

# Questioning Questions in Autobiographies of Intercultural Encounters

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## ABSTRACT

In this article, the author analyzes the discursive forms of the Autobiographies for Intercultural Encounters Young Version (AIEY), which has been developed by the Council of Europe (COE) to encourage young learners to become aware of their intercultural experiences. She tried to analyze both AIEY's questions and 100 ten-years-old children's answers. The aim is to understand the kind of discourse that the AIEY encourages about intercultural encounters and the extent to which it could have affected the pupils' answers.

## KEYWORDS

Autobiographies, Education, Human Interactions

## INTRODUCTION

Intercultural awareness appears to be a major preoccupation of most actors in foreign language education today. According to Pretceille (2005, p. 36), “culture is not a priori construction of models but a complex ensemble of practices and actions, which are at their turn discursive forms that human beings uses to express themselves and to communicate.”<sup>1</sup> Hence, paying attention to these “discursive forms” is a way to become aware (Frame, 2014) of the complexities of human interactions and to overcome the still prevalent idea that “culture” is the homogeneous product of a homogeneous country.

In this article, we analyse the discourses that are negotiated in *Autobiographies for Intercultural Encounters Young Version* (AIEY), which was developed by the Council of Europe (COE) to encourage young learners to become aware of their intercultural experiences. The document, which consists of eight questions, was used in our doctoral research. The objective was to understand which identities were co-constructed during an international school exchange. The group who used the AIEY consisted of 100 10-year-old children who participated in an international school exchange that took place in 2012 between three schools in Italy, France and Great Britain. The children were asked to answer the questions in the document after each encounter with the other European mates. Therefore, we analysed almost 100 completed AIEYs. In our previous work, we focused on the children's answers. Perhaps this focus limited our analysis because we did not take into account the extent to which these answers could have been influenced by the AIEY questions. In this article, we pay attention to the questions asked in the AIEY document in order to shade light on the kind of discourse that it encourages and the extent to which it could have affected the pupils' answers. We use some discourse analysis (DA) tools, which will be described in the theoretical and the methodological sections. In this study, we compare the AIEY with other instruments used by the schools to encourage children to analyse their intercultural experiences. We refer to a simplified version of AIEY, which was conceived by a British teacher, as well as some press articles about the exchange that were written by Italian children for their school journal. These instruments are traditional approaches used in this field.

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## 1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

We can state our research question as follow: "Which kind of discourse is encouraged by AIEY questions and to which extent it affect pupils' answers"?

In order to answer our research question, we draw on Benveniste's definition of discourse (1966, p. 242): "Each enunciation which supposes a speaker, a listener and a speaker's intention to influence the other in a way or in another". Based on this definition, on one hand, we focus on one of the COE's discourses (i.e., the AIEY) and its influence on educational paradigms of intercultural education. On the other hand, we observe how AIEY users react to this discourse. We bear in mind Fairclough's position (2012, p. 11) according to which "Discourses are semiotic ways of construing aspects of the world (physical, social or mental) that can generally be identified with different positions or perspectives of different groups of social actors". Hence, we apprehend the AIEY discourse as an attempt to construct and to model an idea of international relationships according to COE politics.

It is necessary to clarify the notion of interculturality in the frame of this study. First, we understand interculturality as the expression of human relationships, and we share Bastide's (2006) point of view according to which "it's not cultures which come into contact, but persons."<sup>2</sup> Until twenty years ago in the field of language education, culture was presented as an ensemble of fixed images linked to a target language, and pupils were urged to compare them to find differences rather than similarities. Nowadays, pupils are encouraged to observe their own representations of the Other's culture. Under the influence of the COE, students are prompted to engage with people from different countries (Byram, 2008), and attitudes such as curiosity, open-mindedness, collaboration and solidarity are promoted. In his work *Intercultural Impostures*, Dervin (2011) underlined that the intercultural approach is still a culturalistic one, and it does not reflect the "instability" of human identities and representations. As Kramsch (2006, p. 251) highlighted, currently human relationships in global multicultural and plurilingual societies have become more complex because human discourses are the expression of multiple values and ideologies: "In order to understand others, we have to understand what they remember from the past, what they imagine and project onto the future, and how they position themselves in the present." Hence, the ambitious objective of open-mindedness is not always easy and collaboration is often impossible. Conflict is usually inevitable in complex multicultural relationships. Kramsch (2006) and Dervin (2009) argued for resorting to DA tools in order to take into account this heterogeneity (Clark, 2012). First, we refer to the notion of dialogism (Todorov, 1981), which can be used to understand the past discourses to which humans react and the potential future discourses that they anticipate. We then consider the notion of enunciation (Benveniste, 1970), which implies a "subject" (Benveniste, 1966). According to Dervin (2009, p. 169), taking into account the subjective position of the writer leads to considering the instability of human identities and representations. Moreover, the enunciation theory allows the researcher to understand who takes charge of the enunciation in a discourse. We were particularly inspired by Auger's work, *Contruction de l'Inter culturel dans les Manuels de Langue* (2007), in which the author elicited Benveniste's theory in order to determine the "I" enunciator in European textbooks. Often the enunciation is predominated by the textbook's author who tries to dissimulate his/her voice through fictitious characters (Auger, 129). Similarly, Auger (Auger, 191) tried to determine the "we" enunciator, which could be the expression of a national collectivity. Finally, Auger (Auger, 128-147) tries to understand who the "he/she/them" enunciators are. In a discourse, the "subject" positions himself or herself against his/her enunciation, endorses or distances from it, decides in whose name he/she is speaking, and tries to impose a particular role on the Other. Finally, we have considered a lexicographic dimension of a discourse as words are conceived as entities rich of symbolic meaning and charged with history.

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