (2005) found English to be the exclusively used language in spoken and written communication between business partners of different cultural backgrounds.

Apart from the language used, the location of the encounters might also affect their outcome. A lot depends on whether participants take part in intercultural encounters in their home environment, where they feel safer and more secure or during sojourning, a context that makes them feel less confident. Ying (2002) found that Taiwanese university students temporarily studying at US universities were more likely to engage in intercultural encounters if they were more extroverted. However, the same sample of students reported great likelihood to engage in intercultural communication acts back at home, regardless of their extroversion. Thus, it is evident that the home environment made students feel more likely to actively participate in intercultural encounters. Moreover, researching Hungarian English majors' willingness to communicate (WTC), Nagy (2009) found that students who helped foreigners understand the culture and customs in Hungary, or gave them directions, felt a sense of social responsibility which made them more willing to speak (209: 157), thus, ultimately, more likely to take part in intercultural communication acts.

It should not be implied though, that a foreign environment inhibits students and makes it more difficult for them to participate in such encounters. In the long run, a study abroad or a sojourn experience is absolutely beneficial for students' development into competent intercultural communicators.

The literature on the development of intercultural sensitivity suggests that extended stay is more helpful in enhancing students' intercultural sensitivity (Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity - DMIS, Bennett 1986). Patterson (2006) researched US university students' intercultural sensitivity using Bennett's model and inventory. Two groups participated in the study: one group spent a semester studying abroad and a control group stayed at their home institution but completed an intercultural awareness-raising course. The statistical analysis found that the on-campus group showed no progress in intercultural sensitivity, whereas in the study-abroad group noticeable, though statistically not significant progress was found on the measures (2006:77-83). This finding convinced the author to turn to qualitative research design to supplement and better explain findings. Qualitative data obtained from follow-up interviews reflected considerable changes in students' worldview, their desire to travel more, learn FLs and they had more favorable attitudes towards other cultures (p. 86).

Similar results were reported by Faubl (2009) who found that the intercultural sensitivity of German medical students studying in Hungary did progress as time passed by, as predicted by the DMIS. After eight months of stay, students reached the minimization stage of the ethnocentric phase, whereas students of over two years of stay tended to reach the ethnorelative stage.

An extended stay may also be beneficial to boost students' self-confidence as foreign language speakers. Nagy (2008) conducted an in-depth interview study with ten ex-au-pair English majors, who all believed that their language proficiency had improved. The participants reported on becoming more fluent and confident in colloquial speech as a result of the residence abroad experience (p. 185). Moreover, they all believed they possessed a linguistic advantage over those English majors who have not worked in the UK. The same issue is presented from another aspect in Tóth's study (2007), who found that English majors who had not worked or studied in an English speaking country believed that their lack of experience significantly hinders their progress as language learners. Their main concern was that they thought they were disadvantaged compared to their peers who had lived in an English-speaking country. This fact inhibited their performance as English majors, and made them feel anxious and frustrated.

Empirical studies attribute a crucial role to the interlocutors taking part in intercultural encounters, arguing that intercultural contact has a major impact on attitude formation. Nagy's study on English majors previously working as au-pairs in Britain (2008) also highlights that as a result of pleasant first-hand experiences, participants were more likely to modify their previous stereotypes (p. 181). According to Byram (1997), the attitudes required for successful intercultural communication include curiosity, openness, and readiness to suspend disbeliefs and judgments about other cultures, and about one's own (p. 35). These attitudes are most easily formed if the participant had pleasant experiences with members of other cultures.

Moreover, attitudes towards speakers of a language most often determine attitudes towards the target language (Csizér & Dörnyei, 2002; Dörnyei & Csizér 2005; Kormos & Csizér 2007), and thus they impact motivation to learn the language. In their study on teenage Hungarian EFL students' motivation to speak various FLs, Csizér and Dörnyei (2002) found that students' motivation decreased if their attitudes towards the (1) language and (2) its speakers decreased (p. 343). Similar tendencies were revealed with Hungarian primary-school learners of English and German: in their interview-study Kormos and Csizér (2007) found that students had very positive attitudes towards speakers of English and German, and this made them more eager to develop their language proficiency. They found evidence for the importance of frequency of contacts: short-time superficial contacts were not sufficient for this age-group for attitude formation; such contacts were barely enough to neutralize stereotypes based on popular anecdotes. However, more frequent and longer-lasting contacts changed participants' thinking and helped them form complex and positive attitudes towards speakers of the target language (pp. 93-96).

