Developing Learners' Intercultural Competence Through Autonomous Learning

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Abstract This paper examines experiential learning, as exemplified by ethnographic projects assigned for the purpose of developing learners' intercultural competence. In the first, theoretical part, the ethnographic approach with its capacity to develop both learners' intercultural competence and their ability to control their own learning is discussed. Ethnographic projects as an arena of independent learning engage learners in exploring foreign culture/s and provide them with ample opportunities to observe, analyze and interpret various contexts in which the target language is used. They foster their cognitive skills, teach critical and analytical thinking and the ability to mediate. Simultaneously, ethnographic tasks have the potential to foster learner autonomy. Thus, the link between the two has been analyzed. In the second part of the paper, the findings of the research carried out in several high schools in Poland in 2011 are reported. The study attempted to investigate whether and to what degree elements of autonomous learning are implemented in FL classes focusing on teaching foreign culture. The conclusion is that the learners have very few opportunities to become autonomous, both in the foreign language classroom and outside of it. Teachers do very little to foster their learners' autonomy and do not assign ethnographic projects to them.

1 Introduction

Since English has internationalized and is used for global communication, greater emphasis in the foreign language (FL) classroom should be given to the role of language in the construction of our cultural identities and the understanding of cultural differences. This is extremely difficult to achieve in homogeneous classes, typical of the Polish educational context. Autonomous techniques such as ethnographic projects seem to be conducive to the development of learners' intercultural competence (IC) since they provide considerable opportunities to explore various

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aspects of culture and help acquire deeper understanding of foreign culture/s and otherness, which is invaluable for successful cross-cultural communication.

Experiential learning shifts the focus from learning *about* a set of cultural practices to learning *with* and *through* practices, from culture seen as a product (i.e., factual information to be learned by heart) to culture perceived as a process. Furthermore, it gives students resources for analyzing their own cultural identity and practices. The present paper aims at discussing the ethnographic approach to FL learning used for the purpose of developing students' IC and clarifying how it helps them become autonomous and thus effective learners. In the empirical part, it reports the findings of a research project carried out in 2011 in several high schools. The study aimed to investigate whether and to what degree elements of autonomous learning are implemented in the intercultural FL classroom in Poland.

2 Ethnographic Approach to Culture and Language Learning

Ethnographic projects or field research engage learners in using FL to explore different cultures and observe, analyze and interpret various contexts in which it is used. Such tasks develop not only their communicative competence in the target language but also IC. By exposing learners to the micro-worlds of foreigners with their different worldviews, they promote tolerance, increase students' awareness of diversity, help search for human similarities and acquire desirable attitudes to otherness, foster empathy, open-mindedness, respect for the others and try to prevent/modify stereotypical views students may hold.

Learning ethnographically helps learners understand that reality is socially constructed—the world is not a set of objective facts but is made by individuals—social beings in everyday lives (Agar, 2000, p. 26). Students internalize a range of concepts and categories to describe culture, which helps them comprehend its power and influence on communication. They realize both cognitively and emotionally that languages are the vehicles for the expression of culture. Consequently, they can no longer dismiss the centrality of culture in their lives and the lives of others. This knowledge is extremely important since only the people who are aware of cultural differences and know their own culture can distance themselves from it, thus having the capacity to reduce or regulate its influence in contacts with foreigners. Such cultural self-awareness also increases learners' ability to identify any bias in intercultural situations and mediate whenever cultural misconceptions occur. Ethnographic learners become more attentive to cross-cultural encounters and more empathic towards foreigners. They are reluctant to label others mechanically and attribute positive qualities to foreigners without carrying out a detailed inspection first (Weigl, 2009, pp. 347–348).

Ethnographic projects show learners that the perception of the world is subjective and that "our thoughts and feelings are always culturally shaped and influenced by

one's biography, social situation and historical context" (Rosaldo, 1989, p. 129). To know a foreign culture, first we have to go beyond the natural, assumed stance of seeing everything from one unified point of view. Furthermore, culture is always experienced in an emotion-driven way, that is, in contacts with foreigners we are irrational and defensive rather than fair and objective. We tend to favor our in-group and to discriminate against the out-group. Thus, FL learners have to become aware of the role subjectivity and emotions play in their perception of the world and the resultant hurdles they may encounter in communication with foreigners.

