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Are we there yet? Intercultural encounters with British Studies

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This paper aims to contribute to the current debate on British Studies from the perspective of eight international students attending a British Studies module in part completion of a foundation/access programme in the UK. Drawing on three sets of in-depth student interviews and 15 classroom observations used to triangulate findings, the analysis reveals that the module presents partial representations of Britishness through discussion of factual information that places little emphasis on the affective dimension of learning. From this, students are seen to construct generalisations about the host culture which the module fails to address despite claims to the development of intercultural competence.

Αυτό το έγγραφο στοχεύει να συμβάλει στην τρέχουσα συζήτηση που αφορά σπουδές Βρετανικού περιεχομένου παρουσιάζοντας τη γνώμη οχτώ ξένων φοιτητών που παρακολούθησαν ένα ανάλογο σχετικό μάθημα σε πανεπιστήμιο της Μεγάλης Βρετανίας. Επισύροντας τη προσοχή σε στοιχεία που συγκεντρώθηκαν μέσω ποιοτικής έρευνας, η ανάλυση αποκαλύπτει ότι το μάθημα αυτό παρουσίασε μία μονομερή πλευρά της Βρετανικής κουλτούρας χωρίς να δώσει σημασία στη συναισθηματική διάσταση της εκμάθησης. Ως αποτέλεσμα, οι φοιτητές δημιούργησαν στερεοτυπικές εικόνες για τους Βρετανούς που το μάθημα δεν συζήτησε παρόλο που ισχυριζόταν ότι συνέβαλε στην ανάπτηξη της διαπολιτισμικής ικανότητας.

Keywords: British Studies; international students; factual information; intercultural competence

Introduction

As a consequence of intensified transnational educational mobility and ever-increasing concerns about the stress young people face to adapt to a new country, culture and often language, there has been in recent years a significant growth of interest in questions of cultural transition within the context of UK higher education. Leading British universities have become more responsive to the needs of international students, and Burslem (2004) reports a rapid rise in British Studies modules. Although these claim to enable learners to become more conversant with the cultures in which English is embedded in the UK, they have hardly ever been the object of empirical attention. Montgomery (1998) believes that many researchers are

certain about the linguistic and cultural benefits British Studies is designed to offer, while Raw (1998) argues that anthologies which inform the delivery of curriculum content make British Studies an ideal field from which learners can develop cross-cultural perspectives.

Yet, there is a considerable body of theoretical literature supporting the view that the ostensible aims of British Studies are not always realised in practice. Clarke and Clarke (1990), for instance, suggest that British Studies works within a unifying logic of identity that promotes rigid cultural stereotypes based on overgeneralised typographies. Similarly, Durant (1997) asserts that much curriculum content presents a conservative image of Britain which prioritises established public institutions rather than informal networks or street-life. Others again refer to inexpert or superficial teaching where emphasis is placed on the four Fs (foods, fairs, folklores, facts), but also hold the British Council responsible for regulating the content of British Studies modules (Green, 2005; Starkey, 2007). For example, Corbett (2003) points out that British Studies tends to follow a pre-specified pedagogic agenda set by the British Council which in turn aims to form policies influencing teachers' behaviours. To achieve this, the Council publishes annual newsletters (e.g. *British Studies Now*, *Counterpoint*) claiming to inform instructors of the latest developments in the field.

This paper seeks to add another layer to the aforementioned debate. In so doing, it presents the findings of a longitudinal qualitative study which took place in an accredited provider of the British Council at a university in the south of England. The study aimed to explore the culture learning processes of international students attending a credit-bearing British Studies module in part completion of a foundation/access programme, and analyse them in relation to the participants' sojourn experiences in the country. It comprised two major components: three sets of

in-depth student interviews, and 15 classroom observations conducted throughout the academic year. It is intended that this paper will contribute towards a greater understanding of the field and serve as an impetus to reconsider the design and delivery of British Studies modules.

British Studies
British Studies is a slippery subject which is realised against competing institutional policies, curricular tendencies, and pedagogic visions and dilemmas concerning what it is possible to 'know' about a culture. Most theorists share the view that it constitutes 'an umbrella term which embraces a multiplicity of studies about contemporary Britain' including such themes as 'the arts and media, society and institutions, or comparing Britain with another country' (Wadham-Smith, 1992, p. 12). Within this broad consensus, the subject has been variously explored. Topics, for example, range from descriptions of the dynamic nature of identity construction which is often masked by such phrases as 'the British people' (Crawford, 1997; Morley & Robins, 2001) to the complexities of the intercultural encounter from which cultural transformation is achievable for second language sojourners (Byram, 1997a; Kramsch, 1997; Roberts, 1994). It is, however, possible to identify two major ways of understanding British Studies.

