# Intercultural Competence: Another Challenge

## Competencia intercultural: otro desafío

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This paper intends to draw the attention of language teachers and educational authorities to the area of culture teaching in foreign language education at a time when the recently issued Basic Standards of Competencies in Foreign Language have conferred modest attention to this aspect of language education. The paper first describes the notion of Intercultural communicative competence. It then discusses the tensions between this new understanding of the teaching of culture and the prevailing teaching practices, approaches, beliefs and discourses associated with the learning and teaching of culture. Third, it reports on the results of a study which critically analyzed the academic discourses of in-service teachers in Colombia regarding the cultural component of foreign language programs; finally, it proposes ways to start taking new directions.

*Key words:* Intercultural competence, standards, culture, culture teaching, ideologies, discourses

El presente artículo intenta llamar la atención de maestros y autoridades educativas sobre el área de la enseñanza de la cultura en lenguas extranjeras en un momento en el que los recientemente publicados Estándares Básicos de Competencias en Lenguas Extranjeras - Inglés prestan modesta atención a este aspecto. Primero se describe la noción de competencia comunicativa intercultural. Luego se discuten las tensiones entre este nuevo concepto de la enseñanza de la cultura y las prácticas de enseñanza, los enfoques, creencias y discursos asociados con el aprendizaje y la enseñanza de la cultura. Se reportan también los resultados de un estudio que analiza críticamente los discursos académicos de profesores colombianos acerca del componente cultural en la enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras. Finalmente, se proponen formas de iniciar nuevos rumbos.

*Palabras clave:* Competencia intercultural, estándares, cultura, enseñanza de la cultura, ideologías, discursos

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## Introduction

With the likely increase in intercultural contacts in the future as well as of the changing educational demands following technological developments, it appears that the need to rethink the concept of teaching for 'communicative competence in a foreign language' is more pressing than ever.

Though it has for some time been accepted that communicative competence involves more than the mastery of a language's grammar and lexis, and that the sociolinguistic and pragmatic components are an essential part of it, educators have found themselves with a limited notion of culture and culture teaching within the communicative approach. Sociocultural competence, the cultural component in the notion of communicative competence, refers to "how to express messages appropriately within the overall social and cultural context of communication" (Celce-Murcia, 1995, p. 701) and it "represents the speaker/listener's background knowledge of the target community" (p. 703). A table in which Celce-Murcia summarizes the components of the communicative competence as conceptualized by 1995 presents culture competence in brackets. The interest was mainly on speech acts, language functions, and register variation. The communicative approach focuses on the target culture norms, and often treats the regulation of interaction as a fixed body of knowledge. Students in this approach learn how to greet, invite, and request information, but these verbal functions are many times not sufficiently contextualized. More recent insights from communication theory have revealed that successful communication between individuals from different cultural backgrounds can be conditioned, also, by the interaction between partners' *intercultural competence.*

Most of the models developed recently seem to coincide in emphasizing the importance of learners' awareness of own culture, an understanding of the relations between language and culture, and in providing insights into ways to explore, analyze and compare cultures (Paige, Jorstad, Siaya, Klein & Colby, 1999; Bennett, 1993; Kramsch, 1993).

If foreign language and culture teaching intends to prepare learners for the future, it needs to contribute to promoting learners' acquisition of the attitudes and skills required for interacting with people from differing cultural and linguistic backgrounds. It needs to present learners with opportunities to acquire plurilingual and multicultural competence.

This paper is a critical review of the tensions between recent developments in the field of culture and language teaching and learning towards designing a learner-oriented curriculum for the acquisition of intercultural communicative competence, as well as current foreign language and culture teaching practices. First, it briefly describes Byram's model for communicative intercultural competence; second, it discusses some of the factors that contribute to this perceived tension; third, it reports on a study which analyzed the academic discourses of in-service teachers regarding the cultural component of foreign language education; and finally, it proposes ways to start taking new directions.

## Byram's Model of Communicative Intercultural Competence

One of the most influential approaches for the teaching of culture is the one developed by Byram and his European colleagues. Intercultural competence, a part of Byram's intercultural communicative competence, entails five types of competencies, which he calls 'savoirs'. The competence has two preconditions. One is in

terms of *knowledge* (*savoirs*) about the foreign society and social processes, about self and other, and about interaction and all that goes into it in a given situation. The other precondition is in terms of *attitude (savoir être)*. This refers to features like openness, flexibility, empathy, awareness of others, and the ability to relativize one's perspective and overcome dysfunctions and resistances, all of which allow establishing and maintaining relationships with other cultures.

