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Thomas A. Williams: 'It's like I have a switch': Identity shift in a Hungarian English major from Vajdaság/Vojvodina
Alkalmazott Nyelvtudomány, XXIV. évfolyam, 2024/2. szám, 221–236.
doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.18460/ANY.2024.2.012>

'It's like I have a switch': Identity shift in a Hungarian English major from Vajdaság/Vojvodina

The paper reports on a longitudinal case study involving the identity construction of a young Hungarian man from Vajdaság/Vojvodina (Serbia). The study draws on data elicited through semi-structured interviews on three separate occasions over the course of five years (2019, 2021, and 2024). It uses narrative inquiry to explore the changing identity of the participant, a onetime English major at the University of Szeged, with a focus on three salient emerging themes: English, work, and home. The findings have relevance for language learners and teachers, teacher trainers, and educational administrators.

Keywords: narrative inquiry, longitudinal case study, identity construction, Vajdaság/Vojvodina Hungarian, English major

1. Introduction

I have been struck in recent years by a public and private discourse of essentialism in discussing identity in Hungary, in America, and elsewhere: whether or not a person is a true Hungarian, a proper Christian, a real man, actually Black, and so forth. This has given me pause to ponder my own identity/identities and those of my students – identities tied to a range of factors, including home region inside and outside Hungary, ethnic and ethnolinguistic origin, foreign language(s) spoken, gender, age, socio-economic status, and religion. I therefore commenced a series of studies within the narrative inquiry tradition involving various student populations at the University of Szeged: international students, English teacher trainees, students of American Studies, and students of English from Vajdaság/Vojvodina, an autonomous province in neighbouring Serbia with a large population of ethnic Hungarians. The first of these studies was a case study of a self-narrative provided by Balázs, an English major from Vajdaság/Vojvodina (Williams, 2020). Having interviewed Balázs on two further occasions (2021 and 2024), I have expanded this research into a longitudinal study that has produced a fascinating glimpse into the co-construction of an individual's changing identity over a period of five years. In the following, I provide the theoretical and empirical background for that study, describe the study itself, discuss the results, and finish with thoughts on the importance of attempting to grasp our students' identity construction more completely.

2. Theoretical and empirical background

The two key concepts in this study are narrative inquiry and identity. In what follows, I briefly cover each one.

2.1. Narrative inquiry

Narrative, or story-telling, is as old as humanity itself. Research among modern-day hunter-gatherer societies demonstrates that early humans would gather around the fire at night for ‘singing, dancing, religious ceremonies, and enthralling stories, often about known people’ (Wiessner, 2014, p. 14027). Narrative inquiry is an area of qualitative research on stories people tell about their life experiences (Barkhuizen, 2022). Indeed, stories are central to the lives of teachers and teacher trainers as well as their (language) learners. Since stories are so ubiquitous, it stands to reason that we would make use of them for research purposes to better understand the lived experience of both teachers and students. In doing so, we join a long list of academic fields that have used narrative to enrich their understandings: history, philosophy, sociology, ethics, education, theology, law, and medicine (Meuter, 2013).

In language teaching and learning, narrative inquiry has centred on stories to examine areas that are key to the experiences of language teachers and learners: their learning (Golombek & Johnson, 2021), identities (Ahn, 2021), emotions (Prior, 2016), relationships (Josselson, 2007), and imagined futures (Barkhuizen, 2016). Connelly and Clandinin (2006, p. 477) consider narrative inquiry as ‘the study of experience as story’ (p. 477) and recommend that investigations in that vein focus on three dimensions: temporality, place, and sociality. According to Kramp (2004), stories ‘assist humans to make life experiences meaningful. Stories preserve our memories, prompt our reflections, connect us to our past and present, and assist us to envision our future’ (p. 107).

Finally, narratives are situated along a tellership continuum, depending on the degree and type of involvement of those involved in constructing them (Ochs & Capps, 2001). On one end of the continuum are narratives marked by a great deal of discursal collaboration, meaning they are told together, like two old friends complementing each other’s contributions to a story of a shared holiday. On the other end are stories told individually with little or no involvement by anyone else, as in a TED talk.

2.2. Identity

Identity is an elusive concept that might be seen as a person’s or group’s sense of self. According to Spencer-Oatey (2008), it can refer to both features that distinguish an individual from others and those that make him/her/them recognisable as a member of a group. More precisely, identity can be distinguished as indexing the individual (individual identity, e.g., ‘I’m unique’), the self as a group member (group or collective identity, e.g., ‘I’m an applied

linguist’), and the self in relation to others (relational identity, e.g., ‘It’s me, your dad’) (Spencer-Oatey, 2008).