Students have to learn that people with different roots can coexist and learn from each other. According to Kim (2008, p. 360), to achieve cross-cultural under-standing people, "should look across and beyond the frontiers of traditional group boundaries with minimum prejudice or illusion, and learn to strive for a society and a world that celebrates diversity side by side with a unifying cohesion". FL learners who aspire to use English successfully in intercultural communication should undergo a fundamental psychological transformation toward the intercultural identity. Firstly, they should go beyond the limits of their original cultural background and, secondly, transcend cultural differences to be able to acknowledge the interconnectedness among all the people. This transformation can be achieved through prolonged intercultural contacts and adaptation experiences over time whether living, working or traveling abroad and in multiple encounters with foreign cultures at home. In the case of Polish students learning English in homogeneous classrooms, ethnographic projects could provide them with the intercultural input they lack, both inside and outside the instructional setting.

Hymes (1980) claims that we are all born with ethnographic abilities, which are usually lost in the process of formal education. Thus, while young children learn instinctively from participation and observation, adults have to grasp the ethno-graphic approach anew. Ethnographic learning helps learners acquire detailed knowledge and conventions of the target culture and become aware of the com-plexity and contradictions of the cultural discourse. It engages them in exploring on their own the practices and beliefs of whole communities, and the meanings, norms and scripts of their worlds, thus providing ample opportunities to analyze the impact this search has on them in terms of conceptualization of themselves and others, and on their knowledge of foreign social and cultural practices (Roberts, 2003, p. 114).

Small-scale research into behavior in various situational contexts that is carried out by learners can help them realize, for example, that meaning is constructed jointly by the participants in conversations and arises out of the interaction between them in a specific context.[1] By immersing themselves in the target community for a

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[1]Nightingale (1989) has doubts concerning whether such small-scale research projects can be called 'ethnographic', since they usually focus on a small group and consequently lose the complexity of description valued in broader ethnographic studies carried out by professional ethnographers. Yet, from the perspective of developing learners' IC, they are very useful because they help learners realize that culture is multidimensional and give them a broader understanding of it.

longer time, learners become the participant-observers of a foreign culture, and their goal is to uncover the knowledge which governs social behavior in a particular context, exemplified by a set of established linguistic codes. They try to discover and explicate the rules for contextually appropriate behavior in a given group, for example, what kind of body language accompanies basic exchanges such as greetings, or when handshakes or kisses are acceptable or not. This is the knowledge needed to function well as a member of the community. In the process of doing ethnographic research, learners realize that communication breakdowns in a FL may result not only from the speakers' deficient language but also from their wrong cultural assumptions (Kramsch, 1993; Risager, 2007).

A valuable asset of ethnographic activities is that they are exercises in decentering from the conventional attitudes of the students' home culture but are not meant to deny or substitute for the patterns of thought characteristic of the home culture or to imply that one way of thinking is better than another. This decentering encourages learners to see themselves through the eyes of others, which is very useful since the very act of becoming less of a stranger and more of a group member creates an awareness of who we are in relation to others (Roberts, 2003, p. 118). While meeting what is strange and yet not understood in others, learners are encouraged to be reflexive and to acknowledge their role in understanding the others. However, to capitalize on the potential that ethnographic projects have in developing students' IC, each activity should be followed by a period of reflection on and an in-class discussion of the assumptions underlying the observed behaviors (Corbett, 2003, pp. 106–107).

Students bring to their encounters with foreigners culturally conditioned social knowledge and prior experiences used to interpret the utterances of the interlocutors. Thus, ethnographic projects increase their awareness that meaning is dialogic, that is, negotiated between the participants in context, and arises from an individual's wish to express himself or herself (Corbett, 2003, pp. 96–97).[2] Such projects involve students both in oral and written interaction with the teacher, their classmates and the contents of what is to be learned. They also let them gain valuable experience from encounters with a new culture and restructure their knowledge accordingly. Another advantage of the ethnographic approach is that it reveals that declarative knowledge of any foreign culture/s (i.e., factual information) is not enough to communicate successfully with foreigners. Students realize that culture often involves implicit knowledge that governs different types of behavior in concrete situations, which makes it so difficult to learn (Sercu, 1998). Thanks to ethnographic practice learners acquire observational skills which will be useful in contacts with unfamiliar cultures. Learning from immediate experience engages them intellectually and emotionally. Students are no longer passive recipients of information. The experience stemming from ethnographic observations should help them manage intercultural clashes and foster mediation skills.

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[2]A social practice is considered as a kind of text through which certain meanings are produced and interpreted.