Intercultural competence also involves two skills. *Savoir comprendre* means the ability to interpret, compare and contrast texts and events. The other skill is savoir *apprendre,* which is the ability "to analyze data from one's own country as well as from another and the potential relationships between them" (p. 33 in Ware, 2003, p. 69). Finally, *savoir s'engager* is a central subcompetency which draws on all the others and implies the development of critical political cultural awareness; that is, awareness of one's own values, how they influence one's view of others, a relativization of what is apparently natural, and an orientation towards action.

The notion of intercultural competence or competencies in foreign language teaching, according to Neuner (1997), should not be considered a new method of teaching, but a more comprehensive view of communicative competence that goes beyond functional or mere pragmatic aspects of foreign language use and that recognizes that FL teaching has to do with development of the personal and social identities of the learners. Byram (1989) and Alfred & Byram (2002) referred to this type of competence in terms of tertiary socialization, which ideally should comprise part of the foreign language learning experience. It is about socializing with the norms of behavior, beliefs and values of another culture; it should also help learners to integrate other modes of thinking into the schemata, beliefs and concepts acquired during first and second socializations; it should develop the ability to live and grow in a multicultural environment.

## Challenges in Foreign Language and Culture Teaching Practices

The cultural aims of foreign language teaching in the sense proposed by Byram do not seem to have been met. One of the reasons mentioned in the literature is the absence of systematic methodology for helping learners get knowledge, develop attitudes, awareness or insights (Wright, 1996). But, in fact, the new notion is complex, subjective, relative and requires more than methods. Here are some of the difficulties:

### A Superficial View of Culture

Culture has often been viewed as the fifth skill (Kramsch, 1993); that is, it has been considered as separate from language, and it has consisted of teaching big C culture (literary classics, works of art) and/or small *c* culture or the culture of the four *Fs*: foods, fairs, folklore, and statistical facts (Kramsch, 1991). The concept of intercultural competence requires relevant knowledge, skills and attitudes for intercultural encounters for which most teachers may not be prepared. In our context teachers have practically no opportunities to go abroad long enough to get real experience in the target culture(s). Additionally, a widespread structuralist approach to language teaching or misconceptions about the teaching of communicative competence attach occupy a secondary place for culture teaching. Furthermore, cultures have been assumed to be fixed and homogenous and what is taught and evaluated is usually facts that can be easily presented by teachers and learnt by

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students. Textbooks adopted by institutions that teach foreign languages are rarely evaluated in terms of how they promote the development of intercultural competence. A review by Paige et al. (1999) indicated that students were satisfied with the culture as knowledge approach, partly because they know what to study and how to obtain good marks. A change of approach definitely destabilizes current learning situations and it is understandable if teachers do not want to assume it.

Language Programs and the Light Approach

Although there is acceptance of the idea of the need for integration of culture and language in many foreign language departments, what one finds is domination and division between language and literature (Steele, 1996). Culture is not seen as an equally important aspect. Cultural competence has not been defined and operationalized in a straightforward way, as many teachers would like to have it. Moreover, programs usually have limited time, so, for many it is rather difficult to include a new component and develop it within the same time limits. This is especially true when there are public discourses popularizing a pragmatic view of language, according to which it is possible to learn a language in a few days, enjoyably, almost effortlessly and be successful in business, negotiations, etc. (Steele, 1996). Teachers are then faced with the challenge of making culture teaching enjoyable but critical enough (Kramsch, 1993). Besides, learning a foreign language is associated with 'survival' (Wright, 1996) skills, which means that the language is learnt for tourism or short encounters with no transcendence. These approaches are not likely to challenge ethnocentric attitudes and do not contribute to making education a pillar for "learning to live together" as proposed by the Report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-First century (Delors, 1996). Peaceful coexistence on the planet relies on how all human beings are prepared to interact with others, understand the point of view of the other, see it as different from one's own, but also on being able to suspend negative judgment and find "third places" where mutual recognition and respect results from the interaction. Foreign language education has a crucial role to play in making conflicts less likely to happen, in making human interactions less confrontational, more constructive and mutually reinforcing.

