

**Interculturality in English Language Teaching
– A Small Study with Portuguese Teachers**Ana PONCE de LEÃO
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Abstract | UNESCO and many other organisations worldwide have been working on approaches in education to develop tolerance, respect for cultural diversity, and intercultural dialogue. Particularly, the Council of Europe has laid out guiding principles in several documents to promote intercultural competence, following Byram's and Zarate's efforts in integrating this important component in language education. The commitment to developing the notion of intercultural competence has been so influential that many countries, e.g., Portugal, have established the intercultural domain as a goal in the foreign language curricula. However, this commitment has been questioned by researchers worldwide who consider that action is needed to effectively promote intercultural competence. The research coordinated by Sercu, for example, suggests that, although foreign language teachers are willing to comply with an intercultural dimension, their profile is more compatible with that of a traditional foreign language teacher, rather than with a foreign language teacher, who promotes intercultural communicative competence. In this study, I propose to examine teachers' perceptions and beliefs about intercultural communicative competence in a cluster of schools in Portugal and compare these findings with Sercu's study. Despite a twelve-year gap, the present study draws similar conclusions.

Key words | *Common European Framework Reference for Languages* (CEFR), Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), intercultural domain, *Metas Curriculares*, English Language Teaching (ELT), teachers' perceptions and beliefs

Citation: Ana Ponce de Leão, "Interculturality in English Language Teaching – A Small Study with Portuguese Teachers." *e-TEALS: An e-journal of Teacher Education and Applied Language Studies* 8 (2017): 107-125. ISSN 1647-712X

10.2478/eteals-2018-0005

I had never been able to understand where I was meant to be placed, because anyone who comes from the north, and has lived opposite a mountain cannot understand a mountain in a picture in the south.

(Laxness 38)

1. Introduction

To cope with today's paradigm, UNESCO and other organisations around the world have been working on approaches in education to develop tolerance, respect for cultural diversity, and intercultural dialogue. Particularly, the Council of Europe has laid out guiding principles in several documents, namely the 2001 *Common European Framework of Reference*, and, more clearly, in the September 2017 *Companion Volume* to promote an intercultural stance, drawing on a taxonomy of *savoirs* proposed by Byram and Zarate.

The intercultural dimension aims to develop awareness about the 'other' so as to prevent stereotyping and xenophobic behaviours and to promote dialogue across cultures. With regard to language education, the Council of Europe advocates that the intercultural dimension is a central objective "to promote the favourable development of the learner's whole personality and sense of identity in response to the enriching experience of otherness in language and culture" (CEFR 1). Since it has been established in language teaching, Byram, Gribkova and Starkey postulate that it is, thus, necessary to provide learners not only with "knowledge and skill in the grammar of a language, but also the ability to use the language in socially and culturally appropriate ways" (*Developing the Intercultural Dimension in Language Teaching* 4). Language teaching must enhance distinct opportunities so that learners can become successful intercultural speakers, as Byram explains, "in communicating information, but also in developing a human relationship with people of other languages and cultures" (*From Foreign Language Education for Intercultural Citizenship* 29).

Following this paradigm shift, the Ministry of Education and Science in Portugal laid out the intercultural domain goals in *Metas Curriculares*, for all cycles of foreign language education

in 2015. Therefore, the intercultural domain in English Language Teaching needs to gain prominence and become a common practice in the foreign language classroom in the first, second, and third cycles in Portugal and, consequently, this paper aims to examine whether it has been promoted in the classroom.

2. Literature Review

The following section will highlight some important principles that foreign language teachers have to take in consideration to develop an intercultural stance in the classroom.

A report to UNESCO postulates that education, as the main means to promote Human Rights, is an “ongoing process of improving knowledge and skills” (Delors et al. 11) as well as “an exceptional means of bringing about personal development and building relationships among individuals, groups and nations” (12). Their contention is supported by four closely connected learning pillars: learning to live together, learning to know, learning to do, and learning to be (20- 21). Among these, *learning to live together* has been given great emphasis and underpins intercultural education, which the Council of Europe envisions as the foundation of a world “where human rights are respected and where democratic participation and the rule of law is guaranteed to all” (*Intercultural Competence* 14).