Although constructing ethnographic accounts of cultures requires professional qualifications and is usually the job of trained researchers, advocates of the intercultural approach to language learning argue that some training in ethnographic techniques will suffice for language learners to benefit from exploring a foreign culture by themselves (Byram & Fleming, 1998; Roberts, Byram, Barro, Jordan, & Street, 2001). However, Roberts (2003) states that if an ethnographic study is to be beneficial for developing students' IC, it should be holistic: "Whatever size unit is chosen, the ethnographer's job is to understand it from every angle. Often, the best course of action is to focus right down on something small and examine it in detail" (p. 124).

A very good opportunity for learners to carry out small-scale ethnographic projects seem to be student exchange programs. The period abroad during which students are no longer rooted in their native culture and try to establish direct contacts with the unfamiliar environment offers a unique intercultural experience. Ethnographic projects give learners an impulse to analyze and reflect on being in-between cultures, to think about social, emotional and intellectual aspects of this experience. While doing an ethnographic project, learners develop intercultural understanding of the world, learn respect for cultural differences and become more open, mindful, flexible and inclusive individuals. It must be remembered, however, that the development of IC is not an automatic outcome of such visits. New cultural elements are not simply added to the learners' prior, internal knowledge. Developing intercultural sensitivity and competence is a process over which each individual has some degree of control, based on his or her predispositions, pre-existing needs and interests. For learners to become intercultural, deculturation or unlearning of at least some of the old cultural elements has to occur; they have to learn new responses in the situations that would instinctively evoke the ones rooted in the native culture. The act of acquiring something new is always connected with suspending and/or losing some of the old habits, at least temporarily, that is, the interplay of acculturation and deculturation (Kim, 2009, p. 363).
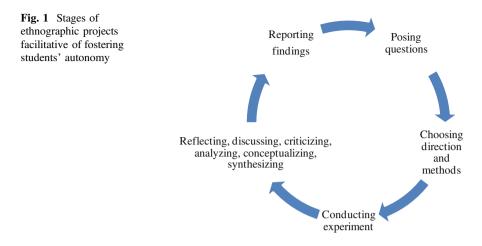
According to Damen (1987, p. 141), the ultimate goal of language and culture learning is acculturation, which she defines as "the continuous process in which the immigrant adapts to and acquires the host culture, so as to be directed towards the ultimate assimilation". For her, the best way to achieve this is to get students involved in a range of observational tasks, which finally leads to their acquiring understanding of the assumptions and knowledge that guide different cultural behaviors. However, the learner is not expected to assimilate the target behavior but only to be able to mediate, that is, adapt his or her usual behavior in order to manage a particular intercultural encounter (Damen, 1987, pp. 228–230).[3]

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[3]For example, an intercultural non-Moslem learner will understand that his or her Moslem friend refuses an invitation to dinner because of his religion's strict concerns about food preparation, and, thus, his refusal should not be perceived as a sign of being unfriendly or giving offence. She or he will recognize that the conventions of friendship and religious belief are in conflict here and should try to find a solution by, for example, thinking of an alternative way of socializing (Corbett, 2003, p. 106).

Learners do not perceive all experiences with foreign culture/s as positive, especially if they have not been given any help and guidance. The largest hurdles for the development of cultural understanding are stereotypes, or pictures in our heads used to categorize the world. Individuals see what they expect to see, which Bennett (1998, p. 12) refers to as *self-fulfilling prophecies*. Stereotypes are formed early during the process of socialization, irrespective of our experiences, and help us identify ourselves as belonging to a certain group. They are deeply ingrained in our minds and are very difficult to reject. Thus, any critique of stereotypes can be experienced as attacks on our socio-cultural identity and values. According to Forsman (2010), our expectations and perception of the world are governed by both positive and negative values closely connected with stereotypes, which do not merely describe the world but create it.

It is extremely important to prepare students both intellectually and practically before they go abroad so that their encounters with foreign culture/s and foreigners could contribute to their deeper understanding of both the foreign culture/s and otherness. Such preparation should not be merely limited to presenting them with information about different aspects of the foreign culture or the necessary linguistic knowledge. Its main objective is not only to compare the native and foreign cultures but also foster students' openness and reflexivity, that is, encourage them to be more explicit about their own assumptions and attitudes about themselves and the foreigners. Teachers should warn learners against generalizations and stereotyping of foreign societies and groups. Without this, the experience of being abroad may widen the gaps between the self and the foreigners and contribute to strengthening learners' prejudices and negative stereotypes concerning the others instead of rejecting and bridging them. Student foreign exchanges should also be summarized after the learners return home. The participants should report to their classmates the findings of their ethnographic projects and should be asked to reflect on the behaviors of both the foreigners and their own. They should have an opportunity to relate their experience of staying abroad to the theoretical knowledge of the foreign culture. At the heart of such discussions lies encouraging learners to think independently, talk about their feelings and thoughts, and find solutions to communication breakdowns resulting from cultural misconceptions.

