



Intercultural Teaching in the EFL Classroom – the Polish Context

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ABSTRACT

The qualitative research reported in this article investigated whether and to what extent students' intercultural competence is developed in the English language classroom at the secondary education level in Poland. In interviews teachers demonstrated their positive attitudes toward intercultural teaching and decent knowledge of the issue. However, the teachers' narratives uncovered that they assigned the interculturality the secondary role, focusing on developing linguistic and sociolinguistic competences. The collected data revealed that students in class had very few opportunities to explore foreign cultures and compare/ contrast one culture with another. There was a lack of attention to teaching that promotes critical thinking skills among learners along with activities which foster them. However, there is insufficient evidence that teachers can currently do anything more, given the context in which they work, their constraints and lack of training and support. The findings of the current study have clear implications for curriculum designers, textbook writers and institutions in charge of teacher training - EFL syllabuses, teaching materials and teacher training should focus more on developing students' intercultural and critical thinking skills.

KEYWORDS: Interculturality; Intercultural communicative competence; Intercultural education; EFL teacher practices.

1. INTRODUCTION

Globalization, increased mobility and advanced internet technologies have rendered encounters with diverse cultures common. Our students are more likely to function in culturally pluralistic settings which often deviate from their familiar cultural scripts and are expected to perform well during intercultural exchanges. In such a new context, the long-established objectives of the English as a foreign language (EFL) education need to be re-considered and focus should shift toward preparing students for effective communication in culturally diverse

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contexts (Corbett, 2003), i.e., performing linguistically and (inter)culturally well in another language and culture. Interculturality needs to become a relevant aspect of students' communicative competence, integral to language teaching and learning (Galante, 2014). Learners should acquire principles of intercultural communication and skills, such as the ability to de-center, postpone judgment and mediate between culturally different individuals in order to be able to cope with diversity effectively (Byram, 1997).

This article will report on the research carried out at the secondary education level in Poland. The author will explore whether an intercultural approach has gained traction and to what extent teachers implement it into the classroom. Albeit a range of earlier studies examined interventions designed to facilitate L2 students' intercultural communicative competence (ICC) growth in educational settings (Alptekin, 2002; Baker, 2009, 2012; Dasli, 2011; Duff & Uchida, 1997; Guilherme, 2007; Lazaraton, 2003; Young, Sachdev & Seedhouse, 2009; Young & Sachdev, 2011), very few analyzed the issue in the Polish milieu. The few which did, investigated how a particular pedagogical intervention affected students' intercultural acumen and measured its effectiveness at lower/ higher educational levels or utilized different methodology (Bandura, 2007; Dziedziewicz, Gajda & Karwowski, 2014; Kusiak-Pisowacka, 2018; Róg, 2015; Sobkowiak, 2012; Sowa, 2014; Strugielska & Piątkowska, 2016). To fill this gap, this qualitative research sought to interview EFL teachers to explore what they do in the classroom to develop students' ICC, with a view to providing further insight to the field.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The present study is grounded within pedagogy which maintains that in order to communicate successfully an additional language an individual needs to acquire much more than a simple knowledge of grammar, i.e., a pre-defined set of syntactical, lexical, morphological and phonological units. This idea was conceived by Hymes (1966) in his model of communicative competence, and developed by Canale and Swain (1980) into a multi-faceted concept which entails grammatical, sociolinguistic, pragmatic and strategic competence. All those components are dynamic and can provide a foundation for designing foreign language courses. In the case of English, since currently interactions in this language are often intercultural in nature, the model has been expanded to include another element, i.e., intercultural competence (Krasnick, 1985). Accordingly, interculturality was considered a relevant facet of communicative competence to be covered in the L2 class (Galante, 2014; Nguyen, 2008; Scarino, 2010; Zhang & Zhou, 2019).

In short, ICC - an individual's language and intercultural competences combined, allows for communicating in an additional language with people from diverse cultural backgrounds in a way which suits a particular context while achieving the anticipated outcomes. To that end, students need to learn explicitly pragmatic and linguistic conventions of the L2 and become aware of the necessity to see culture as a pertinent element, dynamic and evolving (Yates, 2004). Furthermore, it is absolutely imperative that L2 users analyze critically both their own culture and other cultures, and explore alternative worldviews (Bennett, 2009), remembering that their thinking, acting, behaving and understanding is "culturally determined" and not "natural" (Byram, 2000: 9). Each time a person tries to comprehend the culturally diverse interlocutor he/ she interprets it from his/ her own cultural perspective. Since individuals' outlooks, values and thinking modes are frequently incomprehensible for each other, messages are not understood in accordance with the sender's intention (Risager, 2000; Kramersch, 2008).

Scholars explicate that meanings are "made and interpreted across and between languages and cultures", and are carriers of culture. For this reason, language learning should be deemed "an act of learning about the other and about the self and of the relationships which exist between self and other" (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013: 2). An intercultural perspective in teaching and learning transcends traditional culture learning which positions the learner externally to a culture and involves confronting or transforming the learner's existing identity, attitudes and practices in the course of his/ her engagement with (an) additional culture/s. To acquire intercultural proficiency, students need much more than to develop knowledge about a foreign culture - they should strive to examine critically the interrelationship between culture, language and communication (Baker, 2015; Pusch, 2004).