Many organizational and research developments have discussed the definition of intercultural competence and it has been object of various attempts at theorization, from different fields of research since Gudykunst’s work on Intercultural Communication in the United States (Byram and Guilherme 5). Even though Gudykunst was amongst the first communication experts to define interpersonal competence, Byram and Guilherme highlight two general definitions that complement each other: “the ability to interact effectively with people from a culture that we recognize as being different from our own” (Guilherme qtd in Byram and Guilherme 6) and “the appropriate and effective management of interaction between people who, to some degree or another, represent different or divergent affective, cognitive, and behavioural orientations to the world” (Spitzberg and Changnon qtd in Byram and Guilherme 6).

These definitions are in line with the definition of intercultural communicative competence as defined by Byram in the context of foreign language learning, whereby ICC is the ability to interact with people from another country and culture in a foreign language and, therefore, foreign language teaching must focus on negotiation, on producing meanings (*Teaching and Assessing* 83), and on developing skills and attitudes as much as knowledge (Byram et al. 12). Foreign language teaching should then prepare learners to become intercultural speakers who “manage the relationships between themselves and their own cultural beliefs, behaviours and meanings . . . and those of their interlocutors” (*Teaching and Assessing* 12) expressed in a foreign language. For this effect, Byram designed a model of intercultural communicative competence which consists of five *savoirs* (table 1):

Table 1 – Five *Savoirs* (Source: Byram from *Foreign Language Education* 69)

<i>Savoirs</i>	<i>Knowledge of self and other and interaction</i>
<i>Savoir être</i>	<i>Attitudes of relativizing self and valuing others</i>
<i>Savoir comprendre</i>	<i>Skills of interpreting and relating</i>
<i>Savoir apprendre/faire</i>	<i>Skills of discovery</i>
<i>Savoir s'engager</i>	<i>Skills of interaction and critical cultural awareness/ political education</i>

Despite the fact that Byram’s researches has been on language education, this scholar believes that an intercultural stance should be extended to other schooling subjects, such as history which “can confront learners with otherness” (*Teaching and Assessing* 3). Likewise, the Council of Europe (“Intercultural Competence” 41) states that all curricular subjects can contribute to develop intercultural competence. However, there are “some school subjects that lend themselves more readily to adaptation of intercultural education, such history, geography, political/social sciences and languages” (43), which means that intercultural education might imply an extension to the teacher’s role and tasks. Teachers are expected not only to be

experts in their respective subjects, but also to have deeper qualifications in general pedagogy, and also to act as guides and aids to self-development and successful interaction (43).

According to Sercu, a foreign language and intercultural competence teacher (FL & IC) should have the following profile (table 2):

Table 2 – FL & IC Teacher Profile (Source: “The Foreign Language” 57-8)

Knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>be sufficiently familiar with the foreign cultures associated with the foreign language they teach;</i> • <i>the contacts they have with these cultures should be both varied and frequent;</i> • <i>know their own culture well and possess culture-general knowledge that can help them explain similarities and differences between cultures to learners;</i> • <i>know both what stereotypes pupils have and how to address these in the foreign language classroom;</i> • <i>know how to select appropriate content, learning tasks and materials that can help learners become interculturally competent.</i>
Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>employ teaching techniques that promote the acquisition of savoirs, savoir-apprendre, savoir-comprendre, savoir-faire and savoir-être ;</i> • <i>help pupils relate their own culture to foreign cultures;</i> • <i>compare cultures and to emphasise with foreign cultures’ points of view;</i> • <i>be able to select appropriate teaching materials and to adjust these materials should they not allow achieving the aims of intercultural competence teaching;</i> • <i>be able to use experiential approaches to language-and-culture teaching.</i>
Attitudes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>be favourably disposed towards the integration of intercultural competence teaching in foreign language education and willing to actually work towards achieving that goal;</i> • <i>define the objectives of foreign language education in terms of both language learning and intercultural competence acquisition.</i>

Given the knowledge, skills, and attitudes mentioned above, and as intercultural competence implementation in the classroom must be an extension of the role of the teacher, the Council of Europe recommends training to all teachers in both pre-service and in-service (“Intercultural Competence” 44), focusing “on intercultural sensitivity, communication skills and

cultural awareness training, as well as learning how to provide a democratic and unbiased learning environment for students” [ibid.].