## The Need to Change the Paradigm

Educating the intercultural speaker means for the teacher and student to move from what Sifakis (2004) calls the traditional N-bound perspective, with its emphasis on norms, standards and regularities, into C-bound approaches that focus on perception of language, attitudes, values, belief systems, and behaviors in order to stress cross-cultural comprehensibility among learners as a communicative goal. For many, learning a foreign language means learning the language of an idealized educated class which speaks a 'standard' variant (see also Saville-Troike, 2003). This stands in contradiction with what your learners are usually interested in. They are more into urban culture and its manifestations as seen in musical videos and movies. Especially concerning the teaching of English, the challenge is to teach it as an intercultural language; that is, as one that has many variants (cf. Byram & Feng, 2005) and is spoken by people that are the 'owners' of English as much as the learner him/herself. The task is to help students understand that the interaction that takes place between interlocutors is in reality far from the ideal norm taught inside N-bound classrooms (the idea that every communicative

situation engages interlocutors differently, constructs and makes different uses of context, and thus is not regularized or normativized).

Part of the challenge to change the current paradigm has to do with the requirement in Byram's model of intercultural competence to link foreign language education with a social, political and ethical enterprise. A number of foreign language educators (Byram & Feng, 2005; Guilherme, 2002; Reagan & Osborn, 2002) are arguing for citizenship education, which means "critical engagement with one's own position in society and an awareness of the wider forces to which all of us as individuals are responding" (Giddens, 2000, p. 25 in Guilherme, 2002, p. 162). This dimension in Byram's model is in fact related to the deepest meaning of education, especially in the modern world with high levels of mobility and intercultural exchanges. The ultimate goal of all these exchanges should be the possibility of communicating in order to construct a better world. Not only do teachers now have to teach culture facts, skills to interact, and positive attitudes, but they also have to develop commitment to the education of citizens that are "reflective, critical, sensitive and committed to issues of human suffering and dignity both at local and global levels (Wringe, 1984 cited in Guilherme, 2002, p. 165)". It implies that we, as teachers ourselves, have to change.

### Assessment

There is no clear answer about how to assess intercultural competence. Paige *et al.* (1999) found challenges related to what to assess in culture, which and whose criteria to use, how to avoid homogenized views of a foreign language culture and stereotypes, and what tasks to design for culture assessment. Sercu (2004) developed a framework for systematic test development in intercultural competence in which he deals with how issues such as validity, reliability, and authenticity need to be accounted for in assessing culture. However, he does not present either a concrete instrument or a list of criteria or rubric. It seems that the assessment of culture will always be imbued with subjectivity. The following are some of the challenges of the assessment of culture: teachers often rely on their own experiences to make judgments related to culture; there is a positivistic tradition in testing which does not agree with the nature of the competence; there is little interdisciplinary research and collaboration; and the evaluator needs to be flexible in accepting students' own interpretations, which, at the same time, would go against the concept of objective, reliable testing (Paige *et al.*, 1999). This is even more challenging for many teachers in Colombia. Most of them have never been abroad: They may not have experienced the challenge of interacting with a representative of another culture in the cultural context of the interlocutor. These teachers may not know embarrassment when dealing with other cultures, for example. These teachers may have never been culturally challenged!

Other important questions are whether the strategies proposed in class and used for solving or describing an intercultural encounter should be the ones considered correct or adequate; whether education should prescribe attitudes; whether intercultural competence should be evaluated separately from linguistic competence; whether the "saviors" can function independently, one from the other and, lastly, how levels of intercultural competence can be defined (Sercu, 2004; Byram, Morgan et al., 2004). Or, even more general, whether culture should be assessed by the teacher or by the students themselves (Damen, 1987).

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## Technologization of Discourse Teaching

Another problem derives from the tendency to technologize approaches. For example, Fantini (1997, cited in De Capua & Wintergerst, 2004) has developed a seven-stage process which addresses a number of aspects of intercultural competence such as presentation of material, control practice, grammar rule explanation, less controlled production, exploring sociolinguistic interrelationships, assessment of appropriateness, and cross-cultural comparisons. The mechanization of the teaching of culture can lead to routinizing processes, mechanization of answers and stereotyped ways to explain cultures and cross-cultural encounters. Moments in the class that can be used for developing intercultural competence can arise unexpectedly and the teacher will need to be able to handle them without ready-made recipes. This inclusion of technology in the teaching of culture can also be identified in the popularity of cultural primers; that is, handbooks explaining foreign cultures for business relations. It has been found that these primers are more likely to construct or solidify negative stereotypes of the target culture because of the mechanistic simplification of the target culture (Boehringer & Preece, 2002 cited in Boehringer, Gongartz & Gramberg, 2004). Many times, however, information about countries that are more developed economically fosters idealization of the culture of those countries.