To survive in a culturally diverse environment learners need to develop critical thinking skills, since they are requisite for explorations of intercultural dynamics of contemporary communities (Bennett, 2013; Deardorff, 2009). Intercultural learning of an additional language is a process that helps learners develop, as Liddicoat et al. (2003: 46) wrote, "the procedural knowledge for recognizing, valuing and responding to linguistic and cultural variability through processes of inferring, comparing, interpreting, discussing and negotiating meaning in a nonjudgmental manner". In the same vein, it requires learning how to encode and decode verbal and nonverbal messages in the L2 into comprehensive meanings, tolerate ambiguity and adapt linguistic forms and behavior to specific functions, conventions, settings and interlocutors (Baxter, 1983; Jenkins, Cogo & Dewey, 2011). Clearly significant is the ability

to “mindfully manage anxiety and reduce uncertainty about oneself and the people with whom you are communicating” (Gudykunst, 1993: 37).

Research has revealed that deficiencies in ICC frequently translate into miscommunication. For example, Clennell (1999) found that students often misinterpreted a speaker’s pragmatic meaning in the messages conveyed. Albeit a participant understood what was being said to her, she wrongly thought her behavior was being criticized. Other students had problems with assessing whether the interlocutor was being rude to them or not. Basturkmen (2000) discovered that students in the UK could be perceived as impolite or critical because of problems with using indirect language. Similarly, Ellwood and Nakane (2009) showed how detrimental adapting an ethno-relative perspective and essentialist cultural stereotypes can be for intercultural communication. In their study, teachers in Australia misinterpreted their Japanese students’ silence as a sign of their being inarticulate and unexpressive. Similarly, the teachers considered the students unable to engage with classroom content, question authority or speak in a relaxed manner with them. The teachers seemed to be unaware of culture subjectivity and expected the Japanese students to adapt to local norms and never thought that classroom practices could be inhibiting the students. The aforementioned examples of misunderstandings prove that postulates that ICC should not be dealt with in isolation from other aspects of communication are well grounded (Baker, 2015).

Intercultural competence (IC) is broadly defined as a set of capabilities allowing an individual to communicate and behave appropriately and effectively in unfamiliar settings attributable to cultural context (Bennett, 2008; Deardorf, 2006; Lustig & Koester, 2006; Wiseman, 2003). A number of scholars (Brislin et al., 1986; Chen & Starosta, 1999; Gudykunst & Nishida, 1989; Martin, 1994) recognized that IC is multidimensional and constituted by three interrelated elements: cognition, behavior and affect. The three components are considered complementary and thus, should not be isolated in teaching (Risager, 2007). In other theoretical models these three constituencies were identified as knowledge, skills and attitudes respectively (Byram, Gribkova & Starkey, 2002).

The cognitive dimension ((intercultural awareness) consists of culture specific knowledge and understanding of cultural practices of both an individual and those of others, whereas the behavioral domain (intercultural adroitness) comprises a range of requisite intercultural skills, such as listening, observing, analyzing, interpreting, critical thinking and assessing. Intercultural skills allow individuals to search for hidden messages and values transmitted through cultural artefacts, often invisible. The affective (or motivational) facet

(intercultural sensitivity) involves the willingness to learn about cultural differences and prompts individuals to confront their own biases and prejudices concerning otherness, and put effort to accept that culturally diverse people behave differently. Developing such an approach toward otherness requires from individuals a lot of empathy, respect, tolerance, openness, flexibility and curiosity toward diversity and the skill of discovery. Since the affective dimension triggers attention, effort and control, it is critical in facilitating an individual's growth in the cognitive and behavioral domains (Ang et al., 2007). Competence in all three domains is vital so that an individual could adjust his/ her linguistic competence to a variety of sociocultural contexts.

An intercultural perspective where learners are placed between languages and cultures that they bring to the classroom, challenges the legitimacy of the native speaker model which traditionally was employed as a helpful benchmark for EFL. The argument against the monolingual and monocultural native speaker as an appropriate target norm against which L2 learners should be assessed hinges on the notion that communicative capabilities learners need to develop may differ from those required of the L1 speaker. Scholars are of the view that an additional language course should aim at developing the “intercultural speaker” (Byram, 2009; Kramsch, 1998b) who uses English as a lingua franca (ELF). As Canagarajah (2006: 589) put it, “contemporary changes in English’s demography compel us to think of English as a plural language that embodies multiple norms and standards”. The intercultural speaker frequently challenges rigid native speaker norms in interactions with non-native speakers of English, thereby his linguistic forms are far from the model and adapted flexibly depending on the context, i.e., specific settings and interlocutors (Jenkins, Cogo & Dewey, 2011; Rose & Galloway, 2019; Seidlhofer, 2011). Advocates of intercultural teaching and learning argue that L2 learners should be equipped with language which will allow them to understand the native language norms to be able to interpret messages adequately. For production, however, learners should be allowed to deploy linguistic forms flexibly, not necessarily complying with a strict code, provided what they are saying is comprehensible to native speakers (Baker, 2009; Baker, 2015; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013).

