

Teachers' experiences, beliefs and conceptions concerning intercultural communicative competence

Experiencias, creencias y concepciones de los profesores acerca de la competencia comunicativa intercultural

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Abstract

This is a report of a study on teachers' experiences, beliefs and conceptions concerning intercultural communicative competence (ICC). The study explored the relationship between teacher cognition, professional identity and intercultural competence. To stimulate reflection as well as to collect data, autobiographical accounts and semi-structured interviews were used. This exploratory case study showed that even when teachers have intercultural experiences in English speaking countries, as it is the case with the three informants in the study described, they continue to have essentialist perspectives of target cultures that, in turn, affect their vision of the development of ICC. Results revealed how teachers' previous personal experiences are influential in their belief and conception formation of ICC. Besides, they do not master the knowledge, skills and attitudes involved in ICC, in spite of their awareness of the essence and purpose of the development of ICC at different levels.

Key words: Intercultural communicative competence, teacher cognition, teachers' beliefs, teacher development

Resumen

Este es un informe de un estudio sobre las experiencias, creencias y concepciones de los profesores con respecto a la competencia comunicativa intercultural (CCI). Se explora la relación entre la cognición del profesor, la autoimagen y la competencia intercultural. Se usaron relatos autobiográficos y entrevistas semi-estructuradas para estimular la reflexión y recolectar información. Este estudio de caso exploratorio mostró que aun cuando los docentes hayan tenido experiencias interculturales en países de habla inglesa, como es el caso de los tres informantes de este estudio, continúan teniendo percepciones esencialistas de la cultura objeto, que a su vez, afectan su visión del desarrollo de la CCI. Los resultados revelan que las experiencias personales previas de los profesores influyen en la formación de sus creencias y concepciones de la CCI. Además, a

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pesar de su conciencia de la esencia y el propósito del desarrollo de la CCI a diferentes niveles, no manejan los conocimientos, habilidades y actitudes que esta implica.

Palabras clave: Competencia comunicativa intercultural, cognición del profesor, creencias del docente, desarrollo profesional docente.

Introduction

According to Borg (2006), "Teacher Cognition is an inclusive term referring to the complex, practically-oriented, personalised, and context-sensitive network of knowledge, thoughts and beliefs that language teachers draw on their work" (p. 12). Borg's research examines what teachers, at any stage of their careers, and in any language education context, think, know or believe in relation with any aspect of their work, it also entails, although not necessarily, the study of actual classroom practices and of the relationship between cognition and these practices. This is in general terms the framework of my study of teachers' experience, conception, and practices with respect to intercultural communicative competence.

There have been a number of studies that explore teachers' beliefs and practices of intercultural competence development; however, I have not found studies that explore possible relationships among personal experiences, conceptions and practices of EFL teachers with respect to this particular curricular area. Most studies used Byram's definition of intercultural competence (Byram, 1997). This entails the knowledge, skills and attitudes that a foreign language teacher should have to be able to teach intercultural competence. He describes intercultural competence in terms of four "saviors". He defines the first *savoir* as knowledge of social groups and their products and practices. The second *savoir* is *savoir comprendre*, defined as the ability to interpret a document or event of another culture. *Savoir apprendre/faire* is the third component that

entails the skill of discovery and interaction. And finally, *savoir s'engager and savoir etre* involve critical cultural awareness, curiosity and openness. This study embraces Byram's framework because it is a comprehensive and solid construct that lends itself to be applied to varied contexts.

The present study, teachers' experience and conception of intercultural competence, is framed in the teacher cognition domain of inquiry, which is a term used here to refer to "the unobservable cognitive dimension of teaching –what teachers know, believe, and think" (Borg 2003, p.81). Mainstream educational research in the last 30 years has recognized the impact of teacher cognition on teachers' professional lives, and this has generated a substantial body of research. According to Borg (2006) this domain of inquiry is based on the following assumptions: teachers as active, thinking decision-makers play a central role in shaping the classroom events: knowledge and beliefs exert a strong influence in human actions; and understanding teacher cognition is central to the process of understanding teaching. All language teachers have a personal history; they have gone through different learning experiences that determine the way they see varied aspects of the teaching-learning process, and the way they make decisions about what and how to teach their students any given subject, in this case a foreign language.