Studies on the status of intercultural competence teaching have been carried out all over the world. The present study replicates a study on intercultural competence in Belgium, Greece, Mexico, Poland, Spain, and Sweden coordinated by Sercu, based on Byram’s intercultural communicative competence model. From this definition of ICC, Sercu sets forth a Foreign Language (FL) and ICC teacher profile which demonstrated that, despite the different contexts in which the research was carried out, there are two different teacher profiles: the teacher who is favourably disposed to the integration of ICC in the classroom and the teacher who is unfavourably disposed. Despite a positive disposition, these educators are not yet developing ICC in the classroom (11), which leads to the recommendation for teacher training in this intercultural stance (68-69).

3. The Design of the Project Work and the Research Questions

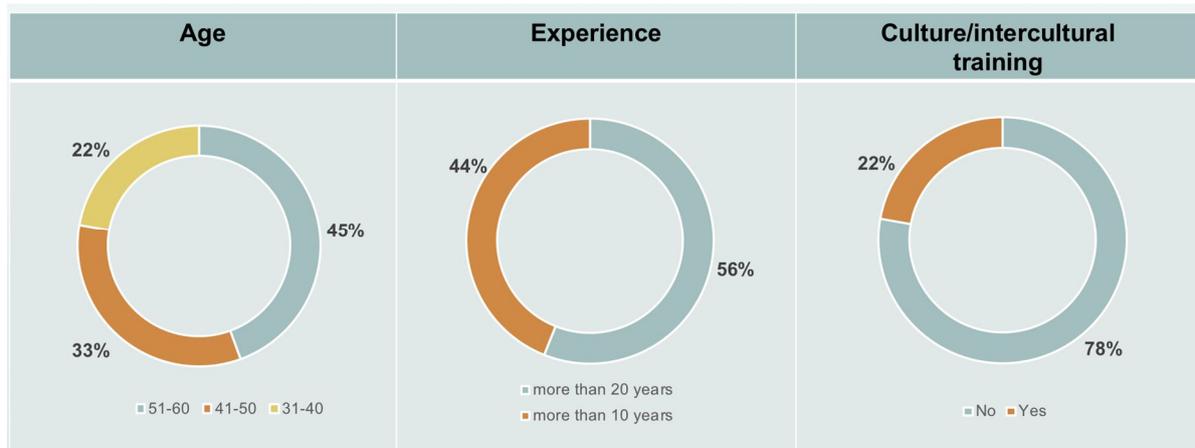
This study was generally designed as a project assignment, combining theory about interculturality in ELT with the analysis of empirical data about current teachers’ perceptions and beliefs on this topic collected from a cluster of schools in Portugal. Following Allwright’s adapted loop of the three propositions from Friends of the Earth to “think globally, act locally, think locally” (115), the current study aims to explore beliefs and practices of English teachers who work at a specific cluster of schools. This study was designed to explore this topic using data collected from semi-structured interviews via an online video chat software application and from a questionnaire online, replicated from a questionnaire used in similar research coordinated by Sercu in 2005 (186-215). Of the fifteen English teachers who work at this cluster of compulsory education, nine teachers responded to the questionnaire: two teach in the first cycle; five teach in the second cycle, and two teach in the third cycle. Two of these respondents also volunteered for the semi-structured interviews, so as to complete or/and triangulate the data.

The present study aims to answer the following key questions: What are the teachers' perceptions of their current language and culture teaching practice? What are the teachers' beliefs about intercultural competence? Is the profile of these teachers similar, in any way, to Sercu's study's profile?

4. Discussion of the Findings

In this section, the discussion will be provided under each research question, linking the findings of this study to some principles that foreign language teachers should take into consideration to develop an intercultural stance in the classroom. Before proceeding to the discussion, there will be, firstly, a characterisation of the teachers who were surveyed (figure 1).