In the Hungarian context various studies have focused on intercultural contacts (Csizér & Dörnyei 2002, 2005; Csizér & Kormos 2009; Dörnyei & Csizér 2005; Kormos & Csizér 2007, 2008), but these studies had primary and secondary school student participants. Nagy's study (2008) investigated English majors' experiences who had worked abroad as au-pairs. To my knowledge, no study has focused on the amount and quality of English majors' intercultural encounters to explore how students can apply what they had learnt in the classroom and how they can reflect on their experiences. The empirical study presented in the next section intends to fill this gap.

Method

The study follows the traditions of the qualitative research paradigm: provides a thick description of students' intercultural encounters allowing in-depth understanding of their experiences. I applied introspective methods by eliciting respondents' self-reflections. According to Dörnyei (2007:147), this is a suitable way to obtain information about unobservable mental processes such as thoughts, feelings, motives or attitudes. There are two specific techniques within introspective methods: think-aloud protocol and retrospective reports (Gass & Mackey 2000). In interaction research immediate report is impossible (Dörnyei 2007:149); instead, Gass and Mackey (2000) propose stimulated recall. The core idea is that some tangible reminder of an event would help the respondents retrieve the thoughts and feelings they

had during an event. In the research instrument designed for this study narrative accounts were elicited from international students about their study abroad experiences. These accounts were expected to trigger participants' ideas about similar experiences they encountered.

Research questions

The following three research questions are addressed in this study:

- RQ1: How do students describe their most memorable intercultural encounters?
- RQ2: What opportunities do students have for intercultural encounters?
- RQ3: How can students' intercultural encounters be characterized?

Participants

Participants were 45 third-year English majors, studying in the BA in English Studies program at the University of Pécs (UP). Students' average age was 22 years; the youngest student was 20, the oldest 23 (SD=1.4). There were 29 female and 14 male participants. Data were not available in two cases. All participants were native speakers of Hungarian, and considered English their first and most important foreign language (FL). All of them had been studying English for a minimum of nine years at the time data were collected.

Data collection instrument

The data collection instrument was specifically designed for this study. First, retrospective narratives were collected from ten international students of the UP (4 German, 3 Scandinavian, 2 Iranian and 1 Korean) on their experiences after arriving in Pécs. As a next step, the texts were analyzed and three narratives were selected to be part of the research instrument. A senior researcher was also involved in selecting the final narratives. These scripts were evocative enough to provoke participants' ideas about similar experiences: one gave an account of a successful intercultural communication encounter, one of an unsuccessful one, and one was about surprising differences in lifestyles between the country of origin and the host country.

Participants were asked to read the three narrative accounts and to write a short essay in English of about 250 words describing an occasion in which they felt similarly to the authors of the sample narratives. A sample narrative from the data collection instrument is provided in the Appendix.

Participants were also asked to fill in a short questionnaire on their background: their age, gender, mother tongue, current year of study, number of years studying English, number of IC courses completed, number of countries they have visited, the typical lengths of their stay, the purpose of their travel, and possible locations for meeting foreigners in their home country. The background questionnaire was used to get an overall understanding of participants' past experiences and opportunities. The information obtained through this questionnaire helped the analysis of the narratives.

Procedures

Data were collected in March 2011, task-completion required 60 minutes. Students gave their informed consent that their writings could be used for research purposes. I assured all participants that their privacy would be protected; for this purpose, narratives were coded.

First, the answers to the background questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Then, qualitative content analysis (Cresswell 2003; Dörnyei 2007) of students' narratives took place. There were some participants who shared more than one story; thus, 49 narratives were analyzed. To obtain more reliable results, a senior expert was also asked to read the narratives and to identify themes and focal points.

Results and discussions

In this section findings are presented on (1) how participants describe intercultural encounters, (2) what opportunities students had for such encounters, and (2) how these encounters can be characterized. The discussion of the results focuses on the findings of the qualitative analysis of narratives; these are supplemented by data obtained from the short background questionnaires. Quotes from participants' narratives are presented as they were written, occasional language inaccuracies have not been corrected. The numbers in brackets following the quotes indicate the code of the respondents.

Participants background in intercultural communication studies

All participants completed introductory courses on Intercultural Communication, and the majority (32; 71%) were enrolled to an elective Intercultural Communication lecture course at the time data were collected. Intercultural communication courses at UP cover a wide range of topics in linguistics, applied linguistics, communication studies, social and general psychology (Dombi, 2011), thus, students became familiar with the basic concepts underlying intercultural interactions during their studies.

