

Towards the Development of Intercultural Competence Skills: A Pedagogical Experience with Pre-Service Teachers

Hacia el desarrollo de habilidades de competencia intercultural: una experiencia pedagógica con futuros profesores

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Although interculturality has been the focus of several studies which reveal a tendency to include an understanding of students' home culture and cultures around the world in the English language classes, few studies focus on the inclusion of an intercultural component in a class different from the English one. This article aims to share a pedagogical experience carried out in a Colombian public university in order to analyze how intercultural competence skills emerged in pre-service teachers after the implementation of an intercultural component in a research and pedagogy class. Data were gathered through field notes, students' artifacts, and group discussions. Findings revealed that pre-service teachers started to develop intercultural competence by developing skills to interpret and contextualize cultural practices and by raising awareness of contextual complexities.

Key words: Culture, intercultural competence, pedagogical experience, pre-service teachers

A pesar de que la interculturalidad ha sido el centro de atención de diferentes estudios que revelan una tendencia a incluir la cultura de la lengua nativa del estudiante y la cultura de la lengua extranjera en las clases de idiomas, pocos estudios se enfocan en la inclusión de un componente intercultural en una clase diferente a la clase de inglés. En este artículo se comparte una experiencia pedagógica que se llevó a cabo en una universidad pública Colombiana con el fin de analizar cómo la competencia intercultural emergió, después de la inclusión de un componente intercultural, en una clase de investigación y pedagogía con futuros profesores de lenguas extranjeras. La información se recolectó a través de formatos de observación, artefactos de los futuros profesores y discusiones grupales. Los resultados mostraron que los futuros profesores desarrollaron su competencia intercultural a través del desarrollo de habilidades tales como la interpretación y contextualización de prácticas culturales y la concientización sobre las complejidades del contexto.

Palabras clave: competencia intercultural, cultura, experiencia pedagógica, futuros profesores

Introduction

Byram (2000) asserts that intercultural competence is an essential skill for language teaching professionals. If language teachers are able to perceive, understand, and value their own culture and other cultures, they may be able to cope more efficiently with differences in their classrooms. In our Colombian context, usually, a school supported by the government (i.e. public) is nourished by students from diverse backgrounds. Students' ages, learning styles, socio economic statuses, and beliefs are different. They regularly come from various regions in Colombia. Besides the previous facts, usually at least three out of forty students in each classroom have a learning disability. This makes a classroom a place in which diverse values, abilities, and behaviors co-exist. It implies, according to Artunduaga (1997), that educators need to value and enrich the culture of their students through a dialogical relationship with other cultures.

Consistent with the vision of the Foreign Languages program at Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia—the institution where this proposal was carried out—graduates from this languages teaching program are human beings who understand their job as teachers of children and young adults and are expected to value and understand their own and the cultures of others so that they are able to make decisions in an informed and critical way. Then, the implementation of an intercultural approach in a course of the undergraduate foreign language program at this public university is aimed at helping future language teachers develop their intercultural skills to be able to understand their own culture and the culture of others. In this way, they may eventually become intercultural individuals and, as such, may be able to understand differences instead of criticizing them.

It is worth mentioning that a big percentage of the pre-service teachers who participated in this study tended to label their own culture with negative features. They picked out what would be deemed to be a negative perception about themselves and their education system. They tended to stereotype and think of their own culture as inferior. For instance, they affirmed that education in Colombia is not as good as education in other countries. That is why, in this context, it was significant to work with an approach that helped pre-service teachers value their own culture and perceive it in a positive way.

This proposal explored how intercultural competence emerged in fifth semester pre-service teachers from the Foreign Languages program through the analysis and reflection of educative issues seen in their own culture and in the target culture. In such a way, future language teachers can reflect upon their own culture and other cultures and then they may eventually become intercultural agents.

This pedagogical proposal was carried out with future language teachers who will mainly work in public or private schools either in cities or in rural areas. These pre-service teachers

might find a mixture of students in their classrooms coming from different backgrounds, socioeconomic statuses, ethnicities, and religious beliefs and thus must be acquainted with the importance of understanding diverse cultures in their classrooms.