## Fallacy of Technology

A great challenge is posed by the spread of modern technology. One aspect was described by Kramsch (1991) at a time when the Internet was not so common or integrated with FL learning. She pointed out how television creates the illusion of immediate mediation among cultures. A number of countries and cultures are presented today in commercial movies, television

programs, popular icons, etc. However, these programs are presented without any distancing or perspective-taking from national culture. This can lead to the stereotyping of other cultures (although this is also true for the American culture(s) as presented in other countries) and the belief that one already knows what the Spanish, Arab or Chinese speaking world is like, without really experiencing any part of it.

A study by Ware (2003) demystifies the potential of on-line communication per se for the development of intercultural competence. He found that the foreign language learners in his study were more concerned with communicative competence than with intercultural competence. Although the students were involved in conversation, they were 'disengaged'; that is, they missed opportunities to engage in cultural understanding such as they did not exhibit critical inquiry or willingness to suspend judgment, they did not take risks, stay emotionally involved or view culture as language.

## Textbooks

In general, there is a shortage of textbooks that can deal appropriately with the challenge of teaching culture for the new demands. After all, as Lafayette (1997) argues, textbooks are not designed to change the teaching of foreign language. A review by Paige *et al.* (1999) concluded that the information in textbooks is biased, fragmented, limited and simplistic. It is argued, however, that important as authenticity of texts may be (Galloway, 1997; García, 1997), what matters is what is done in the classroom with the texts. Moreover, as Feng & Byram (2002, cited in Byram & Feng, 2005) argue, inauthentic context need not be an obstacle because it can be pedagogically treated, it can encourage students to discuss the discourses, the context, and intended meanings,

for example. Thus, what matters then depends to a large extent on the teacher.

### Teachers' Competence

The types of activities that Kramsch (1993) proposes for the development of intercultural competence demand that the teachers possess deep and wide knowledge of language and culture. The new vision of culture teaching indicates the need for teachers to enlarge their philological or literary focus and to gain knowledge and perspective from other disciplines like anthropology, sociology, history, semiotics, etc., in order to be able to discuss culture and do contrastive analyses (Kramsch, 1991). "It is mistaken to assume that teachers can competently provide explanations of complex issues to their students by simply drawing on text information and personal experience" (Byram & Feng, 2005, p. 914).

### Teacher Beliefs and Methodologies

Teacher development in matters of culture teaching, in fact, poses a key challenge. While there seems to be very little known about what actually happens in the classroom in regard to the cultural component of communicative competence (Paige et al., 1999), it is clear, however, that teacher beliefs are an important variable in the teaching of culture. A study by Klein (2004) about teachers' beliefs as regards culture and culture teaching showed that the participants in her study had a vague conceptualization of culture and of the relation between culture and language. For them culture learning meant basically knowledge of facts about the target culture and gains in tolerance and understanding. They considered culture learning as an automatic process, especially in immersion experiences.

Klein's study also showed that culture materials are used as opportunities for language practice and that discussions are done at a superficial level, which leads to the reification of facts which students had to learn. Students in her study were never asked to question their assumptions and sometimes stereotypes were reinforced. Two methodological features that may be characteristic of a number of teachers were 1) the translation into L1 when explanation about cultural connotation was required of a word or expression and 2) that in cultural discussions the procedure was for the teacher to ask for a description of the understanding of an event, passage or issue, and then to ask about the opinion of that phenomenon. That is, the intermediate stage of Interpretation from the perspective of the target culture was skipped. The findings by Klein highlight the need for teacher training.

### Discourses

Finally, one apparently minor issue but which can be of great importance is the following: In order to change the perspective of teaching culture, it seems necessary to start by questioning the way culture, language and the relation between language and culture are all talked about. The conduit metaphor for language is still largely used even by those scholars that try to give guidelines for foreign, bilingual and second language teacher education and culture training (e.g. De Capua & Wintergerst, 2004). Statements like "language is the primary medium for transmitting among its speakers a culture's beliefs, values, norms, and worldview" (p. 25), would solidify the general belief that information is shunted and/or transmitted, as if through a pipe, from one person to another. Metaphors like "language and communication are more than words and grammar; they are also a reflection of the cultural and social context of the speakers"

(p. 69) could encourage a mechanistic view of the relation between language and culture.