The ethnographic approach not only helps learners develop their IC, but it is also conducive to fostering their autonomy in learning since it is learner-centered and self-directed. Autonomy is an attribute of good learners who achieve the expected results in FL learning. That is why Benson (2001, p. 2) considers it "a legitimate and desirable goal of language education". Doing an ethnographic project involves practicing autonomy on different levels, as illustrated in Fig. 1. Firstly, learners take the initiative, that is, they diagnose their learning needs, formulate learning goals, identify resources, make a decision concerning what they want to examine, plan and determine the content of the research project and choose the methods of inquiry and appropriate strategies (thus, they exercise control over learning management). Secondly, while they perform the task they reflect on its goals, which leads to an increase in their sensitivity to the learning process. Thirdly, they exercise control over the input and output of the project (they have control over learning content).

Fig. 1 Stages of
ethnographic projects
facilitative of fostering
students' autonomy

Reporting
findings

Posing
questions

Choosing
direction
and
methods

Reflecting, discussing, criticizing,
analyzing, conceptualizing,
synthesizing

Conducting
experiment

Simultaneously, all the time students get involved in an ongoing assessment of the
task and self-monitoring. Finally, they report the findings of their research, which
might be an impulse to undertake another project in the future. At the successive
stages learners assume responsibility for the task, and, broadly speaking, for
learning itself. They also exercise control over the cognitive processes involved in
carrying out the task, such as reflecting, discussing, criticizing, analyzing, con-
ceptualizing and synthesizing. The stages mentioned above coincide with the notion
of learning perceived as a cyclical process that integrates experience, reflection,
abstract conceptualization and action (Benson, 2001, p. 38).

Ethnographic projects and the concept of autonomy in language learning share a
focus on the learner who is the key agent in the learning process. While performing
the task, the learner is increasingly becoming a person who is able to construct
knowledge about the foreign culture directly from experience. At the same time, he
or she is increasing his or her 'learning capital'. Ethnographic tasks make learners
more independent and, thus, more efficient language learners. The ethnographic
approach also encourages learners to actively participate in the process of learning
and to construct knowledge through social interaction. While doing the task, they
develop a range of cognitive skills, such as making analogies, classifying,
abstracting away, constructing and rejecting hypotheses, reorganizing knowledge
and self-observation of the processes involved in understanding the foreign
language/culture. Additionally, ethnographic projects provide students with ample
opportunities to use learning strategies consciously, to solve problems and to
practice critical and analytical thinking. Thus, they help students not only to
develop IC but also become skilled language learners, capable of autonomic
learning, which is valuable in the times of life-long education.

Getting involved in ethnographic projects learners are fully involved in the
decisions about the content and the process of learning and systematically take
control over their own learning. However, fostering autonomy does not mean
leaving learners to their own devices but encouraging and assisting them so that

their learning can be more effective, which means that the goals they have determined for themselves can be achieved (Benson, 2001, p. 75). Thus, the teacher plays a very important role of a facilitator, helper, coordinator, counselor, consultant and adviser to whom learners can resort whenever it is necessary.

3 Research Study

3.1 Aims, Methodology and Procedures

To see if learners' IC is developed in a Polish FL classroom through autonomous learning, empirical research was undertaken.[4] Its main objective was to check whether and to what extent, while teaching foreign culture/s, teachers attempt to foster autonomy through practices that allow their learners to get engaged in the modes of independent learning. It also aimed at answering the following questions: Does FL classroom practice encourage and enable learners to take control of their learning; do students set their own learning objectives and have a choice concerning the selection of learning materials; do they plan activities and self-manage the process of learning; do they evaluate the outcome of learning and get involved in critical reflection of their learning; and, finally, is the potential of fieldwork capitalized on.

To achieve objectivity of the findings, triangulation of the data collection was used. The research was both quantitative and qualitative. To elicit data for the quantitative part of the study, a noninterventionist approach was adopted and a delayed retrospective method of data collection was used. In Spring 2011 a paper-and-pencil questionnaire in Polish, developed by the author of this paper, was first distributed among a sample of learners in a few high schools in Poznań, Poland. Three schools were selected by drawing, with four classes in each school being involved. The same questionnaire was given to the randomly selected teachers at a range of conferences, seminars and meetings in various cities in Poland (Warsaw, Poznań, Wrocław, Leszno, Koszalin, Lublin) from September to December 2011. In the case of both questionnaires stratified, multiple stage sampling was used. Finally, groups (strata) were established, with their members assigned by gender. Thus, the sample was truly representative and the results can be generalized beyond the study group.

