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Intercultural Communicative Competence: In-Service EFL Teachers Building Understanding Through Study Groups

Competencia comunicativa intercultural: profesores de inglés como lengua extranjera en servicio construyendo entendimiento a través de grupos de estudio

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This paper reports on an exploratory collective case study on three in-service English language teachers in Medellín, Colombia. The study aimed at creating a route for teachers to collaboratively construct their understanding of intercultural communicative competence through their involvement in a study group. Data were collected through recordings, interviews, and reflective logs, which followed a bottom-up analysis. Results evidenced changes in the participants' views of culture, cross-cultural knowledge, intercultural stance, and understanding of intercultural communicative competence. As a conclusion, study groups materialized as an applicable tool for teachers' professional development, which allowed participants to redraw their own initial beliefs and assumptions, fostering them to change professionally and in their praxis.

Key words: Culture, English as foreign language, inservice teacher education, intercultural communicative competence, study groups.

Este documento reporta un estudio de caso colectivo exploratorio en tres maestros de inglés en Medellín, Colombia. El estudio apuntó a crear una ruta para que los maestros construyeran colaborativamente su comprensión de la competencia comunicativa intercultural a través de un grupo de estudio. Los datos recopilados incluyen grabaciones, entrevistas y registros reflexivos, que siguieron un análisis de datos ascendente. Los resultados evidenciaron cambios en las visiones de los participantes sobre la cultura, su conocimiento y postura intercultural, y su entendimiento de la competencia comunicativa intercultural. Como conclusión, el grupo de estudio se materializó como una herramienta aplicable para el desarrollo profesional docente, permitiendo a los participantes redibujar sus propias creencias y suposiciones, fomentándolos a cambiar profesionalmente y en su praxis.

Palabras clave: competencia comunicativa intercultural, cultura, formación del profesorado en servicio, grupos de estudio, inglés como lengua extranjera.

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Introduction

Day after day, language teachers are shifting towards the recognition of the role of culture and its close relationship with language as “an inseparable part of the way in which we live our lives and the way we use language” (Liddicoat, 2002, p. 47). From an intercultural perspective, this shift has turned foreign language classrooms into places of cultural juncture, where the focus does not merely lie on developing linguistic ability in the target language, but “on the impact cultural values, beliefs, perceptions, and social relationship patterns have on the relational experience that results from interaction between people as it occurs within a cultural context” (Smith, Paige, & Steglitz, 2003, p. 90).

Consequently, as a response to this existing relationship, as well as the social and cultural implications of such intercultural encounters in language teaching and learning, the concept of intercultural communicative competence (henceforth ICC) emerged. This competence is defined as the attitudes, knowledge, understanding, and skills, which enable people to

understand and respect people who are perceived to have different cultural affiliations from oneself; respond appropriately, effectively and respectfully when interacting and communicating with such people; establish positive and constructive relationships with such people; and understand oneself and one's own multiple cultural affiliations through encounters with cultural “difference”. (Huber & Reynolds, 2014, pp. 16-17)

ICC represents a shift that has reinforced the assumption that culture is rooted and embedded in language (Kramsch, 2009; Liddicoat, 2002). Moreover, it represents opening new possibilities for learners towards cultural values, beliefs, perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors of those who represent other cultural milieus, aimed at fostering effective interactions among cultures, based on respect for individuals' dignity and equality as the democratic basis for social interaction in a globalized world (Byram, Gribkova, & Starkey,

2002). Finally, it encompasses more than just developing linguistic competences or grasping notional aspects of foreign cultures. In fact, being able to cope with intercultural experiences relates to certain specific competencies and characteristics, namely,

The willingness to engage with the foreign culture, self-awareness and the ability to look upon oneself from the outside, the ability to see the world through the others' eyes, the ability to cope with uncertainty, the ability to act as a cultural mediator, the ability to evaluate others' points of view, the ability to consciously use culture learning skills and to read the cultural context, and the understanding that individuals cannot be reduced to their collective identities (Gupta as cited in Sercu, 2005, p. 2).

Given the aforementioned, the emergence of this approach has led ministers of education, policy makers, language scholars, and publishing houses to initiate actions. Thus, top-down perspectives on ICC have provided frameworks that emphasize the cultural dimension in language curriculum which, in turn, has reverberated into thousands of new teaching materials and textbooks portraying high amounts of cultural contents within them. However, from a bottom-up perspective (emerging from the classroom itself), “the impact of this [intercultural] shift on the micro-level of planning, materials, and assessment design, as well as on classroom practices, remains unclear” (Díaz, 2013, p. 14). These new educational perspectives lead in-service language teachers to face important epistemological and methodological questions, which inevitably affect teachers in different ways based on the specific needs and purposes of the students they are teaching, as well as the inner characteristics of the context in which their teaching takes place (Kramsch, 2009).

Therefore, fostering ICC from a bottom-up perspective requires special support and scaffolding for in-service language teachers. However, teachers' professional development programs seem to weaken, as opportunities for further training are scarce.

