

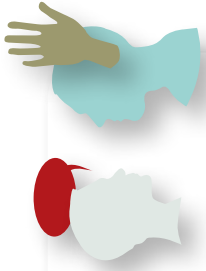
An illustration at the top of the page features several colorful silhouettes of people's heads and hands. From left to right: a dark blue head with a ponytail, a pink hand, a red head, a gold head, a pink head, a dark blue head, a white head, and a purple head. Below the white head, there is a white head with a red cap and a light blue hand. The entire illustration is set against a light teal background.

Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters

Introduction



Language Policy Division



The **Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters** is a concrete response to the recommendations of the Council of Europe's White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue "Living together as equals in dignity" (<http://www.coe.int/dialogue>), Section 5.3 "Learning and teaching intercultural competences", paragraph 152:

"Complementary tools should be developed to encourage students to exercise independent critical faculties including to reflect critically on their own responses and attitudes to experiences of other cultures."

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The views expressed in the *Autobiography* and supporting documents are the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Council of Europe.

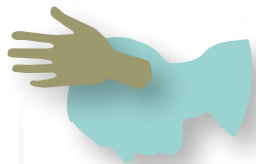
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Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters

Preface

It has become commonplace to say that the world has changed, that globalisation and internationalisation make everything different, that intercultural experience is the experience of everyone. This is indeed true for those – and there are many of them – who encounter people from other countries in their daily lives, as such encounters are obviously ‘intercultural’ experiences. Freedom of movement in Europe particularly has grown in recent decades and the need for intercultural dialogue is well recognised.

On the other hand, there are many parts of Europe and beyond where such experiences are, in fact, not so common, where people may feel that change has not affected their immediate surroundings even if they see the effects of globalisation and internationalisation in the daily news on television.

These two views are based on the idea that ‘culture’ is what is found in distant places, what might be experienced on a holiday in another country, for example, and that ‘intercultural’ applies only to experiences with people from distant places. ‘Culture’ is, however, a complex concept which is used – and sometimes over-used – to refer to many dimensions of our experience with other people. Indeed, ‘other people’ is also a deceptively simple term used to refer to those who are ‘not like us’.

People who are ‘not like us’ and who have a different ‘culture’ may in fact be far more varied than just those from other countries, whom we may or may not meet as a result of globalisation and internationalisation. Boys may say girls are ‘not like us’ and have their own ‘culture’, and vice versa. People who live in the city may say the same of those who live in the countryside, and vice versa. People of one religion/ethnicity/nationality, etc., may say it of those of another religion/ethnicity/nationality, etc., and vice versa.

It soon becomes clear that intercultural encounters are part of our everyday lives with or without globalisation and internationalisation. Some encounters go unnoticed because they are so common and seem natural. Others stick out as special and sometimes demanding and difficult experiences because they are unusual and are the cause of joy or fear or both. Even the ordinary becomes unusual as a particular event or meeting suddenly causes us to stop and wonder.

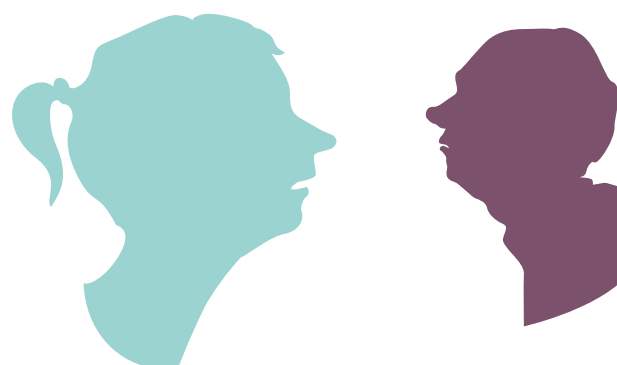
Joy and fear – and other emotions in between – are often best understood through a little reflection and analysis, and can then be a better basis for future intercultural encounters. *The Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters* (AIE) is a means of helping us to think about our experiences of ‘other people’ with other ‘cultures’ whether they seem distant or near to us in time and place. It is also a means of helping us to decide how we

can and should learn from an intercultural encounter, what we should do, what action we might take, how we can find out more about and benefit from the event which has been important to us, and how we can make it part of our understanding of 'others' and their 'cultures'.