Both questionnaires were administered to a sample of 353 learners and 489 teachers, who agreed to participate in the study. The data from the final sample of 338 learners and 317 teachers who completed and returned questionnaires were analyzed using a standard set of psychometric procedures. The sample size fulfilled the sample requirement recommended by Nunnally (1994) of 300 respondents for

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[4]This study is part of a larger research project which aims at assessing intercultural teaching and learning in the Polish context (Sobkowiak, 2012, 2015).

scale testing. Microsoft Excel was used to compute descriptive statistics and estimation theory was applied to analyze the results. Of the 338 learner respondents, 48 % were men (162) and 52 % were women (176). Of the 317 teacher respondents, 83.91 % were women (266) and 16.09 % (51) men.

The students' questionnaire included 21 items (7 open-ended, 14 closed-ended) and the teachers' questionnaire consisted of 33 items (27 closed-ended [multiple choice] and 6 open-ended). Some of the items had the form of checklists, which is exemplified by items concerning methods of teaching culture in classes preparing students for their visits abroad. Only the answers to the items pertaining to fostering students' autonomy are presented and discussed further in the paper. Pilot questionnaires were administered to a sample of 12 learners and 10 teachers to check the clarity of instructions and items, and the overall time needed for completion.

The data collected in the qualitative part of the study came from the observations of 21 English lessons taught in six high schools. The research was carried out from September to November 2011, and the lessons were recorded with the help of a Dictaphone. The observations were conducted in freshmen, junior and senior classes, three of which had an intensive program of English, that is, six hours of instruction, and three of which had a regular program, that is, three hours per week. Their level of language proficiency ranged from pre-intermediate to upper-intermediate. The lessons were conducted by seven different teachers (six females and one male), university graduates with qualifications for teaching English. Their experience ranged from one to 30 years. Three had a position of appointed teachers, three were certified teachers (the highest status in the Polish educational system), and only one was a contractual teacher, with one year of experience.

Each teacher was observed over a sequence of three lessons with the same class; the objective of each class was to develop the students' IC. Finally, the teachers were interviewed, which increased the validity of the findings (Silverman, 2011, p. 253). The sample was not representative since the subjects were not drawn from a population and were chosen at random, so the results from this part of the research cannot be generalized. However, the sample was diversified and reflects well the reality of the Polish high school. The number, frequency and types of autonomous learning/teaching elements observed in the classroom were analyzed. A specially designed form was used during lesson observations, which allowed registering the types of learning materials used in the classroom, and all autonomous practices and their frequency. This made quantification of the results possible. To ensure reliability of the observations, notes were simultaneously taken during these lessons by the author of this paper (Silverman, 2011, p. 247).

3.2 Results and Discussion I (Questionnaire Study)

The overwhelming majority of the teacher subjects (78.86 %; 250) claimed that a wide range of educational materials, such as books, articles and films, as well as discussing cultural differences in the classroom (78.55 %;), can help them develop

students' IC. 72.56 % respondents (230) asked their students to prepare and deliver presentations about history, geography, literature and other aspects of foreign cultures. The informants also ranked highly discussing current events in the country/ies whose language the students are learning (67.19 %; 213) and teachers' mini-lectures on the chosen aspects of the foreign cultures (50.47 %; 160). Lower in the ranking were comprehensive ethnographic projects or individual mini-research into the foreign culture/s carried out on a small scale by the students (41.32 %; 131), role-plays or simulations engaging them in acting out cross-cultural dialogues in the classroom (30.28 %; 96) and creating cultural portfolios (23.66 %; 75).

In the open-ended part of the questionnaire, very few subjects added any other sources of developing students' IC in the classroom than the activities listed by the present author. Among them were inviting native speakers to the classroom (1.26 %; 4), offering separate IC training, assigning translation exercises or cross-national projects to be performed with the students from the partner school abroad by means of e-twinning (each 0.63 %; 2), preparing and performing a play in a FL and organizing special events, for example, a foreign language day (each 0.31 %; 1). Thus, the teachers resorted mainly to traditional methods of teaching, and not much was done to foster learner autonomy.