EFL Teachers' Professional Development and the Colombian ELT Context

English language teaching (ELT) is experiencing massive changes in the way language teaching is carried out in an increasingly multicultural world, as well as the role teachers play within it. Particularly in Colombia, teachers need to cope with changing teaching contexts and settings, employ new methodologies and approaches, make more effective use of technology applied to the classroom, and find new ways to enhance students' learning. These constant demands imply a need for teachers to continuously undergo professional development processes to face the challenges of the 21st century. However, when seeking opportunities for professional growth, in-service teachers often observe a disconcerting scenario. González (as cited in González, 2007) states that "the professional development of EFL [English as a foreign language] teachers through in-service programs in Colombia was, until recently, restricted to limited options" (p. 321). According to her, EFL teachers had to rely on a threesome of options including undergraduate course, ELT conferences, and publisher sessions which, although available, did not offer a complete alternative for teachers' professional growth (González, 2007).

Moreover, concerning the intercultural dimension in language teaching, in-service teachers have to face even more setbacks. For instance, teachers have scarce opportunities for interchanges or stays abroad to get experiential knowledge in the target culture (Barletta, 2009). In addition, center-based international agencies, which provide language institutions with textbooks and materials for language teaching, often provide teachers with workshops as an option for professional development. However, they implicitly follow an instrumental approach that makes "the teacher [become] a technician who applies best practices created by foreign experts, which are supposed to yield results when following a determined sequence of steps in a defined period"

(Granados-Beltrán, 2016, p. 177). Finally, given the teacher's lack of familiarity concerning culture in language teaching, teachers are required to gain knowledge and perspectives from other disciplines like anthropology, sociology, history, and so on, to be able to discuss culture (Barletta, 2009). These informed perspectives are especially relevant when aiming for intercultural understanding; however, opportunities to access this kind of knowledge are scarce, which makes teachers mistakenly rely on their own crafted and often biased perspectives, views, and assumptions about culture and language; as well as on textbooks or personal experiences as their only point of reference.

Considering the multiple difficulties in-service teachers have to face, there is a call for teachers to explore alternative ways to continue their professional development, and at the same time, to seek ways to make ICC become an integral part of their own language teaching experience.

Study Group as a Professional Development Tool

This study implied the necessity to integrate both the collaborative effort of participants to rethink their perceptions and beliefs, as well as to integrate reflection through dialogue towards the development of an understanding of ICC in ELT. Therefore, study groups emerged as an appropriate approach to create this dialectical *mise en place*.

Birchak et al. (1998) define a study group as an assembly in which teachers could share their insights about particular needs and discuss their own agendas, independently from the imposed agendas of experts and institutional professional development programs. Moreover, it provides teachers with a shared space that fosters the recognition of collaborative dialogue as a way to reflect upon, plan, and act on particular issues and concerns. Finally, it represents a tool that empowers teachers to become experts and coordinators of their own professional growth as they thoughtfully analyze their

own beliefs and practices, explore alternative possibilities, and take over their own professional journeys.

Concerning its validity for this study, study groups have been used at an international level to build communities through dialogue and action with in-service English teachers towards fostering intercultural understanding (see Corapi & Short, 2015). However, at a national level, the analysis of literature did not yield studies in which study groups had been used regarding ICC with in-service language teachers, which just extends the already existing research gap. In fact, most of the studies carried out in the Colombian EFL context tend to either explore perceptions and attitudes towards culture and ICC, or to analyze how ICC is developed after implementing specific intercultural components; predominantly in pre-service teachers and students (see Gómez, 2015; Olaya & Gómez, 2013; Ramos-Holguín, 2013).

Method

The scarce quantity of studies found evidences a gap regarding how in-service teachers explore and make sense of ICC in ELT. Therefore, this exploratory collective case study examines how in-service English teachers create a route to collaboratively construct their understanding of ICC through their involvement in a study group.

Research Design

Collective case study, which is defined as an instrumental study extended to several cases that might lead to better understanding, and perhaps better theorizing of further cases (Stake, 2005), seemed to be a suitable research methodology for this study because it allows one to collect in-depth views of participants' experiences. This might materialize the underpinning processes of in-service teachers as they construct their understanding of ICC in their teaching context, emerging from their own crafted collaborative endeavors e.g. knowledge that stands over the mainstream and often labor-oriented knowledge transmitted by institutions.

Participants

This study involved three Colombian in-service EFL teachers working at a binational language center. Selection of the participants followed a convenience sampling without inclusion criteria identified prior to the selection of subjects. Pseudonyms were used in order to preserve the participants' anonymity.

Table 1 illustrates participants' biodata including ages, level of education and degrees obtained, years of experience as EFL teachers, and intercultural experiences abroad.