Literature Review

This chapter serves the purpose of stating the conceptualization or the main constructs that ground this experience. They are: The Concepts of Culture, Intercultural Competence, and The Role of Educators in the Development of Intercultural Competence.

The Concepts of Culture

Culture is a concept that is used widely among people in the academic world. When analyzing what culture means, there are two approaches that we can consider. On the one hand, the first approach is the one by Tylor (1871), who says “Culture in its wide ethnographic sense is the complex universe that includes knowledge, beliefs, art, moral, law, and customs, as well as other capabilities and abilities acquired by people and members of society” (p. 26). From this perspective, culture is the set of interpretations and codes that are taken for granted but that strongly influence actions and beliefs. These interpretations and codes are shared and learned or acquired socially. Although we could say the definition of culture mentioned above is widely accepted, it is not the only one as it considers culture to be almost a static process. Liddicoat (2002) stresses the idea that “the static view of culture does not recognize the link between language and culture” (p. 8).

On the other hand, the second approach relates to a dynamic view of culture: “The dynamic view of culture requires learners to actively engage in culture learning, rather than only learn about the cultural information of the target culture in a passive way” (Liddicoat 2002, p. 8). Crawford and McLaren (2003, p. 233) suggest that in a dynamic view of culture, learners should be “encouraged to view cultural facts as situated in time and space and variable across time, regions, classes and generations.” Kramsch (2002, p. 277) further asserts that “the dynamic view of culture also requires learners to have knowledge of their own culture” and an understanding of their own culturally-shaped behaviors. In this document, culture is perceived as a dynamic process worth analyzing in pre-service language teaching programs and it proposes that one way to analyze culture in the EFL (English as a foreign language) classrooms is by introducing intercultural components in EFL classes.

Intercultural Communicative Competence

There are two concepts that are closely related. They are multiculturalism and interculturality. In fact, as Dervin (2010) suggests, “interculturality is often confused with

cultural, transcultural, or multicultural approaches” (p. 158). Multiculturalism has been seen as the result of the cohabitation of different cultures, while the concept of interculturality is more often associated with the educational world, which is to say that it is the process that allows people of different cultural backgrounds to communicate among themselves (and maintain their culture while valuing others) and it is often presented in the pedagogical programs. These concepts have been developed basically in Europe and in the United States in response to the challenges these places have had in the educational system due to the presence of foreign children whose language and culture differ from that of the host country.

In this experience intercultural communicative competence is understood as the knowledge, skills, and attitudes at the interface between several cultural areas including the students’ own country and a target language country. The development of intercultural communicative competence is a process that includes the students’ experiences and competences from their own cultural background and is a process that allows them to reflect on their own cultural assumptions as an integral part of the further development of their skills and knowledge about the world (Sercu et al., 2005).

When considering the intercultural communicative dimension, speakers are not only supposed to master communicative competence, but should also be mediators in a communicative exchange that acknowledges differences in language use, accents, and so forth, as well as in all cultural particularities speakers may have. This approach aims at breaking stereotypes by allowing participants to engage in conversations without judging their interlocutors, and, conversely, by being aware and respectful of the differences of their interlocutors. In all conversations and exchanges, they are to be themselves and be respectful of the differences of their interlocutors.

What is important in intercultural communication is to have the necessary skills to make comparative and respectful analyses that enable participants in an interaction to communicate effectively. Therefore, it is important to keep in mind that a very important part of meaning is constructed as the conversation develops and that this construction will be greatly enriched if participants are aware of their own cultural characteristics and are open to the other’s cultural traits.

Intercultural education provides us with the opportunity to communicate with others in diverse languages and have tools to analyze without any prejudice as regards what is said from the perspective of a different culture. Also, it helps learners develop skills to compare critically beliefs, attitudes and behaviors that appear both in their own culture and in other cultures.