## FL and Culture Teaching: What Some Academic Discourses Convey

The discussion so far has focused on general difficulties related to the teaching of the cultural component of foreign language and the development of intercultural communication as described by scholars in other contexts, especially Europe and North America. While their descriptions of the challenges seem to apply to a number of contexts around the world, it is necessary to have a closer look at the situation in Colombia. In this section I will provide examples of how the culture dimension and its teaching in Foreign Language programs are represented across 20 monographs of in-service teachers upon completion of a one-year teacher development course in English Language Teaching. Each monograph is approximately 80 double-spaced pages long. Altogether the corpus examined is made up of about 400,000 words. In the monographs, the teacher writers describe the process of collecting information about the needs of a specific teaching context and the design of a course as well as of a sample of the materials that would meet the identified needs of the teaching situation. The brackets after each excerpt indicate the number of the monograph (e.g. T1 means Text 1) and the page number from which the excerpt was extracted.

### Culture is Seldom Defined

Target Language Culture is defined in one of the works analyzed: "The traditions and culture of the country whose language is being studied" (T20: 124). Notice the ambiguous and static representation conveyed in this definition.

### Culture Knowledge is not a Usual Goal

In general, though the notion of culture is found multiple times in most of the monographs, it is not discussed and is rarely considered a goal to be attained in the courses designed. One of the writers practically discarded the cultural aspects of the language as a valid objective for language learning today.

> Previously, learning a foreign language was a cultural or an academic issue; at that moment, learning English became the only tool to have access to the information in the different fields that were transforming the world (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987) (T16: 4).

### Intercultural Competence is Automatically Achieved

The notion of intercultural competence is found very few times in the writings and is never defined. One assumption is that intercultural competence or awareness is achieved almost automatically together with linguistic competence and the earlier the language is taught the better.

> Moreover, the General Law of Education also cites the access to science, technique and research, especially in articles 3, 5, 22, 23, 31 and 91 where comprehension and the capacity of expressing ideas in a foreign language is considered an objective of basic education because through the knowledge of the language students have the opportunity to achieve an intercultural competence (T5: 3).

> The hope is that early childhood exposure to another language within a "natural environment" will facilitate the students' speaking and understanding abilities when they study it further. In this way, they might develop an early consciousness of culture and of the diversity of human beings (T1: 4).

> Linguistic competence and cultural awareness go hand in hand; and both are vital necessities for today's children (T11: 15).

Access, presumably understood as contact with others, seems to be the alleged cultural aim in several texts. Some of these discourses represent the learners of the foreign language as outsiders and the users as if locked and protected. An alternative view would represent both the learner and the representative of the target culture as interested in intercultural exchanges and both making efforts to engage in successful communication.

> I am referring to the English Teaching – Learning Process, not only because English is one of the most spoken languages in the world, but also because it allows you to have access to technology, to other cultures and to professional success (T15: 10).

> […] because thanks to the use of the language and new technologies, learners can <u>access</u> lots of cultures (T5: 9).

## Culture as Context and Established Norms of Interaction

In other monographs, culture is the context and sociocultural norms, important variables to construct meanings and communicate appropriately.

> Words also change meaning according to the culture in which they are expressed and students should be aware of this. Even in our own language, expressions or words change their meaning according to the area in which they are being said or written. In a foreign language, the meaning or the appropriateness of the words or expressions varies from the ones in our first language context (T2: 44).

> Further, when working with oral proficiency, social cultural norms are of prime importance because they enhance the communicative competence when speaking the target language. They consist of formal and informal ways to address others (T6: 27).

## Respect and Understanding as The Goal of Culture Teaching

On the other hand, [name of institution] has its own Institutional Educational Project (PEI) which searches for the development of communicative competences to use the language as a medium of communication to exchange knowledge, understand and respect other cultures (T20: 4).

> The program goal for students is to acquire command of a second language and to understand other cultures because globalisation is part of our world; therefore, communication also turns global (T9: 9).