Empirical studies on effective instruments for helping students enhance their ICC in school settings have been done for decades. The research revealed that intercultural gains may be realized through different means, such as culture-based teaching materials and/ or pedagogical interventions, i.e., classroom activities, teaching strategies or integrated intercultural programs (Zhang & Zhou, 2019). For example, Ogan, Aleven and Jones (2009)

found positive effects on the participants' development of intercultural knowledge through watching intercultural films. Chang and Zhao (2012) reported that embedding the intercultural knowledge into a syllabus contributed to a significant ICC growth among most of the participants, indicated by their increased interest in domestic and foreign culture, and a better understanding of the interrelationship between language and culture. Bücken and Korzilius (2015), in turn, discovered a considerable surge in the participants' behavioral and affective domain, following their use of the Ecotonos, the intercultural simulation game. In the study conducted by Hernandez-Bravo, Cardona-Molto and Hernandez-Bravo (2017), in the course of a teacher-led intercultural tutoring program, the participants developed significantly all three facets of IC, i.e., knowledge, skills and attitudes. Rodriguez and Caranza (2017) demonstrated that students' engagement in storytelling and intercultural projects were associated with their IC gains, i.e., deeper understanding of different cultural aspects and stronger bonds with students of diverse backgrounds. In a similar vein, Worawong, Chartrakul and Damnet (2017) showed that role-plays contributed considerably to more appropriate intercultural behaviors of the participants as manifested by their body movement, gestures and facial expressions in specific intercultural situations.

Research has shown a correlation between a grade level and the effectiveness of intercultural interventions, i.e., students' ICC increased as they moved into senior grades (Tuncel & Aricioglu, 2018). In Spitzberg and Changnon's view (2009), this results from the fact that adults are more interactionally competent than children. Another explanation was provided by King and Magolda (2005) - intercultural capacities develop sequentially in interactions, reaching a maturity level at adulthood. An array of research focused on examining the development of ICC in more natural, less controlled settings, i.e., sojourns abroad. However, since the overseas immersion is beyond the scope of the current study, they will not be discussed in this paper.

Scholarly works have acknowledged the significance of teachers in fostering ICC in students. For example, Cushner and Mahon (2009) and Moule (2012) discerned that students of culturally competent teachers are more likely to achieve an increase in their ICC. This finding may be explained by the claim that teachers who value intercultural capacities for themselves tend to focus on developing them in their students more eagerly. Interestingly, research on teachers' perceptions and beliefs regarding students' ICC formation (Byram, 1997; Guilherme, 2002; Paige et al., 2003; Sercu et al., 2005; Young & Sachdev, 2011) has revealed a lot has to be done to change teachers' attitudes until they gain momentum and start teaching

EFL interculturally with commitment. Sercu et al. (2005), based on their research findings, divided teachers regarding their attitudes toward interculturality in the EFL classroom into two groups. The former considered developing ICC as important as teaching the L2 and believed it renders learners more tolerant. Teachers in the second group, by contrast, were convinced that integrating language and culture teaching is impossible, and saw no correlation between intercultural teaching and students' positive attitudes toward diversity and otherness.

For a few decades the overlap of language and culture has been increasingly recognized and reflected in ELF syllabuses (Feng, Byram & Fleming, 2009; Risager, 2007; Valdes, 1986). For example, in Europe, the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) makes explicit references to the cultural and intercultural aspects of language learning. Likewise, the Polish national curriculum obliges teachers to provide students, to a various extent, depending on the educational level, with knowledge about a TL culture/s, and refer to their native culture, cultivating their intercultural sensitivity and awareness of the interrelationship between language and culture (National Curriculum, 2017). However, the focus given in both documents on native speaker norms, expectations and proficiency reveals they both promote a restricted understanding of communicative competence, sidelining the intercultural component. Policy makers have adopted a national and narrow native speaker perspective on language and cultures, not recognizing more dynamic, intercultural associations between the two.

3. RESEARCH STUDY

3.1. Rationale, setting and aim

The stimulus for the study came from the author's continued interest in interculturality and its applicability in a local classroom setting (Sobkowiak, 2012, 2015, 2016). The cultural homogeneity of Polish society translates into mono-cultural classrooms, where students lack opportunities to be exposed to diverse cultural worldviews characteristic of the multi-cultural world. Thus, their school experience of linguistic and cultural pluralism can be mediated primarily through lesson contents, pre-designed tasks and activities. In addition, the majority of English classes are taught by Polish graduates of English departments, a factor which does not facilitate students' access to intercultural input, either. To compensate for these deficiencies, teaching interculturally appears to be requisite and the current study investigating its status quo seems to be timely. The research project was meant to examine the scope to which an intercultural approach has been adopted in Polish high schools.

This exploratory and retrospective study tried to answer four specific research questions:

1. What are teachers' beliefs and attitudes toward teaching interculturally?
2. To what extent are teachers familiar with an intercultural approach?
3. What pedagogical interventions did teachers undertake in the preceding school year to develop students' ICC?
4. What, in teachers' views, hinders intercultural teaching?

3.2. Methods and participants

Given the nature of both the phenomenon being studied and the research questions, a qualitative approach was adopted, which allowed for a more direct method of gauging the researched problem. The interview sample composed either of personal contacts of the author or individuals found by networking. The sample of 18 interview participants comprised university graduates with MA degrees in English. The main criteria for their selection was current employment as English teachers in public schools and willingness to participate in the research. The respondents were employed in six state high schools, either in a large- or middle-sized city. They spoke English with native proficiency. Nine of the teachers confirmed that they spoke one other foreign language in addition to English (the majority at the level of A1 or A2 according to the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*), seven spoke two foreign languages in addition to English, and estimated their proficiency at the level of A1/A2. One teacher stated that she knew three foreign languages in addition to English. Two of the interviewed teachers spoke Russian at the proficiency level between C1/C2 and had certificates to teach this language at school. Four respondents had lived and worked abroad for a minimum of one year in the USA, Great Britain, Ireland, and China respectively.