Considering the fact that intercultural competence is the general construct and intercultural communicative competence is a specific model developed by Byram (1997) and adopted by scholars in the field of intercultural communication, Byram (1997) suggests a

group of competences as a model of intercultural communicative competence: Knowledge, Attitudes, Skills of Interpreting and Relating, Skills of Discovery and Interaction and Political Education including Critical Cultural Awareness. Furthermore, Atay, Kurt, Camlibel, Ersin, and Kaslioglu (2009) explain that:

Knowledge includes learning about social groups, products, practices and processes of interaction. Attitudes involve curiosity and openness towards the other as well as readiness to revise cultural values and beliefs and to interact and engage with otherness. Skills of interpreting and relating mean ability to identify and explain cultural perspectives and mediate between and function in new cultural contexts. Skills of discovery and interaction are related to the ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication. Finally, critical cultural awareness is defined as the ability to evaluate critically the perspectives and practices in one's own and other cultures. (p. 124)

The Role of Language Educators in the Development of Intercultural Competence

Language educators are called upon to help students value their own cultural and social differences and practices as members of a community. They should also guide students to accept, learn and value others. In this sense, language educators should promote thoughtful environments in which students can reflect upon culture and cultural diversity.

According to De Mejía (2005), teachers need to be able to help their students become aware of the value of seeing the world in different ways. Thus language educators are mediators between cultures. In this sense, they need to be open minded and neutral agents who construct cultural experiences with students.

In an intercultural approach, the gains, in terms of intercultural competence, are not only for students but also for language teachers. Students develop skills that help them to understand and value diversity. Language teachers are faced with a conception that crucially changes the model of the ideal teacher as the native or native-like teacher, since an ideal teacher would be the one that helps students relate to the members of the other culture while being aware of their own cultural characteristics. Hence, the teacher would be a professional well aware of the differences of varieties and how they are not better or worse but just different. Thus, intercultural competence is seen as something that can enrich both teachers and students.

In Colombia, teachers are becoming sensitive of the fact that they can adopt an intercultural approach in their classes. There are various research reports that relate, on the one hand, to the way teachers can incorporate the teaching of culture in the EFL classrooms and on the other, to means of introducing the concept of interculturality in the English classes.

Furthermore, on the one hand, Barletta (2009) accounts for a notion of intercultural communicative competence. She argues that the basic standards of foreign language competencies in Colombia, proposed by the Ministry of Education, disregard the fact of including an intercultural component. She invites EFL professionals to get together to think about ways to incorporate the cultural dimension into the teaching of foreign languages. Cruz (2007) and Gurlek and Arias (2009) explain the need to help learners become aware of intercultural aspects when they are learning a foreign language at advanced levels.

Besides the previous studies, Castañeda (2012) describes a qualitative and interpretative case study conducted at a high school that aimed at exploring how adolescents made sense of the culture-based materials implemented in the English lessons, and at describing their perceptions about foreign cultures. The author suggests that students use their previous knowledge to read the foreign culture. Additionally, Gómez (2012) comments on an action research experience that proposes the inclusion of authentic literary texts in the English as a foreign language classroom. The author mentions that the use of literary texts based on the implementation of four constructivist approaches was seen as a means to develop intercultural communicative competence. Álvarez and Bonilla (2009) report on a collaborative and dialogical experience that aimed at the construction of a theoretical proposal to enhance intercultural awareness and invite EFL teachers to start developing critical intercultural competence in their EFL students.

Ramos, Aguirre, and Hernández (2012) shared a pedagogical experience that aimed at integrating eleventh graders' rural context through the design of curricular units. The authors mention that aspects such as students' sense of cultural belonging and intercultural understanding were enhanced. Finally, Agudelo (2007) also shares a pedagogical experience carried out in an undergraduate foreign language program to implement an intercultural approach. The writer suggests that through this approach students became conscious of the role of culture in language teaching and thus developed critical cultural awareness.