Identities are constructed through overlapping aspects of relationships between the self and others (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). They may be in part intentional, habitual, and unconscious and are ultimately best understood as continually constructed through interactions (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). This is the social constructionist understanding of identity as being a work in progress, a snapshot of which is taken in the process of a conversation or interview – a snapshot that may show different features even months later. (This contrasts with the essentialist understanding of an unchanging identity determined by factors such as native language and birthplace.) Bruner (1987) and Fougère (2008) have done seminal work on the construction of identity through self-narrative. As in the case of the latter study, it is especially fascinating to investigate identities in intercultural contexts because this is where people often reflect on them more. Fekete (2015, 2018, 2021a, 2021b, 2022, 2023, 2024) has explored identity among students and instructors of English in Hungarian higher education.

3. Methodology

In this section, I will provide a detailed background to the study entailing the context, participant, procedure, and research question.

3.1. Context

The context for the study is the University of Szeged in south-eastern Hungary, which consists of 21,000 students and 2200 members of staff (University of Szeged ..., 2024), who set the tone for the city of 156,051 (Magyarország ..., 2024) for which the institution was named. This student body also features an ever-increasing number of international students, which is currently 4500 (University of Szeged ..., 2024). It likewise consists of numerous students from the small towns and rural areas of the Southern Great Plain region – frequently the first in their families to enter university. Finally, it comprises a number of ethnic Hungarians from the nearby Vajdaság/Vojvodina autonomous region of Serbia, who are drawn to the university (and others in Hungary) by increased prospects for social mobility, wider-ranging opportunities, and a way out of a disadvantaged minority status (Takács, 2015).

3.2. Participant

The participant for the longitudinal case study is Balázs (not his actual name), who is now a 27-year-old man with a career in solar panel system design but was once an English major. He comes from Palics/Palić, a town in the northern part of Vajdaság/Vojvodina, where a majority of the local population speaks Hungarian. He attended a vocational high school in the city of Szabadka/Subotica (Serbia), very close to his home town.

3.3. Procedure

I collected the data through three semi-structured interviews designed to elicit a self-narrative about Balázs's identity as (1) someone who had grown up in Vajdaság/Vojvodina, (2) a current resident of Szeged (and, more broadly, Hungary), and (3) a user of English. The three interviews took place in March 2019, June 2021, and October 2024. After engaging in small talk to warm up and (on the first occasion) explaining the project, I began each interview by asking him to talk about his childhood in Palics/Palić, followed later by prompts for an account of his life in Szeged and of his experience with English. Each interview was also intermixed with incidental requests for clarification or further detail. This reflected Fougère's (2008) naturally developing conversation prompted with one general request 'with no further predetermined structure' (p. 191). However, these interviews were different in that I asked Balázs to speak about each of the *three* areas noted above in turn, not only one (see Appendix).

Because I wished to elicit the richest and most candid self-narrative possible, I aimed to ensure that (1) the rapport between the participant and myself was optimum and (2) the setting for the interview was as relaxed and comfortable as possible. As for our rapport, I have known Balázs since he started his university studies at 18 and taught him in three different B.A. seminars. We certainly know each other relatively well and can perhaps even claim a certain degree of mutual trust and respect. Since the second interview, by sheer coincidence, we have even become teammates on the same dragon boating team. Duff (2008) notes a qualitative change in the life narratives provided by her participant as his trust in her grew over time. This is the connection I was seeking.

The interviews were conducted in English, as that has been the language of our student–teacher relationship inside and outside the classroom – although we have also seen a very recent natural shift to Hungarian in our relationship as teammates. English–Hungarian translanguaging also occurred during the interviews, albeit rarely (see below). Our use of English during the interviews naturally proceeds from the fact that English is the medium of instruction in English and American Studies courses in Hungarian higher education, which assumes students' proficiency in academic English (Williams, 2018).

As for the setting, the first two interviews were conducted in my office, a place with which he was already familiar, a relatively quiet room at the end of a not particularly well-travelled corridor. I prefaced the first two interviews with an invitation to coffee and some preliminary small talk to break the ice and then offered him juice and savoury scones, which he accepted. For the last interview, we simply met at a familiar café near the university.

The interviews lasted approximately one hour each. While I was primarily interested in an audio recording of Balázs's self-narrative, I videotaped the first two events because I wished to capture gestures and facial expressions that might clarify any unclear utterances.