The first is largely derived from the discipline of *Cultural Studies*. This is concerned with exploring the relationship which cultural forms, practices and institutions have with society and social change within the context of unequal resource distribution that is regarded as dominating capitalist societies (Hall, 1980, 1992). One of the main influences behind its research agenda was the work which Raymond Williams (1958) had undertaken in *Culture and Society 1750-1950*, a now seminal text marking a move towards an anthropological conceptualisation of culture

which is not confined to the zenith of human achievement. Here, Williams formulates the proposition that 'culture is ordinary' and identifies two ways in which it must be understood. First, culture involves a complex set of shared attitudes, values and beliefs which enable a group to make sense of its life; and second, its growth is an active process of meaning-making that no individual can ever grasp entirely. Behind this twofold proposition, Grossberg (1989/1997) explains, is the idea of historical cultural materialism which draws attention to existing power structures – the school, the church, the state – used to spread the ideology of the ruling class over time. To achieve this, it studies how canonical literary texts discriminate between 'the best that has been thought and said in the world' and 'the raw and uncultivated masses' (Arnold, 1960, p. 6) when appropriated to material conditions of production and reception.

Despite some good evidence of pedagogic practice (e.g. Corbett, 1995), relevant theoretical perspectives show that this model has made relatively little impact on British Studies modules (Brumfit, 1997). Brumfit (1994) was the first to highlight that British Studies mostly points learners to civilising definitions of culture, and argued that this approach aims at nothing more than to export a mythical version of Britishness in the global marketplace. Bassnett (1997) has also seen problems with the sense of intellectual perfection the field arguably promotes when referring to a product of a particular national tradition that is designed to compartmentalise culture from the rest of life as if one engages in it only after a day's work or in the weekend. To challenge the idea that the ordinary has no value, she invokes Williams (1958) in suggesting that culture involves a 'whole way of life' and therefore cannot be controlled by those who dictate what it is and what it is not. Others, who have focused on the alienating effects of 'high' culture on students, alert educators to post-colonial

literature in order to cast light on socio-political issues that traditional literary canons fail to address (Berg, 2001; Mountford & Wadham-Smith, 2000). In their critique however, they emphasise that these texts become available only after they have been completed and thus cannot entirely describe culture as an activity undertaken by particular people during a given moment of time.

The second way of understanding British Studies is largely derived from the discipline of *Intercultural Communication*, which is framed by developments in the area of language-and-culture pedagogy. This has experienced a shift away from the idea of communication as a way of bridging information gaps or transferring messages between idealised native speakers and foreign language users towards the notion of 'intercultural (communicative) competence' (Byram & Zarate, 1997). Without reducing culture to a set of standardised commonalities, intercultural (communicative) competence emphasises 'the ability to interact effectively with people from cultures that we recognise as being different from our own' (Guilherme, 2004, p. 297), and encourages learners to construct an ever-expanding cultural platform of shared knowledge – a 'third place' (Kramsch, 1993) – from which to bring two cultures or a variety of behavioural repertoires into a relationship. As Kramsch (2008) notes, this relationship is one of possibility in that it provides a powerful means of reframing human thought and action within the context of conventional categories that rarely question societal norms of truthfulness and rightness. At its core lies the concept of 'intercultural speaker' which sees learners as individuals 'operating at the border between several languages or language varieties, manoeuvring their way through the troubled waters of cross-cultural misunderstandings' (Kramsch, 1998, p. 27).

According to Nünning and Nünning (2000), British Studies has not, as yet, drawn appropriate conclusions from these considerations given that it almost exclusively defines negotiation skills in terms of country-specific knowledge assumed to be shared by all the indigenous inhabitants of Britain. This is because, as Rojek (2007) argues, political decisions continue to shape the content of British Studies textbooks in ways that distort the culture they claim to portray. For him, this can be broadly seen in pedagogic materials targeted at prospective British citizens where the inconsistencies and contradictions between the knowledge materials present and the constantly re-negotiated behaviours of the subject matter become apparent. Gray (2010) shares this perspective. He, nevertheless, moves on to argue that learners often have the necessary skills to challenge the cultural representations to which they are exposed. Thus, in his study of the use of some best-selling coursebooks in several classrooms, he describes how participants negotiated the preferred message of the text by constructing alternative meanings. Whilst this is a promising finding, Street (1993) warns that without a carefully designed teaching methodology learners are still in danger of perceiving culture as something people have instead of something people do.