It is clear from the above review that Colombian teachers are paying attention to intercultural competence. They are aware of the fact that the teaching of languages should go hand in hand with the understanding of students' own culture and the cultures of others. In this sense, they are creating diverse strategies to include an intercultural component in their EFL classes.

The Pedagogical Proposal

Context of the Experience

This pedagogical proposal took place at Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia in Tunja, Colombia. The program emphasizes the necessity of creating professional

foreign language educators with a broad vision of pedagogy, research, and strong communicative competence.

The name of the course in which this pedagogical proposal was implemented was Pedagogical and Research Project IV. This course emphasized the exploration of aspects related to culture and interculturality based on topics such as evaluation, assessment and testing. It gave a broad introduction to evaluation in educational research emphasizing the areas of ELT (English language teaching) practices in the Colombian context as well as in countries where English, French, and Spanish are spoken. The main purpose of this course was to help pre-service teachers in the construction of an informed theory of evaluation and to start developing intercultural awareness through topics related to education in diverse countries.

The course was developed within an average of sixty four hours during a semester which lasted sixteen weeks. Every week pre-service teachers attended two sessions which lasted two hours each. The pre-service teachers that attended the class in which this proposal was carried out had already taken courses related to EFL pedagogy and research. They mastered topics such as classroom interaction, assessment and evaluation, pedagogical paradigms, curriculum implementation, and Colombian educational policies rather quickly and well. These pre-service teachers, who were in their fifth semester in the programs described above, were the main participants and data were obtained through their discussions and reflective papers. They signed a consent form and the participants' names were not used in order to guarantee anonymity.

Objective of the Pedagogical Proposal

The main objectives of this proposal were, on the one hand, to explore aspects related to culture and interculturality based on educational topics and, on the other hand, to analyze the intercultural competence skills that pre-service teachers acquired.

Course Design

The methodology for this pedagogical experience attempted to foster global cultural consciousness. Kumaravadivelu (2007) mentions that it relates to the fact of teaching and learning not only the target culture but a cluster of cultures learners may be interested in and that can help them to understand the broader network of cultural communities. In addition, the steps proposed by Denis and Matas (2002) and Wessling (1999) were followed. They mention that an intercultural approach to education should:

- Make people conscious of their ethnocentric views: This step is related to giving the learner the possibility of being aware of his/her own ethnocentric vision about the

world. This can be done by looking into students' perceptions about the world around them.

- Make people aware of the reason why their views tend to be ethnocentric: In this step the teacher should provide students with a set of critical questions for them to start analyzing why their views are prevalently ethnocentric. This can happen through the analysis of statistics, issues that are not stereotyped, and so forth.
- Help learners contextualize situations: In this step it is expected that learners contextualize situations so that they understand that issues need to be related to their context in order to get a better understanding of them.
- Help people organize knowledge: At this stage, students should compare different situations considering the context where those situations take place. This can be done by addressing stereotypes, generalizations, and differences in cultures, and so forth.
- Draw conclusions: In this last step, learners are asked to draw conclusions based on the previous steps and try to understand why cultures are varied. This can happen by analyzing diverse points of view.

Conditions of the Implementation

The implementation consisted of a series of workshops carried out with pre-service teachers. The workshops were followed by discussions based on articles, oral presentations, and talks given by guest speakers related to education and evaluation systems in different countries.

The course was intended for students to understand evaluation in educational contexts emphasizing the areas of ELT practices. This issue was analyzed at a wide level. For example, students analyzed the differences between evaluation, assessment, and testing. They also discussed various ways of assessing and testing students and they read research reports about effective practices related to evaluation, assessment, and testing in foreign language education. The course did not intend to look at evaluation systems in different subjects, grades, learning styles, and so forth.

The program was divided into three different components: understanding theory, analyzing the evaluation process in different countries and in Colombia and writing reflective papers based on evaluation. Weeks one to five were focused on getting students acquainted with the different definitions and factors related to evaluation, assessment, and testing. In those sessions, students were expected to read the articles assigned and provide the class with insightful comments about the readings.