When asked if a FL classroom was a source of IC experience for them, 58 % (195) of the learner informants answered *yes*, while 42 % (143) *no*. Those who considered a FL classroom as a place where IC teaching takes place were asked to tick the sources of their IC experience. Among the instruments used for this purpose ticked by the subjects were course books (71 %; 101; 30 %),[5] teachers' lectures (58 %; 83; 25 %), foreign language books, press articles and films (56 %; 80; 24 %), discussing cultural differences (43 %; 61; 18 %), students' presentations on the target language history, geography and various other aspects of the foreign culture (32 %; 46; 14 %). 19 % of the participants mentioned projects (28; 8 %), 15 % discussing the current events (22; 7 %), and 4 % role-playing foreigners (6). Only two respondents were asked to write cultural portfolios (1 %) and three (2 %) mentioned the Internet as a source of IC experience in their FL classroom. Hence, similarly to the results obtained from the teachers' survey, the learner informants claimed that autonomous learning plays a marginal role. Furthermore, there was a huge discrepancy between the opinions concerning preparing and delivering presentations in FL classes centered on teaching/learning a foreign culture (78.55 % teachers reported them in contrast to only 19 % of the learner respondents). However, the data collected from the learners revealed that they try to be autonomous and have contact with the foreign language/s they are learning outside the classroom, and presumably with the foreign cultures. 77 % (259) watch foreign TV channels, 63 % (212) go abroad with their families, 41 % (140) read literature in the foreign language/s, 48 % (161) take private lessons, 34 % (116) have friends who are foreigners and keep in touch with them on a regular basis either by e-mail or Skype, 33 % (111) read the press in the foreign language/s, 31 % (104) listen to

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[5]The second percentage is of the whole population surveyed ($n = 338$).

foreign broadcasts on the radio, 31 % (104) visit foreign sites on the Internet, and 15 % (52) participate in language camps during the summer.

As Byram (1997, pp. 64–65) claims, IC can be acquired in the classroom, by pedagogically structured experience outside the classroom (i.e., *fieldwork*) and by independent experience. The experience of fieldwork, particularly over a longer term when learners are separated from their classmates and teachers, and from their family and friends, has a twofold advantage. Firstly, it generates an interest in foreign cultures which is not that of a tourist or a business person, and, secondly, it provides opportunities to develop the abilities to cope with different stages of adaptation to unfamiliar conventions of foreign behavior and patterns of interaction (Byram, 1997, p. 69). For this reason, the respondents were asked about the foreign exchange programs in their schools.

79.50 % (252) teacher respondents declared that their schools have such exchange programs, whereas 20.50 % (65) claimed that visits abroad are not organized. Although most schools had student exchanges, participation in them was not common. Only 6 teachers (2.39 % of the subpopulation formed by the teachers employed in schools with the exchange programs) declared that in their schools all the students took part in visits abroad. 16 others (6.35 %) stated that the number of students who went abroad ranged from 50 % to 75 % of the whole school population. 52 subjects (20.63 %) claimed that 25–49 % of the school population participated in school visits abroad. As many as 178 informants (70.63 %) declared that the students who went abroad were the minority and accounted for 24 % or less of the whole school population. Relatively low participation in foreign student exchange programs was confirmed by the results obtained from the learner informants. 79 % of them (266) declared that the schools they attended earlier had student foreign exchange programs, whereas 21 % (72) claimed that the visits abroad were not organized by their schools. However, those exchange programs were not available for all the students. Only 34 % (91) of the student subpopulation that attend schools with foreign exchange programs participated in such exchanges (27 %; 91 out of the whole population surveyed), whereas 66 % (175) did not (73 %; 247 out of the whole population surveyed).

Unfortunately, even those students who took part in school visits abroad did not benefit from them from the IC perspective as much as they could have since only 60.32 % (152) of the surveyed teachers prepared their learners for contacts with the foreign culture, while 39.68 % (100) did not. Those who did this resorted to very traditional methods, mainly to discussions in the classroom about the target culture and cultural differences (51.97 %; 79), and lectures or speeches about the target country (28.95 %; 44). Only 14.47 % of the teachers (22) assigned their students presentations and 9.87 % (15) used project work; for example, they gave students observational tasks to be performed while being abroad, allowing them to play the role of an ethnographer. The examples of other tasks used at the preparatory stage preceding the visits abroad included watching and discussing films with their cultural contents (6.58 %; 10), searching the Internet (4.61 %; 7), language preparation (3.29 %; 5), acting out hypothetical situations abroad (2.63 %; 4), analyzing the previous visits from the school annals, discussing tolerance (1.32 %;

2 each) and encouraging students to play the role of ambassadors of Polish culture during the stay abroad (0.66 %; 1). The results obtained from the learners show that the majority of their teachers (67 %; 61) did not prepare them for contact with a foreign culture.[6] The minority who did this (33 %; 30) used very traditional methods, mainly lectures and discussions about the target culture and cultural differences (97 %; 88). Only 3 % (1) assigned their students presentations and 7 % (2) observational tasks to be performed while being abroad.