Table 1. Demographic Information of Participants

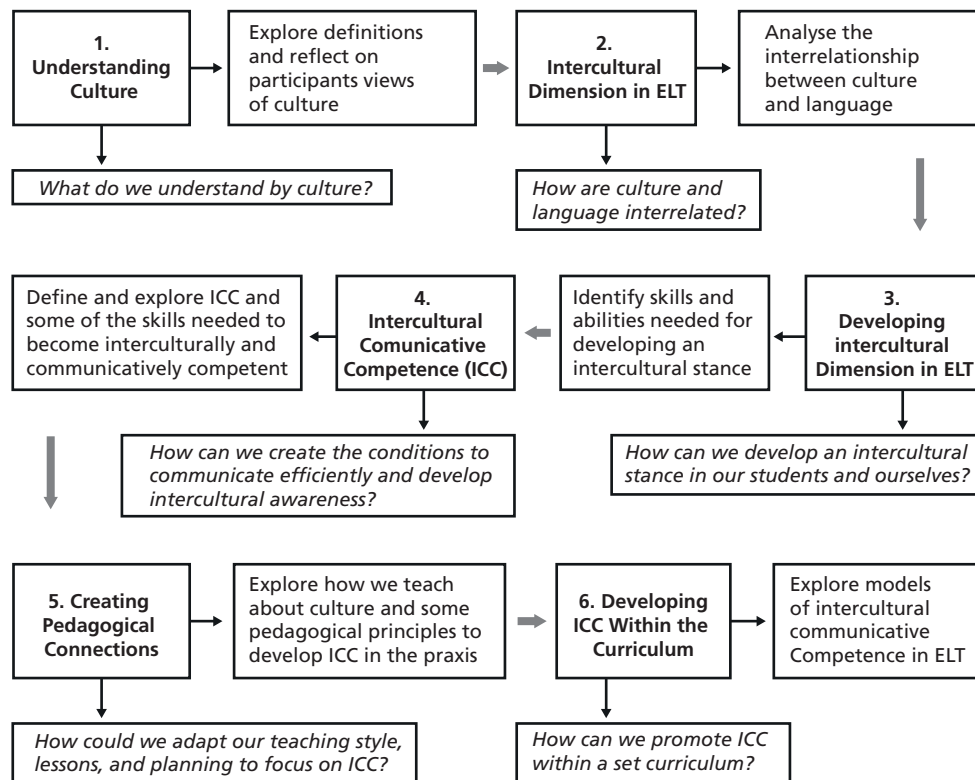
Name	Fer	Edna	Paula
Age	39 years old	45 years old	31 years old
Educational background	B.Ed. in teaching foreign languages, TEFL certification	B.Ed. in teaching foreign languages, bachelor's degree in communications	B.Ed. in teaching foreign languages
Teaching experience	18 years working in high schools and language institutes	15 years working in private elementary and high schools, and language institutes	5 years working in private/public high schools and language institutes
Experiences abroad	Two years in Czech Republic finishing a TEFL certification and working as a teacher of English and Spanish	None	Vacations in non-English speaking countries

Moreover, participants' educational backgrounds converged as they graduated from the same university, which allowed teachers to contrast different practices and experiences, as well as the kind of processes they went through in search of common grounds that could explain their beliefs and assumptions about culture and ICC, and how these are reflected in their praxes.

Methodological Route

The development of the study group involved six two-hour sessions between the participants and the researcher. These sessions were organized into specific topics, each one with its objectives and a guiding question to lead the discussions. The whole design of the study group can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Methodological Route of the Study Group



The sessions were designed to cover a theoretical, practical, and reflective part each. Initially, participants studied and analyzed concepts, notions, approaches, and perspectives taken from theory for the development of their constructed views of ICC. For instance, to name a few, Byram et al. (2002) and Scarino and Liddicoat (2009) were used to elucidate initial assumptions, concerns, and doubts when developing an intercultural stance, and to reflect on language education and their role as teachers

when considering the development of a professional stance towards ICC in ELT.

Secondly, teachers critically analyzed practices and materials used in classes to elucidate existent cultural assumptions and stereotypes. This exploration allowed teachers to perceive how these stereotypes were perpetuated in the materials and textbooks used, and eventually in the class plans based on them, as well as possible ways in which these materials could be

used to problematize such stereotypes and to address different perspectives.

Lastly, leading questions were used to create a reflective dialectical space for discussions around the basis of ICC in ELT. These discussions allowed participants to share, discuss, and reflect on their own experiences when teaching culture, the kind of approaches used, their encounters with difficult situations when teaching them, and the connection between both language and culture in their classes.

Research Instruments

For this study, the following data collection instruments were selected: (a) An initial face-to-face semi-structured interview (see Appendix A) to explore participants' initial assumptions on culture and ICC in ELT; (b) recordings of six two-hour study group sessions held once a week, to analyze how participants collaboratively constructed their understanding of ICC; (c) reflective logs (see Appendix B) collected after each session with participants' insights and reflections to explore over time the inner changes in their understanding of ICC; and (d) a subsequent semi-structured face-to-face interview (see Appendix C) to explore later changes in the participants' understanding of ICC once all study group sessions were finished.

All data collection instruments, except the reflective logs, were audiotaped, transcribed verbatim, and saved in files. Interviews were conducted in English or Spanish according to the participants' preferences. Study group sessions were conducted in Spanish to encourage a trusting environment that enhanced dialogue. Reflective logs were written in English most of the time.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a bottom-up approach that involved organizing and preparing data for analysis, reading through all data to get a general sense of the information, coding, creating categories for analysis, interrelating them, and finally interpreting the meaning

of those categories (Creswell, 2014). The whole data analysis process was undertaken using ATLAS.ti (ver. 8).