## Culture as A Homogenous and Teachable Object

In the examples below the writers not only imply that there is an English culture and that the purpose is to learn 'about' that culture, but also that countries where English has been traditionally established as the official means of communication have one homogeneous and stable culture.

> The English program encompasses literature, grammar, listening, speaking and writing; and the material used in the different grades gives students opportunities to learn about English culture and make connections between and across subject areas (T17: 4).

> […] the institution wants to generate leadership and cultural transformation in its students, teaching them not only the culture of countries whose native language is English, but respect for their own culture as well. This way, the school educates citizens who value their own identity, while keeping a global vision (T11: 5).

## Ideological Representation of Interlocutors

Though concrete interlocutors for the users of English are not often found in the texts, these were often represented as native English speakers.

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Those people in the context are all teenagers who have to be trained for job situations at tourist settings where they will have to deal with native speakers of the target language (T6 Ap Ln: 26).

Since they are going to be involved in personal interactions with foreigners in a tourist environment, it is necessary (according to the results) that the students receive very good instruction in the understanding of *the American culture* as regards the tourist situations (T6 Res: 14).

These discourses imply that there are certain cultures that are worth studying presumably because the learners will be dealing exclusively with their representatives. This certainly leaves out the greater part of the potential international interlocutors and their cultures.

The limited representation of potential interlocutors may be influenced by wider ideologies at the institutional level regarding who Colombians need to or should establish communication with. In the following example the teacher endorses her school's initiative to encompass wider cultural goals for the students. This initiative includes respect for two types of culture: their own culture and that of "native English countries".

On the other hand, considering education as a long-term process, *the institution leaders want* to generate leadership and cultural transformation in their students, *teaching them not only the culture of native English countries*, but respect for their own culture as well. This way, the school educates citizens who value their own identity, while keeping a global vision (T11: 4).

Associated with the ideology that learners of English are to interact with the representatives of the "native English countries" is the idea that native speakers are the prototype of the English users.

[…] the EFL student needs abundant, authentic *models of native speech* (T6: 19).

It is very important that students have opportunities to develop strategies for interpreting *language as it is actually used by native speakers* (T17: 28).

In the case of English, one of the purposes of developing intercultural communicative competence should be, precisely, to enable and encourage communication with wider communities across the planet, to leave aside the idea that there are owners of the language and outsiders, or that there are encounters with certain individuals who are superior to others. Some discourses seem to suggest that advanced levels of competence are necessary if interaction is likely to take place with native speakers.

There is concern about their command of English; some are worried about their ability to speak to and listen to people, so *they want to be on an advanced level of interaction due to the fact that they would probably be in touch with native speakers* and that the abilities mentioned above are definitely of help (T4: 12).

This type of categorization of communities and individuals strongly opposes the ideals of harmonious co-existence in a multicultural world. The discourses contribute to consolidating the current tendency to downgrade the relevance of what happens in certain latitudes and hemispheres of the planet, to ignore the variety of cultures within English-speaking countries, to disregard the increasing number of non-native speakers who are using English for international communication, and to assume that the world is the English-speaking world. Perhaps this has to do with a limited (Western-centered) conception of the world.

### Discomfort with Unfamiliar Cultural Material/Facts

One idea found in four works is that instructional materials that reflect or depict other

cultures and not Colombian or Latin American ones are deficient or not interesting enough.

> In regard to cultural aspects, the material seems to be culturally biased in the sense that *topics (sports) like cricket may not be common for a student or appealing* (T18: 25).

> As said before, *readings are culturally oriented* to different ethnic social groups with easy to read paragraphs that may *not be of adolescents' interest* (T20: 22).

> The presentation of the units is good; lots of white space, pictures; the colors of the cover may not be motivating, though. Also, the choice of cultural aspects is quite good, but *there are no local references*. The context and illustrations are biased (only Americans and Asian people). They may make students feel like aliens, culturally speaking (T4: 23).

There is not a uniform representation of the relation between language and culture, of what the cultural dimension is or should be in the teaching of a language and what the concrete achievements for foreign language teaching should be in terms of cultural gains. More often than not culture is an important and necessary aspect to mention when talking about English and English teaching. These verbalizations, however, do not find concrete implementation when it comes to the design of the courses and the materials. In Text 20, for example, the author, after stating the importance of intercultural development proposed by the Curricular Guidelines emanating from the Ministry of Education, soon switches to the urgency of preparing learners to get good scores on the standardized test that high school students must take before entering any higher education institution and he stays with it. This exam, as the teacher writes, is about reading comprehension, not intercultural competence.