Participants' description of IC encounters

Out of the 49 scripts, 45 described situations in which actual interaction of individuals was involved. Four narratives, all accounting for surprise at the differences of lifestyle, described the participants' ideas on visiting other countries, or observing foreigners in Hungary. Thus, participants overwhelmingly described intercultural encounters as events in which verbal communication between individuals took place.

In 42 stories students mentioned situations in which they talked in English with either a native speaker (NS) of English, or a non-native speaker (NNS). The NNSs included citizens of mostly Western-European countries and Asians. Table 1 provides information on the origins and linguistic backgrounds of interlocutors involved in the interactions carried out in English.

Table 1: *Origin and Linguistic Background of the Interlocutors in the Narrative Accounts*

NSs of English			NNSs of English		
US	GB	AU	Western European	Eastern European	Asian
4	5	1	14	2	16

Forty-two students shared stories of encounters in which they used English, a finding that contributes to the increasing awareness in the literature that English is the language of intercultural communication (Knapp & Meierkord 2002; Meierkord 1998; Seidlhofer 2004). Students reported on interlocutors who strived for mutual intelligibility, similarly to the findings of Meierkord (2000) and Kankaanranta (2009). Even participants describing an unsuccessful event did not attribute the failure to the fact that English was used as a common language.

Three narratives described situations in which Hungarian was used with native Hungarian interlocutors residing in neighboring countries, labeled 'ethnic Hungarians' by respective participants. These three participants did not interpret intercultural encounters as communication acts involving interlocutors speaking a FL, thus, they use a broader definition of culture and intercultural contact. This phenomenon might be due to Hungary's special status of having a considerable Hungarian ethnic minority living in neighboring countries. Apart from these three students, all others described an intercultural encounter in which they spoke English, which shows that they mostly defined intercultural communication acts as situations in which English was used as a common medium.

Differences in students' experiences

The next finding concerns the differences in students' experiences. The situations described are diverse: participants range from the ones first leaving their small town at the age of 18 when entering university to the ones who have visited several European or non-European countries. This section presents students' diverse experiences and highlights how their socioeconomic backgrounds contribute to their intercultural experiences. Figure 1 shows the number of foreign countries students had visited.

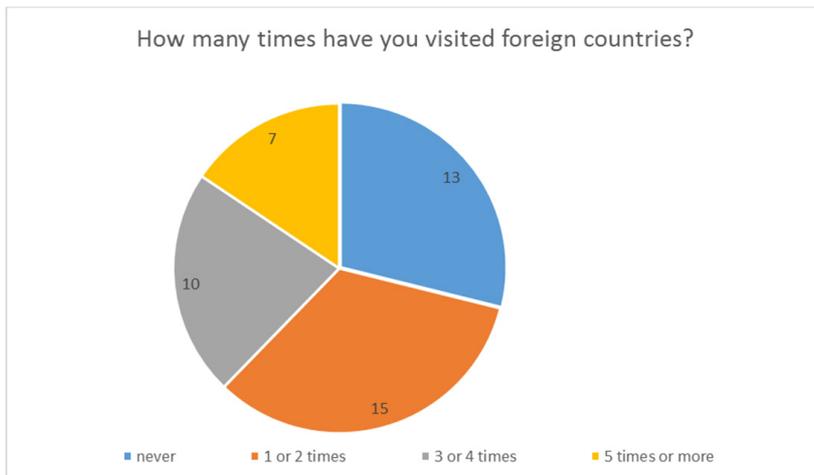


Figure 1: Number of participants' visits to foreign countries. Data from the background questionnaire.

Thirty-two students had visited foreign countries. In their narrative accounts 24 students wrote about intercultural encounters in European countries including Germany, Italy, Belgium, France, England and Spain, whereas eight students wrote about their exotic trips to far-off destinations, such as Thailand (two students), China (two students), India (one student), to the US (two students) and Australia (one student). This shows that every sixth participant had an opportunity to visit faraway tourist destinations which are not typical for Hungarian families. The impact of students' socioeconomic background on their studies has often been emphasized in Hungarian research on education (Csapó 2003), and findings confirm that the amount and quality of intercultural experiences is also influenced by this. Undoubtedly, those participants whose families could afford such trips must have had more opportunities to get to know other cultures and people. One student seemed to be aware of their advantageous position:

'Fortunately, I have been blessed with a family that is open towards our colorful world and loves travelling. As a result, I have visited many countries and met numerous cultures in my life.' (30)

Thirteen students reported that they had never travelled abroad and they all wrote about this fact in strong negative terms. Seven students mentioned insufficient financial conditions, two wrote about the lack of possibilities, and four did not write about reasons.

