

## THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERCULTURAL INTERACTION IN LEARNING ENGLISH AS FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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### Abstract

This paper analyzes the role of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) class in a B.A in Bilingualism through a qualitative case study using three main instruments for data collection (questionnaires, interviews and observations). It focuses on determining the role of ICC taking into account the perceptions and knowledge of 5th-semester pre-service teachers, as well as the ways in which the ICC is applied in their English class. Findings show that although students value the teaching of culture and most of them think it is developed in all their classes, there is not a full development of all the dimensions of the ICC, which leads to a partial understanding of the concept both in theory and practice.

**Keywords:** Interculturality, Culture, Intercultural Communicative Competence, English as a Foreign Language.

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**Introduction.** In the context of foreign language education, Byram's monograph has emphasized the development of ICC in the language classroom. Byram's work is based on the European context, and his model stresses the importance of linguistic competence as well as identity and cultural understanding. In this sense, foreign language education aims to produce an 'intercultural speaker' instead of a native-like speaker. In order for language learners to achieve such 'interculturality', Byram proposed a comprehensive framework that includes three components – knowledge, skills, and attitudes, of which knowledge and skills are considered the foundation of ICC. Knowledge is further divided into two categories: (1) knowledge of others and of social processes of social groups and (2) knowledge of self and of critical cultural awareness, which involves an ability to evaluate practices and products of one's own and others' cultures. Skills are divided into two categories: (1) skills to interpret and relate and (2) skills to discover and/or to interact. Finally, attitudes refer to the ability to relativize one's self and to value others with 'curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and about one's own' (Byram, 1997, p. 91).

Another theoretical framework that informs the current research is Deardorff's model. Deardorff emphasized the impact of internationalisation in higher education in a process model which emphasises the progressive nature of ICC development and posits that, while attitude is the fundamental element for developing ICC and knowledge, comprehension and skills can be established to advance to the next stage, internal outcome, which through interaction can be realised as external outcome. The external outcome, effective and appropriate communication and behaviour in an intercultural situation, is then fed into attitude, forming a loop in the development of ICC.

Both models have been widely cited and serve as the impetus for quantitative research instruments in the field. Moreover, the process nature of Deardorff's model provides a theoretical framework for a teaching approach that enters the loop by building up the necessary knowledge and skills required in one's intercultural interactions, further fostering intercultural attitudes. As they are pedagogically applicable in formal language learning contexts and both of them support the effectiveness of explicit instruction in the language classroom, the current research is based on Byram's and Deardorff's models.

According to Byram, foreign language education which develops ICC should include critical cultural awareness, a focus on 'others' who live beyond our national boundaries and speak another language, and comparative analysis of our situation and theirs. To include these elements, cultural concepts and definitions (e.g. culture, culture shock, and stereotype), frameworks about world cultures (e.g. identity and cultural values), terms for analysis (e.g. verbal styles and non-verbal cues) and cross-cultural comparisons were introduced in the course. The main themes of the course included:

- ✓ Definitions of culture and intercultural communication
- ✓ Culture shock and stereotype
- ✓ Cultural values
- ✓ Identity
- ✓ Verbal communication styles
- ✓ Non-verbal communication
- ✓ Cross-cultural contact and conflict
- ✓ Intercultural relationships
- ✓ Cultural adaptation