Similarly, only 65.87 % teacher respondents (166) stated they summarized the school visits abroad when back at school, whereas 34.13 % (86) did not do it at all. Those who did organized in-class discussions (65.66 %; 109), asked the participants to deliver presentations to their classmates (27.71 %; 46), prepare a bulletin board (9.64 %; 16) or write reports (7.83 %; 13). Some teachers encouraged the learners to show slides or pictures taken during the trip (7.23 %; 12), and others distributed questionnaires (6.63 %; 11), assigned special projects (4.82 %; 8) or organized competitions which tested students' knowledge of the foreign culture (1.81 %; 3). There was again a huge discrepancy between the teachers' declarations mentioned earlier and the results obtained from the learners, who claimed that their teachers did not summarize the school visits abroad when back at school (70 %; 64). The minority who did this (30 %; 27) organized in-class discussions (60 %; 16), slide shows (30 %; 8), assigned special projects (11 %; 3) or writing reports (11 %; 3) and asked the students to prepare a bulletin board (4 %; 1).

Since IC is multidimensional and its development is a lengthy process which takes years, it would be good if teachers of all school subjects made collaborative efforts to get their students involved in tasks focusing on intercultural learning. Unfortunately, the responses received from the teacher informants in the current study showed that in Polish schools such cross-subject cooperation of teachers is very rare; only 17.35 % (55) of the surveyed teachers declared to have undertaken such joint ventures versus 82.65 % (262) who did not do this. Those who worked together with teachers of other subjects reported a wide range of activities designed together with teachers of Polish, history, geography, another foreign language, biology, chemistry, information technology, music and physical education. 32.73 % (18) organized one-day special events such as tracing the writer Gunter Grass while sightseeing in Gdańsk, an exhibition of pictures in memoriam of Anne Frank, a German Jewish woman, an outing to a Christmas market in Germany, a trip to London, an incubator of entrepreneurship (a business fair), a foreign language day, a foreign culture day, a European day, a tourism day and various school competitions (e.g., a language competition or a history-of-England-from-the-female-perspective competition). 27.27 % (15) assigned their students projects with such titles as *Ethnic minorities in Poznań* (in cooperation with geography and history teachers), *Polish-German relationships* (together with a history teacher), *Music and dance*: *past and presence*

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[6]Teachers' responses given in questionnaires often reflect what they learned about a specific issue in their methodology classes at the university and not what they really do in the classroom. For this reason, the findings of such research are often considered unreliable and have to be complemented by data from other sources.

(music, physical education, history teachers), *Animals in literature* (Polish and biology teachers), and *Safety on the Internet* (with an information technology teacher). 23.64 % (13) of the respondents organized fieldwork for their students. Other examples of FL teachers' cooperation with the teachers of other subjects reported in the study included staging a play in a FL (7.27 %; 4), lessons about festivities and a range of holidays in foreign countries (9.09 %; 5; with a teacher of Polish), tourist attractions in our region—the best poster competition (10.91 %; 6; with a geography teacher), and a lecture on ecology (3.64 %; 2). One respondent cooperated with a teacher in a partner school; however, she did not specify the nature of this project.

3.3   Results and Discussion II (Observational Study)

57.14 % (12) of the observed lessons were based completely on the textbook a given class used. 33.34 % (7) worked with the materials, mostly texts, chosen by the teacher from other course books available on the market. In one lesson (4.76 %) aimed at discussing the problem of stereotypes, namely whether using stereotypes is bad or not, no educational materials were used at all; the whole classroom time was devoted to a discussion. However, the topic was imposed on the learners and the teacher had not prepared them to analyze this extremely difficult issue thoroughly. What is more, the discussion was spontaneous and the learners did not participate in its planning. This might be the reason why the students' arguments presented in the classroom were very naïve and vague, often off the topic. In fact, the role of stereotypes in cross-cultural miscommunication was completely ignored. The learners did not have any opportunities to exercise self-management, and, since there was no moderator, the discussion was quite chaotic. The students tended to digress and talk about a wide range of things not connected with the subject; for example, by resorting to Schopenhauer' philosophy one student wondered if the nature of mankind is good or not. There was no summary of the debate at the end. Although there were only 12 students in the classroom, seated in a circle, and the teacher withdrew completely (she was a silent observer, standing outside of the circle and helping the students a few times by giving them words they did not know), half of the participants (6) did not take advantage of expressing themselves spontaneously in English and did not say a word. The lesson did not contribute much to developing the learners' IC, nor was the potential to foster their autonomy exploited. The result would have been much better if the teacher had asked her learners to think of arguments in advance, at home, using any sources available. Only then would such a simultaneous assignment have been a good exercise in practicing autonomous learning.