I watched/listened to the recordings multiple times, reviewed the data, took notes, and coded the data. Through content analysis, I found three emerging themes – home, work, and English – and explored the data with a focus on these themes. I used triangulation for trustworthiness: follow-up emails, a term paper Balázs had written about cultural differences between Serbia and Hungary, and ‘member checking’, where I reviewed my findings with Balázs (Barton & Hamilton, 1998). Here too the language of communication was English.

3.4. Research question

My research question was: How is a student’s identity constructed through self-narrative, and how does it change with time?

4. Results and discussion

In what follows, I will report on Balázs’s life narrative, which was co-constructed by both Balázs and myself on three occasions that spanned over five years (cf. Ochs & Capps, 2001). First, I will provide a framework for his life and then explore the themes of English, work, and home, which emerged all three times (in March 2019, June 2021, and October 2024), and offer clues as to his identity.

4.1. Framework

As noted above, Balázs (27) is from Palics/Palić in Vajdaság/Vojvodina (Serbia). His family is Hungarian, although Serbian and English are also spoken in the family home. His mother is an accountant, his father was a postman and is now an electrician, and Balázs is their only child. He started learning Serbian in kindergarten, where he remembers naturally trading languages with his Serbian playmates. He also learned French and English in primary and secondary school, where he takes pride in always having been at the top of the class in the latter subject in particular.

He went to a secondary school in the nearby city of Szabadka/Subotica that specialized in electrotechnics, but, in his final year there, he decided to forego that trade and go on to university. At his mother’s recommendation, he applied to the B.A. programme in English at the University of Szeged, just across the Serbian-Hungarian border. A tutor quickly prepared him for Hungary’s advanced Matura examination in English. (Serbia’s Matura examination would not have counted.) However, Balázs was then disappointed to find that, while his results were sufficient for admission to the programme, he still needed to develop his skills in English. He did so by redoubling his efforts to read in that language, especially fantasy novels, which he liked very much. Once in the programme, he came to a second realisation that his English proficiency was still lacking for his academic courses, so, once again, he concentrated on improving both his vocabulary and grammar. He chose the American Studies track because he was not particularly fond of English literature. Three years later, he defended his thesis on the film

adaptation of *The Godfather*. He was proud of completing his degree, especially while also working almost full-time at a call centre.

Having completed a minor in media and communication, he went on to do a Master's degree in that field at the same university, thinking that might lead to a career in public relations. He also spent a summer in the U.S., travelling and working in a camp. While he has fond memories of that experience, his strong homesickness also cemented for him how close he is to his parents. After his second degree, he decided to change tack and capitalize on his previous vocational training by working as an electrician after all. This choice enabled him to earn a very good living and remain in Szeged. Now, he works in an office in the same city designing solar panel systems while earning a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering by distance study at the University of Óbuda in Budapest.

4.2. English

In 2019, at 21, Balázs recounted the various stations of his life with English from the very beginning.

‘Well, actually, my English career started when I was at the elementary school. I was the best in the class. ... I was the only one who could get an “A” (Williams, 2020, p. 336).

His pride in his success clearly shows here, as he stresses how strict his EFL teacher was and how difficult it was to do well. He continues:

‘Then I went to high school. ... I wrote usually everyone's test.... ... Well, actually, I wrote, let's say, six different essays on the same topic. ... Well, we had an agreement that if I write the essay, I don't know, they'd buy me something, food, or something, Coke, or I don't know’ (Williams, 2020, p. 336).

His story of actually preparing around half a dozen different versions of an essay on the same topic in English for his classmates in anticipation of a written test suggests a practical shrewdness, and, as he freely admits, it helped him to improve his own writing. However, like so many who learn English as a foreign language, he had no idea how low his level was compared to the requirements of an English degree programme. As he recalls, shaking his head,

‘At home, I thought I was very good at English, but when I got here....’ (Williams, 2020, p. 337).

Nevertheless, these setbacks at university made him even more determined to improve. He read more fiction in English and completed multiple grammar exercise books. English even became part of his life beyond his studies:

‘I do everything in English, actually. ... I’m watching films in my free time in English, only in English ... without subtitles. ... Well, in the workplace, ... I can use my English in there as well.... With my friends who are also studying English or American Studies, 90% we speak in English. ... I write messages in English’ (Williams, 2020, p. 338).