The AIE is essentially a series of questions about a special experience which has been particularly important. The questions take us back over the encounter, over how we responded, how we think others in the encounter responded, how we thought and felt about it then and now, and what conclusions we can draw from it for the future. The questions follow a careful sequence which is based on scientific research but are written in a way which makes it easy for anyone to follow. In the 'Standard' version, those who use the AIE can do it alone or with others – with the help of a friend or teacher for example – whereas the version of the AIE for younger learners is intended for children who need help from an adult in reading and writing and in thinking back over their encounter.

The AIE is accompanied by *Notes for Facilitators* in both versions, where a more detailed explanation of its purpose and origins is given. There is also a feedback form which will help the team which designed and produced the AIE to improve it in the future. Thirdly there is a text – *Context, Concepts and Theories* – which deals in some depth with the concepts which underlie the AIE, such as what we mean by 'culture' and many other concepts which help to clarify a complex area for 'facilitators'. Finally, there is a shorter and simplified version of this explanatory text, entitled *Concepts for Discussion*, which can be used with people who complete the Standard version of the AIE and who themselves might want to understand more about how disciplines such as psychology and sociology help us to analyse intercultural encounters in a scientific way.

It is hoped that the AIE will be a means of helping anyone who has had a significant intercultural experience of any kind to benefit from it, make it part of their way of seeing the world around them, and decide how to take a full part in the intercultural world to which they belong.



Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters

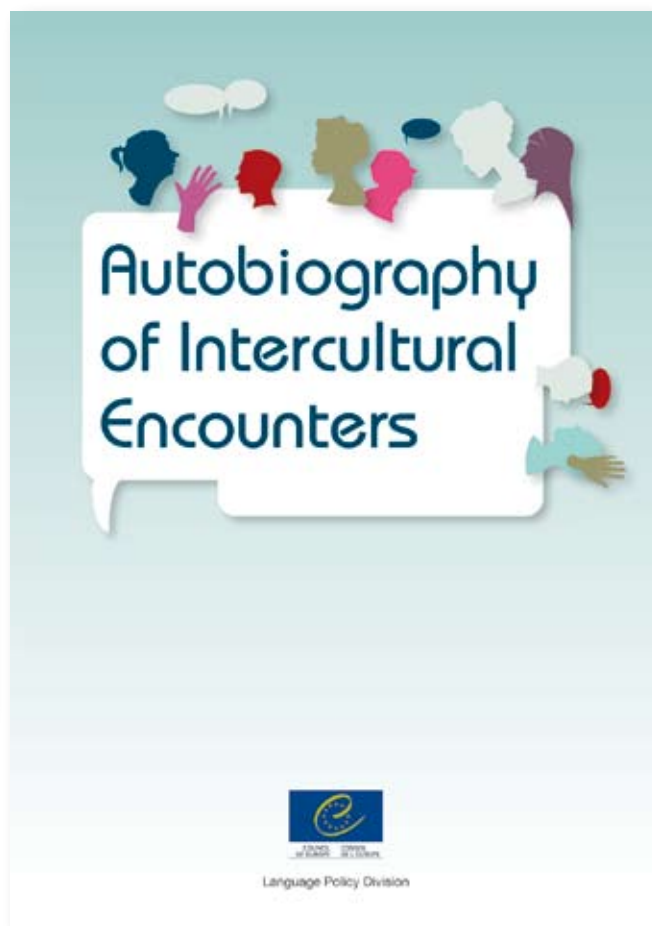


The Autobiography has been produced at a time when we are increasingly aware of the inter-relatedness of our lives and experiences across all kinds of cultural and national divides, and of our need not just to acknowledge each other's existence but to communicate and engage with each other at a deeper level of understanding. The aim of the Autobiography is to encourage, through guided reflection on experience, the development of the skills and intercultural competences required to do just that.

Introducing the **Autobiography**

- A group of young people from a variety of countries across the world meet each other for the first time at a social event for international students at a European university.
- Children newly arrived in Europe from West Africa join in a football game with their young European neighbours in the recreation ground outside the apartment block where their families live.
- A newly qualified teacher in her first day teaching finds that between them the children in her class speak seven different languages as their mother tongue.

These and intercultural encounters like them are part of the experiences of many young people in our modern world. They are the kind of intercultural encounters that provide the material and inspiration for the Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters.



The Autobiography materials include:

- *The Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters*
- *The Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters for younger learners*
- *Facilitator's notes* for both versions
- A concept paper setting out the contexts, concepts and theoretical background of the project
- A 'cut down' version of the concept paper to use as a stimulus for discussion and debate with older students





What is the Autobiography?