In response, Byram (1997b; and see also Lu & Corbett, 2011) has proposed one enduring model of intercultural (communicative) competence which comprises five behavioural objectives or 'savoirs' that characterise the practices and skills required for students to act interculturally:

(1) Attitudes *(savoir-être)* – curiosity and openness to otherness;

(2) Knowledge *(savoirs)* – how social interaction occurs both in one's own and in one's interlocutor's discourse community;

(3) Skills of interpreting and relating *(savoir comprendre)* – the ability to relate the linguistic expressions of the Other to those of the Self;

(4) Skills of discovery and interaction *(savoir apprendre/faire)* – the ability to observe, understand and operationalize knowledge of a culture under the constraints of real-time communication;

(5) Critical cultural awareness/political education *(savoir s'engager)* – the ability to evaluate the cultural practices of the Self and the Other from a rational and explicit perspective.

This model has had a tremendous impact on the teaching of modern and foreign languages, and has often been seen to inform pedagogic practices for the 'year abroad' which is compulsory for students undertaking an applied languages undergraduate degree in the UK (Dasli, 2011). Among them, one can distinguish that of ethnography whereby learners are more likely to develop the analytical and conceptual tools with which they will be able to understand how different facets of culture work (Phipps & Gonzalez, 2004; Roberts, 2003). For example, Roberts, Byram, Barro, Jordan and Street (2001) report longitudinal data from advanced language learners engaged in residence abroad on the relationship between deep culture learning and ethnographic study. They conclude that the practice of ethnography enabled participants to embrace their personal expansion and to develop an understanding of the differences in values and beliefs that affect the relationship between the Self and Others in given situations. Allied to this understanding was the habit of 'relativising', of seeing reality as socially constructed and not abstracted from the discursive context of interaction. Ulrich (2002) also discusses the value of ethnography in the context of British Studies and proposes that it represents a viable alternative to book-based information that is often held to offer a less reliable picture

of a society. However, her suggestion has not, as yet, attracted intensive research interest and therefore competing accounts as to what the field aims to achieve remain open to interpretation.

In summary, the debate regarding the nature of British Studies is characterised by two extreme positions. The first alludes to partial representations of Britishness which create or reinforce national and other stereotypes; whereas the second refers to a highly fluid area of study that optimises the potential of international experience in ways that encompass a diverse range of cultural activities including the anthropology of everyday life. Given the reflexive character of qualitative inquiry which does not necessitate prior commitment to any single set of ideas about the nature of social phenomena (Watt, 2007), this study treats both positions as parts of an on-going debate against which to investigate the British Studies module in question. In order to do so, the following research questions are addressed:

(1) How are the cultures of Britain presented by a British Studies module?

(2) To what extent can a British Studies module claim to facilitate the development of intercultural (communicative) competence?

Context

The British Studies module at the centre of this study is targeted at advanced learners of English attending a foundation/access programme for international students at a university in the south of England. This university is an accredited English language provider of the British Council for meeting and maintaining quality standards defined by the 'Accreditation UK' scheme. Broadly speaking, these concern four areas of work including 'management', 'resources and environment', 'welfare and student services', and 'teaching and learning' (British Council, 2009). Although a focus on the first three areas goes beyond the scope of this study, teaching and learning clearly

suggests that the institution followed a closed system of planning and practice which is characterised by a commitment to make the experience of living and studying in the UK less threatening and more accessible to international students. To achieve this, it adhered to 'pedagogic principles and developments in the English Language Teaching profession' (British Council, 2009, p. 26) which, as I have already shown, resonate sympathetically with the fields of Cultural Studies and Intercultural Communication in the context of British Studies.

With this in mind, the main objective of the module was to facilitate the development of intercultural (communicative) competence by inviting learners to reflect upon the shifting nature and role of culture in contemporary British society. In so doing, it claimed to familiarise students with a range of non-academic texts (e.g. newspapers, websites) and accessible academic readings from which they could undertake directed research into the historical, social and political conditions that affected the construction of British identity during the twentieth century. Within limits of knowledge, this approach would enable them to collect, interpret and evaluate data and information from the point of view of another culture while making comparisons to their own where appropriate. The class sessions were part lecture in which key themes and theoretical perspectives were introduced by the tutor, and part seminar in which students were encouraged to discuss particular issues in greater depth. These made a total of 100 hours of lectures/seminars over three academic terms. An additional 200 hours were devoted to private study.