By 2021, during our second interview, Balázs (then 24) was in his second year of a Master’s programme in media and communication at the same university. As the medium of instruction was Hungarian and there was a good deal of reading to be done and a thesis to complete, he found he had less time for English. However, he still made a point to watch films and read books in English, and he recounted a three-month stay in the U.S. during the summer since we had last spoken:

‘I was there. ... I started to think in English. It was good.’

He had worked at a camp there in the summer of 2020, had the opportunity to travel and talk to people, and was fascinated to gain first-hand experience of the culture, which he had only been able to study from afar during his B.A. While he used English to maintain contact via video call with the other staff from the camp, he had stopped speaking English with his peers from the English B.A. programme. After a forced hiatus due to the COVID-19 pandemic, they were planning to meet soon. However, he admits:

‘I think we won’t talk in English er because most of us are not using it regularly ... so we talk Hungarian nowadays.’

Still, ever determined to build on his past successes with English, he declares:

‘I really insist that I keep my English at a certain level.’

However, by 2024, Balázs (27), who now designs solar panel systems full-time for a Hungarian company in Szeged, says that he rarely has occasion to use his English there. He sometimes watches TV series in the language but otherwise has few opportunities for English in his life. He thinks back to three years earlier, the time of our previous interview:

‘At that time [2021], I made time to er keep up with English and er try to not forget and engage in conversations and watch films and read books. But, nowadays, it’s not a focus for me. So, obviously, I don’t want to forget it, but there are some other priorities.’

Beyond his job, these priorities include his girlfriend, a second bachelor's degree, and sports.

Still, despite his sense of resignation about his current limited exposure to and use of English, he is introspective all these years later about the disconnect between his English proficiency in high school and the requirements of his English major:

‘I thought: I’m pretty good at it. It turns out I wasn’t.’

Asked about the winding road his studies and working life seem to have taken – a road that appeared to immerse him in English at one point but now appeared so far removed from it – he responds:

‘It was a necessary path so I could move abroad, to Hungary. At that time, I didn’t know what to do, to study. I needed the time to figure it out. ... It’s never too late to start a new thing.’

Thus, we see a downward trajectory for the centrality of English in Balázs’s life over the three occasions, with the slight possibility that he may use it in the future. At first glance, this might suggest a wasted education. However, I am quickly reminded of two old friends who took divergent career paths after a humanities degree: one who studied history only to eventually become an anaesthesiologist and another who read English literature but ended up in investment consulting. Notably, the purpose of their grounding in the humanities was never to provide them with job training. It was to aid them in honing soft skills, such as abstract and critical thinking, that would become invaluable not only on the job, but in all areas of their lives. Balázs also shows signs that he is making use of the same, while his spoken English continues to be perfectly serviceable.

Simon (2004) points out that language affiliation is key to identity. Indeed, I have spoken to Balázs in Hungarian, and a different aspect of his identity emerges. By his own account, he is a different person in Serbian than he is in Hungarian, and, indeed, new languages and cultures can have a hybridizing effect on one’s identity:

‘As I cross the border, my personality changes. ... I think that it’s just another side of my personality. It’s like I have a switch, like I go through the border – Serbian. When I come home, then back to Hungarian or English, yeah. I think that English is already integrated into my Hungarian personality’ (Williams, 2020, p. 342).

Similarly, Early and Norton (2012) refer to language learners’ identities being constructed through narrative in powerful, agentic ways. They point to the

capacity of narratives to index the centrality of language learners' identity in their own learning, the potential for teacher–student interaction to influence learner involvement in classroom practices, and the degree to which both space and time are involved in learners' imagined identities (Early & Norton, 2012). Fekete (2024) also stresses the possibilities of 'learners' identity construction in and through the second language' (p. 68). Early and Norton (2012) likewise stress the light shed through narratives on learners' power as social agents to resist or even to re-write their own stories. Indeed, in the firm but kind manner in which Balázs has sometimes partly or wholly disagreed with my assertions or suggestions during our interviews, I see the English speaker identity he claims has become incorporated into his own.

4.3. Work

In 2019, Balázs said that he had started working at the age of 13. He had two jobs: one with his father and a summer gig involving 'hard work in the fields'. He sums this up as follows:

'I grew up early.'

This experience provided him with a strong work ethic, and he believes that laziness is not tolerated in Serbia – whereas he has witnessed a great deal of it in Hungary. For example, he was given a task to do on a construction site in Szeged, which he ended up doing in half the time. He has also noticed that the call centre where he worked in Szeged was thought to be very efficient and productive, yet the staff there seemed to take an inordinate number of breaks. He thus concluded that

'Work is different here.'