Learning experience as well as any life experience is a basic component that guides teachers' careers, especially in the formation of concepts or constructs (literacy, teaching of grammar and intercultural

competence, among others). Borg (2003) presents a general picture of different studies on teachers' experience to conclude that teachers' prior language learning experiences establish cognitions about learning and language learning which form the basis of their initial conceptualizations of L2 teaching during teacher education, and which may continue to be influential throughout their professional lives. For example, in a study conducted by Numrich (1996), 27.6% of the teachers reported in their diaries that they attempted to integrate a cultural component into their teaching because they had found learning about the L2 culture to be an enjoyable part of their L2 learning experiences. In contrast, the teachers noted that they avoided teaching grammar or correcting errors because their own experiences of these aspects of L2 instruction had been negative. In relation to teaching culture, some questions could be raised: Are all EFL teachers prepared to teach I.C.? Is teaching culture amusing for all teachers? Are teachers' intercultural encounters all pleasant experiences? Do personal experiences as well as experience of instruction influence the formation of beliefs, personal theories or conceptions?

Beliefs, perceptions, conceptions, implicit theories, personal theories, practical principles, etc. are some terms found in the literature that describe a concept that, according to Pajares (1992), is characterized by being influential in determining how individuals organize and define tasks or problems, and by having its basis on evaluation and judgment. For investigative purposes, they must be inferred and understood as a system of beliefs that interact with one another and with other cognitive/affective structures to form beliefs about constructs- beliefs about politics, about marriage, about the nature of language, etc. Thus, beliefs are created through a process of enculturation and social construction and they are formed early and tend to self-perpetuate. Particularly, "educational beliefs must be understood in terms of their connections not only to each other but

also to other, perhaps more central beliefs in the system. Psychologists refer to these substructures as attitudes or values". (Pajares, 1992, p.325)

According to Castro, Sercu & Mendez-Garcia (2004) there is no doubt that beliefs are pervasive, perseverant, and they are affected by previous experience, and shape instructional behaviour. However, these beliefs are formed not only as a product of instruction; they are also shaped by personal experiences in the world with people from other cultures or subcultures. I believe that positive or negative experiences might exert an influence on teachers' perception or conception of intercultural competence development in EFL classrooms. It is worth saying that this is only a foreshadow assumption that motivates in part my study of this particular curricular area. As researcher, I approach this study with the belief that teachers' previous intercultural experiences influence their present way of conceiving and approaching the development of ICC in their students as well as the construct they hold of the concept.

However, teachers might have their own perception of intercultural communicative competence. Teachers have their own ideas of what to teach, what resources to use, how to teach. This is true regarding the teaching of grammar, reading, and writing but it is also true in relation to areas such as educational technology or intercultural competence which are not traditionally regarded as fundamental for the command of a target language. My purpose is to discover teachers' experience and conceptions of intercultural competence in my study, due to the lack of research in this area within the teacher cognition domain of enquiry in the Colombian EFL context.

Study

The present study is qualitative in that the data have been collected through autobiographical accounts and interviews. These data are true only

about the teachers I have interacted with and interviewed. The aim of this study is to explore three university teachers' perception of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) using a case study approach, resulting in the understanding of the influence of previous intercultural experiences in their conception of intercultural competence. In order to carry out this type of study, two different types of instruments were used: a biography of intercultural encounters, and a semi-structured interview.

Review of related studies

In this section, the focus will be on literature on teachers' beliefs concerning the cultural dimension of foreign language teaching. Research in this area is relatively recent, and studies investigating this dimension are not abundant. The first study I found in which teacher cognition and intercultural competence are studied is Duff and Uchida (1997). They carried out an interesting qualitative research in Japan, which aims at exploring teachers' construction, negotiation and transformation of their socio-cultural identities and practices. This study confirms the importance of investigating EFL teachers' self-image and beliefs about teaching EFL and cultures.

