

Teachers' Perceptions on the Integration of Intercultural Training in Pre-service Teacher Education at the ENSC

Perceptions des enseignants sur l'intégration de la formation interculturelle dans la formation des enseignants à l'ENSC

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Abstract

Over the last two decades or so, the field of foreign language teaching has witnessed a shift towards intercultural education. Educators are no longer concerned with merely enhancing learners' language proficiency and communicative abilities, but also with developing their intercultural communicative competence (ICC). The present paper aims at investigating teachers' perceptions towards the integration of intercultural training in English as a foreign language curricula at the Teachers' Training School of Constantine (ENSC). The ultimate goal of such a training is to prepare pre-service teachers to deal with interculturality in their future teaching at middle or secondary school settings. In order to gather relevant data, a questionnaire was administered to twelve English language teachers from the ENSC. The findings revealed a consensus among the respondents of the necessity of integrating the intercultural dimension in pre-service teachers' training, who, in turn, would be responsible for transmitting ICC knowledge and skills to teenagers or adolescents in need of critical cultural awareness, tolerance and respect towards others, and an understanding of oneself and others.

Keywords: Intercultural communicative competence, intercultural education, intercultural training, ENSC teachers, pre-service teachers

Resumé

Les deux dernières décennies ont montré que le domaine de l'enseignement des langues étrangères a été marqué par une évolution vers l'éducation interculturelle. Les éducateurs ne s'intéressent plus seulement par l'amélioration des capacités de communication des apprenants, mais aussi par le développement de leur compétence de communication interculturelle. Cet article a pour but d'examiner les perceptions des enseignants vis-à-vis de l'intégration de la formation interculturelle dans les programmes de l'enseignement de l'Anglais comme langue étrangère à l'école normale supérieure de Constantine (ENSC). L'objectif ultime de la formation est la préparation des futurs enseignants à aborder l'interculturalité dans leur pratique pédagogique dans l'enseignement moyen ou secondaire. Pour pouvoir recueillir des données pertinentes, un questionnaire a été distribué à douze professeurs d'Anglais de l'ENSC. Les résultats révèlent un consensus sur la nécessité d'intégrer la dimension interculturelle dans la formation initiale des enseignants, qui à leur tour, seraient chargés de transmettre aux adolescents les idéaux de la tolérance et du respect ainsi que la compréhension de soi et des autres pour susciter une prise de conscience culturelle critique.

Mots clés: Compétence communicative interculturelle, éducation interculturelle, enseignants ENSC, enseignants en formation initiale, formation interculturelle.

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INTRODUCTION

Foreign language education in the 21st century is no longer restricted to enhancing learners' linguistic and communicative competences. ICC is a crucial element and a prerequisite for individuals to live in harmony with a world of cultural diversity. To respond to the emergent need of globalization, foreign language

education is expected to equip learners with the necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes to function appropriately across difference. This requires teachers to receive adequate training on intercultural education/communication in order to transmit that knowledge to their learners.

For the Council of Europe (2008), intercultural education is the cornerstone of intercultural dialogue taking place between people of different ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds that should be open and based on mutual understanding and respect. Several research initiatives have been launched in Europe over the years, such as Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange Projects¹ and DIALLS². The aim of these projects and others is to promote “intercultural dialogue as a vivid experience not limited to *knowing about* other ethnical/religious/linguistic identities, but including the engagement in a *being with* relationship with any other person having their own cultural identities” (Rapanta & Trovão, 2021, pp. 9-10, emphasis in original).

When it comes to the Algerian context, intercultural education/training research is scarce at best. Most of the studies in this area revolve around the failure of middle and secondary school textbooks in promoting the intercultural communicative dimension (Berramdane, 2017; Dehda & Hocine, 2020; Selama & Amziane, 2020). In a recent article, Boudghene Stanbouli and Sarnou (2022) investigated the issue of intercultural education from the perspective of EFL pre-service teachers at the Teacher’s Training School of Oran. One of their main findings that is relevant the present study is the fact that none of participants was exposed to intercultural training in their teacher education program. The only exposure they had during their education was to cultural diversity topics in the speaking course.

¹ “Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange is a ground-breaking project enabling youth in Europe and the Southern Mediterranean to engage in meaningful intercultural experiences online, as part of their formal or non-formal education” (European Union: https://youth.europa.eu/erasmusvirtual_en)

² A three-year long project that included ten partners from countries in and around Europe. “The project has focused on teaching children the dialogue and argumentation skills needed to engage together using tolerant, empathetic and inclusive behaviors” (<https://dialls2020.eu/>).