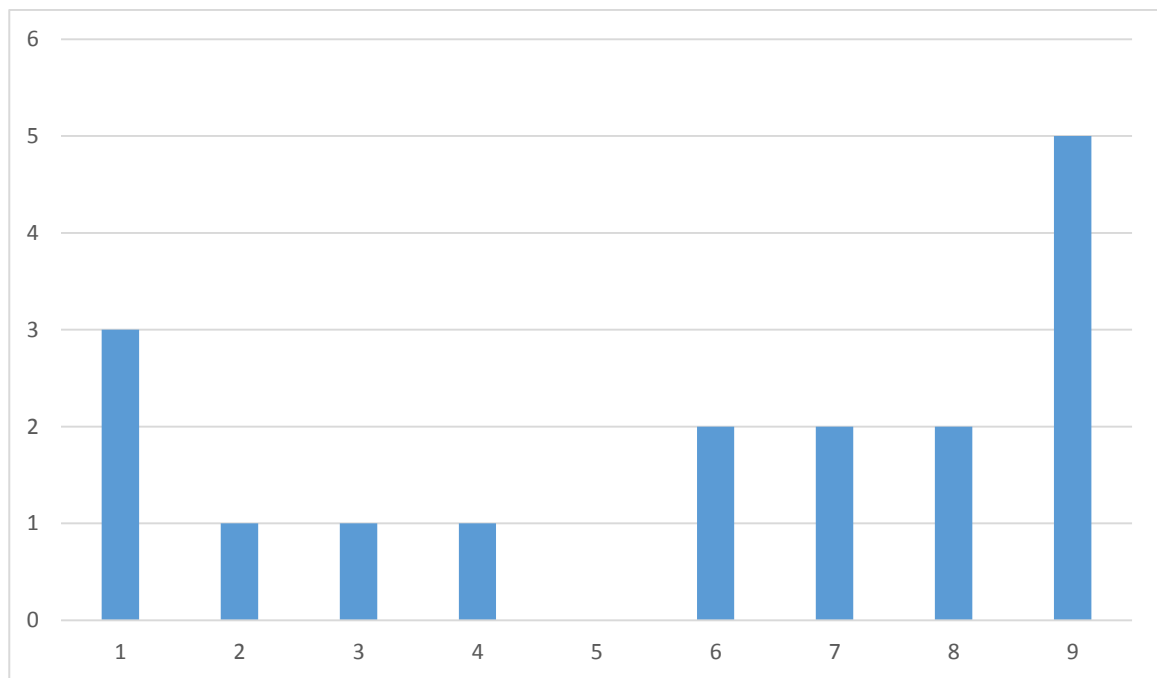
Following the prototypical structure of explicit instruction proposed by Archer and Hughes, each lesson was structured in the following order: (1) opening (state the goal of the lesson, review prerequisite skills/knowledge, discuss relevance, and link new content to previous content), (2) body (model, prompt, check, and present examples), (3) closing (review, preview and group practice), and (4) practice (independent practice). The course was delivered in two principal modes: lecture and discussion of case studies. The main theories and concepts were introduced and case studies relevant to the theories were presented in the form of video or text and then analyzed. Case studies were compared to a possible encounter in the local culture. Through analysis of case studies and comparison, students were to understand cultural values of others and their own. Class activities also included group discussion as well as independent work.

There is a strong link between culture and interculturality. To this extent, Bugnone & Capasso (2016) dedicate an article focusing on interculturality and how to apply it in second language teaching and learning contexts. The need to consider what makes each culture unique and to presume the possibility of democratic coexistence underpins interculturality, while the "other" reflects an otherness that is neither assimilable nor unifiable, but is submerged in its own historical state as a topic of enunciation (p. 681). Additionally, they mention interculturality entails, on the one hand, democratic coexistence between national groups and cultures, acceptance of differences and equality of rights, tolerance for differences and their integration without nullification, and on the other, respect for differences and their integration without nullification. On the other hand, Pasterick (2015) defines this concept as "a complex process in which people from various cultures engage in order to learn about and challenge their own and each other's cultures. This can result in cultural change over time". Also, she continues emphasizing that language and culture are inextricably related, and that effective and adequate intercultural interactions necessitates critical knowledge of other cultures as well as one's own (p. 18). However, Zárte in his article focuses on how interculturality has been used by dominant groups as a means to assimilate local minority cultures. To start, Zárte (2014) states that "there is no specific concept of interculturality, to the point that its definition remains abstract, since many intellectuals from the