The Autobiography takes the form of a series of questions and prompts carefully designed to guide the learner's reflections on a chosen incident of encounter with someone from another cultural group. It provides the learner with a structure to analyse the incident and consider what they learnt from the encounter.

Talking to each other

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

First thoughts

Further ideas – for example:

I was talking to them in my own language and I noticed I needed to make adjustments to help them understand me, for example...

I was not speaking in my own language and I had to make adjustments to make myself understood - to simplify/to explain using gestures, by explaining a word, by...

I noticed things about how they spoke – that they simplified, that they used gestures, that they spoke more slowly...

a) example of one of the questions from the standard version

Display text card: Talking to each other

Communicative aspects of the encounter

How did they talk to you?

Was it easy for you to understand them?

If yes: *How come?*

If no: *Why not?*

How did you talk to them?

Was it easy for them to understand you?

If yes: *How come?*

If no: *Why not?*

Did you have to change the way you usually talk?

If yes: *How did you change the way you talk?*

Did you find any other way, like signing to them with your hands, to help them understand you?

If yes: *What did you do?*

Did they do any signing to you with their hands, to help you understand them?

If yes: *What did they do?*

b) example of questions from the young learner's version

How might the Autobiography be used?

The Facilitators' Notes give a number of suggestions as to how and when the Autobiography could be used.

The facilitator and the learners can decide whether it is to be used as:

- something for private use only, a self-reflection and self-assessment that is not viewed by others;
- something to be shared by learner and facilitator in confidence as part of a joint conversation and assessment of intercultural learning;
- a group exercise and focus for classroom discussion and collaborative learning.

When might the Autobiography be used?

There is also flexibility about the occasions on which the Autobiography might be used as shown in the following examples taken from the facilitator's notes.

Regular use: It could be used at regular intervals so that the growing collection of reflections serves as a record of developing intercultural awareness and skills, for example after the regular holidays that punctuate the young person's school career when each learner will have their own individual story to report.

After a school holiday

After a school holiday, when learners may have been on away from home – perhaps to another country or to another region of their own country or at a school camp – the Autobiography can be used with primary/elementary school learners to encourage them to reflect upon a specific experience which they have had while on holiday. In the case of such learners, they may be interviewed individually either by their teacher or by a classroom assistant.

Planned use: Use of the Autobiography might be planned to coincide with a particular event being organised for the learners such as a school trip. In this case the learners could be writing individual accounts of a shared experience.

After a school trip

Schools often organise visits to other regions of the same country or to other countries. Often they prepare the students/pupils for this very carefully but it just as important to facilitate their reflections after the event. Each student/pupil in a group will have had some particular experience or encounter even though they have all been on the same trip, and the Autobiography can help to individualise the follow-up and reflection. After each individual has completed the Autobiography, they may be willing to share their encounter with others in the group and, with the help of a teacher, think about the variety of experience rather than over-generalise their individual experience.

Responsive use: It could be an unplanned response to a particular unexpected encounter or unforeseen incident (positive or negative) that nevertheless might have a significant impact on the learner's intercultural understanding.

After a major event

After a major event such as learners witnessing an exchange of racial abuse, the Autobiography is used as a tool for analysis of learners' reactions. This may be in a classroom and led by a teacher. It may be a private use encouraged by a teacher – with the option of keeping it confidential or showing it to others.

The Model of Intercultural Competences

Both versions of the Autobiography are structured round a model of intercultural competences that includes these four elements:

- Knowledge and skills
- Behaviour
- Attitudes and feelings
- Action

Each of the questions relates to one of these elements as shown in the examples below. In the Autobiography the questions follow each other in a careful progression.

Knowledge and skills

Discovering knowledge: using certain skills to find out about people one meets, by asking questions, seeking out information, and using these skills in real-time encounters; becoming aware of one's own assumptions, preconceptions, stereotypes and prejudices.

Example: *Did you already have any knowledge or previous experience which helped you communicate better?*

Behaviour

Adapting one's behaviour to new situations and to other people, being sensitive to ways of communicating.

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

Attitudes and feelings

Being able to take someone else's perspective, to imagine their thoughts and feelings. Identifying positive and negative emotions and relating them to attitudes and knowledge.