Participants

Despite the large number of students attending the foundation/access programme, the module was only available, as a credit-bearing compulsory component, to those wishing to pursue a Bachelor of Arts (BA) degree in the disciplines of anthropology,

education, psychology or sociology upon successful completion of their studies. From this cohort, eight out of eleven students volunteered to participate in the study making a representative sample size of the whole in terms of nationality, age, gender, disciplinary interest, and length of stay in the country before starting the programme. This information is summarised in Table 1 where pseudonyms are used for student names in order to retain confidentiality.

Pseudonym	Nationality	Age	Gender	Disciplinary interest	Length of stay
Akiko	Japanese	19	Female	education	3 weeks
Carlos	Spanish	18	Male	sociology	1 week
Georgios	Cypriot	19	Male	psychology	1 week
Ivie	Nigerian	18	Female	sociology	1 week
Limin	Chinese	19	Female	psychology	3 weeks
Nikolaos	Cypriot	20	Male	psychology	1 week
Roshan	Mauritian	20	Male	anthropology	1 week
Sara	Saudi	19	Female	education	2 weeks

Table 1. Participant profiles

All students in the sample planned to extend their period of residence in the UK for an extra three years in order to complete an undergraduate degree in the aforementioned disciplines.

Methods

As the study was fundamentally qualitative in nature, it primarily relied on three sets of audiotaped semi-structured interviews in order to capture the participants' subjective experiences of the social world that was being researched across time, space and personal history. The first interview took place shortly after the beginning of the module as a means of gaining an initial understanding of their perceptions about culture and Britishness. Subsequent interviews were held at approximately two-month intervals in an attempt to explore the ways in which classroom discussions had affected, if at all, their perceptions about the host culture over a period of time. Following Carspecken's (1996) model of qualitative interviewing, all interviews were

conceptualised with a general interview guide approach that grouped a series of open-ended questions under topic domains relevant to the British Studies debate: theorisations of culture, attitudes towards the host population, representations of contemporary Britain, and cross-cultural understanding. They began with one domain opening question which invited students to describe as vividly as possible their beliefs, values and feelings about a theme addressed and culminated with follow-up questions that moved participants towards generalising some of the background issues to the cultural contexts they had encountered during their extended period of residence in England.

Given that what respondents actually do may sometimes differ from what they say they do (Wolcott, 1988), the study also relied on 15 classroom observations conducted throughout the academic year in order to operate a reality check of what was said to be happening in the classroom through the triangulation of findings. These observations were semi-structured as I entered the setting with an agenda of topics emerging from the interviews but open-ended enough so that I could explore other issues which the participants might have been reluctant to discuss in a closed room situation. During this time, I sat at the back of the classroom without initiating any conversation with the students for fear of manipulating their learning situation, behaviours and opinions about the host culture when completing cultural tasks. To compensate for the lack of classroom interaction however, I organised social events as a means of establishing a friendly relationship with them that reached beyond my official research role. These offered data that carried a rich cargo of references to the broader culture of the country concerned. Both classroom observations and opportunistic conversations were recorded in a field journal to which I continually

returned in the process of researching the module, and will be drawn upon where relevant in the analysis to better contextualise participants' interview responses.

Data analysis and data collection were carried out simultaneously as in qualitative inquiry analysis does not constitute a distinct stage of research but one that informs the next interview and observation in a back and forth process (Gibbs, 2007). Analysis involved reading field notes and transcripts several times as well as listening to entire tapes repeatedly until clusters of meaning began to emerge. I undertook three rounds of eight interviews and after each round I produced a 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) discussing general and unique themes to be followed up in subsequent interviews and observations. During this time, a peer debriefer, familiar with qualitative research, read my work for signs of meaning distortion in addition to checking the accuracy of the transcriptions against the recordings as it is typical for speech to be misheard or for words to be confused. His comments proved useful for achieving a degree of external validity and were fed into the overall context of the study which resulted in a composite description of the module. Through discussion of some verbatim quotations from participants, the following sections present three key themes which emerged from this description: representations of Britishness, students' assumptions about the host culture, and the relationship between the British Studies module and intercultural competence.

Representations of Britishness

Although admitting that there is no unified theoretical framework behind British Studies, Bassnett (1994) argues that many British Studies modules take the nation-state to be their central object of study in order to discuss the structural changes that have taken place in Britain. The first set of interviews makes an illustrative case of this point given that most students generally agree that the module refers to the

political history of the country through discussion of some key events that affected the construction of British national identity during the twentieth century: 'We learn English history and politics' (Nikolaos); 'It's something to do with politics and the history of England' (Limin); 'The tutor is talking about British history and politics and maybe national identity' (Carlos). Implicit in their argument is the critique of dominant ideology which problematizes various forms of elite culture in an attempt to reveal the asymmetries of power in the abilities of individuals and groups to define and realise their needs.