The sample varied across the attributes of gender, status in the professional hierarchy and their teaching experience. The demographics of the respondents included a gender split with 14 females and four males. There was also a diversified representation of age among the participants, ranging from 29 to 62. The sample differed across position in the professional hierarchy: one of the interviewees was a trainee teacher, four were employed as contract teachers, and five were appointed teachers. The remaining majority (eight teachers) constituted the category of chartered teachers, holding the highest status in the teachers' hierarchy. The participants reflected the structure of the population of English teachers in Polish high schools thus, the logic of purposive sampling was followed (Corbin & Strauss, 2007; Silverman, 2013).

3.3. Data collection and procedures

Since qualitative data in the form of asking questions seemed to enable gauging the researched problem directly, the author of the paper carried out semi-structured interviews. To check for clarity, prior to the interview sessions, the interview questions were piloted with one additional teacher who was not part of the sample. This resulted in a few changes in the wording of the questions to resolve the ambiguities. In the interviews the researcher not only asked a set of prepared questions, but also followed the participants' lead. To avoid response bias (i.e., offering acceptable responses) and over-directiveness, the teachers were prompted to add their comments freely and make digressions. The interviews took place individually, either in quiet rooms at schools where the participants were employed, or via Skype, with the intention to encourage the teachers to express their attitudes, perceptions and opinions in an unrestrained manner. The interviews were conducted in Polish, between June and September of 2018, by the author himself, recorded and transcribed. The interviews took from 18 to 50 minutes, collectively amounting to 517 minutes ($M=28,72$; $SD=9,83$; $CV=34,21\%$). All contributions were anonymized and ethics approval based upon informed consent procedures was followed.

The interview consisted of four main parts. The interview questions, which were supposed to guide both the interviewer and the respondents, were constructed by the author himself after a comprehensive survey of source literature on intercultural teaching (Byram, 1997; Corbett, 2003; Dearthoff, 2009; Gudykunst & Moody, 2002; Holliday, 2018; Kramsch, 1993; Kramsch, 1998a; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). The questions were developed based on both the objectives of the study and the theoretical framework adopted. To ensure content validity, all questions in the interview were discussed with another researcher until an inter-rate agreement was reached. First, the respondents were asked about their biographical data, and then about their attitudes toward an intercultural approach and its role in their teaching practice. The researcher investigated the informants' understanding of the complex interplay between language, culture and learning, and their readiness to go beyond teaching merely language. Second, the teachers were enquired about the main assumptions underpinning intercultural language teaching and whether they introduced elements of ELF into their classes. In addition, the researcher strove to elicit responses to the question regarding the place of intercultural teaching in the teachers' professional development training.

Third, the participants were asked about their teaching practices, and the place of the intercultural perspective in them. The questions in this part of the interview concerned the quality and quantity of the intercultural exposure in class, namely the extent to which the

teachers assigned their students tasks designed to explore linguistic and cultural diversity. The teachers were asked what techniques, activities and tasks they employed to foster students' ICC. Finally, the teachers were asked about impediments to implementing intercultural teaching into their classes.

3.4. Data analysis

A detailed qualitative content analysis of the transcripts was carried out by the author of the paper. After reading and rereading the transcripts thoroughly, key categories were identified in the corpus of data which reflected teachers' attitudes toward intercultural teaching, their knowledge of the subject and classroom interventions. Each segment of the collected narrative expressing the participants' experiences was assigned a code (label) representing one theme. The data pooled were then analyzed in several steps, following the principles of the constant comparative analysis (Rice & Ezzy, 1999). Each coded segment of the narrative was analyzed in turn, which was followed by drawing comparisons and contrasts across the data, searching for emerging patterns, concepts and themes. This allowed for selecting, grouping and labeling units of data in a way that informed the current research purpose and questions (Baptiste, 2001). The emergent categories were considered through the lens of the theoretical framework discussed earlier in the paper and utilized as an interpretative tool for the collected data. Finally, the established categories, verified by another researcher, were grouped into five themes:

- a) teachers' beliefs and attitudes toward intercultural teaching
- b) teachers' knowledge of an intercultural approach
- c) teaching procedures, materials, activities and tasks for developing students' ICC
- d) professional development/ intercultural training
- e) impediments to intercultural teaching.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the interview data is presented according to the research questions and the themes identified at the data analysis stage discussed earlier.

4.1. Teachers' beliefs and attitudes toward intercultural teaching

The respondents showed they were favorably disposed toward intercultural teaching and declared they directly had strove to adopt it in their classrooms:

I do my best to expose my students to linguistic and cultural diversity. If, for example, "tea with milk" appears in the context of British culture, and some students respond negatively to this,

saying “It seems disgusting”, I encourage them to try it, persuading this might be an interesting experience. [T3]

By stimulating my students to analyze in class a range of diverse cultures and habits, I try to instill into them respect to different rituals and traditions. For example, when we talked about arranged marriages, which still is a norm in some cultures, I prompted my students to think positively about this phenomenon. I emphasized that parents all over the world always want the best for their children, so if they decide to find a wife/ husband for their child, they must see some advantages in it. I believe such in-class discussions of customs entrenched by tradition have the power to progressively change students’ attitudes. [T12]

The interviewees unanimously acknowledged that language and culture are intertwined and inseparable, emphasizing the pertinent role of the (inter)cultural dimension in language education and the need to adequately equip students with intercultural capacities and dexterities. This outcome concurs with the results of earlier studies where teachers expressed favorable attitudes toward intercultural teaching and accorded relatively high priority to it (Atay, 2008; Eken, 2015; Petosi & Karras, 2020). (research question 1)