Ryan (1998) explored two teachers' beliefs about the dimension of culture in their teaching and the relation of these beliefs to teacher instruction. He found that distinctive styles of interaction with students surface and raise concern about the question of cultural knowledge. Ryan (1998) concludes that in his case study he demonstrated that beliefs strongly influence behaviour but one determining factor, besides teachers' expressed beliefs about the dimension of culture, was the actual knowledge about aspects of L1 and L2 cultures. Another conclusion he drew was that teachers as participants in the process have knowledge to offer an evolving experience with language. Such knowledge goes hand-in-hand

with intercultural competence and the desire to increase such competence.

In her study focusing on Flemish foreign language teachers' professional self-concept, Sercu (2001) found that they defined their objectives of EFL mainly on linguistic, not cultural, terms and that this pattern is identical for teachers of French, English and German, despite the different curricula with which they are working. This finding confirms views put forward in Byram and Risager (1999). In their study of Danish and British teachers, they found that very few teachers in Denmark and England thought the cultural dimension was more important than the linguistic one.

Both Sercu (2001) and Byram and Risager (1999) found that foreign language teachers clearly consider cultural issues their responsibility. However, students feel frustrated in their attempt to treat cultural dimension seriously because of pressures to produce measurable results and the curricular focus on linguistic competence. In their study, Castro, Sercu, and Mendez Garcia (2004) report on a research among Spanish secondary EFL teachers, focusing on the extent to which teachers support the new language-and-culture teaching objectives. They found that teachers are willing to support the new objectives, but their experience conflicts when having to prioritize language teaching and culture teaching objectives.

According to Sercu (2005, 2006) there is certainty that the findings of previous studies show that progress is being made and that teachers now are willing to support intercultural objectives, however, teachers still tend to favor approaches to teach communicative competence rather than intercultural competence. In her study, which has a more international scope with teachers from Belgium, Bulgaria, Greece, Mexico, Poland, Spain and Sweden, Sercu (2006) takes a step forward and suggests a profile of foreign language and

intercultural competence teacher (FC&IC teacher). On the basis of Byram's conceptual definition of intercultural competence, she specified the knowledge, skills and attitudes that a foreign language teacher should possess to be able to teach intercultural competence.

Regarding knowledge, Sercu (2006) says that foreign language teachers should be sufficiently familiar with the foreign cultures associated with the foreign language they teach and that the contacts they have with these cultures should be both varied and frequent. In addition, teachers should know their own culture well and possess culture-general knowledge that can help them to explain similarities and differences between cultures to learners. They should know both what stereotypes pupils have and how to address these in the foreign language classroom. They should know how to select appropriate content, learning tasks and materials that can help learners become interculturally competent. With respect to skills, she stated that teachers should be able to employ teaching techniques that promote the acquisition of *savoirs*, *savoir-apprendre*, *savoir-comprendre*, *savoir-faire* and *savoir-être*. Teachers should be able to help pupils relate their own culture to foreign cultures, to compare cultures and to empathize with foreign cultures' points of view. They should be able to select appropriate teaching materials and to adjust these materials should they not allow achieving the aims of intercultural competence teaching. In addition to being skilful classroom teachers, teachers should also be able to use experiential approaches to language-and-culture teaching. With respect to attitudes, FL&IC teachers should be favourably disposed towards the integration of intercultural competence teaching in foreign language education and willing to actually work towards achieving that goal. They should try to identify the objectives of foreign language education in terms of both language learning and intercultural competence acquisition.