Figure 1 - Teachers' Age, Experience, and Training



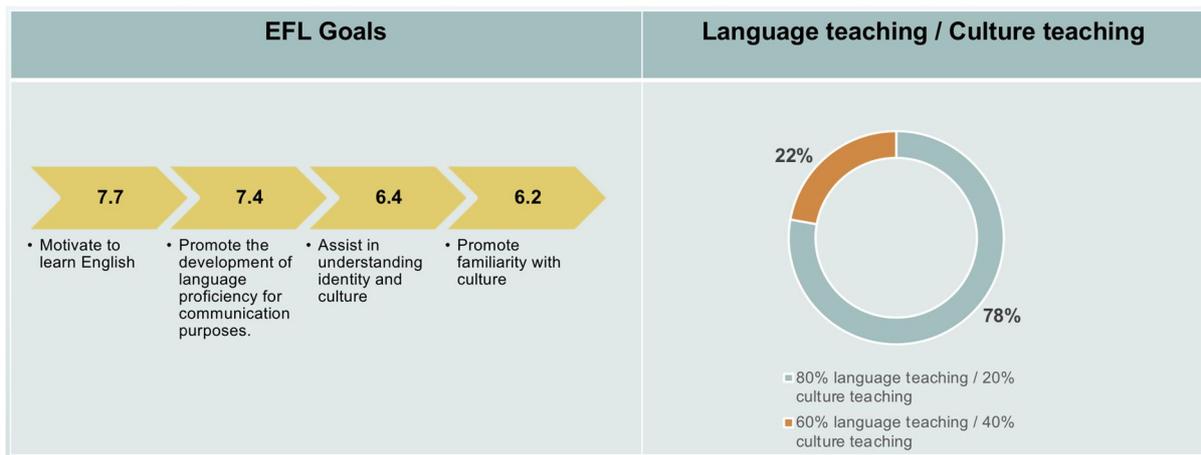
From the data, the age of these teachers, all identified as having more than ten years of experience, ranges between 31 and 60. Only two teachers of the second cycle claimed they had had some training in culture/intercultural competence at university. The teachers of the first cycle, very recently, had to undergo special training to teach English in the third and fourth years of the mandatory education in Portugal, and so were more likely to mention this training. The findings reported may serve to demonstrate that the implementation of an intercultural

stance in this cluster might be compromised, unless the survey on teachers' beliefs and practice shows evidence otherwise.

4.1. What are the Teachers' Perceptions of their Current Language and Culture Teaching Practice?

This section will focus on five different aspects of the question in the title: teachers' perceptions of their language and culture teaching; teachers' beliefs on their learners' perceptions; teachers' engagement in experiential activities; teachers' views on pedagogical materials, and teachers' practice on intercultural domain assessment.

Figure 2 – Language Teaching / Culture Teaching and English as a Foreign Language Goals



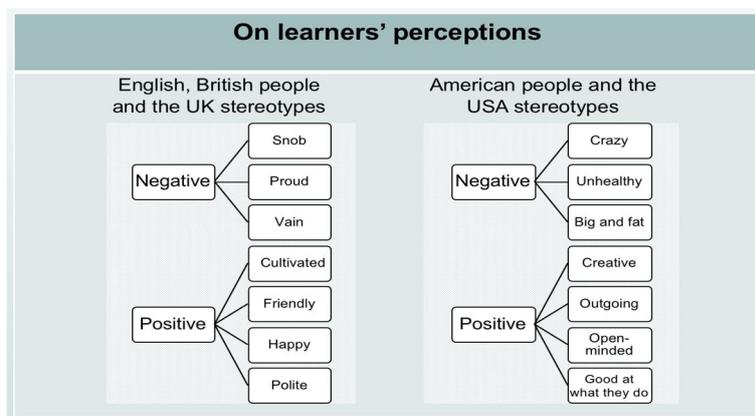
Regarding teachers' perceptions of their language and culture teaching, the findings of this research (figure 2) show that teachers at this cluster of schools strongly believe that English teaching should comply with the following main goals: motivating to learn English and promoting the development of language proficiency for communication purposes. Furthermore, most of the respondents spend more time teaching language than teaching culture because they claim that complying with the syllabus and the four skills takes nearly all of their time. Unfortunately, these findings show that teachers are not accomplishing all the curricular goals, nor are they fully motivating their learners, as they aim to do, because motivation is a "multifaceted construct",

which “has a pronounced sociocultural angle” (Byram 425-26). Teachers believe that culture/ intercultural domain are optional topics which can be overlooked.