Boudghene Stanbouli and Sarnou (2022) concluded their study by emphasizing the importance of intercultural training as part of the teacher's training program.

The present paper aims at investigating the views of teachers from the ENSC towards the importance and ways of teaching ICC. The study is exploratory in orientation and seeks to gain an understanding of practitioners' perspectives in relation to intercultural training for pre-service EFL teachers. We believe this to be an important first step towards the design and integration of a course on intercultural education at the higher education level. After training trainers, intercultural education can be introduced at middle and secondary education where the concept of culture is not adequately covered in the teaching curricula, let alone interculturality or intercultural education.

1. Literature Review

Intercultural competence (IC) is associated with many terms which vary according to the discipline or field of study. For instance, researchers in social studies use "cultural intelligence" while those in engineering prefer "global competence" (Deardorff, 2011). Beneke (2000) states that IC "is to a large extent the ability to cope with one's own cultural background in interaction with others" (p.109). Deardorff (2006), for his part, views IC as the "ability to interact effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations, based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes" (p. 247). IC and ICC are used interchangeably; however, for some scholars they are two different concepts. For the purpose of this paper, the term ICC is used because it is linked to the field of foreign language education and emphasizes the role of language "to describe effective social interaction with someone from a different country" (Rapanta & Trovão, 2021, p. 11). ICC refers in its basic terms to the set of knowledge, attitudes, and skills that enable people to interact effectively and appropriately with others from different cultures who speak different languages. 'Effectively' stands for the individual's ability to achieve his/her objectives of interaction, while 'appropriately' stands for conforming to the cultural

norms and rules valued by the participants in the interaction. Fantini & Tirmizi (2006) views ICC as “a complex of abilities needed to perform *effectively* and *appropriately* when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself” (p.12, emphasis in original).

Intercultural training, on the other hand, refers to the training that teachers or students receive on intercultural education. Pre-service teachers are expected to be aware of ICC’s different theoretical foundations and how to invest that knowledge in their practice. They need to start with setting appropriate and tangible aims and move to designing adequate materials, activities, and assessment methods. Such a training can enable them to teach and assess ICC for young learners. According to the Council of Europe (2014), intercultural training is:

a pedagogy – aims, content, learning processes, teaching methods, syllabus and materials, and assessment – of which one purpose is to develop intercultural [communicative] competence in learners of all ages in all types of education as a foundation for dialogue and living together (p.27).

Paris (2012) argues that intercultural training enables teachers to be aware of cultural differences, accept these differences, integrate and expand upon them to provide meaningful learning experiences for learners. The Council of Europe and European Commission (2000) accentuate that intercultural principles “concentrate on openness to the other, active respect for difference, mutual comprehension, active tolerance, validating the cultures present, providing equality of opportunities, fighting discrimination” (p. 33). Intercultural training is then important in enabling teachers or students studying to be teachers to implement intercultural education a crucial aspect for today’s young learners. Intercultural education can promote:

- a better comprehension of cultures in modern societies;
- a larger capacity of communication between people from different cultures;

- a more flexible attitude to the context of cultural diversity in society;
- a better capacity of participation in social interaction, and the recognition of the common heritage of humanity (Ouellet, 1991, as cited in Council of Europe and European Commission, 2000, p. 33).

Shifting interests from communicative competence to ICC places intercultural education at the center of foreign language learning. Communication across languages and cultures has proven to fail without tolerance, understanding, acceptance, and awareness that go both ways. It is no longer the duty of the foreign language learner to grasp the 'target' culture and make accommodations while interacting with native speakers. Intercultural education encourages mutual understanding and openness to all cultures and is considered of paramount importance in today's educational systems.

2. This Study

The context of this study is the Teachers' Training School of Constantine (ENSC³). Teachers' training schools in Algeria are the main source of teachers for national education. Once admitted, a student at the ENS becomes a pre-service teacher because as soon as graduated, they will sign a contract and start teaching at middle school after four years of training or at secondary school after five years. It is true that in the case of deficiency of teachers, employment contests are organized to select candidates who have graduated from universities. However, we chose the ENS because learners there know right from the beginning what they will be doing in the future, which would have a direct impact on their motivation and efforts during the years of their training. Teachers at training schools, for their part, are aware of the demands of the training and focus their attention and efforts on the aspects needed for becoming a teacher.