4.2. Teachers’ knowledge of an intercultural approach

14 teachers (78% of the sample) seemed to be familiar, to a limited extent, with the principles pertaining to intercultural teaching and learning. On the one hand, the respondents were aware that intercultural EFL classroom needs to transcend providing merely knowledge of the TL culture, on the other hand, however, the participants seemed to have a very vague idea of how to implement it into their teaching. The collected data revealed that the participants found the cognitive and the affective component of IC more relevant than the behavioral one (intercultural skills). As many as ten respondents (56%) attached intercultural teaching to sensitizing students with cultural diversity, highlighting its positive consequences for international understanding:

Thanks to exposing students to cultural diversity, they can gain a completely different perspective on life. They learn that understanding another person’s perspective requires putting some effort. I hope this may help students change the way they perceive foreigners. [T12].

Four teachers from the interculturally-savvy subpopulation highly valued activating students to discover and critically explore various cultures and compare them with their own. Such assignments allowed for positioning students between their own culturally derived perceptions (the world of familiarity) and those of another cultural group (the world of difference). As one

¹ All quotes were translated from Polish into English by the author of the paper.

participant remarked, “an individual has to know his/ her roots in order to be able to position himself/ herself in relation to other people” [T18]. Another teacher explicated that “awareness of the principles which govern one’s native culture is a prerequisite for an individual to be able to grasp foreign cultures” [T4].

One respondent from this subpopulation prompted his students to find similarities and differences regarding different aspects of life in their own culture and other cultures, e.g., public spaces. He argued that such intercultural engagements should help students understand the subjectivity of each culture and its multidimensional nature. The teacher wanted to inoculate in his students the idea that one’s own complex cultural makeup has a significant impact on how an individual perceives the world and sought to help them gain an insight into diversified perspectives:

Sometimes we discuss how Polish people and culture are perceived by English speaking individuals. I hope it helps detach students from their own perceptions of well-known traditions and cultural practices. It also raises students’ awareness that their behavior and standpoints are culturally-bound and understanding often requires going beyond a national realm. For example, I drew student’s attention to Polish people’s reluctance to paying compliments and returning or accepting them. [T3]

The other teacher added that comparing cultures in class could contribute in the future to lowering cultural shock that students might suffer when confronted with unfamiliar culture(s) and should help them deconstruct stereotypes. These findings did not substantiate the earlier studies by Baker (2015), Han and Song (2011), Larzén-Östermark (2008) and Young and Sachdev (2011) where the researchers concluded that many teachers still considered intercultural teaching and learning as confined to the transmission of factual knowledge of English-speaking countries, i.e. cultural content rather than a specific method. However, what the teachers in the current research did not express explicitly was whether and how by means of the teaching materials utilized they aroused their students’ cognitive curiosity to dig deeper on their own, or whether and how they activated their critical thinking, i.e., prompted students to analyze, compare and make inferences. The teachers’ commentaries were unclear and vague in this respect, which rendered drawing conclusions impossible.

Only two other teachers (11% of the sample) identified intercultural teaching and learning as creating in the classroom an environment conducive to promoting openness to the multicultural world, and fostering students’ tolerance and openness to otherness:

I often encourage my students to keep their eyes and ears wide open to diversity. I also show them that attaching value to what they have heard or seen without an in-depth analysis of the context might lead to completely unjustifiable conclusions. I stimulate students to take a perspective of a pierced, tattooed or homeless person, since I believe only reflection and empathy can contribute to making them more open-minded and tolerant. [T18]

The narratives of the remaining participants (89%) demonstrated that while comparing cultures, the teachers referred to mainstream ways of thinking and behaving within a particular dominant, monocultural group, ignoring the multicultural characteristic of modern societies. The respondents discussed and compared national cultures rather than adopted a more dynamic, intercultural perspective. Accordingly, their students were not provided with assignments which would prompt them to inquire and/ or explore directly cultural differences within one multiethnic society or a cultural grouping other than nation-based. This, in turn, might have led to relying exclusively on generalizations about cultural categories and unfair stereotyping. Such an approach was contrary to calls issued by scholars to abandon a national paradigm in intercultural teaching (Risager, 2007; Baker, 2015) and the finding echoed the outcomes of Young and Sachdev's study (2011) in this respect.

It is noteworthy that five teachers (28% of the sample) revealed utterly inaccurate cognitive understanding of the main assumptions underlying the intercultural optic. For example, one study participant's conceptualization of "the intercultural" was curtailed to teaching language in a cultural context, but what she meant by this was not further elucidated. In the same vein, for the three youngest female respondents an intercultural approach meant merely traditional teaching of culture of the target country(ies), i.e., exposing students to declarative knowledge of the TL culture, elements of literature included. The comments collected from this subpopulation of respondents were pure generalities or clichés, which revealed they did not recognize particular challenges of interculturality for EFL classes. The teachers did not realize that, as scholars argue, intercultural teaching cannot be confined to culture contents of the textbook, since these predominantly present restricted or essentialist images of cultures (Barrett, Huber & Reynolds, 2014; Pedersen, 2010). As one informant put it, "the textbook introduces topics connected with the Anglo-Saxon culture allowing for exposing students to diversity and otherness of foreign cultures. This, in my view, per se, imposes interculturality into the classroom." [T9]