On the contrary, culture and intercultural domain should be addressed in regular EFL classrooms intertwined with the other domains and should not be seen “as hermetic compartments, independent of one another” (*Caderno de Apoio* 3). One of the suggestions in the literature to get around this situation is to contextualise teaching to reflect that “language is always cultural in some respects” (Risager 185). This view is maintained in research areas of linguistic anthropology, translation studies, and studies of intercultural communication since “linguistic practice is always embedded in, and in interaction with, some cultural meaningful context” [Ibid.]. Therefore, culture should not be seen as a separate content in language teaching, and language-and-culture teaching should not be strictly related to one or two nations like the UK and the USA, as the findings of this study show (figure 3). Language and culture teaching should transcend “the national paradigm” and set forth “a dynamic transnational and global perspective . . . centering on the study of meaning” (Risager 195).

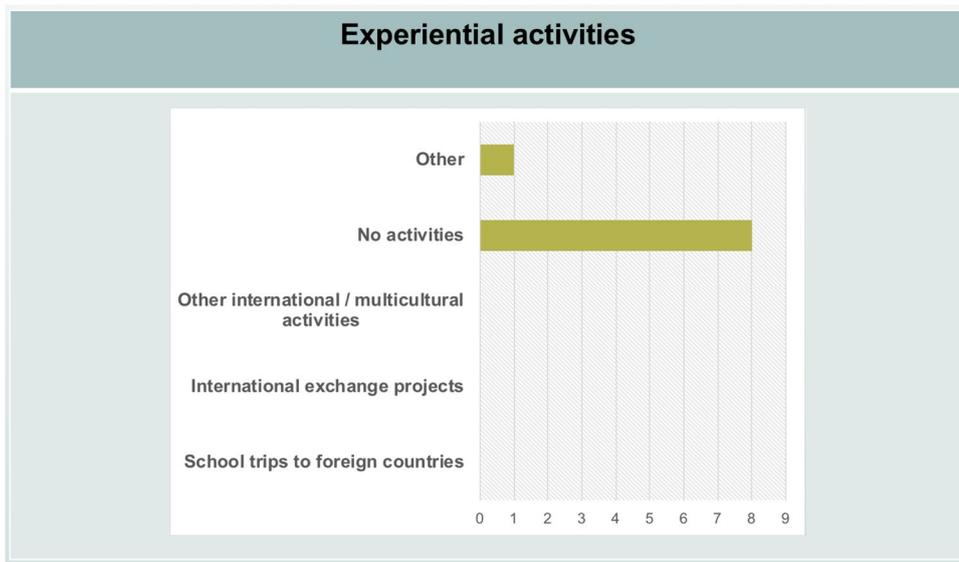
As for teachers’ views on their learners’ perceptions, the findings shown in figure 3 indicate that most teachers perceive that their learners hold more positive than negative traditional stereotypes of peoples and cultures related to the English language. These findings may imply that teachers are conveying unrealistic depictions of culture through materials and teaching practice.

Figure 3 – Learners’ Perceptions of People(s) and Culture(s) Related to the English Language



Teachers might cultivate less stereotypical results in their learners by engaging in an interpretative analysis in search of meanings (Geertz 5), instead of the prevailing definite and hermetic analysis of culture revealed through this study. Since schools are places of “identity work and identity making” (Reay 2) and to avoid stereotyping, even with a positive categorisation, teachers ought to develop opportunities in the classroom for learners to understand their own identities, how others see them, how to relate to others, and how the process of categorising people functions. Conveying a realistic depiction of culture(s) when teaching a foreign language and culture(s) provides opportunities for learners to recognise the distinctive characteristics of culture(s). These opportunities should include experiential tasks not only in the classroom, but also outside the classroom.