The second component of the course was dedicated to the analysis of the evaluation system in different countries. Before starting with this part, pre-service teachers were asked

different questions about their prior knowledge related to education in the countries to be analyzed (see Appendix 1). This stage was called *presentation of reflective questions* in order to get students aware of their ethnocentric views. The pre-service teachers were provided with some other questions to analyze the reasons why they thought in such a way and they were made aware of their ethnocentric views.

Pre-service teachers were then expected to create groups of four (maximum) and choose an English/Spanish/French speaking country about which to prepare their presentation. The idea was for them to look for information about education evaluation processes in those countries and organize an oral presentation and present an activity related to the topic. Pre-service teachers looked for information about the evaluation system of countries such as Cuba, China, Scotland, New Zealand, Nigeria, Switzerland, and Equatorial Guinea. They presented different aspects related to the country. First, they briefly introduced some generalities related to education in the country and then focused much more on the evaluation system in the country they had chosen.

In this part of the program, pre-service teachers also had the opportunity to listen to native speakers who studied under their home country regulations. It is to say that they were acquainted with the educational and evaluation system in their countries. Those guest speakers were from France, Mexico, Germany, Switzerland, the United States, England, Barbados, Jamaica, and Colombia.

Table 1 summarizes the profile of the guest speakers as well as the presentations they had in class.

The evaluation system in the countries presented was highly controversial in educational terms, as it was somehow different from our Colombian educational system. Some of the oral presentations of the guest speakers showed the connection between parents and school while others attempted to see evaluation as a process that was punitive and restrictive.

The third component was the workshops. The workshops consisted of two main parts: First, pre-service teachers were presented with questions for them to analyze and contextualize the information provided in the talks or in the oral presentations (see Appendix 2). This part was called *Reflective Questions to Contextualize Situations and Realities*. Second, pre-service teachers held a conversation about the questions and the answers provided in the workshop; those answers were discussed in small groups and finally, a debate took place.

After all three components occurred, students were asked to write a reflective paper in which they compared the educational systems in different countries based on facts, avoiding stereotypes or wrong interpretations. This step was called *Making Conclusions About Educational Issues in Diverse Countries*.

Table 1. Guest Speakers' Profile and Topics Addressed

| Country | Academic Profile | Topics Addressed in Their Presentations |
|---------------|---|---|
| France | French teacher | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Education in France (some generalities). – Evaluation system in France. – Scholarships. |
| Mexico | Psychology undergraduate student | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Education in Mexico (some similarities and differences with the Colombian educational system). – Evaluation system in Mexico. – Tuition and other fees. |
| Germany | Political science undergraduate student | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Education in Germany (some generalities). – Parents' role in education. – Evaluation system in Germany. – Similarities and differences between German and Colombian education. |
| Switzerland | Psychology undergraduate student | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Education in Switzerland (some generalities). – Evaluation system in Switzerland. – Scholarships. – Languages spoken. |
| United States | Engineering undergraduate student | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Education in the United States (some generalities). – Evaluation system in the United States. – The school system in the United States. |
| Barbados | Spanish teacher | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Education in Barbados (some generalities). – Evaluation system in Barbados. – The influence of English standards in Barbados education. |
| Jamaica | Political science undergraduate student | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Education in Jamaica (some generalities). – Evaluation system in Jamaica. – The influence of English standards in Jamaican education. |

| Country | Academic Profile | Topics Addressed in Their Presentations |
|----------|---|---|
| Colombia | English/Spanish teacher with an M.A. in language teaching | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Education in rural areas (some generalities). – Models that have been used in rural education: Unitarian Schools, Rural Development Concentration, The New School, Accelerated Learning, Rural Education Service, and the Sectorial Project for Rural Education. |

Findings

A group of 40 pre-service teachers provided the information in this study. Those students were under rigorous observation during an academic semester. During those observations, notes were taken and at the end of each session a reflection upon those observations took place. The reflections were either comments about pre-service teachers’ interactions in the workshop, questions they asked related to the topic being addressed or questions that emerged from what was observed. Besides taking notes, group discussions held in class were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. Some comments were written about the aspects that were related to intercultural communicative skills. In addition, all the pre-service teachers were interviewed and their reflective papers were read and analyzed. The comments and the questions written in each instrument focused on aspects related to intercultural communicative competence skills.