The respondents in the current study unanimously held a strong and rigid native-speaker norm in their teaching and agreed on native-like linguistic competence to be inculcated in EFL learners. Contrary to recommendations of EFL scholars who argue that teaching English should

reflect ELF, its real world utilization and new linguistic landscapes (Rose & Galloway, 2019), the study participants shared deep reservations as regards to the use of global English. In their classes they focused on the idealized native speaker model and a monolithic perception of the L1 speaker's language and culture. The only exception when the native speaker's standards were challenged were seldom situations when students were listening to ELF from audio materials attached to their textbooks. We can presume the teachers did not attach IC to the linguistic competence and remained oblivious of the fact that it would require benchmarking students' L2 competence against a new norm based on the lingua franca status of English (Alptekin, 2002). (research question 2)

4.3. Teaching procedures, materials, activities and tasks for fostering students' ICC

15 participants (83%) declared that they worked to enhance their students' ICC in class relatively frequently - either often (eight teachers [44%]) or from time to time (seven teachers [39%]). Although the respondents acknowledged the inextricable interface between language and culture, the need to reflect on it explicitly during class and teach interculturally, their reported teaching practices disclosed the relatively low priority they accorded to "the intercultural" which was deemed secondary to the linguistic goals. When the study participants were asked to specify what activities and exercises for students' intercultural growth they utilized, their comments were characterized by a high level of generality.

The informants covered culture topics mainly when they appeared subsequently in the textbook, the main source of intercultural input for their students:

The textbook we use contains a lot of texts with cultural contents which often lead to in-class discussions about a range of topics connected with culture(s). [T9]

Interestingly, teachers' narratives showed that while choosing the textbook, as many as fourteen respondents (78%) did not take into consideration the quality of cultural sections and their usefulness to teach interculturally. Only two interviewees (11%) remarked that the intercultural dimension was one of the criterion by which the coursebook was selected. The remaining two teachers (11%) said explicitly they regarded the cultural and intercultural aspects as marginal facets in their teaching. The informants focused on superficial aspects of cultural manifestation, such as food and drink, travelling or festivals, which, when taught in isolation without attachment to students' world, could not be considered effective in cultivating students' ICC. Further, cultures were often presented in essentialist ways and discussed in terms of very stereotypical projections of monoethnic societies:

I ran lessons about various social groups, for example about Amish communities; I had a lesson about Australia and behaviors typical of Australians. [T12]

The teachers' accounts demonstrated that textbooks were not exploited for any intercultural investigation and reflection. Students usually tended to read a text on a specific aspect of a foreign culture, the teacher checked comprehension and engaged students in accompanying vocabulary practice. Thus, they basically developed the four skills in the cultural/ intercultural context. In the interviews, the teachers were unable to give examples of deploying tasks requiring students' observations, analyzing the content in depth or critical reflection.

On a positive side, a range of interventions with enormous potential for improving students' ICC was reported in the interviews. All interviewees but one (94% of the sample) aimed to discuss cultural differences in class and cultivate in students positive attitudes toward cultural diversity and otherness. The accounts of the teachers' practices seemed to confirm their declarations:

I kept saying that once confronted with individuals from a diverse culture, we should avoid assessing them immediately. Instead, we should focus on listening to them and observing their behaviors. It is the only way to obtain a deeper understanding of diverse cultures and people. [T5]

By asking students to act out different roles, e.g. a Muslim immigrant applying for a job, I wanted to provide them with opportunities to look at various situations through somebody else's perspective. Then, we discussed how students' own values and beliefs influence the way they perceive other cultures. [T10]

I always responded promptly to my students' offensive comments; e.g., a racist remark concerning laziness typical of black people. When I heard my student saying "All Gypsies are thieves", I asked if he knew any representative of a Romany community, adding that the former word seems to be offensive to them. I tried to explain to the students that such unjustifiable stereotypes impede understanding between people. [T14]

We compared cultures while we were discussing a range of traditions associated with Christmas, Easter or other public holidays, such as St. Patrick's Day. [T18]

Three teachers (17%) declared that they used films to develop their students ICC. One focused students' attention on examples of communication misinterpretations and analyzed with them the factors which contributed to miscommunication:

While watching a film, I riveted students' attention to the fact that the main characters may perceive certain things in a completely different way than they do, and their "strange", incomprehensible behaviors are deeply rooted in the culture they originated from. [14]

Two other respondents (11%) watched films with their students to foster their intercultural sensitivity (the affective facet of IC). One mentioned a comedy about a girl rebel who against her parents' traditionalism bended the rules to reach her goal of becoming a professional soccer player ("Bend It Like Beckham"). Another teacher reported watching with his students "Billy Elliot" - a story of a talented young boy torn between his dream of becoming a ballet dancer and the necessity to fulfill his dad's expectations and perform a more manly activity. Both stories lead to an in-class discussion about issues connected with gender, its perception in various communities, how the roles both genders had to perform in life had changed over centuries/decades, and sexual minorities. Both teachers hoped to foster learners' positive attitudes toward otherness, people's choices and to promote widely understood tolerance ("I believe you can influence students' attitudes." [T12])

Another teacher acknowledged that he often strayed from the main subject of the lesson and drew on his rich personal intercultural experiences as a traveler around the world, asking students about theirs. A female respondent reported that while discussing hospitality, she pinpointed how it differed in a range of countries, whereas another talked with her students about what was (not) allowed in diverse cultures while discussing the grammar concept of prohibition. One interviewee compared Christmas traditions across the globe, whereas another, while discussing meals in England, directed the students' attention to the fact they are eaten at different times than in Poland. One female respondent discussed problems connected with the current migration and the perception of female/ male roles in diverse cultures. Another teacher covered the issue of punctuality across cultures.

