

# Interculturality in English Language Teaching

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## **Abstract**

UNESCO and the Council of Europe have been working on approaches in education to develop tolerance, respect for cultural diversity, and intercultural dialogue. Portugal, like many other countries, has established the intercultural domain as a goal in the foreign language curricula. Nonetheless, this commitment to developing intercultural dialogue has been questioned by researchers worldwide who consider that action is needed to effectively promote intercultural competence in the classroom. In this article, I examine teachers' perceptions and beliefs about intercultural communicative competence in a cluster of schools in Portugal and the evidence shows that although foreign language teachers are willing to comply with an intercultural dimension, their profile is more compatible with that of a traditional foreign language teacher, rather than with a foreign language teacher who promotes intercultural communicative competence.

**Keywords:** *Common European Framework Reference for Languages* (CEFR), Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), intercultural domain, English Language Teaching (ELT), Teachers' perceptions and beliefs.

## **Resumo**

A UNESCO e o Conselho Europeu têm desenvolvido esforços para promover tolerância, respeito pela diversidade cultural e diálogo intercultural no âmbito da educação. Portugal, tal como muitos outros países, consagrou o domínio intercultural como um objetivo a atingir no currículo da língua estrangeira. No entanto, este compromisso para desenvolver diálogo intercultural tem vindo a ser questionado por investigadores que consideram que é necessária ação para promover competência intercultural na sala de aula. Neste artigo, proponho-me a analisar as perceções e as convicções dos professores, num agrupamento de escolas em Portugal, sobre a competência comunicativa intercultural. Mediante a análise dos dados recolhidos, os

professores de línguas estrangeiras demonstram que estão dispostos a desenvolver uma dimensão intercultural. Contudo, o seu perfil está mais em sintonia com uma representação tradicional do professor de línguas estrangeiras do que com o professor que, proativamente, promove competência comunicativa intercultural.

**Palavras-chave:** *Quadro Europeu Comum de Referência para Línguas (QEER)*, Competência Comunicativa Intercultural (CCI), domínio intercultural, Ensino da Língua Inglesa (ELI), Percepções e convicções dos professores.

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We live in a troubled globalized world. Nations are challenged by a reality of growing diversity and globalization. New technologies provide information, knowledge and communication as easily and quickly as we have never seen before. Especially children and teenagers have been impacted in particular by international television channels, Internet, video games, mobile phones, social digital networks, or new classmates coming from other countries. This new world paradigm should be enriching, yet we show inadequate discernment to live together with diverse cultures.

A report to UNESCO postulates that education, as the main means to promote Human Rights, is an “ongoing process of improving knowledge and skills” (Delors et al. 11) as well as “an exceptional means of bringing about personal development and building relationships among individuals, groups and nations” (12). From the four closely connected learning pillars presented by Delors, *learning to live together* has been given great emphasis and underpins intercultural education, which the Council of Europe (CoE) envisions as the foundation of a world “where human rights are respected and where democratic participation and the rule of law is guaranteed to all” (“Intercultural Competence for all” 14). Regarding language education, the CoE has laid out guiding principles in several documents, namely the 2001 *Common European Framework of Reference*, and, more clearly, in the September 2017 *Companion Volume* to promote an intercultural stance. The CoE advocates that the intercultural dimension is a central objective “to promote the favourable development of the learner’s whole personality and sense of identity in response to the enriching experience of otherness in language and culture” (CEFR 1).

Since it has been established in language teaching, Byram, Gribkova and Starkey postulate that it is imperative to provide learners with skill in the grammar of a language and “the ability to use the language in socially and culturally appropriate

ways” (4). Following this shift in Foreign Language Teaching (FLT), the Ministry of Education and Science in Portugal laid out the intercultural domain goals in *Metas Curriculares*, for all cycles of English as Foreign Language (EFL) in 2015. Therefore, the intercultural domain in English Language Teaching (ELT) needs to gain prominence and become a common practice in the foreign language classroom in the first, second, and third cycles in Portugal. Consequently, this article aims to examine whether it has been promoted in the classroom.<sup>1</sup>

### Intercultural dimension in Foreign Language Teaching

In the context of foreign language learning, Byram puts forward an intercultural model developed with Zarate as part of a collaborative work for the Council of Europe. The model consists of linguistic, sociolinguistic, and discourse domains taken from the concept of communicative competence. It also includes components of intercultural competence such as *savoirs*, *savoir comprendre*, *savoir apprendre/faire*, and *savoir être*, which is the terminology used in the *CEFR*. Although Byram added *savoir s’engager* in 1997 (figure 1), the *CEFR* does not consider it.