After reading the data, common patterns were found; the coding process claimed by Miles and Huberman (1994) was applied to all the instruments. The coding system was used to read the data and name the aspects that caught my attention as they were related to the development of the intercultural competence skills. Then, I reduced the data, displayed it, and verified it.

After completing a deeper reading, analysis and comparison of the information collected in the different instruments, it was evident that the pre-service teachers’ intercultural competence skills started emerging. It was found that they developed skills to interpret and contextualize cultural practices as well as to become aware of contextual complexities.

Developing Skills to Interpret and Contextualize Cultural Practices

As mentioned earlier in this paper, Byram (1997) accounts for a series of competences associated with intercultural communicative competence. One of them is related to the process of interpreting and relating. This competence aims to interpret an event, explain it and relate it

to one's context. In this pedagogical experience pre-service teachers started to compare their own culture with the foreign language culture as a way to make sense of cultural issues.

During the analysis of the information, it was found that pre-service teachers began to compare their culture with the target one using either factual data or information that was not biased. It was notable that pre-service teachers tried not to be ethnocentric but rather open to the new concepts they were learning in class. It was also observed that most of them created an atmosphere in which they could recognize their culture and the values of the other cultures. They were able to make sense of diverse events and later on could explain them and compare them with their own realities. What students were doing while comparing their own culture with the target one was a way to start interpreting new knowledge because they were aware of their own culture and they were also able to value and respect other cultures.

In the following excerpt of the final semi-structured interview, a pre-service teacher mentioned her feelings in relation to standardized tests. At the beginning, the student was asked about any topic she would like to address related to evaluation in Colombia and in other countries. After answering that a topic that really called her attention was the issue of having standardized tests: the student mentioned that standardized tests can be useful depending on the country. This sample shows how she tried to understand and explain an issue that was addressed differently in various countries.

I am going to talk about standardized testing. I think that they are, [*sic*] sometimes useful because in some countries they are necessary. Especially in those countries that offer scholarships. Here in Colombia I don't know because it is just to say if this schools is [*sic*] good or bad or if the region has a poor level. (Julian, I).¹

In the following sample, a pre-service teacher was contrasting his own reality with the reality people in Jamaica live. The significant outcome here is that this pre-service teacher was able to make meaning out of his own reality by recognizing the positive aspects of another culture. Pre-service teachers then managed to recognize the values other cultures have and based on that recognition, he proposed a solution for Colombian education to have high quality standards for everybody.

In Jamaica they are beginning to understand and use their own origin language in order to improve education. In Colombia if we do the same thing, if we begin to understand our origin languages [*sic*], we can use our culture and improve and ensure that education can be more equal for all people in Colombia. (Kelly, GD 6)

In this pedagogical proposal, it was also found that the participants indicated the need to contextualize education. This fact is related to the way they interpreted the reality of their

¹ Codes used: I=Interview, GD=Group discussion, WK=Students' workshops.

educational system. Participants emphasized the need to have equality in education. As a matter of fact, they mentioned that every country's education is different and if the comparison is between rural and urban schools, the difference is even greater. Essentially, pre-service teachers were stating that education varies greatly depending on the place students are located. They also affirm that it is not a matter of the country where people are educated but rather a matter of recognizing the differences between rural and urban education. As can be seen due to the comparisons pre-service teachers carried out, they could understand an educational issue, evaluate it and provide a solution for a problematic situation.