³ ENSC is the official acronym for the Teachers' Training School of Constantine: 'Ecole Normale Supérieure (Assia Djebbar) de Constantine'

During the years of training, English majors at ENSC take several courses that can be classified under three categories: language proficiency courses, content courses, and didactics courses. In terms of language proficiency, students have a separate course for the skills of reading and writing. Listening and speaking are combined together in the “oral expression” course. Furthermore, grammar is also taught during several years. Though vocabulary is not an independent course, it is explicitly taught in the reading course and implicitly reinforced in almost every other course. Regarding content and general knowledge acquisition, literature, civilization and linguistics are essential components of the training during all levels. In relation to didactics and English language teaching methodology, courses like educational psychology, material and syllabus design are highly regarded in the students’ training as they present specialized theoretical and practical knowledge related to the profession of foreign language teaching in middle and secondary education. Thus, the ENSC offers a rich and diversified training in almost all areas related to English language proficiency, knowledge and teaching. The question, then, that is worth being asked is why intercultural training is not covered for ENSC students? In other words, intercultural communication, understanding and sensitivity are of the main purposes of 21st century education; how come they have no place in the training of those expected to teach young learners? Most importantly, the present paper aims at answering the following questions:

1. How necessary it is to integrate intercultural education for pre-service EFL teachers from their instructors’ perspectives?
2. What are the mechanisms that allow for the best integration of such subject?

In fact, teachers' views are significant for understanding what needs to be done and what needs to be changed. It definitely requires more than the recommendations of teachers to make a change or introduce something new; however, gauging teachers' perceptions is always a good start. Subsequently, this paper analyzes data obtained from a questionnaire administered via Google Forms to twelve teachers from the ENSC. More than half of the participants have at least ten years of experience (58,4%), while 33,3% have an experience of 6 to 10 years, and only 8,3% have less than 6 years of experience. The questionnaire entails a combination of multiple choice and open-ended questions that revolve around the importance and mechanisms of integrating intercultural training in the curriculum of pre-service EFL teachers at the ENSC.

3. Results and Discussion

Item 1:

Integrating intercultural training for pre-service ENSC teachers is:

- a. Not important at all b. Not important c. Important c. Very Important

Item one delves into knowing ENSC teachers' perceptions of the importance of intercultural training for their students. Almost all of them (91.7%) consider that this training is very important (50%) or important (41.7%), while only one participant sees it as unimportant. This reveals that the respondents hold a positive attitude towards the role of intercultural training in preparing pre-service teachers to deal with the intercultural dimension of foreign language education. It is a significant point of departure that almost all the participants of this study consider intercultural training as a crucial component of the training of teachers-to-be.

Items 2 & 3:

*In your opinion, how is intercultural training relevant for pre-service ENSC teachers?

- a. Pre-service teachers need to be trained in all areas related to TEFL, including intercultural training.

- b. Pre-Service teachers should know how to deal with sensitive topics in class such as racism, discrimination, stereotypes and prejudice.
- c. Pre-service teachers should be trained on how to deal with teenagers who need to develop their ICC.
- d. Other, please specify.

*Please, Justify your answer.

Item two inquires about the reasons that make intercultural training relevant for pre-service teachers. Participants were asked to order the options according to their pertinence and then provide justifications for their choices in item 3. The findings show that option (a) is regarded as the priority for integrating intercultural training, that is “pre-service teachers need to be trained in all areas related to TEFL, including intercultural training.” Respondents consider interculturality as an integral component of foreign language education and argue that its teaching contributes to raising individuals’ awareness of the complex and multidimensional culture-language interrelatedness. One teacher, for instance, argues: “As language is taught with its culture, pre-service teachers should receive a training on how to integrate and deal with the language cultural issues during their teaching of the foreign language.” Another teacher reveals: “Pre-service teachers need to learn how to deal with culture in class because language and culture are related,” and another one holds: “Learners and future teachers of a foreign language being exposed and familiar with the target culture is key.”

It is worth mentioning here that teaching culture or ICC must not be limited to the ‘target’ culture only. The aim of intercultural education, overall, is to steer away from the native speaker competence being the objective and encourage learners to be intercultural speakers instead. The speaker “acquires knowledge and skills of cultural mediation or interpretation, and not just a linguistic competence modelled on a native speaker” (Alred, Byram & Fleming, 2003, p 2). In fact, Ur (2012)

argues that it is inappropriate to use the term 'target' culture to refer to a native-speaker one. For him, learners "need to be aware of a diverse, international, cosmopolitan set of cultural customs, literature, art forms and so on, rather than those of single community" (Ur, 2012, p. 5).