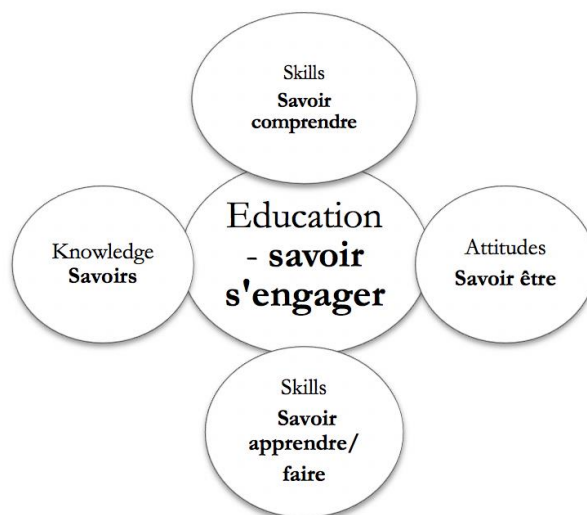


Figure 1 - Five *savoirs* (Byram, *From Foreign Language Education for Intercultural Citizenship* 69)

According to Byram, *savoirs* is the knowledge of one's own and other cultures, "the knowledge of the relationships among different perceptions of one's own and another culture and relationships in the processes of individual and societal interaction", which are linked to communication and the acquisition of language (*Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence* 66); interrelated to knowledge is *savoir comprendre*: the skills of decentring and comparison are crucial to interpret and relate documents or events. In Byram's opinion, learners can acquire the skills of eliciting meanings under the guidance of the teacher in lower levels of language (67); *Savoir apprendre* is the skill of discovery and interaction to acquire new knowledge of people from other cultures about their beliefs, values, and behaviours because "every single social encounter potentially involves different values, opinions and world-views" (18); *savoir être* is crucial so that all other components of this competence may progress because learners should possess curiosity and openness to "suspend disbelief and judgement with respect to other's meanings, beliefs and behaviours" and belief about one's own meanings and behaviours (34); last but not least, *savoir s'engager*, the central concept in this framework (*From Foreign Language Education* 162), is the ability learners develop to critically evaluate their own values as well as other people's values "on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices, and products, safeguarding of the principles of democracy, social justice and respect for human rights" (*Teaching and Assessing* 26). In spite of this centrality, all aspects of this competence are important and all of them are intertwined (76). Yet this does not mean that these components are developed at the same time with equal level of attainment. All *savoirs* are part of a life task process, which may start at primary education (*From Foreign Language Education* 83).

The Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) is, thus, the ability to interact with people from another country and culture in a foreign language. Hence, FLT must focus on mediation, and on producing meanings (*Teaching and Assessing* 83). In line with this definition, CoE expands the concept of mediation, which was underdeveloped in the 2001 *CEFR*, stressing the importance of "co-construction of meaning in interaction and constant movement between the individual and social level in language learning" (*Companion Volume* 33). Therefore, skills and attitudes should be promoted in the classroom as much as knowledge because language is not the only reason to impede people from understanding one another. The difficulties may be associated to a "lack of familiarity with the area or field concerned" (*Companion Volume* 120), which may infer the implication of an intercultural perspective due to an interplay of different interlocutors' perspectives.

FLT should then prepare learners to become intercultural speakers who “manage relationships between themselves and their own cultural beliefs, behaviours and meanings [... and] those of their interlocutors” (*Teaching and Assessing* 12), taking into consideration students’ age and needs, ideally through a task-based approach in the classroom or through experiential activities within a notion of a “spiral curriculum” (81).