Regarding the frequency with which teachers practice particular kinds of culture teaching activities, Sercu (2006) affirms that teachers tend to employ techniques that aim to enlarge learners' knowledge of the foreign culture, and not to encourage learners to search for information in different sources, analyse it independently, and present their finding in order to discuss them with others. All in all, Sercu's study concludes that "teachers in all countries were in favour of teaching intercultural competence, and integrating IC in foreign language education and that an average culture-and language profile exists and that teachers are moving towards becoming FL&IC (foreign language and intercultural) teachers, but that at present their profile does not meet all expectations regarding knowledge, skills and attitudes". (Sercu, 2006, p.67)

All studies presented deal with EFL teachers from secondary and higher education in European settings and one can gather that most teachers are not fully equipped to develop ICC in their students. If this is what is happening in Europe where most language students have the chance to travel abroad to experience the language they are learning and they have "a year abroad" official program (Alred, & Byram, 2002) that should make them communicative and intercultural competent. What is happening in other less privileged settings, as far as their cultural awareness is concerned? Can we expect EFL teachers from Latin America, for instance, to meet the EF&IC teacher profile that is required in the globalized and internationalized world? Do our teachers in other contexts have the self-image of an EF&IC teacher?

Participants and context

The participants of this study are qualified and experienced teachers of English as foreign language in Latin America. They all hold a B.A. in TEFL from a Latin American university. This study was conducted in England at a university where

they were completing their graduate studies in ELT. After having signed an informed consent form to comply with ethical issues, my informants, who are highly proficient in English, all voluntarily wrote a detailed autobiographical account of an intercultural experience in English. Subsequently, and they were interviewed in English to delve into their personal intercultural experiences, and find out about their perception of intercultural competence and how they think the development of intercultural competence should be implemented in their context.

The first participant was Nancy. Born, raised and educated in Colombia, Nancy is an experienced EFL teacher at university level in a small city of Colombia, she has been teaching English for more than 10 years. She lived in England in the 90s when she studied to improve her English. The second participant was Daniel born, raised and educated in Mexico, Daniel has taught English as foreign language for more than 12 years. He teaches at the university level at a university in a city of Mexico. The third participant was a teacher from Buenos Aires, raised and educated in Argentina, Stella is an experienced EFL teacher at university level. She has been teaching English and English literature for more than 20 years.

They all have lived either short or long periods of time in an English speaking country. Nancy lived in London for a year after finishing her undergraduate studies in Colombia ten years ago, and at the end of 2008, she had been living in Coventry for a year. Daniel has spent short periods of time in the United States in the past and when this study was done, he and his family had been in Coventry for about a year. Stella has lived in Italy and England and has travelled to several countries in her life.

Analysis of Data

The analyses and interpretations are rendered in a reflective manner, incorporating insights from

research participants as well as the researcher. The aim of this section is to share insights, discoveries, representations and interpretations of the collected data. I started my data collection with the autobiography (Byram, 2007), and after reading and analysing this instrument by means of selective coding and categorization, I used the semi-structured interviews to go deep into the participants' experience and to find out about their perspectives on ICC however this analysis of data of both instruments is presented as evidence of my interpretations of teachers' views. After coding and categorizing the data of autobiographical accounts and transcription of interviews, the data were compared and contrasted to find emerged common patterns and issues.

Findings

In the following paragraphs, the vision of culture each teacher has is presented, however it is worth saying that Nancy and Daniel have never had taken courses or training on intercultural communication, whereas, Stella has taken courses on culture and intercultural competence as part of her master programme. Therefore, it is not surprising that Stella has got a clearer picture of what ICC entails and goes deeper in the reflection on her intercultural encounter.

Nancy chose the experience of a visit to a church and a teacher's house on Christmas because, as the informant said, it was a recent event and it was easy to remember. There were people from different nationalities and she wrote:

I had already met some people from China and Japan, so their faces were very familiar to me. I had not met anyone from Russia, India, Cyprus and Africa. I just knew that most African people are black. That Russian people have blond hair. I didn't know much about Indian people.

It can be gathered that Nancy had the opportunity to re-examine a clear essentialist perspective of

culture she held in the sense that she assumes that people from one nation or continent belong to the same race, religion and have the same language. In her account she refers to nationalities and her stereotypes of each national physical characteristic. They also showed the tendency to homogenize one nation, one ethnicity and one language in one monolithic view, as Holliday et al. (2004) characterized the essentialist perspective of culture.