Georgios and Akiko below seem to share this perspective when focusing on the welfare system and Thatcherism in the second set of interviews. In their responses, however, they also choose to emphasise the presentation of factual information which has defined their learning encounters with representations of Britishness.

> **Georgios:** We learn about politics, about the welfare system, about how people vote, how they decide, how they protest. We learn the facts. That's just really it! (Interview 2)

> **Akiko:** I know about Britain and how Thatcher influenced Britain, how the south was more privileged than the north and the strikes which caused trouble for Thatcher. But, I haven't really talked to real British people. The reality might be different to what we learn in class. (Interview 2)

At first sight, both students appear to see the module as attempting to specify forces of domination and resistance that have aided the process of social transformation within Britain. They do this by implicitly invoking a particular image of Britishness: the working-class which has struggled to regain political authority through a number of collective arrangements such as voting and protesting. Fundamentally though, both students assert that fact-based knowledge constitutes the default pattern of learning in the classroom. This is strikingly reflected towards the end of their statements, where they express concerns about possible contradictions between the concrete context of

everyday encounters and the passive reproduction of a standardised canon of texts that fails to take into consideration the actual viewpoints of those concerned.

Classroom observations also bear witness to the type of learning these two students describe as the tutor was frequently observed to distribute hand-outs found on the website of BBC (www.bbc.co.uk). Among them, one can distinguish those referring to 'British Timelines' presumed to serve as a non-negotiable set of facts about the political history of Britain. These usually formed part of reading comprehension activities in which students were invited to either respond more generally to a short list of questions or provide specific statistical figures about the ethnic make-up of the UK as one example. As the classroom was international in outlook, the tutor would then ask learners to compare statistical findings or socio-political events to those that have taken place in their own countries in order to obtain some comparative understanding of the content-oriented side of culture. Risager (2007) explains that while this approach is part of an established culture-pedagogical tradition which is designed to offer an objective, all-round picture of a society, it often fails to consider the affective dimension of learning which emphasises the ways in which an ability to tolerate cultural difference in an increasingly globalised world ought to cultivate the mental attitudes and aspirations of intercultural citizens. This is because, as Durant (1997) suggests, most British Studies courses assign to students a consumer role in the mistaken belief that they want to be assimilated into 'typical' British relations without being interested in contributing to intercultural dialogue. To him, this can have a damaging effect on culture learning as some learners may feel threatened by the arguably patronising curriculum content of the field. This is illustrated in the following quotation taken from Nikolaos' third interview where he launches a verbal onslaught against the host culture.

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> **Nikolaos:** We learn about the Falklands and about colonisation and all I can see is Britain conquering other nations to make everyone like the British. And there is nothing to be proud about because I can see 15-year old boys pushing a pram and holding a cigarette and drinking beer and this shows you that their society is destroyed. Why can we not focus on a more international theme? Because Britain has nothing to offer compared to Greece that invented democracy and the Egyptians who invented numbers. (Interview 3)

Considering the preceding extract, it is evident that Nikolaos is increasingly incapable of accommodating cultural difference given that he seeks strategies to counter the impact of perceived threats to cultural identity. At one point, he makes overt statements of hostility towards some young Britons while at another he relegates cultural differences to a lower-status position by comparing Britain to other countries. In the midst of his critique, he also asks one rhetorical question which presumably serves to mask his derogatory comments as well as to seek some objective confirmation that treats difference as an inferior state inhibiting human development. The sort of negative evaluation which Nikolaos makes here can be measured against a defensive level of ethnocentrism which for Bennett (1993, p. 35) fulfils one distinct purpose, that of 'preserving the absoluteness of his own worldview' perhaps in the face of a potentially threatening British Studies module which regards ideology and power as unproblematic.

To further explore instances of ethnocentrism triggered as a result of teaching culture as knowledge, I now turn to the second theme which emerged from the composite description of the module. This focuses on differing as well as complementary assumptions about the host culture which students make in the process of constructing relatively innocent and blatantly negative cultural generalisations.

Students' assumptions about the host culture

The first extract is drawn from Roshan's second interview where he compares his initial period of transition in the host culture to his most recent experiences of nightlife in Britain.