Only one of the observed lessons (more precisely the phase of its preparation; 4.76 %), the subject of which was youth subcultures, helped the learners exercise their autonomy. Most of the classroom time was spent on the students' delivering their presentations prepared at home in groups of three or four. Although the subject was imposed on the learners, they had a choice concerning which of the subcultures

they would analyze. Since the assignment was group work, the students had an opportunity to make a lot of decisions, such as appointing a group leader or allocating subtasks to group members, to practice self-managing, and to synchronize their work. This entailed a lot of negotiation and let the students exercise control over their learning outside the classroom. The learners had had to do a lot of research on their own, which also involved decision-making on a microscale. They had a lot of independence at the stage of preparing their presentations, which presumably contributed to an increase in their self-confidence. While delivering presentations, the students had an opportunity to practice turn-taking and time-management. In the follow-up phase, they had to decide who would answer the questions from the audience. Unfortunately, the learners were not asked to self-evaluate while doing the project, so we cannot draw any conclusions concerning the effectiveness of this mode of autonomous learning in helping them overcome obstacles to progress in learning or to develop their IC.

None of the observed teachers promoted self-access learning; in no school visited was there a self-access center which would engage learners in studying the language outside the classroom, allow them to exercise personal control, self-direction and facilitate their informed choices, thus promoting autonomy. No one resorted to new learning technologies, such as computer-assisted language learning or the Internet, either. Probably, this was the result of a lack of proper infrastructure at the schools. In no classroom did the learners have access to computers or the Internet. Furthermore, the teachers very rarely took advantage of the students' having access to the Internet at home; only 2 of them (9.52 %) gave them tasks which required using Internet resources independently at home. None of the homework assigned by the subject teachers gave the learners an opportunity to choose alternative tasks. The most typical pattern for homework assignments was either to do the tasks and exercises chosen by the teacher (38.09 %; 8) or the ones in the textbook (23.80 %; 5). Quite surprisingly, in as many as 7 lessons (33.34 %) no homework was assigned at all.

In the interviews which followed the observations, the teachers agreed that they did not take into consideration promoting the learners' autonomy when designing their classes or teaching the cultural modules. The students did not participate in either determining the goals of their learning or planning their classes since the teachers were convinced that they had to work toward the objectives established by the Ministry of Education. Quite surprisingly, developing learner autonomy is in fact one the goals stated in the ministerial documents. Furthermore, the teachers say that the learners, their parents and the school authorities expect them to prepare the students for their final exam in English, which does not assess learners' capabilities of being autonomous. When asked why they did not allow their learners to choose the content of their learning, task types or methodology, they claimed there is no time for doing this and the students are not competent to make such decisions. The respondent teachers were convinced that they know what is best for their learners to pass the final exam, so there was no need to ask them what to do in the classroom or how to do it. The time constraint was also responsible for avoiding learners'

self-assessment of their achievements in the classroom or encouraging them to reflect on achieving learning objectives.

4   Conclusions

The data collected and analyzed in the study revealed that students' IC in the Polish context is developed in a very traditional way, mainly by transferring declarative knowledge of the foreign culture/s. Autonomous practices, such as ethnographic projects are used very rarely. Learners are not engaged in setting their own learning objectives and do not select learning materials, nor do they plan in-class activities, self-manage their learning or evaluate outcomes. The potential hidden in student foreign exchanges is not used, either; not all students participate in them, and those who do are not prepared to benefit from them to develop their IC.

Since the sample of the teachers observed in the classrooms was very limited, more lessons should be observed to get a broader picture of whether FLs are taught from an intercultural perspective and to what extent intercultural teaching is accompanied by students' managing their own learning and exercising control over the learning content and cognitive processes involved in doing various tasks. Further research into this would also validate the findings of the current study. As for the directions of future investigations, research should be done to test the relationship between students' IC and using autonomic procedures such as ethnographic projects. The findings of such studies, if a positive correlation is found, would provide strong grounds for believing that giving learners control over various aspects of the learning process is essential for the effective development of their IC. Only then could the ethnographic approach become more popular in Polish schools.

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