Daniel chose a recent experience in the United Kingdom where two families, one from Mexico and the other from England, meet. Daniel had a very fixed image of what British people look like, giving the impression of holding an essentialist perspective of culture. That is to say, perceiving the members of a culture as homogeneous with the same physical traits spread evenly, giving the sense of a simple society, he said: "The very first time they (a British family) visited us I think it was an experience full of curiosity on both sides. Their clothing had nothing different but their behaviour did."

Their appearance was just like typical British people, good looking, tall, blond hair and most of all a very strong British accent. However, British society nowadays is not only composed of only white British citizens but a great diversity of races product of the mobility of people within Europe and the immigration from different parts of the world. It is surprising how many of us still identify one race, one religion, one prototypical behaviour with one culture and nation. A lot more has to be done in order to modify our essentialist view of culture as a static entity, especially on teachers' part since they are the ones in charge of transmitting and reproducing either complex or simplistic visions of the world.

Conversely, Stella narrated the encounter with an Italian relative she had never met before and how universal hints of non-verbal communication

or extra-linguistics factors helped them identify themselves in a airport full of unknown faces: "To my astonishment, we were able to recognise each other immediately. I could later confess my ignorance to her and we had a wonderful time together. It (this encounter) made me aware of the possibilities of communication beyond the level of linguistic signs. It (this mutual recognition) helped me understand better the saying "When there is a will, there is a way."

Stella chose an intercultural encounter in Italy that occurred long time ago, she did not pin down on any characteristics of Italians but she identified "the other" in a non-essentialist way by giving her the possibility to communicate not through a prototypical cultural representation, but through a communicative strategy used in any language in any culture.

Regarding how one interprets behaviours based on one's axiological framework, which is the tendency when one lives exclusively monolingual and mono-cultural experiences and has no contact with other groups or subcultures: Nancy assumed that other people felt the same about this particular event (Christmas) or a particular place (church). One usually takes for granted that places and events have the same meaning to everybody regardless many individual and contextual factors and one thinks that perceptions, feelings and the construction of particular cultural artefacts, for example, are universal and built around the same beliefs and values, as Nancy made it evident by saying: "I suppose when they were in the church they all thought about their own countries and how far they were from them. They might have started wishing about being there with their families and friends".

Nancy did not answer all the questions that would allow her to expand or reflect more on her intercultural encounter, she thought that the experience was not good enough. Later on, in the

interview, I had the chance to ask her more about her autobiographical account and I asked her if she thought that people from other countries had the same feelings about Christmas and she said: "Well, China definitely, no. I am sure they don't have the same Christmas tradition, I was saying that because, maybe I was thinking more about myself than anything else."

In the same way that Nancy realised that she was assuming universal beliefs or behaviours based on her own value structure. Daniel, who chose an encounter with an English family, showed the same ethnocentric perspective when asked about the other family's perception of the encounter.

I think they thought they were to interact with someone from a developing country and culturally very different to them. I think they also felt excited about the experience of interacting with a Latin-American family. Which they said was the first family from America they had ever known.

Here, besides the fact that Daniel makes assumptions about others' value structure and was not able to decentre from his own cultural viewpoint, we can also feel the perception of the difference from a socio-political perspective, assuming that a family that comes from the "developing countries" is a curiosity. He adopted a term given by the politically and economically powerful countries to refer to those countries that are peripheral, third world countries. For this informant, and for many of us, the internalised status of "first world" countries and "third world" countries is so powerful that one might tend to think that such imaginary would create, or in fact creates, two super large cultures in the world. This is evident in his biographical account as well as in his interview. How very different actually a family from Mexico is compared to a family from Unites States, for example? We might be different in socio-economic, socio-political terms but these differences might

be determined by how relationships are shaped in relation to power, authority, functions of the members depending on economic circumstances, injustice, inequality, wealth, poverty, etc.