> **Roshan:** A big difference that I didn't like is nightlife. I used to go out at 12 or 1 o'clock but in Britain pubs shut at 11. I know that the British drink a lot because I've seen my group of British friends starting to drink from home before going out. I didn't like this in the beginning because my friends could get really loud and shout names at people. But, I think this doesn't shock me anymore. It's a thing that I expect to see when I go out. (Interview 2)

What becomes apparent from the above extract is that Roshan adopts a rather stereotypical stance towards cultural knowledge by perhaps treating his British friends as representatives of the cultural category he seeks to describe. Here, it is noticeable that undesirable characteristics are ascribed to a large group of ordinary Britons who are not only seen to consume vast amounts of alcohol but also to raise their voices in public as a consequence of such consumption. Realising, however, that his views might be called into question, he attempts to licence them and at the same time soften them through the use of mitigating discourse features. The kinds of mitigators which Roshan uses here range from references to personal experience which serve to render his statements more trustworthy to face-saving utterances that can preserve the reputation or dignity of the group whose company he seems to enjoy.

This finding lends support to other work in the field of cross-cultural interaction which suggests that individuals tend to construct generalisations about the host culture but seek to legitimate them by reference to some authoritative observation. For example, Tusting, Crawshaw and Cullen (2002) provide evidence that, under the right discursive conditions, students engaged in residence abroad orient themselves towards stereotyping which however they attempt to resist through the use of hedging or other mitigating devices often associated with personal experience. Galasinska and Galasinski (2003) also discuss the function and importance of

mitigating devices in multi-ethnic discourse by reference to 12 border communities in which informants negotiated accounts of negative stereotyping during their interviews. In a rather different study which included focus group interviews with employees in a global business organisation, Ladegaard (2011) similarly found that mitigating devices were used repeatedly to moderate stereotypical perceptions of the other. The assumption here was that the construction of stereotypes by the employees was potentially face-threatening and thus they employed mitigating discourse features to mask expressions of ethnic prejudice.

Similar mitigating devices are also noted in the following extract taken from Sara's second interview where she provides her own reasons of perceived communication problems between what might be called the host culture and the Arab guest.

> **Sara:** My flat-mate, she asked me about my home town and I told her I'm from Saudi Arabia and after that she didn't talk to me at all. You know some problem with what happened to America and London. They think it has to do with Saudis and I think in this country they are afraid of Arabs. But, I'm not a bomber. I didn't do anything. I came here to learn. I don't know what to do. When they hear I'm Muslim, they are so negative to me. I got some sweets from my country and gave it to her but nothing changed. She stays outside and she smokes and when she sees me returning from class, she turns her back to me. (Interview 2)

In the preceding extract, Sara seems to make a number of persuasive arguments which are used to convince the interviewer of the idea that she has been subjected to unfair treatment or even religious prejudice. Like the previous example, this extract begins with Sara volunteering her own narrative proof for her negative opinion about ordinary Britons which she takes care to construct carefully given that she uses the mitigator 'you know' to claim some common knowledge between herself and the interviewer. She, then, proceeds to make a contrastive comparison move which presumably serves to highlight the differences between herself and the British population in a self-defensive manner. To achieve this, she appears to foreground a

negative image of the other and a positive image of the self simultaneously by perhaps projecting herself as a victim who cannot satisfy the needs of her British flat-mate despite her many efforts. This act of self-defence, van Dijk (1987, p. 300) explains, constitutes a 'powerful rhetorical device' which helps interviewees to justify derogatory comments without being accused of constructing cultural generalisations, and to preserve a positive face in the presence of the interviewer who may not necessarily share the respondents' views.

Unlike Sara, Ivie seems to engage in blatant out-group stereotyping during her third interview when referring to one unpleasant encounter she has had with a group of ordinary Britons in a church where seemingly poor race relations discouraged others from approaching her in a dialogic manner.

> **Ivie:** I went to church somewhere here and after the service we sit and talk and all the time I was just sitting alone. Nobody was talking to me because of my colour, because every person in there was white. And the priest came to talk to me and started introducing me to people. But, I got the message. I wasn't wanted. The British, they don't tell you they don't want you. You understand it. (Interview 3)

With the exception of subtle contrastive comparison moves, the above extract shares many mitigating devices with the previous example in that Ivie also draws on personal experience to legitimate claims of racial discrimination and at the same time express her very negative opinion about white Britons. In so doing, she also appears to present herself as a victim who was 'just sitting alone' by perhaps aiming to transfer the guilt or cause of her loneliness to the other group with which she was entirely unfamiliar. Although this again may be interpreted as a face-saving strategy used to prevent negative impressions, what is interesting in the unfolding account is that Ivie chooses to take little notice of evidence which may invalidate her views. This can be detected at the end of her response where she not only assumes that she is unwanted without being explicitly told but also fails to acknowledge that the priest –

presumably a white Briton – did introduce her to total strangers. From this, it can be inferred that she replaces the strategy of mitigation with that of 'oracular reasoning' (Mehan, 1990) where conflicting views are either ignored or rejected in order to maintain the world relatively intact in the face of a seemingly hostile majority.