Concerning validity in the data analysis, data collection instruments were piloted by two colleagues who kindly provided thoughtful feedback on the response consistency and reliability. Moreover, recordings of the interviews and study group sessions, plus the reflective logs helped to achieve trustworthiness through triangulation, as it made possible the finding of patterns among the data collected. In addition, data analysis was revised by an external advisor who acknowledged the relationships established among the data as coherent. Finally, findings were validated through member checking to give participants an opportunity to provide their insights on the results.

Results and Discussion

Data analysis showed that the study group provided an opportunity for participants to foster their professional development by scaffolding and supporting each other in the construction of a more informed view of ICC. Due to this fostering, teachers could acknowledge the importance of moving beyond unfounded views of culture, increasing their cross-cultural knowledge, building bridges between such knowledge and their students, developing an intercultural stance in their students and selves, and understanding ICC as a whole rather than as an isolated curricular element. In the following paragraphs, these realizations are explained further.

Quotes are presented using the following codes: initial interview (In1), study group (SG) plus the session number, reflective log (RLog), and final interview (In2). All quotes were translated into English.

Teachers Moving Beyond Unfounded Views of Culture

Throughout the study group, one of the issues that fostered more discussions was teachers' views of culture and their ways of connecting them with their praxis.

Recognizing these views is paramount considering that teachers can think about culture in many ways; however, the way in which they think about it in their classes affects the way they teach culture and the way students learn it (Liddicoat, 2002).

Considering participants' initial views of culture all conceded the fact that teachers possess a factual-based tourist-inspired view of culture, which constitutes information to transmit to learners about one's country, the particular ways in which its people act and behave, and its distinctive elements.

I see culture as something very innate of every people, of every country, like customs or food, something that they [students] can learn if they want to travel for example, they could know about what possible problems they can face there. (Paula, In1)

Moreover, when exploring the way teachers connected their views of culture with their praxis, they often used cultural concepts with which to start classes (as a warm-up), to elucidate prior knowledge, and entertainingly to enhance class atmosphere or to contrast different behaviors from other cultures and ours. However, this goes far from the seriousness of the topic and puts other cultures in a hilarious light, a view of the difference that does not motivate acceptance, but discrimination, mockery, and lack of appreciation.

Furthermore, teachers agreed that they mainly focused their classes towards developing communicative competence in their students as culture becomes just the starting point to go to a more linguistic objective. Notwithstanding, whatever the way culture might be used inside the classroom, it accords with both teachers' former experiences and lack of consensus on how to address culture:

We teach culture in the way we teach it because it was the way we implicitly learned to teach it. (Fer, SG2)

This lack of specificity and connection on how to address culture was evident in the participants, as we could perceive that they followed an empirical and

uninformed factual-based view of culture. Thus, there is no way to expect teachers to implicitly know how to address culture differently as they have not been shown other ways to address it. This evidences a recurrent teachers' lack of knowledge about culture and the techniques needed to teach it (Lafayette, 2003).

Moreover, the value of addressing culture in classes is not clearly seen by teachers who sometimes are concerned about the underlying reason. This concern appeared throughout the study group related to the way teachers connected culture with language teaching and their institutional duties. For instance, one teacher made this point clear by expressing his concerns on why they have to address culture:

What about that [culture]? Is that really there? Our institution has never told us to put an emphasis on this; however, you know you have to develop the communicative skills in the students. Do it no matter how, if you want to do it with this culture, that's OK, so culture in our context is really secondary, it is not an objective to teach about this or that other culture. (Fer, SG2)

This extract evidences an inner conflict experienced by the teachers who, permeated by mainstream communicative-oriented views they have traditionally followed, face the demand of including their own unfounded views of culture in their classes. Concerning this conflict, Lange and Paige (2003) acknowledge culture as complex and varying, with underlying elements such as attitudes, beliefs, perceptions, ways of acting and behaving, thoughts, and values that "cannot be included in language programs in the linear and objective instructional formats that have traditionally been used" (p. 11). Therefore, teachers find themselves faced with a dichotomy, facing culture as an element that demands a more significant role in their classes, but at the same time unable to connect this demand methodologically.

Additionally, teachers recognized that putting culture in a more central role takes learning not just far beyond their own experience, knowledge, and interest, but also takes the class away from the demanded focus

on linguistic/communicative objectives, which might entail concerns in terms of their teaching duties: “You lose the focus they pay you for” (Fer, SG1).

Teachers considered that having an intercultural-oriented perspective in classes actually diverts them from achieving the required linguistic-oriented objectives. In this sense, teachers are worried about doing something different from what they have been hired for. This posture occurs mainly because they are constantly under pressure due to their labor conditions (in order to keep their jobs, they need to comply with what institutions demand), and their own beliefs about their teaching practices (teachers consider they are doing well when achieving the goals set in the way they have traditionally achieved them).