### Teachers’ profile within an intercultural dimension

An intercultural approach might imply an extension to the teacher’s role and tasks. Teachers are expected not only to be experts in their respective subjects, but also to have deeper qualifications in general pedagogy, and also to act as guides and aids to self-development and successful interaction. According to Sercu, a Foreign Language and Intercultural Competence Teacher (FL & IC) should have the following profile (table 1), based on Byram’s ICC model:

<i>Knowledge</i>	<i>Skills</i>	<i>Attitudes</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○be sufficiently familiar with the foreign cultures associated with the foreign language they teach (...);</li> <li>○ know their own culture well and possess general knowledge that can help them explain similarities and differences between cultures to learners;</li> <li>○know both what stereotypes pupils have and how to address these in the foreign language classroom;</li> <li>○know how to select appropriate content, learning tasks and materials that can help learners become interculturally competent.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○employ teaching techniques that promote the acquisition of savoirs, savoir-apprendre, savoir-comprendre, savoir-fair and savoir-être;</li> <li>○help pupils relate their own culture to foreign cultures;</li> <li>○compare cultures and to emphasise with foreign cultures’ points of view;</li> <li>○be able to select appropriate teaching materials and to adjust these materials should they not allow achieving the aims of intercultural competence teaching;</li> <li>○be able to use experiential approaches to language-and-culture teaching.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○be favourably disposed towards the integration of intercultural competence teaching in foreign language education and willing to actually work towards achieving that goal;</li> <li>○define the objectives of foreign language education in terms of both language learning and intercultural competence acquisition.</li> </ul>

Table 1 - FL & IC teacher profile (“The foreign language and intercultural competence teacher” 57-58)

In spite of the importance of being familiar with the foreign cultures associated with the foreign language and of knowing their own culture as Sercu points out, teachers should be aware of a myriad of formulations to make sense of culture, the “human-made part of the environment” (Triandis viii). Above all, teachers should engage in an analysis of culture, not as an experimental science, but as an interpretative one in search of meaning (Geertz 5). Risager clarifies that hermetic views of culture and society can be found in course books as “a reproduction of society in a nutshell” (“Languaculture as a Key Concept in Language and Culture Teaching” 6), which may, unfortunately, lead to generalisations and stereotypes, if teachers and learners do not adopt a critical attitude. Nonetheless, Risager remarks that there is a shift away from a national alignment, “pointing towards a more international and transnational approach in teaching language and culture” (3), which is the underpinning of a “dynamic process through which both meanings and the boundaries of groups or communities are renegotiated and redefined according to current needs” (Byram, *Multicultural Societies, Pluricultural People and the Project of Intercultural Education* 5).

The concept of culture developed by the anthropologist Geertz, as Risager explains, “influenced language teaching in the sense that the concept of culture began to be widely used as an umbrella term for what transcended pure language teaching” (“Languaculture” 5). However, Risager admits that language teaching and culture teaching did not have much to do with each other till the research work done by Byram and Zarate (1). From then on, many foreign language teachers and researchers all over the world started to understand that intercultural learning should be part of language learning and a number of researchers have been interested in developing “the more politically oriented dimensions of intercultural learning, with special reference to intercultural and critical citizenship” (9).

Still, there are two opposite trends in pedagogy as Risager outlines: the first is that language and culture are inseparable; and the second view is that language is culturally neutral (*The Language Teacher Facing Transnationality* 5). The former is “a conception of a closed universe of language, culture and history and mentality - a national romanticism” (185). The latter is “not far from a reconstitution of the

classical structuralist conception of the autonomy of language” (*Ibidem*). Yet Risager expresses her dissatisfaction with both views and sets forth a third position: “language and culture can be separated, and language is never culturally neutral, it carries linguaculture” (6). For example, English carries “linguaculture no matter in what context it is used, no matter where it is used, and with what topic” (8). In short, EFL teachers should consider that “[l]anguage is always cultural in some respects” (*Linguaculture* 185), and language and culture teaching should transcend “the national paradigm” and set forth “a dynamic transnational and global perspective (...) centering on the study of meaning” (195).