Clearly, the above extracts are filled with negative perceptions about the host culture which students attempt to justify either by drawing on personal experience or by ignoring evidence that confront their assumptions. As Hooks (1992, p. 341) reminds us however, through attention to the 'black imagination', that such stereotypes are formed 'as responses to white stereotypes of blackness' which like fiction constitute one form of representation that serves as a substitute for what is real. And van Dijk (1993) also explains that media elites play a powerful role in the reproduction of negative stereotypes of blackness unless audiences have other sources of information which can change or reshape discernible media messages within an overall framework of interpretation. The next section looks into the ways the module addresses student perceptions as a means of facilitating the development of intercultural competence.

The relationship between the British Studies module and intercultural competence

During the first set of interviews, some participants appeared to agree that the module concerns the development of intercultural competence given that it aims to develop a relational understanding of a culture. For instance, Georgios and Sara below refer to comparative processes of reflection with which they will engage in order to gain a greater insight into the values, beliefs and perceptions which members of particular groups subconsciously acquire in socialisation. In so doing, they seem to allude to their own cultural background as a starting point which they possibly see as a pre-

condition for re-evaluating both their own responses to otherness and the culturally patterned sequences of interaction which are expected to occur in the new environment. Their argument, therefore, shows that the module resonates with Byram's (1997b) approach to intercultural curriculum design where among five behavioural objectives 'savoir comprendre' and 'savoirs' become clearly relevant here in that 'skills of interpreting and relating' can potentially enable learners to mediate between incompatible interpretations of phenomena when coupled with declarative 'knowledge' of a society.

> **Georgios:** I think it will help me understand this culture and my own and maybe test my opinions regarding this. (Interview 1)

> **Sara:** The module will help me see the society here. And I know about my own. Things you notice here, you compare them to your own society. And you might know more things about your own society after knowing this society because you might discover something about England and then check if you do it in your own society. (Interview 1)

Valid though this point is, when themes are probed further in the second set of interviews, they reveal a simple adoption of surface behaviours which, for Byram (2003), can pull the content of any unreflective intercultural module in conflicting directions. This is illustrated below where Roshan and Sara discuss a rather problematic approach to understanding otherness.

> **Roshan:** I understand a lot more about the country but not about individual people. From my experience, I can tell you that they have different ways of cleaning the kitchen. They will leave the dishes and if they wash them, they will wash them altogether in the sink. We wash them differently. They fill up the sink with soap. I don't understand this. But, I do the same. When I'm in Britain I feel I need to adopt British norms and when I go back home I can lose them again. (Interview 2)

> **Sara:** I have lived here longer and I believe that it is not a fault to have a different life and they accepted me to come and stay. So, I don't find a reason to change. I can't be two-faced! (Interview 2)

In the first extract, Roshan seems to argue that the module offers an 'objective' picture of Britain which fails to explain the complex set of shared practices which enable members of the host culture to make sense of their life. In so doing, he draws

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on personal experience to justify his point as well as to suggest that he has displayed great initiative in observing patterns of collective and individual living without being invited by the module. While this can compensate for the module's apparent lack of engagement with aspects of everyday life, it does not necessarily respond to the development of intercultural competence given that Roshan has an arguably misleading understanding of identity formation. This is entirely obvious at the end of the quotation where the student expresses a need to adopt unquestioningly the cultural practices of the other as if 'going native' is the best possible solution to approach the host culture. If this is compared to Sara's extract where she rather forcefully assumes that residence abroad demands individuals to deny their cultural backgrounds, the potential limitations of the module to facilitate the development of intercultural competence become evident. Note that even though the adoption of surface behaviours may to a degree suffice to orchestrate effective cross-cultural encounters, a narrow approach to understanding cultural difference falls short of constructing a 'third place' (Kramsch, 1993) in which social identities are constantly re-negotiated in-between cultural spaces or at their extremities. This is demonstrated in the following extracts taken from Carlos' and Ivie's third interviews.