It happens in almost all the countries and I think it is very unfair because many students don't receive a basic education because of the social problem and their geographic position [sic]. I think that it is the biggest problem in most countries, not only in Colombia. Education is not contextualized and it is different depending on the place where it is imparted. (Albert, WK 4)

Raising Awareness of Contextual Complexities

In the previous finding, pre-service teachers showed how they interpreted an issue and how they related it to their own context. The next finding attempts to explain another intercultural skill pre-service teachers started developing. This skill relates to the fact that there was a level of social and cultural awareness in pre-service teachers. By being aware of social and cultural aspects of educational issues, pre-service teachers not only could explain cultural practices but they could evaluate those practices in a more informed way.

Byram, Gribkova, and Starkey (2002) argue that the people involved in an intercultural approach should be able to evaluate cultural issues in an informed way. It means that the evaluation of cultural aspects should be done without prejudice or stereotypes. In this sense, pre-service teachers were addressing cultural issues related to education and considering their real world situations.

The next quotations, taken from the interview that was conducted at the end of the semester, show how pre-service teachers felt they needed to analyze cultural issues by placing themselves in others' shoes. Pre-service teachers recognized it was of paramount importance to locate issues before giving an opinion about them. Similar findings were reported by Castañeda (2012). She argues that when students are provided with culture-based materials, they usually contrast their home culture with the foreign culture and in that way students can challenge home culture policies or value home or foreign cultural representations.

Maybe one way to understand the others is by understanding who they are and, where they are located; the politics behind the country where they are and trying to be in their positions [sic]. (Diana, I 2)

The fact of being able to evaluate the usefulness and the validity of standardized tests shows again that pre-service teachers developed awareness of contextual complexities. For instance, when they mentioned the need to connect the needs of the community to the education system, they demonstrated their abilities to make informed judgments. That is to say, pre-service teachers' voices were more objective considering the particularities of a given context.

The biggest problem our education has is that sometimes it is not contextualized. I am from the Amazon region and I study in Tunja. I think that Boyacá and the Amazon region are different in cultural terms. However, I do not see any difference in terms of the evaluation system. (Angela, WK 3)

Awareness of contextual complexities also emerged as a way to reflect on pre-service teachers' future agenda as languages teachers. They were thinking about how to address cultural particularities in their future teaching contexts so that their learners could understand the content of the subject and see it in a more meaningful way. In the following samples taken from the group discussions, in which pre-service teachers were asked to discuss the issue of teaching and evaluating foreign languages in their future EFL classrooms, pre-service teachers started reflecting upon the fact of really understanding the complexities of the local contexts where their students might be immersed.

I think that to teach a language implies to understand who the students I teach are. Some students go to school to have lunch because they do not have food in their house. I need to understand that part and in that way I can teach the language. (Sebastian, GD 3)

You should assess your students' performance in another language but first you need to get to know them. You cannot assess the same aspects in a vereda or in a city because students can feel nervous and not motivated [sic] Students can have the same quality in their education but from a different perspective. Students in rural schools are interested in animals, plants, etc. We, as teachers, should teach that and more based on what calls their attention in their reality. (Albert, GD 3)

Conclusions and Pedagogical Implications

The main objective of this pedagogical experience was to analyze how intercultural communicative competence skills emerged in foreign languages fifth semester pre-service teachers. It was found that they developed skills to interpret and contextualize cultural practices as well as skills to raise awareness of contextual complexities. Pre-service teachers started comparing their home culture with the target culture and such a comparison intended not to be biased or based on stereotypes but rather based on facts that showed how they were able to recognize the virtues and the problems of the other culture and their own. They also noticed the significance of analyzing contextual complexities when teaching a foreign language. In this sense, they developed cultural awareness.

In terms of the pedagogical implications, as the participants in this study are foreign languages pre-service teachers and are expected to be future languages teachers, they should

be aware of the fact that working with interculturality is something they need to be familiar with. In fact, they should foster an intercultural approach on a daily basis, specially if one considers that in the Colombian classrooms diversity is an issue teachers have to face.