Four teachers (23%) sensitized their students to the fact that pragmatic competence in any language is culturally bound. For example, "How are you" in English is used as a friendly greeting and the speaker does not expect a detailed account of your health. The participants sought to prompt students to use a formal/ informal style or to adopt language to the situation depending on a context. Although another four respondents (23%) admitted they had engaged their students in mediating conflict which stemmed from cultural diversity, they were not able to give any details regarding how they had done it. Furthermore, their explanations were vague and unconvincing, which rendered it difficult to assess to what extent such activities were valuable for developing students' IC.

Ten interviewees (56%) reported they had focused in their classes on non-verbal communication. For example, one teacher revealed, "when discussing beauty, the students compared the contemporary paintings with traditional ones. In another class, her students

analyzed the body language in advertising, focusing on how visual cultural representations were presented in the analyzed advertisements or commercials” [T10]. Another teacher hosted representatives of different cultures in her class so that the guests could discuss with her students the topic of body language. Consequently, their students could learn that even if an individual does not actually say negative things about a person, he/she may still express it non-verbally. Three other teachers analyzed the use of body language in different cultures so that their students were able to see how meaning is conditioned by culture, e.g., the same gesture might be interpreted in a completely different way and what can be easily presented non-verbally in one culture does not necessarily translate into language of gestures in another. However, it is noticeable that such interventions were made extremely rarely.

It is noteworthy that tasks with the highest capacity for students to investigate and analyze cultures in depth reported in literature (Corbet, 2003; 2010), such as ethnographic projects or “critical incident” problem-solving tasks, were used extremely rarely or not at all. Only two teachers (11%) claimed they occasionally analyzed critical incidents with their students, prompting them to explore intercultural encounters thoroughly, search for the causes of misinterpretations and failures in communication, and finally propose a satisfactory solution.

The findings in this section unveiled a complex picture that is not entirely consistent with other research on intercultural teaching in the L2 and revealed many of the same concerns signaled in the previous studies. First, to a certain extent, the interviews provided confirmatory evidence for the previous research that intercultural EFL teaching is often curtailed to covering shallow aspects of cultural differences (Duff & Uchida, 1997; Lazaraton, 2003; Young, Sachdev & Seedhouse, 2009). Second, the participants in the current study did not teach intercultural systematically, but incidentally. Good intercultural practices were employed exceptionally and because of their low frequency they were not likely to yield significant effects in nurturing students’ intercultural capabilities. The teachers seemed not to realize that intercultural development is an on-going and lifelong process and it is imperative to work on it on a regular basis (Deardorff, 2009; Fantini, 2000). Third, pedagogical interventions aimed at enhancing students’ ICC focused on the cognitive dimension, awareness of cultural differences and promoting positive attitudes toward otherness, neglecting intercultural skills. Fourth, intercultural input was derived from textbooks which under-exploit contents for genuine intercultural investigation and reflection. (research question 3)

4.4. Impediments to intercultural teaching practice

Only two respondents (11%) in the current research expressed considerable doubts whether students' intercultural acumen could be successfully developed in a monocultural Polish context. The remaining group of 16 teachers (89% of the sample) did not consider cultural homogeneity of EFL classes in Poland as a barrier to the development of students' intercultural capacities. The respondents assented strongly to the claim that lack of cultural diversity in the classroom could be compensated by stimulating students' cognitive curiosity and prompting them to search authentic materials about different cultures in the Internet and via other multimedia. This could also be done by drawing on students' and teachers' experiences as travelers across various places in the world, or inviting foreigners to school. The study participants' views in this respect contradict what other empirical studies have demonstrated; i.e., that school cultural diversity seems to be the most important school-based factor contributing to students' intercultural growth (Thompson, 1998), even if it does not guarantee that it will automatically happen (Halualani et al., 2004).

When asked what constituted the greatest obstacle to intercultural teaching, the interviewees pinpointed time constraints and inappropriate textbooks or teaching materials. The respondents were aware that the latter predominantly utilize a monolingual native speaker as a model and a linguistic view of communicative competence. Another hurdle was final exam-oriented teaching (a "washback effect"). The teachers complained that everything they did in class was subordinated to the dictum of the final exam (Matura), which does not test students' ICC. Thereby classes focused on preparing students to take the exam, since it was what all the stakeholders, i.e., students, their parents and school authorities expected from the teacher:

Pressure of the final exam is ubiquitous - our work is assessed by our students' Matura results.
[T1]

Preparing students for the Matura exam is what stakeholders, namely parents, students and school authorities expect from us. That's why I don't deal with culture in the classroom on a regular basis. [T6]

Furthermore, in many schools, English was taught only three times a week for 45-minutes, which left not much space for anything else than developing students' knowledge of grammar, vocabulary and the four skills.