Despite all these arguments about culture and language, one may also recall the importance of notions such as self-identity and social identity linked to culture, which teachers should also take in consideration if they intend to embrace an intercultural approach. The construction of notions of self-identity and social identity undergo an unstable continuous process, which endows its fragmented, multiple and expansive nature (Kumaravadivelu 11). The meaning of identity within education crosses a range of identity categories: race, ethnicity, sex, gender, sexuality, culture, ability and disability (3). Learners identify themselves within these categorizations, which are socially constructed (Byram, Gribkova and Starkey 27). Notions of unstable continuous construction of self-identity and social identity may be helpful for teachers to develop a basis to work with children and teenagers because it can help learners understand their own identities, how others see them, how to relate to others, how stereotypes arise, and how the process of categorizing people functions. This perspective may prevent inaccurate and simplistic generalisations learners hold of the culture (s) and people (s) related to the English language, as teachers of this current study believe their learners have.

In addition to all crucial aspects considered above, teachers should also know how to select the appropriate materials that can help learners become intercultural speakers. Course books, for example, provide guidance to many foreign language teachers throughout the world (Davcheva and Sercu 90) because they provide more advantages than disadvantages. Nevertheless, coursebooks have been criticised for many reasons, for example, for “presenting a highly fragmented picture of the foreign culture and stereotypical tourist views on the target people” (91). In Portugal, for example, the publication of the new curricular objectives for the first, second and third cycles ascertains the intercultural aspect as one of the seven domains within English learning in mandatory schooling in Portugal. In spite of this, Hurst assumes that, in Portugal, some coursebooks “still reflect a simplistic view of culture limited to

a few facts and cultural trivia to do with fame, food or festivals” (26). These are isolated in special sections, which might be viewed by teachers as unrelated with other domains, and therefore optional, as this study may attest.

In fact, one of the most demanding aspects of the intercultural approach is to challenge the accepted propensity to categorise people, countries and cultures, as this current article may show. Therefore, when teaching a foreign language and culture, it is crucial to convey a realistic depiction of culture (s), and to provide opportunities to recognise objectively the characteristics of culture (s) with learners. In short, culture should not be taught as a separate content in language teaching, nor strictly related to one or two nations.

All the aforementioned aspects should be considered within an intercultural stance, and for this reason, for two decades, the Council of Europe has been recommending training to all pre-service and in-service teachers (“Intercultural Competence” 44), focusing “on intercultural sensitivity, communication skills and cultural awareness training, as well as learning how to provide a democratic and unbiased learning environment for students” (*Ibidem*). Nowadays intercultural competence implementation in the classroom should be the result of this training.

Therefore, this article aims to point out the status of intercultural competence teaching in the EFL classroom at a cluster of schools in Portugal based on the analysis of empirical data, which were collected from semi-structured interviews and from a questionnaire online.

### **Intercultural domain at a cluster of schools in Portugal**

This section of this article intends to clarify teachers’ perceptions of their current language and culture teaching practice, teachers’ beliefs about intercultural competence, and to identify the profile of these teachers. Before proceeding to the discussion of the findings about teachers’ perceptions of their current language and culture teaching practice, there will be, firstly, a brief characterisation of the teachers who were surveyed.

Of the fifteen English teachers who work at a cluster of compulsory education in Portugal, nine teachers responded to the questionnaire: two teach in the first cycle;



five teach in the second cycle, and two teach in the third cycle. From the data, all teachers referred as having more than ten years of experience, and their age ranges between thirty and sixty. Only two teachers of the second cycle claimed they had had some training in culture/intercultural competence at university. Due to this, the findings reported may serve to demonstrate that the implementation of an intercultural stance in this cluster might be compromised, unless the teachers' beliefs and practice shows evidence otherwise.

### **Teachers' perceptions of their current language and culture teaching practice**

This section will focus on four different aspects: teachers' perceptions of their language and culture teaching; teachers' beliefs on their learners' perceptions; teachers' engagement in experiential activities; and teachers' views on pedagogical materials.