Finally, on a personal level, teachers experienced an additional inner conflict when reflecting on the actual benefit of learning about culture:

The fact that you know all those concepts of other cultures doesn't touch you, you don't change, you don't feel affected, you don't feel responsible for anything...in Greece, making this gesture is an insult...ahh well, that is, it doesn't transform us, it doesn't convert us, it doesn't do anything to us. (Fer, SG2)

This defiant reaction towards learning about culture has its root in the participants' own views of it, as teachers perceived cultural knowledge as a set of knowledgeable items to keep and transmit to their students. Culture as mere concepts just leads teachers to keep a vast amount of factual information without any subsequent connection or outcome; thus, not representing a significant change in themselves either as individuals or as teachers.

However, as the sessions went on, teachers acknowledged that culture, from an intercultural perspective, implies a transformation of views, attitudes, values, and perspectives on the teacher's behalf towards a total redrawing of their view of culture and its role in language teaching. Thus, moving from a factual, unspecific, entertaining, subordinated to linguistic goals, and unfounded understanding of culture, to then acknowledge it as

The context and content of communication in any form, the link to any discipline, the opportunity to contrast and compare cultures and cultural contexts, and the most authentic way to connect the individual language learner to the broader target language community. (Lange & Paige, 2003, p. xi)

These realizations guided teachers to overcome ethnocentric stages in their development of intercultural sensitivity and to rethink the way they have traditionally conceived language teaching and culture.

We do not teach culture so that students are evaluated regarding what they know about a specific culture, but so that an understanding arises within the relation between that culture and ours, in a more personal visualization. (Paula, RLog)

The intentionality behind this is to reach the point where there is a transformation in the students; that students understand things are not like that just because, or that they are not objects of ridicule, or cliché objects, or stereotypes against others. There is something beyond, and there are many positive things that can be rescued, many relationships that can be made. (Edna, RLog)

Teachers Increasing Their Cross-Cultural Knowledge

Another main setback teachers expressed in the study group was their lack of knowledge concerning culture and culture teaching, as illustrated in the following extract:

That is the vision we have of culture, very broad things...so broad that it is very difficult to handle it, we are not able to have a broad knowledge of that because it is impossible, we are not from there, we do not live there, we have never been there, and we pretend to teach that...and we do not only pretend it, we are also forced to! (Fer, SG1)

This lack of cross-cultural knowledge does not only make teachers feel unprepared when dealing with the concept of culture, as they consider themselves not very well acquainted with the target culture they have to teach about, but also overwhelmed, as they feel they are forced to cope with the institutional demands concerning

culture teaching. These feelings usually make teachers see themselves “frequently overcome by the enormity of the task they have undertaken” (Damen, 2003, p. 73).

Moreover, far from being an unpleasant situation that affects teachers’ confidence in their teaching, this lack of cross-cultural knowledge is strengthened as teachers recognized that the sources of information they have to learn about culture are neither reliable nor complete.

We find support in documentaries, magazines, books, and those things, but the sources that we have to teach culture do not show us everything. (Paula, SG1)

We don’t often have access to deep cultural knowledge, just what we find online. (Edna, SG1)

Concerning the sources, the participants agreed that movies were the main repository of cross-cultural information regarding other cultures. As an example, one teacher described a scene of a movie in which a person was alone in a hospital after suffering an accident. She contrasted it with the way families are supportive in Colombia, given that in a similar situation the hospital room would be full of people accompanying the victim. Although this might work as an anecdote or a cultural curiosity, this reflects the way teachers, in their haste to contextualize class topics, resort to sources that might not be very reliable. The fact that movies portray such situations does not guarantee that they are real for every case, or that they reflect deeper cultural values of families and medical staff attitudes towards patients. Relying on biased sources of cross-cultural knowledge leads teachers to misunderstand and often assume that what they see is actually what happens, which leads them to perpetuate and transmit stereotypes and wrong assumptions.

However, concerning this lack of knowledge, Byram et al. (2002) are clear when clarifying that teachers do not necessarily need to know everything about the target culture. According to them,

This is in any case impossible and in fact there are many cultures associated with a particular language, for example many countries

where French is spoken as the first language, and within those countries many variations on beliefs, values and behaviours which people share, in other words many cultures. (p. 14)

One of the conclusions teachers drew about their lack of cross-cultural knowledge is the necessity of getting more informed about the target culture. Thus, rather than feeling overwhelmed or frustrated due to their lack of cross-cultural knowledge, teachers need to become aware of the importance of being acquainted with further knowledge which will allow them to take informed decisions about the topics to explore and to increase the scope of such exploration in class.

I definitely need to be more informed about other cultures...I need to read more, so I can have nice arguments or knowledge to help my students to tremble stereotypes. (Fer, In2)

Finally, in the case of constructing a view of ICC in ELT, further cross-cultural knowledge needs to go alongside reflection, analysis, and self-assessment of teachers’ own practices, aiming at a reinterpretation of our role of teachers from being knowledge givers to becoming cultural mentors and figures of guidance and support in the students’ cultural exploration.

The teacher’s role as a cultural mentor must not be as the purveyor of the good, the true, and the believable, but rather as a trainer in the development of sensitivity to cross-cultural differences, of social skills in communicating across cultural patterns and appropriate behavior as lifetime pursuits. (Damen, 2003, p. 84).