Figure 4 – Experiential Activities

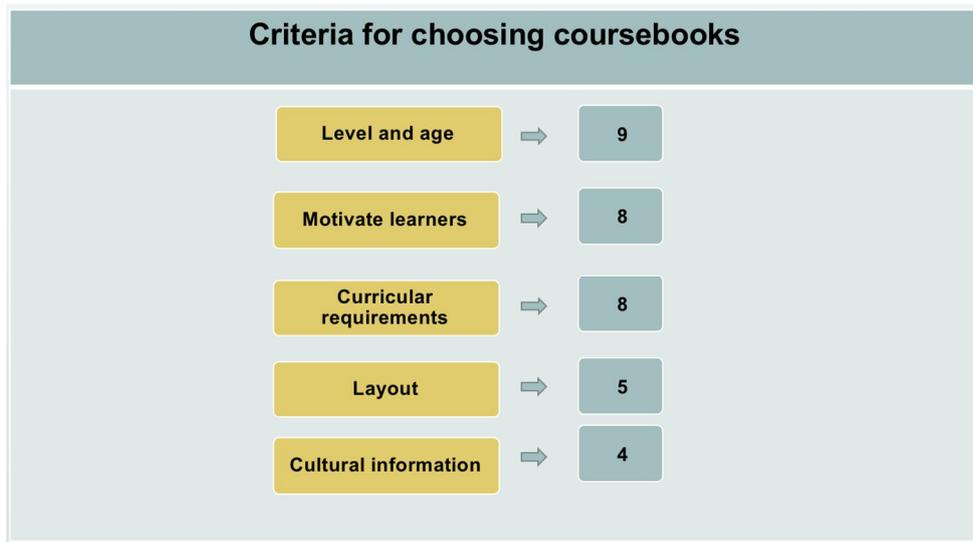


In terms of experiential activities, figure 4 shows, however, that teachers at this cluster of schools were not involved in school trips or exchange programmes in the 2016-2017 school year. Although they recognise that experiential activities develop the learners’ sense of otherness, teachers claim that experiential activities are risky and a great responsibility, which may show that opportunities to develop ICC are very limited in this cluster of schools.

The literature suggests that experiential activities are “powerful in developing self-awareness as well as perceptions of other countries” (Byram, Gribkova and Starkey 10) and that study visits or exchange programmes are a holistic experience which provide the means of using, on the one hand, language-culture knowledge and, on the other hand, “intercultural skills and acquiring new attitudes and values” (15).

As for teachers’ views on pedagogical materials, 89% of teachers rely on coursebooks to comply with the syllabus. While one of the skills teachers should possess is the ability to critically review and evaluate the materials they use, the following figure (figure 5) indicates that teachers may be lacking this skill, with only four teachers mentioning culture information as criteria for choosing coursebooks.

Figure 5 – Criteria for Choosing Coursebooks



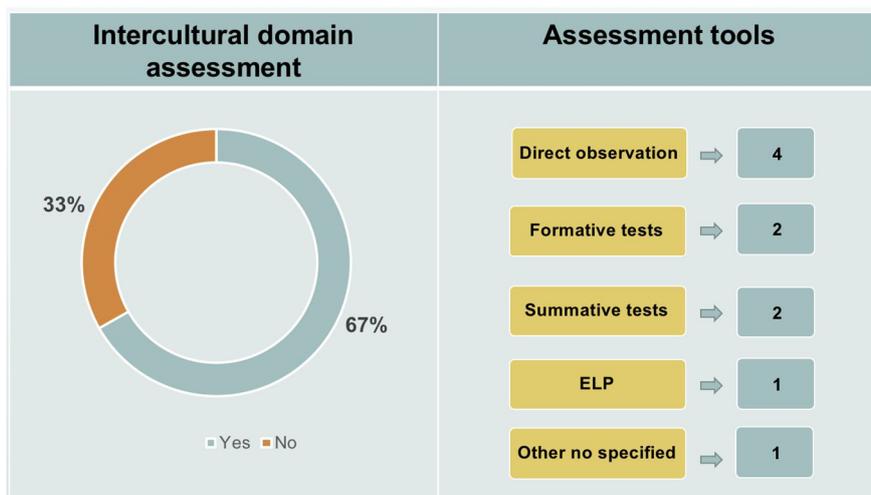
Teachers follow the coursebooks, and, obviously, the topics the coursebooks deal with. This may suggest that teachers convey a fragmented picture of foreign people and cultures not only because, in general, Portuguese coursebooks, “still reflect a simplistic view of culture limited to a few facts and cultural trivia to do with fame, food or festivals” (Hurst 26), but also

because teachers have not considered the intercultural domain, as one of the criteria when they adopted the current coursebooks.

Foreign language teachers should be trained to critically review and evaluate pedagogical materials, since the majority of the teachers resort to other materials to complement the prescribed coursebooks. Choosing the appropriate coursebook or other teaching materials aligned with an intercultural stance is one of skills required in Sercu’s profile of the foreign language and intercultural communicative competence teacher (Sercu et al. 5-6).