Another significant implication is that an intercultural approach can help EFL learners to value their own culture. In this sense, Kumaravadivelu (2007) argues that “we generally accept and propagate stereotypes without proper reflection. There is a natural tendency among individuals and communities to portray their own culture as one that is superior” (p. 170). However, in the Colombian context, there are still students who tend to belittle their own community and stereotype and think of their own culture as inferior. In this sense, more work needs to be done by educational institutions in order to foster in students a positive identity.

The experience reported in this paper may allow students at the Teaching Languages’ programs to assume the risk of being critical and reflective observers in their culture and in the other cultures. The skills of critical reflection can be developed easily if pre-service teachers experience an intercultural approach to education in their classes. It would also help them to promote a reflective atmosphere in their future EFL classrooms.

A general trend in pre-service teachers’ reactions was an awareness of contextual complexities. This was due to the fact that they had the opportunity to explore and contrast educational issues from different perspectives. Therefore, if one wants to go deeper into the teaching of culture and intercultural communicative competence, one must guarantee that students are given the opportunity to investigate the complexities of each culture and each context.

Ariza and Viáfara (2012) assert there is the need of university undergraduate programs and exchange agencies to build a supportive framework in relation to students’ intercultural development. Consequently, this pedagogical experience aimed at creating spaces for undergraduate pre-service teachers to develop their intercultural competence. However, it is of paramount importance to understand that not only English teachers in their English classes should be implementing methodologies to develop cultural sensitivity towards students’ culture and others, but also teachers from different areas should support intercultural understanding in their classes. As such, undergraduate students and language pre-service teachers would be able to develop critical intercultural competencies that may help them succeed in any encounter with other cultures.

Finally, another issue that could be analyzed in a further study is related to the political dimension of educational testing in Colombia and the way an intercultural approach may help EFL teachers and policy makers in Colombia to analyze the way tests are designed and their real usefulness. It is a fact that tests in Colombia are not designed taking into consideration the complexities of each geographical region. Then, an intercultural perspective could provide reasons for the importance of contextualizing not only education but also testing.

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Appendix 1: Questions About Students' Prior Knowledge

1. What do you know about this country?
2. Where is it located?
3. What language do people in this country speak?
4. What do you know about education in this country?
5. What have you heard about people from this country?
6. Are all people in this country professional?
7. Which are some similarities people from Colombia share with people from that country?
8. Which are some differences people from Colombia share with people from that country?

Appendix 2: Sample of a Workshop

Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia Pedagogical and Research Project IV

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. Read the following proverb:

Before I judge someone, let me walk a mile in their shoes. Maria Fontaine

What does the proverb mean for you?

2. Based on the reading about Jamaica, on your partners' presentation, and on the speech given by the guest speaker from Jamaica, do the following task:

Put a tick [✓] for those characteristics you think are either very, quite, fairly, or non-relevant in Jamaica. Then, based on your answers, provide a suitable explanation for your answer.

| Characteristic | Non | Fairly | Quite | Very | Explanation |
|--|----------|--------|-------|------|-------------|
| | Relevant | | | | |
| 1. Parents and teachers can work cooperatively to assess students. | | | | | |
| 2. Testing restricts educational experiences and penalizes the disadvantaged students. | | | | | |
| 3. The best way to evaluate students comes from a top-down approach. | | | | | |
| 4. Textbooks are evaluated by the government before they are used at any school. | | | | | |
| 5. Tests are used to gain access to scholarships. | | | | | |

| Characteristic | Non | Fairly | Quite | Very | Explanation |
|--|----------|--------|-------|------|-------------|
| | Relevant | | | | |
| 6. The best evaluation system is based on international standards. | | | | | |
| 7. Parents select in which school to enroll their children based on the institution's performance on district and national examinations. | | | | | |
| 8. National evaluation systems evaluate students as if they receive the same type of education. | | | | | |
| 9. National examinations are the gateway for higher secondary education and for jobs. | | | | | |

Now, in groups of four people, share your answers and complete the following chart:

| Similarities | Differences | Explanation |
|--------------|-------------|-------------|
| | | |