According to the study participants, the second reason for integrating intercultural education in the training of pre-service EFL teachers is for them to transfer that knowledge to teenagers and adolescents. Indeed, dealing with middle or secondary school students is not an easy task. Eventually, ENSC trainees need to learn how to develop young learners' understanding of themselves and others, and how to communicate with others from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds as one of the essential goals of 21st century education. In this respect, one of the respondents explains: "Future teachers need to know how to teach their students not only linguistic competence but also ICC because it is important for understanding others."

The third reason for introducing pre-service teachers to intercultural education is to allow them to deal with sensitive topics in class such as racism, discrimination, stereotypes and prejudice. Teachers should raise young learners' awareness about such issues while valuing diversity, openness, respect and tolerance towards all people. In this regard, one of the participants observe: "Teenagers need special care from experienced teachers. Training pre-service teachers would help them gain theoretical knowledge about adolescents and the related issues that may hinder their learning and help them learn better."

Item 4:

Intercultural training for pre-service teachers should involve:

- a. Understanding the relationship between language and culture
- b. Methods and techniques for integrating aspects of the target culture in EFL classrooms.
- c. Understanding the shift from cultural to intercultural based education in EFL

- d. Understanding theoretical frameworks for teaching and assessing ICC.
- e. Designing and developing suitable materials and activities to teach ICC.
- f. All of the above.
- g. Other, please specify.

When asked about some specific elements to be included in the training of pre-service teachers as far as intercultural education is concerned, 83.33% of the participants selected all the elements provided. Intercultural training can start by understanding the relationship between language and culture. However, before dealing with such complex relationship, pre-service teachers need first to understand the various conceptions of culture. Understanding the relationship between language and culture alone does not ensure that future teachers will manage to address this relationship successfully in their teaching. That is why it is important to learn about the various methods and techniques for integrating the target culture in class. Nonetheless, the target culture should not be the sole focus of teachers who need to understand the shift from cultural to intercultural-based education.

Once the necessity for shifting from cultural to intercultural-based pedagogy is understood, teachers can move to considering the theoretical frameworks for teaching and assessing ICC. In fact, there exist several models of ICC⁴ (examples include Bennett, 1993; Chen & Starsota, 1996; Deardorff, 2006). It is widely acknowledged that Byram (1997; 2021) proposes the most influential model for teaching and assessing ICC within second or foreign language teaching. He links communicative competence to the five competences known as “savoirs” namely attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness. After understanding most of the

⁴ It is useful to refer to Spitzberg and Changnon (2009) review that conceptualizes and classifies the various models.

theoretical frameworks related to language, culture and ICC, pre-service teachers need to put the theory into practice and learn how to develop suitable intercultural materials and activities for teaching ICC.

Items 5, 6 & 7:

* In which level can intercultural training be integrated in the curriculum of ENSC pre-service English teachers?

* Please, justify your answer.

* What is the most suitable course for introducing intercultural knowledge?

Concerning the level during which intercultural training should be introduced, 8.3% of the respondents suggested the first year and none the final (fifth) year. Participants' answers were divided between second, third and fourth year. One of those who opted for the second year specifies that during their first year, students are still adapting to a new environment; therefore, intercultural training should be delayed to the second year but not later as someone else argues: "The sooner the better." Thirty-three percent of the participants opted for the third year and the same percentage for the fourth. Here, the same argument was provided for different choices; there is only a disagreement vis-à-vis the level. The majority of participants (66%) see that during the early years of training at the ENSC, focus should be placed on developing the language skills and competencies. After that, focus is shifted towards equipping students with knowledge pertinent to EFL teaching, ICC included. One of the respondents summarizes the arguments provided as follows:

During the first 3 years, students at the ENSC acquire the theory of the language. Starting from year four, students will put this theory into practice. It is the appropriate time to develop students' awareness of about the importance of ICC in EFL classroom.

For the courses that could embody intercultural training, half of the participants suggested a new course devoted completely for the matter. The other half reported that it could be integrated in the existing courses where writing and speaking came in the first place. In fact, it is necessary to have a separate course for ICC that discusses the literature. It is useful for pre-service teachers to study the different concepts, models and terminologies of ICC to be equipped with relevant literacy to make informed decisions whenever needed. On the other hand, the other courses can always provide practice and exposure to authentic communicative events.