In 2021, Balázs spoke about working in maintenance at a summer camp in the U.S.:

'I felt that I was more appreciated than I should have been.'

Apparently, he and his co-workers were told that they were the best maintenance staff there in ten years. They were given perks, days off, the use of a car in their spare time, and general support from both the other staff and the campers. However, this was clearly a level of appreciation Balázs had never experienced or expected for a job well done.

In 2024, he compared his current work of designing solar panels behind a desk and his previous work as an electrician in the field:

‘I kind of like both.’

He finds he misses the field when he is in the office and vice versa. At this point, he does on-site inspections of the systems he has planned but only occasionally.

‘We have a lot of work, thank God, which is not good, since now I’m studying, but I have to manage somehow the work-school balance.’

He also hopes to be able to move forward once he completes his electrical engineering degree. Ultimately, his thinking is as follows:

‘In order to be in a better position, you have to be committed ... disciplined.’

Balázs’s references to work-centred groups he has gladly been part of, such as the maintenance staff at the summer camp and even the group of English majors with whom he would communicate in English, point to group identity (Spencer-Oatey, 2008). More specifically, they suggest a community of practice (CofP) (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Wenger (1998) has found three criteria for a CofP: shared engagement, a collective, negotiated enterprise, and a common linguistic repertoire developed over time. Clearly, English is key to both these examples of CofPs of which Balázs has been a member, but members share more than that. Indeed, given Balázs’s strong valuing of work, it seems likely that he will always become an integral part of whatever CofP he seeks out and that this, in turn, will continue to shape his identity. Certainly, Balázs’s identity as a young, urban, university-educated, European professional presupposes his identity as an English speaker.

4.4. Home

In 2019, after three years of living and studying in Szeged, Balázs reported that he was starting to feel at home there but that sometimes he missed his family and friends. He said,

‘I still have that feeling that I miss home, and it feels good to go home because there are my friends who didn’t come to Szeged. So I have friends there, I have friends here, and it’s, for me, it’s like, I have a life in Serbia, and I have a life in Szeged – which is two different [lives], actually’ (Williams, 2020, p. 343).

At the same time, he had plans to pursue a career abroad and thus potentially find a new home:

‘In December, I had a job opportunity at the Google. ... I’m starting [courses in] commerce and marketing and public relations, actually. And later on, well, if not

Budapest, then Dublin or San Francisco or Australia, I don't know yet' (Williams, 2020, p. 338).

Two years on, in 2021, he seemed to have established himself in Szeged:

'I'm kind of settled in Szeged. I think I should stay here. ... I think Szeged is the final destination for now.'

Although he valued his independence and the opportunities life in a city offers, he was ever mindful of his proximity to his parents and grandparents in Palics/Palić, which is about a one-hour drive from Szeged across the border at Ásotthalom:

'Now, I'm close to my home. If I'm in Budapest, I can't do that.'

Later during the conversation, his use of the word *home* seems to shift:

'I feel Szeged is my home. Me and my girlfriend moved in together a year ago. Since then, I think it's my home. I started to remember the street names. What's cheap in Aldi. What's cheap in Tesco. ... I'm trying to transition everything from there to here. ... Now I feel that I'm at home here.'

Indeed, he made a second reference to life with his girlfriend and shared activities that evoke hearth and home:

'We decided that we should cook at weekends together ... and I think it's a good way for bonding.'

He was anxious to complete his media degree at the time, find work in online and social media, and establish himself in Szeged, perhaps set up his own business there:

'I'm still trying to settle even more here.'

Finally, as if to anticipate my unasked question of where home is for him, he made apt use of translanguaging to describe a weekend trip from Szeged to Palics/Palić:

'Megyek itthonról haza.'

DeepL translates this, very roughly, as 'I'm going home from home'. This quote perfectly captures the duality and complementarity of the sense that one's home may be more than one place.

By 2024, with a full-time job that he enjoys and a new relationship, he has firmly established himself in Szeged. At this point, only his parents and grandparents have remained in Palics/Palić. As for his old friends, they have moved to Szeged, Budapest, Germany, and elsewhere:

‘Nobody’s at home. I can’t say one person from my friends who is still at home.’

However, he sees his family regularly, either because he travels there or they visit him in Szeged. As for the status of Szeged as home:

‘Nothing’s changed. I liked the city at the first time. And I still like it. It’s not too small, not too big. Compared to Budapest, it’s much better here. It’s a very big city. Budapest. And I would not like to live there because it’s just concrete and concrete and concrete. It’s just too much for me.’