Teachers Building Bridges Linking ICC, Students, and Praxis

A further concern among teachers had to do with the way teachers should address ICC in their classes with their students, particularly less proficient ones, as illustrated in the following extract:

We teachers are not willing to deal with deep cultural concepts due to the level of the course. Apparently, we think beginner students might not be ready to deal with a cultural approach in class. (Edna, RLog)

This extract portrays a common assumption concerning the required proficiency to develop ICC, which assumes that students might not have the necessary level of proficiency for cultural analysis. However, this assumption is a reductionist view of the students' capacities that many teachers accept, mainly because of the implicit connection they make between linguistic and communicative implications, and the cross-cultural knowledge required to do it properly.

To discuss those things [cultural concepts] you have to be with advanced courses. (Edna, SG1)

Because suddenly you think they [the students] are not capable. (Paula, SG2)

The assumption that students are not capable of understanding cultural concepts led teachers to avoid certain cultural issues in their classes until their students were ready to address them. However, this also evidenced the lack of methodological strategies teachers had when dealing with culture teaching, the heavy influence of language proficiency and standardization cannons that those learning about culture still suffer, and the difficulty to incorporate cultural topics that might be quite vast in class regardless their students' level.

This assumption was discussed thoroughly in an effort to bring clarity to the way ICC can be addressed regardless of the students' level. One conclusion teachers drew was that more than waiting for students to reach the necessary level, teachers must find the adequate strategies to build bridges between what students can understand and produce, and the complexity of the topics they are working on. Thus, based on those discussions, participants acknowledged that an intercultural and critical approach to the themes available in the curriculum could help to build such bridges.

According to Byram et al. (2002), "the key principle is to get learners to compare the theme in a familiar situation with examples from an unfamiliar context" (p. 21). In this sense, themes such as sports, which is

usually worked in beginner courses, can serve to build bridges by taking a different approach towards more critical issues, for instance:

Gender – are there sports that are . . . predominantly played by men or by women? Are things changing? . . . Age – are there sports for younger people and older people? Region – are there local sports? Do people . . . identify with local teams? . . . Religion – are there religious objections to playing sport . . . Racism – . . . are the players of foreign teams, or foreign players in local teams always treated with respect? (Byram et al., 2002, p. 21)

An example of these suggestions can be seen in the following extract, in which one teacher shared how she developed ICC in one of her classes:

As part of my class [level A2 of CEFR], I developed an activity in which my students watched two video clips. The first told the story of a Maasai girl in Africa. This video narrated her lifestyle, where she lives, the conditions in which she lives, her daily activities, etc., giving a sample of her daily life. Then, I used a similar video but about an American teenager. In the beginning, a discussion was held aiming at seeing different prior knowledge about both cultures and to discern some stereotypes students bring up with them. The idea was to compare both lives and look at that dialogue between them, their opinions on the subject, and what they know about those cultures. Students made a comparative chart in pairs, then shared the information orally with other groups. (Edna, SG5)

In her class, she used these two videos to create a comparison between the daily routines in two different countries, which portrayed different ways of living. These examples represented a dynamic view of culture (Liddicoat, 2002) as it represents non-set patterns and kinds of activities performed by people in particular cultural milieus. Thus, far from just making students contrast different daily routines to present it orally in class (linguistic/communicative outcome), she used the videos to raise awareness as to the different conditions in which people live—their lives, possessions, feelings, reactions, and so on—to eventually reflect on the students' own ways of living their daily lives.

Moreover, the fact that those students were low proficient ones did not delimit the prior knowledge, experiences, and learnings they possessed, which actually strengthened the discussions within the classes:

Many students come to class with many significant experiences and knowledge that one does not possess, and this takes classes to places that one had not explored before. (Paula, SG5)

Teachers realized the importance of using students' prior knowledge as a source of discussion and analysis, which might include general knowledge (formal and informal), experiences, and understandings that can complement the class. By drawing on the students' backgrounds, teachers can promote cooperative learning and group work with inquiry-oriented purposes, moving from teacher-centered to student-centered learning, as should concern the classroom (Lafayette, 2003).

Teachers Developing an Intercultural Stance on Their Students and Selves

Teachers were also worried about the way they can deal with different students' susceptibilities and their negative reactions towards cultural issues and controversial topics in the classes. The following extracts illustrate this point:

Sometimes there is one or some students that, depending on the person, feel a bit awkward in classes, so one says: "well, if I touch this topic maybe it can be hot and it can hurt the person, or the person may not feel comfortable". (Edna, In1)

Specifically, when you have to teach on which people have certain opinion or conceptions about other cultures, for example, people say that Asian people like to eat dogs. So, let's suppose I am in class dealing with food around the world, so they would immediately say: "hey, I don't like this class because they kill dogs and eat them!" And stuff like that, so that is more or less what I have to deal with. (Fer, SG3)

This fear appears to stem from the teachers' unwillingness to find themselves in the spotlight, having a negative image among their students as the inciters of

uncomfortable conversations in class; an image that might represent problems in case they need to face or deal with complaints from susceptible students.

Moreover, in terms of praxis, this fear usually leads teachers to make decisions on how to deal with certain cultural topics in their classes. On the one hand, they can very well teach different cultural topics in a shallow manner to avoid susceptibilities but presenting students with reductionist views of such cultural topics. On the other hand, they could take the risk of going deeper and exploring underlying controversial issues, but possibly affecting students' susceptibilities.