These three teachers, in a way, represent not the population of EFL teachers in their countries, but probably they represent the variety of EFL teachers one can find in each of these countries, in terms of degrees of awareness about the development of intercultural competence. Ranging from those who are more concerned about developing linguistic competence to those who are fully aware of the complexity of the development of an intercultural communicative competence, they all demonstrated to be interested in the incorporation of intercultural competence in their EFL classes:

I like the idea. I mean, now that you mention it (incorporating I.C. into lessons) and you say if I would do something with all that information, it would be nice, very nice, because not many people have the opportunity to travel to other countries. Nancy.

I think now that we are on this conversation, I am becoming aware of this (how relevant the teaching of I.C. is), It should be, It has not been until now and I don't think the cultural aspects have not played a critical role in language teaching, I don't think so. I am not sure if these cultural aspects have been fully considered when designing language textbooks, but I think for a language teacher definitely I.C. is an issue that should be considered very seriously, especially if you have had an experience abroad. Daniel.

If teachers are not aware of this intercultural competence, nothing will make them aware, you cannot pass onto your students something you do not believe in. It is not something that is stated in a plan but something arises in the development of the lesson if you are aware. Stella.

This awareness depends on two important factors, as far as I can infer from this study: one factor related to the theoretical knowledge or professional development they have in relation to ICC and another factor is their experience in an English speaking country, either for a short or a long period of time, or the combination of the two.

Regarding the theoretical knowledge on ICC Stella is more knowledgeable, because she is doing a MA in literature and cultural studies, while Nancy and Daniel are doing a MA in ETL and Multimedia and a M.A. in Research Methods respectively. They all consider these experiences very influential in their professional and personal lives. One of them, Daniel even said that if a teacher has not had an experience abroad, this could place a disadvantage for the teacher, he said:

If you have not lived abroad, which is also the case of the vast majority of language teachers in my country, I think that, obviously, absolutely it is a limitation. How can you talk about something that you have not experienced? It would be a limitation, absolutely for the teacher to teach I.C., it would be a limitation. That will finally become a barrier for the teacher.

Given that intercultural experiences are not only experiences abroad but they could also be experiences with other subcultures or groups in your own country, probably this is not a good reason to prevent thousands of EFL teachers from teaching ICC to their students. However, this is an interesting point to reflect on because a very small percentage of EFL teachers actually has the possibility to study or live in an English speaking country or travel for a short period of time to a foreign country. This is especially true in Latin American countries where, for social, economic or political reasons, it is really difficult to leave for other countries and stay there for long periods of time. Consequently, how can EFL teachers become competent enough to teach

Intercultural Communicative Competence within these constraints? It is a question worth asking to come up with an attainable solution for many teachers around the world in the same condition.

Based on the participants' narrated experience of intercultural encounter and interviews, it is possible to say that each informant holds their own perspective of intercultural competence in different ways: ICC as knowledge of target culture, target culture, ICC as behaviours in target culture, and ICC as attitudes towards target culture (Byram, 1997): knowledge, in the sense that the target language and culture implies knowledge of social groups, products, and practices as well as knowledge about otherness and how people act in intercultural contact situations. Secondly, I.C. as behaviour in the sense that one needs to acquire skills to interpret and relate, discover and interact with others. The interpretation of another's behaviour as well as the behavioural patterns followed by persons in a particular situation and context is determined by one's own cultural background. Finally, intercultural competence as attitudes, in the sense that one should develop curiosity and openness to other cultures, which in turn reflects that attitudes such as respect for diversity have been developed.

I found that the participants hold different perceptions of ICC (as knowledge, as skill, as behaviour) but this depends on their conception of culture and intercultural competence they have. In the analysis of interviews, they explained those perceptions in similar ways when they were asked if people from their same group would have reacted in the same way facing the event they presented. There seems to be a clear awareness of the process of enculturation they have suffered. Let us take into consideration some quotes from the autobiographical account:

Nancy says: "that is the way we have been raised. There are some attitudes that we have been told

are polite or impolite. There are words that cannot be said in certain places. It is all about the way we have been educated”.