> It is very important, too, to keep in mind the main objective of the Lineamientos Curriculares which intend that Colombian students learn the language as a *medium of intercultural development*, a tool to build knowledge and mainly as a means of acquiring specialized information in different fields that could help us in our scientific, technological and commercial development, and according to this objective, high school students must be prepared for the ICFES national exam which is rather oriented to reading comprehension.

> Considering these aspects it is necessary to design a course in which students should be able to develop reading comprehension abilities as a medium of knowledge acquisition and the development of communicative skills such as speaking and listening through reading that enable them to be prepared for the ICFES examination (T20: 16-17).

While some teachers seem to entirely neglect the inclusion of teaching culture or developing intercultural competence, others make statements in the Course Design section of their monographs, which could make the reader believe there is still some preoccupation for culture. For the author of Monograph 1, culture was not an aspect to mention in the entire text until approaching the description of the materials she designed. She wrote:

> The role of these materials is summarized as follows:
>
> - Attract students' attention
>
> - Engage students with other universal cultures
> (T1 Cd Met: 40).

Interestingly, culture-teaching is not a goal or topic discussed in her writing, but she seems to expect that this culture component will, nevertheless, be present in her course because she selected readings in English which deal with people, events and problems in other countries. It is clear, however, that whatever is achieved is not really central to her purposes, but more likely a 'side-effect'.

Conclusions

The features of the challenges facing the development of intercultural competence and the seemingly narrow and often ideological views on culture and culture teaching in the discourses of in-service teachers point to the need to address the topic seriously, especially in view of the recent publication of Standards for English teaching in the country.

Much as the *Basic Standards of Foreign Language Competencies in Colombia* was worked out following the European model, the concept of intercultural communicative competence did not find a place in it, and, in general, the cultural component was relegated to occupy an insignificant position. Students up to 8th grade are meant to recognize cultural elements (big and small c approach) and in 10th and 11th grades they should be encouraged to construct *their* interpretation of others' identity and "appreciate the value of the English-speaking culture (note the singular)". (Estándares Básicos de Competencias en Lenguas Extranjeras - Inglés, 2006, p. 26). [1]

If English in our country, as advertised today, is a basic skill from which to construct success and one that is going to "insert the country in the processes of universal communication, the global economy and the cultural opening" (Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo cited in Estándares Básicos de Competencias en Lenguas Extranjeras - Inglés, 2006), there is a need to think together about how we want to represent ourselves in interacting with other cultures, how we represent

other cultures in the foreign language classroom, what are the types of interactions that we would like to engage in and in which contexts. This effort implies that conferences, symposia, seminars and other academic events should be organized within the country to discuss these issues, to think together about how to incorporate the cultural dimension into the curricula or even in the national standards, how to evaluate it, to share and assess the larger or discrete attempts at developing intercultural competence. International events within the country would bring together representatives of different cultures and have them interact in an environment where there is no superior culture, but where, perhaps, a new, hybrid one can be constructed on the bases of mutual recognition and understanding.

If these decisions are not taken, we will continue reading and hearing myths about what English can do for the country and its citizens. We do not need to consider ourselves the Other, the outsiders, the backward, the different. Neither do we need to think that the entire world speaks English, or that there is such a thing as "*the* English-speaking culture".

The importance of foreign language education then could lie in preparing citizens to have more flexible views of the Other and of the Self and in the attempt at having more mutually reinforcing encounters. This is especially true of Colombia which is a multicultural country. This issue, however, is hardly tackled in day-to-day English classrooms. And instead, it is a superficial approach to the teaching of culture that prevails.