Example: *Imagine yourself in their position. How do you think the other people felt in the situation at the time?*

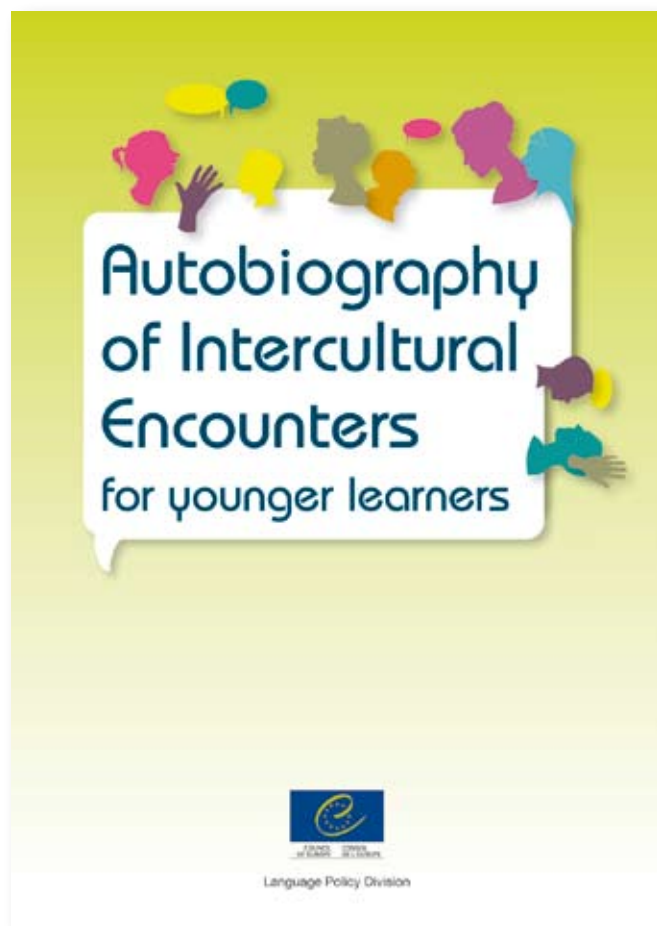
Action

As a consequence of all the rest, being willing and able to become involved with other people in making things different and better.

Example: *The way I acted in the experience was appropriate because what I did was... I think I could have acted differently by doing the following... I think the best reaction from me would have been...*

The Younger Learners' Version

The younger learners' version of the Autobiography uses the same model of intercultural competences as the standard version, but explores the issues raised by encounter at a cognitive, linguistic and emotional level appropriate for young children.



This version has two formats; a written format for children able to work more independently and an oral, interview-style format where the child talks to a facilitator about an encounter and the facilitator is able to keep a record of the child's thinking.

Different support materials have been provided with the younger learners' Autobiography which the facilitator can use to help children relate to the theme and grasp the concepts involved.

There are a number of colourful pictures which can be used to introduce the children to the idea of encounter with someone different from themselves, and a series of suggested questions for use with these or other pictures.

Choose one or two of these pictures and think about the following questions:

- **What do you think will be the first thing they notice about each other?**
- **Do you think they will notice something different about each other or something the same?**
- **Do you think they are happy to meet each other or not? Why do you think that?**
- **Are they going to find each other easy to talk to? What might they talk about?**
- **Do you think they will make friends or not? Why do you think that?**



There is also a set of seven colour-coded flash cards which can be used by the facilitator to structure the discussion into its various parts and make it easier for the child to follow.



The facilitator's guide suggests a number of different ways the younger learners' Autobiography might be used including suggestions from teachers who have used the material with their own classes.

Contexts and Concepts

The Autobiography can become not only an opportunity for personal reflection on a particular encounter, but also a stimulus for reflection, discussion and debate around key concepts that often shape our relations with others.

The Autobiography materials include a paper, 'Context, Concepts and Theories', in which international experts in a number of related fields have set out the historical and theoretical contexts of the Autobiography and explored key concepts including culture, nationality, citizenship, multicultural, intercultural, plurilingual, tolerance, respect and dialogue. This paper will be interesting background reading for facilitators and a useful resource for students in further and higher education.

2.11 Multiple Identities and the Impact of Intercultural Encounters

Individuals are simultaneously members of a large number of different social groups (such as national groups, racial groups, religious groups, gender groups, etc.). When membership of a particular social group comes to form a salient part of an individual's own self-concept, such that he or she attributes value and emotional significance to that membership, that person may be said to have acquired a subjective identification with that group. Usually, individuals subjectively identify with more than just a single social group. In addition, people frequently use their personal attributes (such as fun-loving, conscientious, conservative, tolerant, etc.) and their interpersonal relationships and social roles (such as mother, friend, son, employee, etc.) as further components of their self-concepts.