Daniel says: “Well when you are born and grow up within a certain context, you acquire your culture which is a mixture of lots of things. So people of the same group, or nationality or family usually have the same concept about different aspects of life”.

Stella says: “Because there are many (people) back home who share the same background”.

The three responses have to do with the process of enculturation teachers have undergone and the context in which it takes place. Nonetheless, we can see a reduction in the interpretation of the event and other members of their own community to the culturist perspective that does not give room for other possible reactions from members of the same group depending on individual differences, personal history, intentions and attitudes. Again a tint of an essentialist perspective of culture is hard to dismantle unless all of us undergo a constant reflective intercultural practice.

The purpose of the autobiographical account was to find out about teachers' intercultural experiences. This exercise might give the narrator some distance or perspective of the experience. Also the value of bringing up intercultural experience for teachers to the present moment is the fact that they can analyse and reflect on that intercultural experience and possibly act on that experience by changing stereotypes, by understanding values, beliefs or behaviours of others, or by changing at a cognitive, attitudinal and behavioural level. In the same way these accounts allow to highlight the influence of previous experiences in the formation of teacher cognition, as Borg (2006) stated: teachers' prior language learning experiences establish cognitions about learning and language learning which form the basis of their

initial conceptualisations of L2 teaching during teacher education, and which may continue to be influential throughout their professional lives.

The experience teachers have had abroad is viewed by the teachers as a fundamental part of their life as EFL teachers, however it can not be concluded that this experience is influential in their practices, even though their beliefs are, to a certain extent, influenced by previous intercultural experiences. This influence of their experience could not be conclusive unless they had been observed in their lessons. However, from their answers in the autobiographical account and their interviews, it could be gathered that in the case of Nancy, she is willing to try to teach ICC but she does not feel prepared to do it. She said: “...to be honest, every time I hear the term culture and this kind of things, I prefer to avoid it, because I think to be able to manage, to deal with that topic you need to have knowledge... about history, history of the country you are talking about, literature, the social way, the organisation. And I don't know that I don't know many things about the countries and cultural issues”.

In the case of Daniel, he is more willing to try to incorporate I.C. in to their lessons and to be, in a certain way, an intercultural mediator. Reflecting on his intercultural experience, he wrote: I will try to be aware of cultural differences... the language teacher might be the only reference in the learners' whole life, of what life is like in a country of the target language.

He also said that his short intercultural experiences in the U.S. have not been very influential, but his experience in the U.K., which has been for a longer period of time, has. He commented that he would share this experience with his students and would include it in his lessons.

The perspective of teaching ICC of teachers' reported practice is varied and some teachers have

taken a step forward to incorporate the teaching ICC into her lessons without knowing they were doing it. For example, Stella wrote that she would teach her students the problems of intercultural communication and make them aware of paralinguistic and extra linguistic features in communication. She also said: "I was not aware of her choice to teach I.C., because I didn't know what it was, I only found it one or two years ago, I could "name it". What I feel and what I believe is called "Intercultural Competence". It was a set of beliefs that I held to but I didn't have the academic background".

Many of us can be actually in the situation of any of the teachers who participated in this study, but I think that only when teachers are properly trained and ICC is taught in a intentional way, the development if ICC can take place for the teachers themselves, and consequently for their students in a thorough manner.

Conclusions and Discussion

Based on the analysis of data, it was found that the informants have experienced living in English speaking countries and this fact has varying degrees of influence in the beliefs they have about TEFL, and in particular teaching ICC. They believe that it is essential to have lived abroad to teach intercultural issues. They all think that it is not necessary to state intercultural objectives in their lesson plans. They consider that the teaching of intercultural competence should not be limited to the exploration of only the culture of the main English speaking countries, even though it is a common practice in their own context.