Regarding teachers' perceptions of their language and culture teaching, teachers at this cluster of schools strongly believe that English teaching should comply with the following main goals: motivating to learn English and promoting the development of language proficiency for communication purposes. Furthermore, most of the respondents spend more time teaching language than teaching culture because they claim that complying with the syllabus and the four skills takes nearly all of their time. Unfortunately, these findings show that teachers are not accomplishing all the curricular goals, nor are they fully motivating their learners, as they aim to do, because motivation is a "multifaceted construct", which "has a pronounced sociocultural angle" (Byram, *Routledge Encyclopedia of Language Teaching and Learning* 425-426). Teachers believe that culture/intercultural domain is a set of optional topics which can be overlooked.

On the contrary, culture and intercultural domain should be addressed in regular EFL classrooms intertwined with the other domains and should not be seen "as hermetic compartments, independent of one another" (Ministério da Educação e Ciência, *Caderno de Apoio* 3). One of the suggestions in the literature to get around this situation is to contextualise teaching to reflect that "language is always cultural in some respects" (Risager, *Languaculture* 185). This view is maintained in research areas of linguistic anthropology, translation studies, and studies of intercultural

communication since “linguistic practice is always embedded in, and in interaction with, some cultural meaningful context” (*Ibidem*). Therefore, culture should not be seen as a separate content in language teaching.

As for teachers’ views on their learners’ perceptions, data indicate that most teachers perceive that their learners relate the English language to the UK and the USA and hold more positive than negative traditional stereotypes of these peoples and cultures. These findings may imply that teachers are strictly relating language to these two countries and also conveying unrealistic depictions of culture through materials and teaching practice.

On the contrary, language and culture teaching should transcend “the national paradigm” and cultivate less stereotypical results in their learners by engaging in an interpretative analysis in search of meanings (Geertz 5), instead of the prevailing definite and hermetic analysis of culture revealed through this study. Since schools are places of “identity work and identity making” (Reay 2) and to avoid stereotyping, even with a positive categorisation, teachers ought to develop opportunities in the classroom for learners to understand how the process of categorising people functions. Conveying a realistic depiction of culture (s), when teaching a foreign language and culture (s), provides opportunities for learners to recognise their similarities and distinctive characteristics. These opportunities should include experiential tasks not only in the classroom, but also outside the classroom.

In terms of experiential activities, teachers at a cluster of schools in Portugal were not involved in school trips or exchange programmes in the 2016-2017 school year. Although they recognise that experiential activities develop learners’ sense of otherness, teachers claim that experiential activities are risky and a great responsibility, which may show that opportunities to develop ICC are very limited in this cluster of schools.

The literature suggests that experiential activities are “powerful in developing self-awareness as well as perceptions of other countries” (Byram, Gribkova and Starkey 10) and that study visits or exchange programmes are a holistic experience which provide the means of using, on the one hand, language-culture knowledge and, on the other hand, “intercultural skills and acquiring new attitudes and values” (15).

As for teachers’ views on pedagogical materials, eighty-nine per cent of teachers rely on course books to comply with the syllabus. Therefore, one of the skills

teachers should possess is the ability to critically review and evaluate the materials they use. However, teachers may be lacking this skill, with only four teachers mentioning “culture information” as criteria for choosing course books. Teachers follow the course books, and, obviously, the topics these materials deal with. This may suggest that teachers convey a fragmented picture of foreign people and cultures not only because, in general, Portuguese course books, “still reflect a simplistic view of culture limited to a few facts and cultural trivia to do with fame, food or festivals” (Hurst 26), but also because teachers have not considered the intercultural domain, as one of the criteria when they adopted the current course books. Foreign language teachers should be trained to critically review and evaluate pedagogical materials, since the majority of the teachers resort to other materials to complement the prescribed course books.

Choosing the appropriate course book or other teaching materials aligned with an intercultural stance is one of skills required in Sercu’s profile of the foreign language and ICC teacher (Sercu et al. 5-6). The intercultural stance seems to presuppose the acquisition of specific professional characteristics to provide learners with intercultural experience and develop intercultural understanding.