Item 8:

In your opinion, what are the challenges for integrating intercultural training for pre-service teachers at ENSC? *

- a. Lack of time
- b. Lack of suitable resources for dealing with Intercultural training
- c. Lack of teachers who understand the nature and purpose of intercultural training
- d. Intercultural training is a wide and complex field that may not be adequately grasped and implemented by pre-service teachers.
- e. Other, please specify

Two thirds of the respondents (66.7%) see that the main challenge for an efficient and appropriate integration of intercultural training for pre-service English teachers is the lack of practitioners who understand the nature and purpose of such a training. The rest of responses were divided between the other options. These issues and others are worth addressing in further research. But first of all, the necessity for integrating intercultural training in all levels of Algerian education must be established.

Items 9 & 10:

* Do you think that pre-service teachers will be able to implement their intercultural training once they start teaching at middle or secondary schools?

* In your opinion, what are the challenges for integrating intercultural training for pre-service teachers at ENSC?

- a. Lack of time
- b. Lack of suitable resources for dealing with Intercultural training
- c. Lack of teachers who understand the nature and purpose of intercultural training
- d. Intercultural training is a wide and complex field that may not be adequately grasped and implemented by pre-service teachers.
- e. Other, please specify

A good number of the respondents are uncertain (41.7%) whether or not pre-service teachers will be able to effectively teach intercultural educations once they start teaching. Regarding the other question, 66.7% see that the main challenge for an efficient and appropriate integration of intercultural training for pre-service English teachers is the lack of practitioners who understand the nature and purpose of such a training.

Teachers' responses to questions 8, 9 and 10 uncover their real concern regarding the implementation of intercultural training/education from their perspective. Most of them are concerned about the capability of teachers and pre-service teachers to deal with issues of interculturality as a subject that is, in fact, absent from the English language teaching curricula at all levels of education. Indeed, the literature is rich in the area and offers plenty of practical experiences and projects for teachers to inform themselves and develop their teaching practices. Furthermore, any practice should be accompanied with relevant theoretical and empirical research. The orientation of intercultural research studies must be directed towards problem-solving and the suggestion of initiatives.

Item 10:

Please, mention any recommendations you have for making intercultural training as an integral part of the English curriculum for pre-service teachers.

The last question is a space for teachers to reveal their suggestions and recommendations regarding intercultural training and the curriculum of pre-service teachers. Three important themes have emerged from their responses. One third of the respondents say that there should be a curriculum reform. One of the teacher's with more than ten years of work experience at the ENSC highlights, "Since 2008, the ENS curriculum was not reviewed. All we need now is to adapt the curriculum to fit the 21st century's debatable issues where ICC awareness is one of them." Updating the curriculum for students at the ENSC necessitates that "A committee should be designed to prepare an intercultural training course and then integrate it within the official program". Indeed, "Introducing a new module called intercultural training is interesting, but it needs a change in the curriculum."

Other answers were divided between recommendations for coursebook designers, curriculum designers, practitioners at the ENSC and teacher trainees themselves. Some of them (25%) stressed the need for specialized books on intercultural education for learners of English as a foreign language to reinforce an official curriculum to teach the subject. In addition to an official curriculum and coursebooks, 41.67% of the respondents think it is necessary to invest in teachers and teacher trainees by raising their awareness of the issue and organize regular seminars and workshops to exchange ideas vis-à-vis the different dimensions of interculturality and foreign language education.

CONCLUSION

Intercultural communicative competence is an important aspect within the field of foreign language education. Developing this competence in learners, whether at middle or secondary school levels, is indispensable. That is why it is important that pre-service teachers in institutes like the ENSC receive a suitable training in intercultural education in order to promote this competence in their teaching contexts. The importance of intercultural training for pre-service teachers entails a significant change in the curricula to cope with the demands of language teaching and build future teachers' intercultural competence; which, in turn, would be integrated in their teaching tasks.

Creating a new subject that covers issues related to ICC is seen to be challenging, yet highly recommended. Integrating intercultural training at the ENSC or any other school for teachers' training in Algeria requires curriculum reforms by policy makers in addition to adequate planning and methodologies. Indeed, such a reform cannot be achieved overnight; it needs careful and thorough analysis of the teaching contexts, teachers' expectations, and students' needs. Still, it is possible to integrate such a training in order to conform to the demands of the 21st century's education and the age of globalization, especially at times where "the need for more opportunities to intercultural learning is more pressing than before" Boualli & Hamadouche, 2022, p. 296).

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