Another finding was that they are all aware of the importance of teaching intercultural competence, but they have different perceptions (as knowledge, as skill or attitudes) of the same concept of Intercultural Competence (IC), and they implement, to a certain degree of explicitness,

the development of intercultural competence in their lessons. However, my own perception based on my interaction with the informants was that their concept of intercultural competence is still incomplete and that more work on teacher training has to be done to achieve the understanding of intercultural communicative competence in all its complexity. Although, it was not the purpose of this study to evaluate the impact of teacher training on the awareness of IC, I have to acknowledge that one of the participants, who received some training in cultural studies, has a clearer picture of what ICC entails and she seems to be familiar with strategies to explore cultural artefacts such book and films.

Teachers identify cultural objectives in terms of intercultural competence development or knowledge of the target culture, in terms of knowing about others' behaviours, beliefs and values, which is a precondition, according to Byram (1997), for successful intercultural interaction. Nonetheless, some teachers have not the attitude to relativise themselves and value others due to the strong essentialist perspective of culture that they have, in a higher or lower degree. It is not enough to have lived in another country, to have information about the target culture or to have the skills to compare two cultures, it is necessary to go further: being aware of our own cultural identity, and acquiring interpretative skills and critical cultural awareness of the other cultures. Nonetheless, no evidence was collected that this essentialist perspective is actually reproduced in their lessons because classroom teaching lessons were not observed.

The mastery of intercultural competence does not only depend on living abroad, having the theoretical background in the area of EFL, or being trained as an interculturalist but it is this and much more. When analysed, teachers' views in the biographical accounts and in the interviews, their perception demonstrated how complex this

issue is. Incongruence might be found between the theoretical preparations or positioning they have and how they actually implement the development of I.C. in their classrooms, but there is a clear intention of going deep and understanding this curricular area in all of informants.

The role of teachers' perception in the development of Intercultural Competence in EFL contexts, shown through biographical accounts and interviews in these three cases studied here, has revealed how previous personal experiences are influential, in different ways, in the formation of beliefs and how complex the perception of an aspect of TEFL such ICC is in each individual. We cannot generalise by saying that EFL teachers' practice in today's world is not yet characterised as intercultural because they do not fulfil a pre-established set of criteria regarding EF&IC teachers, as stated by Sercu (2006), because every teacher, in a lower or higher level, is aware of the responsibility of preparing students for a multicultural world where open-mindedness, respect and tolerance are basic skills everyone has to develop. We might say, however, that it is necessary to work towards a more integrative vision of pre-service teacher education, where ICC is included, so that they will be able to face the present challenges.

This exploratory study shows that the teachers developed the knowledge about otherness and how people act in intercultural contact situations, and that they have developed positive attitudes and feelings towards other cultures. However, what they find more demanding is to interpret others' behaviour as well as the behavioural patterns from an ethno-relative perspective. I would say that this is due to the lack of training as inter-culturalists, since it is not enough to have experienced an intercultural encounter of any sort, but it is necessary to have the frame from which to approach the events in more analytical way and go through a reflective process in writing or collaborative talks.

In the exploration of teachers' perception of ICC., I found that the teachers that participated in the study all have awareness of the essence and purpose of the development of intercultural competence at different levels, but that their perception is not characterised altogether by a mastery of knowledge, skills and attitudes involved in the theorisation on this concept found in current literature. Also, teachers need support in the implementation of assessment, textbooks use and syllabi design for the introduction of intercultural issues, as recently presented in a study on the same area (Young & Sachdev, 2011). Therefore, more efforts have to be made to design teacher education programmes that are up to date with the current developments not only in the area of TEFL but also in related areas such interculturality and education for intercultural citizenship.

Beyond exploring perceived intercultural competence of university teachers, further studies have to be conducted to observe real practices in tertiary EFL classrooms. In addition to this; research about primary and secondary teachers' perception of ICC needs to be done under the qualitative paradigm to keep on building the panorama of EFL teachers' current reconfiguration of complex identity in the era of global communication in English as an International language (EIL) or English as Lingua Franca (ELF) nowadays.

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