It seems intuitive that the place one actively selects as one’s home should be ‘just right’. In analysing the classic fairy tale ‘Goldilocks and the Three Bears’, Booker (2006) points to the ‘dialectical three’, where ‘the first is wrong in one way, the second in another or opposite way, and only the third, in the middle, is just right. ... This idea that the way forward lies in finding an exact middle path between opposites is of extraordinary importance in storytelling’ (pp. 229–232).

As for whether he sees Szeged as his final destination, Balázs responds:

‘For now, yes. Now, I don’t have a reason to move away. I still have that connection with my parents. I’m close enough and far enough.’

The only factor that would tempt him to move away would be a well-paying job elsewhere. However, while he had considered international career opportunities five years earlier, now he only entertains the thought of a move to another small city in Hungary, such as Győr and Sopron. Still, he would be happy to stay in Szeged. Does he feel at home there?

‘Much more than in the past [in 2021]! ... I think that er, first of all, [I have a] better job or a different job, thank God, a better salary, at least er and er I have this community around me ... we engage in interactions much more frequently than back at that time ... So I’m not missing my home so frequently than I used to in 2021. Er so yeah in a word, I feel home. Obviously, it’s a pleasant feeling when I go home, but I don’t feel that homesickness that I’d feel for weeks the last time. ... I don’t wish to go abroad.’

Thus, we see the possibilities for home as shifting from Palics/Palić to Szeged to both. Ultimately, just as Balázs need not choose between a Vajdaság/Vojvodina

Hungarian and a Hungary Hungarian identity, he also has no reason to pick one place over another as home. Home for him can be and clearly is a composite of both Palics/Palić and Szeged. Indeed, Tuan (1976) refers to the distinction of ‘hearth’ (the warm, safe, familiar, comfortable place) and ‘cosmos’ (the challenging, exciting, possibly dangerous space out there). The sense of ‘hearth’ is clearly evoked by Balázs’s description of cooking meals with his girlfriend over the weekend in their shared flat in Szeged and chatting with his mum over Turkish coffee in the family kitchen in Palics/Palić. Indeed, in a sense, both and neither are home.

5. Conclusion

This longitudinal case study of a single student, whose life story is at once familiar and unique, explored his identity as regards having grown up in Vajdaság/Vojvodina, living in Szeged, and using English. It focused on the emerging themes of home, work, and English.

As powerful and accessible as qualitative data can be, I also concede the limitations of a case study in terms of its generalizability – even a diachronic one like this one that spans over five years. However, other such interviews, as well as my over 35 years of experience with current and former students, suggest that there is a certain verisimilitude to Balázs’s experience, which is to say that it is not unlike that of many of his peers.

Finally, for teachers dealing with students who have stories to share of ongoing identity construction – which may well be all teachers – it is clear that a more in-depth understanding of student identities allows us to deal with student needs with greater efficacy. For instance, students from a different school system who are admitted to an English B.A. programme based on a threshold score but whose language skills are still not up to par, as in Balázs’s case, may require additional instructional support. In addition, students coming to terms with a new culture that is at once so close and yet so far add a unique perspective to discussions in first-year language classes and later seminars involving culture, identity, agency, power, social uses of language, and other postmodern themes. Thus, one implication of this longitudinal case study for foreign language learners and teachers and, indeed, anyone involved in the foreign language learning and teaching enterprise is that our experience is characterised – and enriched – by multiple cultural and linguistic identities that are ever-changing.

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Appendix.

Interview guide

Following Fougère (2008), I asked Balázs a broad question about each of the three areas of identity I was interested in: that of (1) someone who had grown up in Vajdaság/Vojvodina, (2) a current resident of Szeged (and, more broadly, Hungary), and (2) a learner, speaker, and student of English.

After warm-up questions on a range of topics, e.g., courses of mine he had attended, the kind of coffee he likes, and what his BA thesis is about, I elicited background information, such as his age and home town, and then proceeded with the first broad question: ‘I want to ask you just to speak as much as you can, freely, whatever comes to mind, about your experience of learning English’.

Beyond the three broad questions, I also asked incidental questions for clarification, to round out the narrative or to prompt a resumption of the narrative when it had stopped. These include the following:

- How did you write your classmate’s papers in advance so that they looked different enough not to arouse the teacher’s suspicion?
- What has your main reason been for deciding to study English?
- Why did you pick American Studies and not English Studies?
- Do you feel in any way that you are a different person because you’ve come here?
- Why do you change? Why do you speak differently?

The key was to promote Balázs’s self-narrative with as few interruptions as possible.