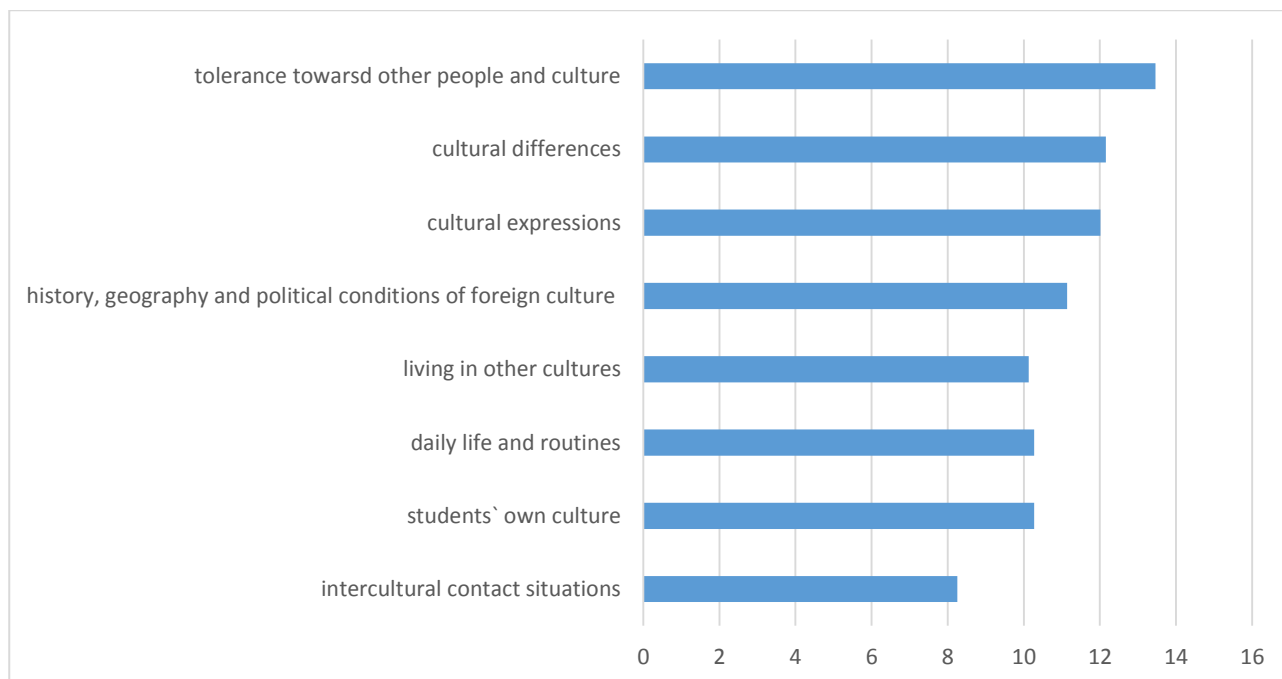
Eurocentric perspective, have reconceptualized this term. In this way, dominant cultures use interculturality as a means for cultural homogenization” (p. 5). Interculturality is the dialogue between cultures, enrichment and mutual synthesis where identities of origin are deeply lost. This concept reflects cultural homogenization. Regarding cultural synthesis, the author explains that this implies a mixture in which diversity is lost with the consequent homogenization of identities of origin (Zárte, 2014). In other words, if people of local cultures rebuild their personal and cultural identity according to the Western model, they lose their being, their essence and their sense of belonging. Additionally, interculturality starts from a dynamic conception of culture in which there are no hierarchies between cultures or peoples; cultures are open and capable of mingling. Interculturality is the interaction between cultures, exchange and communication, where the individual recognizes and reciprocally accepts the culture of the other. However, this perception is unreal. No cultural relationship has been egalitarian; historically, always one of the cultures ended up imposing on the other or others. Generally, it ends up dominating the one who possesses the greatest economic or military power (Zárte, 2014).

The data collection process was carried out using video recordings from the interviews complemented by transcripts, students and teachers answers of the questionnaire and field notes of the observations supported by video recordings. These instruments were implemented in a virtual environment during English classes, in which students could share their ideas and opinions about culture and ICC. Therefore, the implementation of this instrument guides us to describe some ideas, perceptions and thoughts about the importance of ICC. Also, this guides us to obtain ideas based on our conceptual framework and get some directions for data analysis.

As stated before, we opted for a mixed-method approach, the following being the quantitative part that compiled data from the students through the use of questionnaires. There was a total of 17 participants from two different English classes from the fifth semester.



Most students gave a higher importance when it came to more practical topics (history, geography) with 29.4% of them giving these a high score. When asked about the topic of daily routines, there was a small increase with 32.2% of students giving a high score to the statement. However, when it came to more subjective information such as values and beliefs, it stayed, with 23.6% of respondents giving it a high score. Afterwards we decided to measure the individual importance when it came to cultural expressions from each student regarding music, literature, theater and film among others.



In addition, students were asked about the amount of time that was devoted to language and culture teaching in their English class, to which a fairly high percentage of students agreed that at least 60% of class time was devoted to language teaching and a 40% to culture teaching, a somewhat balanced number. Others considered that it was 50% - 50% on both with 23.5% of the students, while 29.4% thought that it was less balanced with 80% dedicated to language teaching leaving only a 20% to culture teaching and a surprisingly 5.9% of the students considered the classes to be 100% language teaching with no room for cultural teaching. By adding the percentages, we found that most students (a majority of 64.7%) find the lessons to be balanced when it comes to culture and language teaching.

**Conclusion.** The aim of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of providing intercultural information in English as a foreign language context on learners' attitudes and the impact of the attitudes on their overall need's analysis. The results of this research indicated that learners in experimental group which received additional intercultural text and activities outperformed control group. The findings of this study have some implications for teachers since they would be aware of the positive impact of intercultural communicative instruction in intermediate level. In addition, they will know different techniques for application of these instructions especially in classroom context. Moreover, the results of this research can have implications for material developers help them design tasks to provide opportunities for focus on the most effective approach. However, there are certain delimitations in this study. First, this study is limited to intermediate level. There can be more in investigations for elementary and advanced levels of proficiency to infer some generalizations. Second, in this study only one form of activities related to the intercultural competence were used.

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