In essence, teachers should help learners transcend a monocultural perspective through their teaching and materials because younger generations are already in contact with the Other through new technologies, travelling, and migration and, as a result, they feel this influence. The exposure to the Other could imply a transitional moment “between the culture of the learner and another culture” (Kordes 301) which would serve as the threshold that could lead to intercultural understanding. For this to take place, the current practice at this cluster of schools has to teach more than the knowledge of language as a system, beyond the notion of *Landskunde*, and beyond communication skills.

### **Teachers’ beliefs about Intercultural Communicative Competence**

Regarding this topic, there is a positive correlation between teachers’ opinions and their willingness. However, only two teachers are confident about an intercultural perspective in English language classes. All the others indicate some contradictions: on the one hand, they state that they wish to promote intercultural skills through their

teaching; on the other hand, they are not sure if intercultural skills can be acquired at school. These findings might also suggest that teachers, in general, do not hold a clear idea of what ICC implies over the course of English language education. The present findings may suggest that teachers are favourably disposed towards teaching ICC in foreign language education because they believe that ICC has a positive effect on students' attitudes towards foreign cultures. Moreover, teachers seem to be favourably disposed to providing opportunities for all learners to develop ICC, even when there are no children of an ethnic minority community in classes because they understand that acquiring ICC helps learners become more tolerant.

In sum, a step forward is needed to develop ICC in the foreign language classroom. Whereas a *language-culture* practice involves “knowledge, skills and attitudes concerning a specific cultural area” (*Ibidem*) associated with the target countries, the developmental process of ICC involves starting from the students' own knowledge, skills, attitudes, and cultural backgrounds so that they reflect on their own assumptions, contrasting these with the acknowledgement of the premises of others, understanding how categorisation works, and critically reviewing social constructs.

### **Teachers' profile at this particular cluster of schools in Portugal**

There seems to be a profile of a language and culture teacher in this cluster of schools who is favourably disposed towards the integration of ICC in foreign language education.

The teachers seem to be suitably skilled to teach within the foreign culture approach, yet they may lack the skills necessary to teach towards the full attainment of intercultural competence. For example, teachers still define the goals of English language education exclusively in terms of linguistic competence. Although they recognize that their learners hold traditional stereotypes of peoples and cultures related to the English language, they do not consider these perceptions and attitudes to design an alternative plan of activities to develop ICC.

On the whole, teachers recognise the importance of intercultural education and are willing to take action in their classroom. Nevertheless, their practice is not aligned with the requirements of the foreign language and ICC teacher profile.

## Conclusion

This article has shown the main principles to guide FLT and to promote *learning to live together*; the relevant aspects to provide an approach to develop ICC, mainly in language education; and the required profile for teachers to facilitate its development in their classrooms.

As this article purported to explore whether teachers at a specific cluster of schools in Portugal are implementing ICC in foreign language education, one may conclude that these teachers believe that motivating their pupils to learn English and promoting the development of language proficiency, as teaching goals, are more important than assisting in understanding identity and culture. Teachers do in fact recognise the importance of ICC and are willing to implement it in their classroom, though their teaching practice is not aligned with the requirements of the foreign language and ICC teacher. These outcomes may be due to: firstly, teachers' beliefs may tend to persevere when they are solid and steady (Sercu, "The foreign language" 68), which may compromise the development of ICC; and, secondly, the development of ICC in this cluster of schools has been jeopardised since teachers in general do not receive training on cultural/intercultural issues.

The implications for FLT in this cluster of schools can be justified from two perspectives: first, the need for developing an educational and training programme in ICC for teachers was identified, which could represent the situation of other school clusters across the country; and second, the output of this study clearly demonstrated that teachers need to collaborate and coordinate actions in-group regarding the intercultural domain.

As a result, the researcher, as an EFL teacher at this cluster of schools, has been developing a virtual space, in this case a blog<sup>2</sup> about ICC, to be shared with colleagues in this cluster to create opportunities for discussion and collaboration. This

strategy may provide support for these teachers as they design an umbrella project to develop ICC using experiential approaches inside and outside the classroom.

#### Footnotes

1 This article resorts to a master's degree project work written by its author, presented in November 2017 in Nova University of Lisbon. <<http://hdl.handle.net/10362/27903>>

2 <<http://interculturalityefl.blogspot.pt>>

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