'Unfortunately, I have never been abroad.' (28)

'If I have better financial conditions, I will definitely travel all around the world.' (31)

'I was interested in getting to know other cultures but, unfortunately, I didn't have the time, nor the money to actually do something for it.' (33)

However, both students' narratives and their answers to the background questionnaire revealed that their home and study contexts provide them ample opportunities to interact with members of other cultures. Figure 2 presents the places students identified as frequent locations for intercultural encounters.

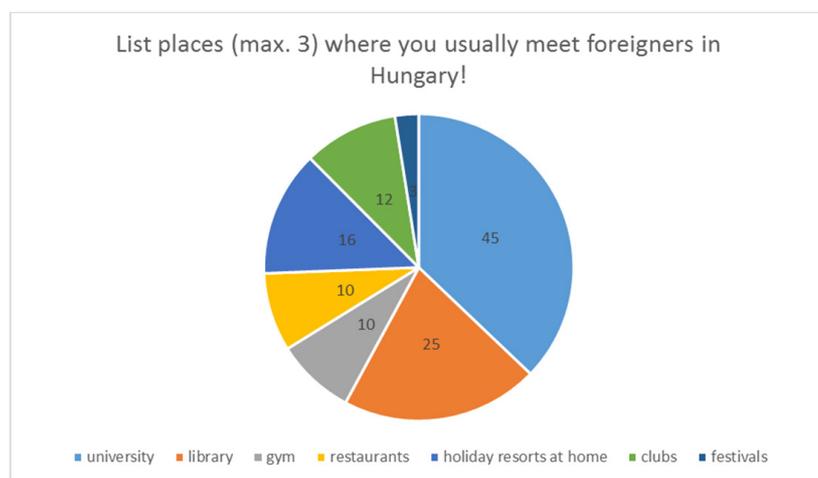


Figure 2: Places where participants usually meet foreigners in Hungary. Data from the background questionnaire.

The background questionnaire asked students to list the places in their home country where they are most likely to meet and interact with foreigners. Most participants listed 3 places, and the university was the first mentioned by all the 45 participants. As both Figure 2 and the following narrative extracts present, those students who lack the privilege of extensive traveling can also acquaint themselves with other cultures at the university, in the neighborhood where they live, or during leisure activities:

'I have the chance to meet other cultures, because in Pécs, where I am studying, there are lots of foreigners, Erasmus students and medical students, from different countries and cultures as well.' (28)

'I live in a neighborhood, where many ERASMUS and medical students live, and I go to the same gym with many of them.' (45)

'There are many foreign students at our university, and there are many opportunities to meet with them. I frequently meet some at spinning classes, and Paulus is another popular scene.' (25)

'I could have many such opportunities, because I live in Szigeti Street, where all the foreign students rent their flats.' (27)

'Well, all my days are intercultural, as my boyfriend is from Norway. He is a university student, here in Pécs, training to become a doctor.' (19)

The outcome of the intercultural encounter is largely influenced by whether students took part in them as hosts or as guests. The narratives revealed that students tended to feel somewhat more confident if they were at home and could use their local knowledge, and some of them found it easier to interact with foreigners in their own cultural environment – a tendency similar to those found by Ying (2002) and Nagy (2009).

Participants' texts also show that their most frequent intercultural contacts in Pécs were international students. They are particularly important contacts: (1) they are of the same age as Hungarian students; (2) they typically live in the same neighborhood close to campus; (3) students have plenty of opportunities to socialize with one another during leisure activities.

Out of the 32 narratives that described experiences abroad, 20 presented holidays or school-trips, five students worked abroad and two described study abroad; the purpose of travel was not stated in five cases.

Holidays typically last shorter than a work or study-abroad experience. Figure 3 provides data obtained from the background questionnaire on the typical length of students' stay in a foreign country.