These multiple identifications with social groups, attributes, relationships and roles help individuals to orientate, position and define themselves in the social world relative to other people. The term 'identification' is used here (rather than 'identity') to help capture the notion that identifications are active psychological processes (rather than reified entities which individuals possess).

extract from *Context, concepts and theories*

In addition a 'cut down' version of the concepts has been produced for use in the classroom or seminar group with older students. This version provides short and clear definitions for ten of the key concepts and supplies a number of questions for each which encourage students to examine the concepts in detail and relate them to their own lives and the societies in which they live.

Below is an example of the way in which one of the concepts has been presented in order to stimulate discussion.

a) Culture

- Are there elements in your life that you (or others) might view as part of your culture? What are they? How did you acquire them?

The word 'culture' is associated with practices, beliefs, values, symbols and traditions, with particular ways of living and of understanding the world. Cultures can be understood as the fixed, inherited features of different national, ethnic and religious groups. This way of talking about culture as the distinct and essential features of a particular group is called 'dominant' discourse. Cultures can also be understood as dynamic and changing, continually being redefined by individuals and groups as they interact with others of different backgrounds or respond to changing circumstances. This way of talking about culture is known as 'demotic discourse'.

- What might the benefits and disadvantages be of having a strong sense of a fixed, inherited cultural identity?
- Can you think of any instances in your environment where interactions between different cultures are creating new cultural expressions?

extract from *Concept for discussion*



Developing the Autobiography

The Autobiography instruments and support materials have been designed collaboratively by an international team bringing different perspectives and areas of expertise to the project. The instruments have been piloted with school children and older students in a number of countries across Europe, and have been revised and developed by listening to what those young people and their teachers had to say. There is a *Feedback Form for facilitators* should you wish to share your own experiences of using the Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters and suggestions for the further development of the tool.



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Acknowledgements

Authoring Team

The *Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters* and supporting documents were developed for the Language Policy Division of the Council of Europe by:

**Michael Byram, Martyn Barrett, Julia Ipgrave,
Robert Jackson, María del Carmen Méndez García**

with contributions from:

**Eithne Buchanan-Barrow, Leah Davcheva,
Peter Krapf, Jean-Michel Leclercq**

The Authoring Team would like to thank the following for their input to the first draft version of the *Autobiography*:

Jean-Claude Beacco, Gill Musk, John Thorogood, Geneviève Zarate

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- Byram, M., 1997, *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence*, Clevedon: Multilingual Matters;
- Zarate, G. and Gohard-Radenkovic, A. (eds), 2004, *La reconnaissance des compétences interculturelles: de la grille à la carte*. Paris: Didier.



Piloting

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<i>Armenia</i>	Araik Jraghatspanyan, Karine Nalchajyan
<i>Azerbaijan</i>	Rauf Garagozov, Rena Kadirova
<i>Bosnia and Herzegovina</i>	Senad Alic
<i>Bulgaria</i>	Leah Davcheva, Iskra Georgieva, Milena Katsarska
<i>France</i>	Trevor King
<i>Georgia</i>	George Gakheladze, Giorgi Kipiani, Mzia Tsereteli
<i>Germany</i>	Simone Bonafaccia
<i>Greece</i>	Roy Chourdaki, Katerina Toura
<i>Italy</i>	Rita Bertone, Janine Fournier, Isolde Maria König Strauß, Rita Gelmi, Gisella Langé, Virgilio Marrone, Andrea Mennella, Lorena Parretti, Claudia Perlini, Maura Properzi,
<i>Japan</i>	Stephanie Houghton, Sugitani Masako
<i>Macau</i>	Isabel Morais
<i>Netherlands</i>	Ina ter Avest
<i>Russian Federation</i>	Kira Iriskhanova
<i>Spain</i>	Manuela Chica Colomo, Catalina Salas Caparrós, Isabel María Espinosa Zafra, Antonio Villodres Moreno, María del Carmen Méndez García
<i>Turkey</i>	Figen Cok, Tulin Sener
<i>United Kingdom</i>	Inma Álvarez, Jo Angouri, Martyn Barrett, Tita Beaven, Tony Bennett, Eithne Buchanan-Barrow, Michael Byram, Jennifer Fleming, So Hiranuma, Matthew Howard, Julia Ipgrave, Marta Jenkala, Annie McHugh, María Luisa Pérez, Gerdi Quist, Cristina Ros i Solé, Christine Sas

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