The task of the English teacher is multifarious: teaching about the cultures of English speaking people, thus helping students gain understanding of their own culture; contributing to the understanding and appreciation of different world views conveyed through the foreign language

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1 From the official document: Grados 8 a 9. Lectura: Identifico elementos culturales presentes en textos sencillos (p. 24); Conversación: demuestro que reconozco elementos de la cultura extranjera y los relaciono con mi cultura (p. 25). Grados 10 a 11. Lectura: en un texto identifico los elementos que me permiten apreciar los valores de la cultura anglohablante (p. 26). Monólogos: opino sobre los estilos de vida de la gente de otras culturas, apoyándome en textos escritos y orales previamente estudiados (p. 27).

and the cultural practices associated with groups that speak the foreign language; helping students compare these cultures and their own culture; establishing relationships between the cultural practices and products of peoples around the world; and envisioning possible mutually enriching encounters with representatives of other cultures. It is not possible to make concrete proposals for measures that work across contexts; rather, one should start from the perspective of the specific learning context and decide on sensible things to do, considering factors like time, resources, goals of the program, teachers' competencies, etc. An awareness raising approach from within, led by committed enthusiastic and eager-to-know-more teachers, could help. Needless to say, the teaching of intercultural competence should be an area in the curriculum of undergraduate language education.

Depending on the state of the art in a specific place, one could argue that one or several of the following measures should be undertaken:

- Exploration of the concept of culture and intercultural competence. Though undoubtedly a step in the right direction if included in English language programs, it is necessary to move beyond the teaching of cultural products or the 4 Fs approach (see above). Interdisciplinary work with disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, economics, and the arts could give special impetus to the cultural component in language programs or in language teacher education programs.

- Re-examination of the images of the foreign cultures. Research into how certain foreign cultures are idealized and even worshipped (while others are discarded) by language teachers is urgently needed. It is particularly important to have young people reflect on the economic strings attached to the export of cultural products and icons, especially concerning the multi-billion dollar entertainment business and to explore other less advertised but equally important aspects of the cultural life of other communities.

- Problematizing the stereotypes and the smooth representation of intercultural encounters in the textbooks. Dialogues and conversations seldom include the misunderstandings, frustrations and resentments that often arise when individuals from different backgrounds, expectations, values and world views come together. Learning to communicate in a second language must include dealing with the unexpected, coping with uncertainties, acting in flexible manners, and de-centralizing one's own perspective.

- Development of syllabi that integrate language and culture with special focus on contrastive analysis of behaviours, responses, reactions, and values of individuals from different cultures.

- Development of materials conducive to culture teaching as well as assessment criteria and instruments.

- Capitalizing on the study abroad experiences of Colombians who travel as part of the educational experience of their curricula.

- It is essential to renew efforts towards teacher education with a strong component of reflection on culture, cultural encounters, the relation between language and culture and focus on the knowledge, skills and attitudes that are part of intercultural competence.

- More research about culture teaching, learning and evaluation. We need to abandon the consumerist approach, carry out our own research and socialize it within the academic community. Teachers should be encouraged to venture into the unexplored land of teach-

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ing and evaluate the cultural component of a class. Considering the current state of confrontation and vulnerability as well as fragility of citizens in the country, we may profit from research leading to suggesting better ways of communicating. The study of ways in which intercultural communication can alienate or include, empower or disempower some individuals or groups of people should result in raised awareness among learners of the importance of responsible use of the language.

- Organization of national conferences on the topic; encouragement of the production and publication of working papers dealing with this specific aspect of foreign language teaching.

Educational authorities should consider the serious inclusion of a cultural component in the standardized examinations. Given the perceived washback of these exams in the country, they may prompt interest and research on these issues.

Equally important is the need to formulate concrete standards regarding the development of intercultural competencies so as to orient teachers regarding the knowledge and abilities their students need to develop in order to become efficient communicators and "insert the country in the processes of universal communication, in the global economy and cultural openness" (Estándares básicos de competencias en lenguas extranjeras: Inglés", 2006).

For the language teacher interested in the topic, one could propose a systematic examination of his or her own teaching practices. Some of the issues to put under scrutiny are as follows: What is the role of culture in the class? What is favored cultural knowledge, skills, attitudes? How is it taught? What kinds of interactions are favored in the class? Whose opinions are valued? How are the Others represented and spoken about (or spoken to if that is the case)? Is difference considered and discussed? What is the role of conflict and misunderstanding? How is that dealt with? What are the opportunities missed? Such observations should be followed by reflection and action towards change in small steps. One could also propose that teachers be required (and funded) to study abroad and do ethnographic studies, for example, which would include interviewing, describing, analyzing, interpreting and reporting the culture and intercultural encounters, challenges, disappointments and successes.

Beyond immediate pragmatic considerations, the teaching of foreign language in general should contribute towards the general achievement of better relationships among human beings on earth for the mutual benefits of all who interact in order to make our planet a better place to live.

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