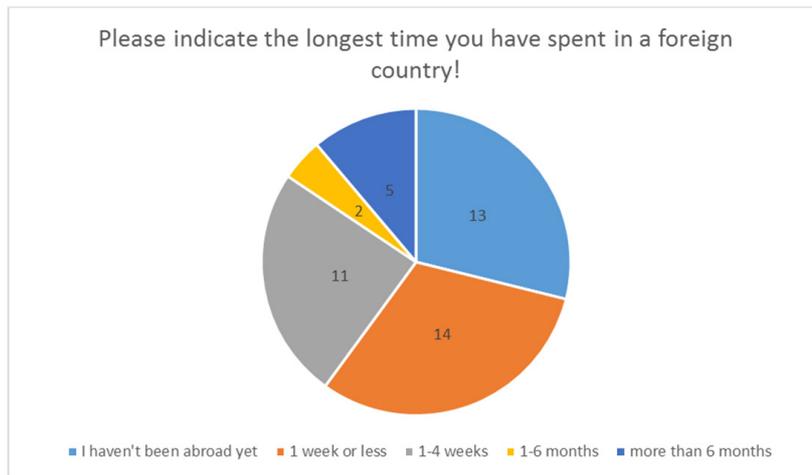


Figure 3: *The length of participants' stay in foreign countries. Data from the background questionnaire.*

Evidently, extended stays allow students to gain a deeper insight into a foreign culture and a better understanding of others' thinking, contributing to the development of their intercultural skills (Patterson 2006; Faubl 2009).

However, only seven students stayed abroad for longer periods, ranging from three months to one year. Two of these students worked as au-pairs, a job that enabled them to observe others closely during their everyday activities. Au-pairs had the opportunity not only to get first-hand experience of other cultures, but also to chat with au-pairs from other countries, and these encounters had contributed to shaping their ideas about their stay-abroad. As one student wrote:

'I asked the other girls at the playground – Polish and Estonian, mostly – to tell me more about their experiences, and I was shocked that they were not as enthusiastic as I was. (...) Looking back, this may be due to the fact that they were permanently there, not just for the three months I was. I feel I was successful in my staying there, because I learned a lot, mostly the language, but not only that. I also became familiar with British culture, and with other nations' view on Brits.' (13)

Three students wrote about their experiences while working as a receptionist in tourist resorts, two in Croatia and one in Turkey. These multicultural environments allowed them to improve their intercultural communication skills through extensive interaction with their co-workers and with tourists:

'We had many different people at the camp-site I worked for. I mean not just the guests, but the co-workers as well. I worked at the reception desk, and I had to deal with different costumers.' (16)

'Once I spent a couple of months in Turkey working in a hotel by the see. I got acquainted with a bunch of Turkish people who were mainly my colleagues.' (18)

Two students described events that had happened to them while taking part in study abroad programs, their destinations were Thailand and the United States.

A further difference between students' experiences is whether they have visited an English-speaking country. As has been presented, 32 stories describe encounters that happened abroad. Out of these, ten students reported on their intercultural experiences in an English-speaking country. As the following extracts show, students were very enthusiastic about their stays in these countries:

'Australia is a fascinating country with friendly people and superb landscape and view' (29)⁰

'My school trip to England two years ago was fantastic. I was looking forward to it very much, and it was like a dream coming true.' (38)

'When I was in the US for the first and only time in my life, I had many great experiences' (04)

'My most important intercultural experience was (...) when I was in England as an au-pair for a summer.' (13)

However, the fact that less than a quarter of the 45 third-year BA students had visited an English-speaking country is important. Although the transmission of authentic cultural information is not restricted to residence in the target language country, it would be interesting to find out what kept English majors from visiting these countries, most importantly Great Britain, as it is closer to Hungary than other English-speaking countries; no visa is needed to enter and it is a popular work destination for Hungarians. The students I asked in follow-up sessions told me that they were unable to go abroad because of financial problems: they could not save enough money to start a stay-abroad experience in Britain. Moreover, they were afraid that they may not return in the near future if they find a job there, or find it difficult to study on after having worked abroad, which would mean that they won't graduate and 'end up as a receptionist in Britain forever.' Some students added that this would be something their parents would not support. All of the students I had asked were very sorry they couldn't work in the UK, mostly because they believed they could achieve otherwise unattainable language proficiency (September 2011, follow-up personal communication with the students). This finding is in line with previous studies on Hungarian English majors, who hold a firm conviction that they can best learn English if they go to an English speaking country to work or study (see Nagy 2008, Tóth 2007).