> **Carlos:** They want you to do what they do. One day a barmaid refused to serve me because I didn't say 'please' and when I eventually did, she said: 'say the f***ing word in the end'. (Interview 3)

> **Ivie:** I went to a shop the other day to make change for the washing machine. I had five pounds and needed 20p coins and the boy refused to make change for me. I asked to speak to the manager and she said that their policy wasn't to make change and that I had to go to the bank. And when I told her that this was urgent, she said I should buy something to make change and so I did. But why couldn't she understand that the bank was far away and that this was urgent? (Interview 3)

Here, we can see that both respondents construct the host culture as being responsible for many communication clashes that prove insensitive to their norms given that they again refer to personal experience to justify claims surrounding forceful integration

into the new environment. Although these might have emerged from the inherent complexity of everyday interactions or from the presumably ethnocentric behaviours of Britons the students encounter outside the classroom, the reasons for dysfunctional communication in these particular examples can be best explained in terms of the cultural systems within which the actors have been socialised. During one of our opportunistic conversations, Ivie, for instance, reports of having been raised in an environment where all she heard was stories about how her black counterparts were forced to serve whites in an attempt to help her survive in white supremacist societies rather than internalise negative stereotypes of whiteness. These, as the literature has repeatedly shown (e.g. Byram, 2008; FitzGerald, 2003), can affect one's ways of interacting with other people by compromising the ability to display an understanding of their own and others' intentions during the communication process. Viewed side-by-side with social facts and sterile comparative activities that are unlikely to help students apply working knowledge of a culture to the situational contexts of real-time interaction, it is then no surprise to confirm the observation which Akiko so perceptively made in her first interview – that the module is not apt to provide for critical self-analysis and reflection.

> **Akiko:** Maybe, the module will help me to understand this society and my own because so far we have been talking about strikes. And maybe the tutor will ask if we had strikes in our countries for similar reasons. So, we can compare one society to another. But, this will not help me to understand what's going on about me. (Interview 1)

Conclusion

The qualitative study documented in this paper aimed to respond to two research questions: How are the cultures of Britain presented by a British Studies module, and to what extent can a British Studies module claim to facilitate the development of intercultural (communicative) competence? Findings reveal that the module treated

the cultures of Britain as political history in order to introduce students to key events that affected the construction of British national identity during the twentieth century. Although this approach expects learners to engage in ideology critique by specifying the ways in which cultural forms served to either further or reduce social domination within Britain, most respondents found themselves having to acquire a non-negotiable set of facts that claimed to offer an 'impartial' or 'objective' account of the society in question. This not only encouraged participants to reproduce dominant versions of knowledge passively but also failed to accommodate the affective dimension of learning from which they could empathise with the Other where appropriate through the use of Byram's (1997b) five 'savoirs'. As a consequence, most respondents constructed relatively innocent and blatantly negative generalisations about the host culture by raising many important issues related to religious and ethnic prejudice. Here, they were seen to refer to personal experience to justify their negative perceptions while at the same time drawing a sharp distinction between their often positive, yet victimised, self and ethnocentric impressions of Britishness.

While one would expect the module to address such cultural generalisations, the presentation of factual information was often seen to overtake discussions that could enable learners progress towards the development of intercultural competence. This became particularly evident in the foregoing section where most participants assumed that residence abroad demands individuals to 'go native' without having to negotiate behaviours within the context of cultural relativity. Drawing on personal experience again, they revealed that there is tension between what they perceive as the defining characteristics of the host culture and the need to come into presence as a distinct identity that can be easily distinguished from different others during the process of interaction. In working out this tension, some made an even greater call of

need to retain their identities intact by completely rejecting the locals whereas some others pointed to perspectives acquired in socialisation as the basis for understanding one's 'natural' ways of interacting with other people. In so doing however, they referred to comparative activities they were expected to carry out in class, which not only did little to interpret misunderstandings in terms of the cultural systems present but also failed to discuss techniques that could enable learners to bring into contact through themselves two or more sets of behaviours under the constraints of real-time communication.

In conclusion, while these findings throw some light on the current status of British Studies, they also show that the presentation of factual information constitutes an ineffective form of pedagogic practice to which the British Council must have raised few objections when accrediting the provider that offered the module concerned. So, despite making claims to ethnographic methodology which invites students to critically explore different facets of the life-world, the introduction of facts reveals that approaches to the study of Britain have only changed slightly since the early 1990s. Thus, they evoke echoes of the past which Brumfit (1994, p. 5) summarised in a single statement: 'This is Britain as a set of given facts, or as an organism, but not Britain as something to live in'. Specific recommendations for pedagogic practice lie beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, they could be developed through theme-based work or case studies presenting social facts as potentially changing forms of cultural practice in need of contextual analysis. Indeed, authors like Bassnett (1997), Brumfit (1997) and Byram (1997b) have already established models that can enable learners to question simplistic assumptions about culture when arguing for closer integration between factual information and the observers' perspectives. This paper only confirms that their views have regrettably

made little impact on related British Studies modules whose own sets of pedagogic

practices are only theoretically organised to foster deep culture learning.

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