The intercultural stance seems to presuppose the acquisition of specific professional characteristics to provide learners with intercultural experience and develop intercultural understanding. Teachers should help learners transcend a monocultural stage through their teaching and materials because younger generations are already in contact with the “other” through new technologies, travelling, and migration and, as a result, they feel this influence. The exposure to the Other could imply a transitional stage “between the culture of the learner and another culture” (Kordes 301) which would serve as the threshold that could lead to intercultural understanding. For this to take place, the current teaching practice at this cluster of schools has to teach more than the knowledge of language as a system, beyond the notion of *Landskunde* and beyond communication skills.

Figure 6 – Intercultural Domain Assessment and Assessment Tools



Last but not least, the findings in figure 6 may provide some information about the teachers' practice in assessing the intercultural domain. Although 67% of the participating teachers assess the intercultural domain, the findings indicate that they may be acting differently in this respect because of one (or more) of the following justifications: they do not consider the intercultural domain to be as important as the four skills; they might not know how to undertake assessment of the intercultural domain; and/or the intercultural domain is not a topic discussed at meetings among teachers to coordinate assessment activities.

Given that the intercultural domain has been an explicit goal of the Portuguese *Metas Curriculares* since 2013, teachers should undertake its assessment in spite of its complexity. Byram, for example, suggests portfolios and profiles as assessment tools because these favour reflection and analysis. The European-funded ICCinTE project of the European Council of Modern Languages (ECML) recommends “ongoing collations of information in the classroom” (29), such as “anecdotal records, observation checklists, observation rating scales . . . portfolios, journals, self-evaluation reports . . .” [Ibid.]. Corbett (202) postulates that ICC assessment should involve both formative and summative assessment tools. Despite this divergence of opinions, teachers at state schools should decide in-group on the forms of assessment to be used to measure the intercultural domain to guarantee accountability cross-classes and lessen its ambiguity (Byram 220).

4.2. What Are the Teachers' Beliefs about Intercultural Communicative Competence?

Regarding the second question, although teachers recognise the importance of intercultural education and are willing to take action in their classroom, their practice is not aligned with the requirements of the foreign language and ICC teacher profile.

Figure 7 – Intercultural Communicative Competence Teaching

Intercultural communicative competence teaching		
Number of teachers	R value	Correlation evaluation
2 teachers	0.8668	Strong correlation
	0.7586	
4 teachers	0.7262	Moderate positive correlation
	0.6757	
	0.5309	
3 teachers	0.5215	Technical positive correlation
	0.4467	
	0.3759	
	0.3143	

Regarding the teaching of intercultural communicative competence, the positive correlation between teachers' opinions and their willingness (figure 7) show that only two teachers are confident about teaching intercultural competence in English language classes. All the others indicate some contradictions: on the one hand, they state that they wish to promote intercultural skills through their teaching; on the other hand, they are not sure if intercultural skills can be acquired at school. These findings might also suggest that teachers, in general, do not hold a clear idea of what intercultural communicative competence implies over the course of English language education. Although the interviewees indicate a positive opinion of ICC in the foreign classroom, their teaching is limited to teaching culture and language, which they consider to be linked in everyday topics. Only one of the interviewees recognizes she had not been aware of its importance before she did her training on intercultural communicative competence, and states that her teaching must be adjusted in order to incorporate intercultural communicative competence on a regular basis.

In fact, these interviewees' teaching practices show that "the focus should be on defining and teaching the cultural dimension of language itself, or of discourse" (Sercu et al. vii). Nevertheless, a step forward is needed to develop intercultural communicative competence in the foreign language classroom. Whereas a *language-culture practice* involves "knowledge, skills and attitudes concerning a specific cultural area" [ibid.] associated with the target countries, the developmental process of ICC involves starting from the students' own

knowledge, skills, attitudes, and cultural backgrounds so that they reflect on their own assumptions, contrasting these with the acknowledgement of the premises of others, understanding how categorisation works, and critically reviewing social constructions. In sum, foreign language teachers should engage in a pedagogical approach towards an “educational process” (Byram 110) in which educational values such as human rights and peace should be pursued in other subjects as well, and be the basis for “cross-curricular co-operation” (44).