When faced with this dichotomy, teachers tend to prefer avoiding controversial issues because they judge this will prevent uncomfortable situations or the students' negative attitudes towards the lessons. However, bearing in mind that students are constantly exposed to biased mainstream views, the teachers, by not addressing controversial issues appropriately, can predict students' susceptibilities may be accentuated.

Sometimes the disposition of students is not inviting, because sometimes some students seem not to pay much attention or are only focused on seeing what happens in the rich countries, but what happens in poor countries, for example, like that ill-fated lifestyle, obviously not. We have the idea of comparing and taking a neutral position, but that seems to me that it depends on the disposition, because there are some who are not used to that kind of topics, they are only accustomed to grammar or to see the topics in a very shallow way, but not to see beyond. (Edna, In1)

In this extract, we can see that teachers perceive students as unwilling to explore other cultural views because they have been permeated by touristy visions of cosmopolitan cities and rich countries. According to the teachers, these visions have made students grow up with a view of the North-American culture as a symbol of prestige (enthronization of culture), whereas the culture of developing countries and minority communities are viewed as inferior or undeveloped. This reflects a serious issue that might lead students to emphasize negative

aspects about other cultures, rather than emphasizing the values and facts that might enrich the student's learning process. This pejorative way of contrasting is what perpetuates stereotypes of other cultures.

It seems that dealing with students' perceptions and reactions towards cultural issues that might be difficult to understand is a challenging task, as certain students might find it hard to perceive different perspectives and points of view, evidencing a difficulty to move from an ethnocentric stage to an ethnorelative one in the development of an intercultural stance (Bennett, Bennett, & Allen, 2003).

This particular issue led the study group to explore how different worldviews have permeated students' beliefs and understanding of cultural concepts seen in classes. From such exploration, one of the conclusions is the fact that students' stereotypes and prejudices are based mostly on feelings rather than thoughts (Byram et al., 2002).

Concerning this realization, one teacher shared an experience connected to her veganism, which illustrates how avoiding generalizations opens the gate for further understanding and possibilities in interaction. She told us that once she was buying some groceries, including some nuts and other products. Apparently, some people asked her about such products and she mentioned she was vegan. She was shocked when the people asked, "What illness do you have?" They judged her veganism as if she were sick, rather than understanding that her veganism made up part of her eating habits.

This example took us to reflect on how understanding becomes key in the process of developing an intercultural stance. It is not just a matter of understanding that the person is vegan, her reasons, decisions, experiences, and beliefs which have made her follow veganism, but also understanding why I am not vegan, what were my own reasons, decisions, experiences, and beliefs which have made me not to be vegan and to interpret vegans as sick people. This realization might lead students to *savoir comprendre* that there are different ways of acting,

living, and expressing as they vary from culture to culture (Byram & Zarate, 1994). Thus, and more importantly in terms of teaching practice, this realization represents

a unique opportunity to broaden the horizons of our students, to help them better understand themselves, and in so doing help them understand others. Or maybe it should be the other way around, help them understand others and in so doing help them better understand themselves. (Lafayette, 2003, p. 61)

Teachers' Understanding of ICC From a Part to a Whole

A last concern teachers expressed dealt with the way they connect the aims of ICC with the curriculum. In this regard, they mentioned the necessity of achieving the requirements expressed in the institution's curriculum as the core of their practice. However, when asked about how to develop ICC in their classes within such curriculum, they were hesitant about the time required:

You lose time because you need to develop what is there, not those other elements. That is not an objective but a tool. If one is left to analyze all these things, there is no time left to develop what one is told to teach. And the most terrible thing is that students say, "here is this teacher, we talk very nicely with him, but you don't learn anything." The thing is that for many students, the "I did not learn any English" is to get into things of the language, for example, a lot of vocabulary, structures, and things like that, more punctual things of the language. (Fer, SG5)

Teachers acknowledged that developing ICC in their classes entails time to analyze and reflect upon decisions to be taken in terms of knowledge, materials, and ways of addressing them alongside the curriculum they must follow. However, when counting the time necessary for doing so in comparison with other requirements teacher need to fulfill in their courses, it seemed that developing ICC outnumbers the time needed to cover the linguistic and communicative goals set within the curriculum, which are seen as the main objective to achieve. As a result, teachers considered culture not

as an objective to be achieved: "It is not our focus, our focus is more communicative" (Edna, SG2).

In addition, teachers reflected a certain fear about what their students might think concerning their teaching practices, as they might not consider them as effective or pertinent as they must be. Teachers expressed their concerns with the complaints and comments students might make if they devoted more class time to discussing cultural issues rather than providing linguistic elements to develop the communicative competence. In this order of ideas, teachers did not perceive the relationship between culture and language, and also, certain perpetuated beliefs from the communicative competence conceive a view of culture as an instrument with which to achieve objectives rather than the objective itself.