The findings presented in this section indicate that there were enormous differences between the amount and quality of participants' intercultural encounters. However, even students who could not afford expensive journeys had opportunities to meet members of other cultures in their home environment.

Context of the encounter

All participants provided information on the context of the encounter. In this section the context will be presented in terms of (1) the interlocutor and (2) the specific setting of the interaction. Students had limited contact with NSs of English: only ten narratives describe situations in which a NS of English was involved. Consequently, participants used English in intercultural situations mostly with other individuals for whom English was also a FL.

Participants describing their intercultural experience with NSs of English tended to have positive and pleasant memories even if interlocutors were unfamiliar to them:

'As I was sitting on a bench [in a park in London], a guy came up to me with a big smile on his face, and asked me whether I wanted to play volleyball with him. I tried to say 'yes' as soon as I could, even though I was flabbergasted by the offer. It was pure kindness and directness that caused such a big astonishment to me.' (41)

'When I was in England, once in a supermarket the cash-lady said to me how much it was and she added "sweetheart", I was quite shocked. Never at home, not even with a cash-lady I would see regularly, would I have been addressed that way. I found it quite nice though.' (01)

'I went to the kitchen and told the mother kindly that I need more food for breakfast and less for dinner. She accepted it and kindly told me to tell her if I have any such problems.' (38)

The positive memories participants wrote about in connection with their NS contacts are very important, as they play a key role in attitude formation and may also impact motivation to learn the language. From the above extracts it is evident that students' pleasant experiences positively influenced their attitudes towards target language speakers (for similar results with Hungarian learners, see Csizér & Dörnyei 2002; Dörnyei & Csizér 2005; Kormos & Csizér 2007).

Apart from the NS interlocutors, the foreign partners mentioned in the narratives include a great variety of people with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, both from Europe (19) and from Asia (16). Table 2 presents the nationality of the interlocutors who were NNSs of English.

Table 2: *The Nationality of Interlocutors who were NNSs of English*

Europe	Italian	6
	German	4
	Ethnic Hungarians	3
	Spanish	3
	Norwegian	2
	Belgian	1
	Croatian	1
	Dutch	1
	Turkish	1
Asia	Thai	4
	Arab	3
	Chinese	3
	Indian	3
	Japanese	1
	South-Korean	2

It should be noted that students were asked to describe their most memorable experiences, and it is assumed that for many participants the encounter was not the only contact they had with people of other languages and cultures. Consequently, Table 2 does not imply that more students had contact with Thai interlocutors than with, for example, Croatian ones. Students tended to find their encounters more memorable with people from significantly different cultures.

The outcome of a communication act is heavily influenced by the social status of the communication partners (Gumperz & Cook-Gumperz 2008; Trudgill 2008; Wardhaugh 2006). Thus, the social relationship between participants and their interlocutors was also analyzed, as it might have affected their negotiation for meaning. Identifying the social status of the interlocutor was possible in 40 narratives, and the social relations between participants could also be analyzed. In 26 stories participants were engaged in

communication acts with interlocutors of equal social status: peers of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. In twelve narratives participants wrote about interlocutors of higher social status, mostly parents of their host families, teachers, employers or other adults. In two narratives the communication partners were of lower social status: staff of a restaurant where the participant was a customer, and trainees in an aerobics class where the other participant was the instructor.

No special relationship was found between the outcome of the encounter and the social status of the interlocutors. As participants did not provide enough information on the actual discourse, the narratives do not make it possible to find out how exactly intercultural encounters were influenced by social status. A more detailed conversation analysis of the actual spoken discourse would shed light on this question (see, among others Carrier 1999; Holtgraves 1986, 2002), but this was not the focus of the present study. However, the analysis of the narrative accounts revealed that students felt rather easy to interact with their foreign peers; such interactions between partners of equal social status in most cases meant befriending:

'We very soon made friendships with other choirs, and explored the town together. I had opportunity to make friends with other people My best friends became the Italian girls. They were very-very nice and close. They were always happy and cheerful, and they always made me feel better when I had homesickness. We spent most of our time together.' (15)

'We lived in a hotel with many other nationalities, we were the only Hungarian family there. I liked this so much: I had opportunity to make friends with other young people, Dutch, German and Austrian. (...) We had great chats in that 10 days, mostly in the evenings when we went to bars or to the 'terazzo'. They became my friends, we constantly keep in touch on facebook.' (26)

On the other hand higher social status occasionally made students feel insecure and less willing to share their ideas or problems:

'Maybe I could have explained peculiar things [to this elderly man at the barbecue party] about Hungary, and not these stupid information [he was curious about]. Or I could make him realize how stupid his questions were by asking the same ones from him, in his context. But I didn't. I wasn't brave, or I didn't care.' (08)

'[M]y host family was totally careless towards me. When I got off the plane, none of them helped me to carry my luggage (...). No warm, welcome-hugs or introduction was waiting for me, just a cold „hello” from each member of the family. I thought „okay, they are just having a bad day”. Obviously, I was wrong because from then on, they didn't have a nice word towards me, only the instructions about the upcoming work I was going to have to do. (...) Unfortunately, I didn't dare to ask them directly about this issue, so the possible explanations are only in my head.' (36)

Similar findings were reported by Nagy (2008): some Hungarian au-pairs felt inferior to their British host families because they were domestic workers of lower social status (p. 182) and this situation inhibited verbal interactions as communication mostly focused on daily tasks.

In order to explore the direct effect of social status on intercultural communication in depth, a different approach would have been necessary: authentic discourses should have been collected on how participants communicate with interlocutors of different social status in their own culture in their own language and in a different culture using a FL (see Carrier 1999; Hassani, Mardani, & Dastjerdi 2011).

Although there was insufficient information in the narratives on how communication was influenced by the interlocutors' social status, it is clear that equal social status made it easier for students to interact with and even to befriend members of other cultures.

Conclusion

This study aimed to offer insights into the opportunities English majors have for intercultural encounters. The qualitative methodology was chosen to shed light on how participants reflect on various aspects of their intercultural encounters: the quality and quantity, the interlocutors and the specific contexts where they took place.

The analysis of the narratives indicates that participants perceived their encounters as important and influential on their lives. Participants' intercultural contacts were overwhelmingly people of other European and Asian nations, for whom English was also a FL; only one-fifth of the participants wrote about encounters in which NSs of English were involved. Almost all participants wrote about events in which they spoke English, thus, they tended to define intercultural communication acts as situations in which English is used as a common medium, a finding that supports previous investigations of English becoming the language of intercultural communication.

There are enormous differences between students' opportunities to meet members of other cultures. Some participants never left their place of birth prior to entering university; whereas others have travelled extensively. This difference highlights the role of students' socioeconomic background in their studies. However, even those students who did not have the opportunity to travel abroad had chances to interact with members of other cultures in their university town.

Findings also carry pedagogical messages to instructors: although the study lacked an in-class focus, its findings are beneficial for teachers, as the narratives provided by participants proved that revisiting previous intercultural experiences is a task students find interesting and useful. The retrospective design of the task helped them to reflect on their and their interlocutors' behavior in light of what they had studied. Such tasks could be used more widely as they offer useful ways to integrate theory and personal experiences.

Some possible limitations of the paper also have to be addressed: the study was cross-sectional, and provided no insight into development. This could be overcome if students were repeatedly asked to do similar tasks in their Intercultural Communication courses. Second, the trigger stories of the data collection instrument might have limited the outcome of participants' narratives. However, the methodology required stories that stimulate memory (Gass & Mackey 2000). A series of semi-structured interviews with students could provide more specific data on their experiences and would provide a possibility to ask for more information about issues that were not addressed in the narratives. More specific inquiries into the exact contexts and settings would help us draw a more realistic picture about the contextual factors that influence students' behavior in IC encounters. Bearing these in mind, I intend to design an interview study with fewer participants.

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Appendix

A sample narrative from the data collection instrument used for stimulated recall:

'My stay here in Pécs for the past three months has been terrific. I have lived in Boston, Massachusetts for four years, and like that, I am aware that being Asian, my home country, Korea, is totally different from the 'WEST'. However, this is the first time I visit Europe. It is a totally different experience. Everything is very old here, but not in the wrong sense. You can feel history here. Not only in Hungary, I have also visited Venice, for example. Same thing: buildings, streets, vehicles, everything is old and has a certain sense of past attached to it. If I had to describe my experience here in Pécs, I'd say it's very different. At this time I still enjoy this difference, but I can see signs that after some time it may be a bit annoying. For example, at this time (after 3 months) it is still funny that professors are not always available at the university. Last time I asked for someone, and the administrator told me he didn't work that day. This was very surprising, I can't think of a situation back home like this, people simply always work.'

Seung from South-Korea

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