4.3. *Is the Profile of These Teachers Similar to Sercu's Study?*

There seems to be a profile of a language and culture teacher in this cluster of schools which might be similar to the teacher that is favourably disposed towards the integration of ICC in foreign language education in the study coordinated by Sercu.

Like in Sercu's study, the teachers seem to be suitably “skilled to teach within the foreign culture approach” (64) although they may lack “the skills necessary to teach towards the full attainment of intercultural competence” [ibid.]. For example, demonstrating further similarities with Sercu's results (65), teachers still define the goals of English language education exclusively in terms of linguistic competence. Although they recognize that their learners hold traditional stereotypes of peoples and cultures related to the English language, they do not consider these perceptions and attitudes to design an alternative plan of activities to develop intercultural communicative competence. The present findings may suggest that teachers are favourably disposed towards teaching ICC in foreign language education because they believe that intercultural communicative competence has a positive effect on students' attitudes towards foreign cultures. Moreover, teachers seem to be favourably disposed to providing opportunities for all learners to develop ICC, even when there are no children of an ethnic minority community in classes because they understand that acquiring ICC helps learners become more tolerant.

However, in contrast to Sercu's study, this replication study may not have found a profile reflecting teachers who are unfavourably disposed towards ICC integration. In essence, the

findings of the present study show that, while teachers are willing to develop the intercultural domain, their actions do not promote ICC in the classroom.

5. Conclusion

Today's global world challenges citizens to take action in order to promote peace and understanding among peoples and cultures. This study has shown the main principles established globally and locally to guide education and to promote *learning to live together*, the relevant aspects to provide an optimal approach to develop intercultural communicative competence, mainly in language education; and the required profile for teachers to facilitate its development in their classrooms.

This study purported to explore whether teachers at a specific cluster of schools in Portugal are implementing ICC in foreign language education. One may conclude that these teachers believe that motivating their pupils to learn English and promoting the development of language proficiency as teaching goals are more important than assisting in understanding identity and culture. Teachers' beliefs may tend to persevere when they are solid and steady (Sercu 68), and these may compromise the development of ICC. Secondly, the nationally prescribed course programme for teacher education and training may not have covered the strategies for facing this new educational paradigm. Thirdly, teachers may take decisions individually on including (or not) intercultural teaching and assessment. A possible conclusion is that teachers do in fact recognise the importance of intercultural communicative competence and are willing to take action in their classroom although their teaching practice is not aligned with the requirements of the foreign language and ICC teacher.

Finally, the present replication study supports the findings of Sercu's study as this cluster of schools has a similar profile of language and culture teachers. While teachers in both studies enable learners to appropriately use knowledge and skill in the grammar of the English language, their profile does not fully match the knowledge, skills and attitudes of a foreign

language and ICC teacher so that learners may learn to use the English language “in socially and culturally appropriate ways” (Byram et al. 4).

As pointed out, the findings of this study also corroborated the hypothesis that the development of ICC in this cluster of schools has been compromised since teachers in general do not receive training on cultural/intercultural issues. The implications for foreign language education can be justified from two perspectives: first, the need for developing an educational and training programme in ICC for teachers in this cluster of schools was identified, which could represent the situation of other school clusters across the country; and second, the output of this study clearly demonstrated that teachers need to collaborate and coordinate actions in-group regarding the intercultural domain. As a result, the researcher, as an EFL teacher in this cluster of schools, has been developing a virtual space, in this case a blog about intercultural communicative competence¹, to be shared with colleagues in this cluster to create opportunities for discussion and collaboration. This strategy may provide support for these teachers as they design an umbrella project to develop ICC using experiential approaches inside and outside the classroom.

As a replication of Sercu’s study, this research on teachers’ beliefs and perceptions is limited at least in three ways: first, since it only investigates English teachers’ beliefs and perceptions in a cluster of schools, it cannot be generalized for other clusters of schools in Portugal to hold more comparability with Sercu’s study; secondly, although this study explores the teachers’ beliefs and perceptions of all English teachers of the three levels of compulsory education, it could have explored the reasons behind these beliefs and perceptions more deeply if the research had focused separately on each cycle; thirdly, it did not investigate how preparation in intercultural communicative competence, recommended by the Council of Europe, has been implemented in universities and other polytechnic institutes in Portugal for all teachers in both their pre-service and in-service training.

Note

¹ <http://interculturalityefl.blogspot.pt>

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