The participants acknowledged unanimously that the development of students' ICC was not an explicit curriculum aim, hence teaching interculturality remained low on the teachers'

list of priorities and was not done systematically. These findings confirmed the results of Young and Sachdev's study (2011) and the research done by Petosi and Karras (2020). Among other things hindering intercultural teaching were teacher's incompetence and lack of equipment. It is notable, however, that one respondent claimed that the only impediment to "the intercultural" in the classroom were teachers themselves and their unwillingness to implement it, saying: "there are no formal restraints to focus on intercultural teaching" [T12]. (research question 4)

4.5. Professional development and intercultural training

Albeit none of the respondents had ever attended intercultural training, eight of them (44% of the sample) declared they felt competent and well-prepared to teach English interculturally. The narratives below shed light on what the participants attributed their qualifications for teaching interculturally to:

As a person with a broad range of interests I read a lot and try to deepen my knowledge about diverse cultures. [T8]

I dig deeper to find similarities and differences between cultures and cultural diversity by searching the Internet and reading a lot of publications which tackle this issue. [T11]

I got involved in the Erasmus+ program *Europeans for Fair Trade* together with teachers from Spain and Sweden. I learned a lot about cultural diversity through the contacts with other participants the program entailed. [T15]

I feel competent to teach interculturally because I keep in touch on a regular basis with representatives of various cultures. [T18]

Four teachers from the subpopulation who felt confident about their abilities to teach interculturally lived abroad for a longer period of time and appreciated the extensive contact they had with locals while living abroad. Those participants admitted their sojourners surged their intercultural acumen substantially and allowed them to explain the intercultural issues by recourse to their own intercultural experiences.

As many as ten teachers (56% of the sample) expressed serious doubts concerning their capabilities to introduce "the intercultural" into their classrooms, straightforwardly conceding they felt either prepared to do it merely to a limited extent or even completely unprepared. The relatively low, self-reported knowledge of and skills for intercultural teaching among these teachers might result from ignoring this area both in university education and teacher training programs. Although the majority of the sample (12 teachers [67%]) attended a range of

professional development courses, seminars or webinars in the school year preceding the interviews, none of those courses covered any aspect of an intercultural approach. The informants complained that neither the university nor the professional development seminars they had attended prepared them to teach the L2 interculturally:

The world is dynamic and changes so rapidly, making it difficult to keep updated. In addition, I have seen far too little and thus, I know too little to say I am competent to teach interculturally. [T3]

I have never attended a seminar, conference or workshop which focused on IC teaching. [T6]

Deficiencies in teacher training reported in the interviews indicated there was a need for both university programs of EFL methodology courses and training sessions offered to practicing teachers to promote a more dynamic and multilingual teaching model rather than a linguistically-oriented approach. Both pre-service and practicing teachers should be given guidance on how to teach those elements of language and communication which best serve the development of students' ICC and how to systematically integrate the intercultural into their teaching. This outcome substantiated the findings of other researchers who noted dearth of an intercultural focus on TESOL MA programs in the US or in EFL teacher training (Nelson, 1998; Young and Sachdev (2011).

5. CONCLUSIONS AND LIMITATIONS

Albeit the majority of the respondents regarded ICC an asset in an increasingly globalized world and supported the pertinence of cultivating it in the EFL classroom, intercultural teaching did not emerge as salient in the teachers' discourse. The respondents assigned the interculturality the secondary role, focusing on developing linguistic and sociolinguistic competences. In practice, in the participants' classrooms there was a lack of attention to teaching that promotes critical thinking skills among learners. The teachers strove to deliberately facilitate students' intercultural acumen through specially designed pedagogical interventions, but it happened relatively rarely. The respondents' narratives documented that teaching was often curtailed to exposing students to diverse cultures, rendering them passive recipients of declarative knowledge. The main instrument used for intercultural teaching were textbooks, whose cultural sections lack in-depth analysis of the presented contents and do not encourage students to pursue deeper interpretations, nor do they activate their critical thinking, thus hardly can contribute to intercultural gains (Sobkowiak, 2016). The activities with the

highest potential to engage learners in active participation in linguistic and cultural diversity were not used at all.

However, it seems that the teachers cannot currently do much more to provide effective scaffolding for students' intercultural growth, given the context in which they work, their constraints and lack of training and support. The findings of the current study have clear implications not only for EFL teaching in Poland, but also for school authorities, textbook writers and institutions in charge of teacher training in other contexts. First, the development of students' ICC should become a distinctive hallmark of EFL curricula. Second, students' results of final exams, which still check rigid, monolingual native speaker norms and proficiency, and do not incorporate the intercultural perspective, should not be the only criterion against which teachers' work is assessed. Third, interculturality should be given more emphasis in teaching materials - they should incorporate activities and tasks which would stimulate students to critically and reflexively explore cultures on their own and analyze them beyond surface cultural differences. Such an approach would allow for interrogating and challenging simplified stereotypes, biases and prejudice, which hinder rather than facilitate intercultural development.

Some limitations of the present study should be addressed because they provide agenda for future research. First, the research was carried out on a relatively small sample and the findings cannot be generalized beyond the study group. The research should be considered as a pilot study, its results as preliminary and tentative. Second, more insight could be gained by complementing the present retrospective study with the data received from introspective, longitudinal research and other than interview account sources - lesson observations, teachers' diaries, journals and logs would provide actual content analysis rather than reports of the content. Although an examination of in-class interaction was beyond the scope of the current study, such critical reflection could deepen understanding of intercultural teaching and learning, would help validate the obtained data and, thereby increase the credibility of its interpretation. What is needed is further research into students' perspective on developing ICC in the language classroom. Only triangulation of sources will help further pursue and investigate the matter thoroughly, and eventually allow for giving reliable answers to the research questions. Much work remains to be done.

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