Moreover, there is a generalized assumption concerning the development of ICC in class. Apparently, ICC was not seen in its entirety but rather as sections to be covered in particular moments, illustrated as follows:

We were discussing in the course how the gun regulations here and in other countries allowed easy access to weapons, and as in some countries, violent situations like gunfights and attacks were commonly seen. We analyzed concepts and possible reasons behind it, for example, mental disorders, government, etc. However, as for the objective, I do not know if it was developed from a final product [writing task], I do not know if we developed what we have seen [ICC]. (Paula, SG5)

Teachers needed to dissociate the goals of the class in terms of linguistic goals and intercultural goals. Apparently, teachers thought that when the goal to be achieved was merely linguistics, the intercultural aspects were put aside and vice-versa. Teachers also considered that the development of an intercultural goal is not achieved as it is just explored during particular sections of the class rather than during the whole class as a linguistic goal. In this sense, teachers needed to change their view of the development process from a segmented view to a holistic one, where developing the intercultural dimension seems a whole rather than a part.

It should be considered how the development of intercultural communicative competence is not a part but a whole. Therefore, we still have to work on a more global and articulated vision of what the intercultural dimension represents for the classes. (Paula, RLog)

Conclusions

As a result of the teachers' involvement in the study group, the insights and experiences shared, the concepts studied, and the different analyses and reflections made, in-service teachers redrew their own initial views, beliefs, and assumptions in order to collaboratively build a self-crafted understanding of ICC in ELT, which fostered their change both professionally and in their praxis.

Moreover, their involvement in the study group encouraged teachers to defy their unfounded views of culture, ascribed in mainstream communicative-oriented views they have traditionally followed, and to move to a more intercultural communicative-oriented perception that leads them to meet the current educative, social, and cultural demands of an increasingly intertwined world. In addition, it helped teachers to raise awareness on the importance of increasing their cross-cultural knowledge in order to move from a factual, stereotyped set of knowledgeable items, to a more dynamic view of culture (Liddicoat, 2002). Besides, it changed teachers' unfounded assumptions in regard to their own students' development of ICC, raising awareness on the importance of finding the necessary methodological strategies to build bridges that foster such development. Furthermore, it helped teachers to recognize the importance of moving from an ethnocentric stance to a more ethno-relative one, aiming at generating greater intercultural sensitivity and the potential for further intercultural competence (Bennett, 2004). Finally, it empowered teachers to adopt a more informed stance towards ICC and the curriculum that considers culture as the core of language learning (Lange & Paige, 2003).

Considering the results obtained, one can say this paper calls for a reconsideration of the role study groups

can play as an applicable tool for teachers' professional development that might contribute to future endeavors in the realm of ELT and teacher training. The inclusion of study groups into formal training programs might contribute to filling the existing gap in light of the scarce approaches towards the development of ICC in EFL teachers. This reconsideration could help to propose tailored strategies and programs aimed at both pre-service and in-service teachers as well. In this order of ideas, study groups might become a suitable way to contribute in accordance with the current needs of our ELT context, which demands a more inclusive and holistic approach for the development of ICC in all English language teachers.

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Appendix A: Initial Teachers' Interviews

Teacher's profile	<ul style="list-style-type: none">· Personal information questions (age, nationality, educational background)· How long have you been teaching English as a foreign language?· How would you describe your teaching style?· Have you ever had experiences abroad?
Teacher's insights on culture in language teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none">· Can you tell me what your understanding of culture is in language teaching?· What kinds of cultural learning do you think is going on in your classroom?· What do you like to teach when you teach culture? Can you think of any examples?· Do you encounter any difficulties when it comes to teaching culture?· What do you think the purpose of teaching culture is?
Teacher's insights on ICC in language teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none">· Can you tell me what your understanding of ICC is?· To what extent does ICC, as you understand the concept, make up part of your daily lesson planning? Can you give me some example of what do you do in your classroom practice?· Have you met any difficulties when it comes to developing ICC?· When you carried out your undergraduate studies, did you have any courses that addressed the concept of teaching culture and/or ICC?· How familiar are you in regard to the foreign language curriculum used and the concept of ICC?

Appendix B: Reflective Log

Name:	Date:
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Reflective log – Study group

Description: What issues about theory were raised in this session?

Analysis: What sense can you make of the activities or discussions in today's group session?

Reflection: What have you learnt and what would you do differently in the future?

Evaluation: Is there anything you would like to work on/do differently next session?

Appendix C: Final Teachers' Interviews

Teacher's insights on culture in language teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none">· After your participation in the study group, what do you currently understand by culture?· Have your views on culture in language teaching changed? How have they changed?· Have you experienced something new when it comes to teaching culture?
Teacher's insights on ICC in language teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none">· After your participation in the study group, what do you currently understand about the ICC?· What has changed about you as a language teacher in your classes? (e.g., students' attitudes, kind of topics)· How are you currently developing the ICC in your classes? What kind of activities/tasks/materials are you currently using?· Have you met any difficulties when it comes to developing ICC?· To what extent do you think it is important to develop this competence in your classes? Why?· What is in store for you as a teacher after working on the ICC?
Teacher's experiences in the study group	<ul style="list-style-type: none">· What was your experience in the study group?· How did the study group contribute to your professional development?· What difficulties/challenges/changes did you experience?· What would you do differently concerning the study group?