

# Culture teaching in foreign language education. EFL teachers in Spain as cultural mediators

---

LIES SERCU

MARÍA DEL CARMEN MÉNDEZ GARCÍA

PALOMA CASTRO PRIETO

*Universidad de Jaén*

**ABSTRACT:** This paper focuses on an investigation carried out in Spain into EFL secondary school teachers' perceptions of their culture teaching practice and their role as mediators of language and culture in the foreign language class. The research is part of a larger comparative study in seven countries (Belgium, Bulgaria, Greece, Poland, Mexico, Spain, and Sweden).

The article describes how teachers perceive of culture-and-language teaching, their students' perceptions and attitudes towards the foreign countries and cultures associated with the language they are learning, and their teaching practice related to intercultural competence and intercultural communication.

It is anticipated that outcomes of this study will serve as a guide in designing programs for teachers in-service regarding intercultural competence teaching in foreign language education.

**RESUMEN:** El presente artículo se centra en una investigación llevada a cabo en España acerca de las percepciones que los profesores de inglés de secundaria tienen sobre la enseñanza que ellos realizan del componente cultural y su papel como mediadores de lengua y cultura en la clase de idiomas extranjeros. Esta investigación forma parte de un estudio comparativo más amplio en el que forman parte siete países (Bélgica, Bulgaria, Grecia, Polonia, Méjico, España y Suecia).

El artículo describe cómo los profesores perciben la enseñanza de la lengua y la cultura, las percepciones y actitudes de sus alumnos hacia los países y culturas extranjeras asociadas con la lengua que están aprendiendo, y las prácticas educativas que los profesores procuran en torno a la competencia y la comunicación interculturales.

Los resultados de este estudio tienen importantes implicaciones didácticas y han de servir de guía para el diseño de programas relacionados con la instrucción de la competencia intercultural en la enseñanza de idiomas extranjeros para profesores en activo.

**KEYWORDS:** Cultural, mediator, culture teaching, intercultural communication, teachers' perceptions.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Foreign language education is by definition an intercultural subject matter. All languages are used within particular cultural contexts and reflect those contexts. Learning a new language, therefore, involves more than the acquisition of linguistic and communicative competence in that language. It also entails an increase in learners' familiarity with that language's

cultural background, an expansion of the learner's cultural awareness and intercultural competence.

One of the main and most demanding goals of foreign language teaching is 'intercultural competence'. Intercultural competence (Guilherme, 2000: 297-300) is defined as the "ability to interact effectively with people from cultures that we recognise as different from our own". Drawing a parallel between "intercultural communication' and 'effective interaction', she defines success in intercultural communication as 'accomplishing a negotiation between people based on both culture-specific and culture-general features, that is on the whole respectful of and favourable to each'.

Foreign language teachers are now expected to teach intercultural competence. European (the Council of Europe's *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*) and national documents and/or legislations assert that this new competence should be promoted in students. More than ten years ago, the Spanish National Curriculum justified the inclusion of foreign languages in young people's school curricula-through stating that foreign language learning "allows students to be open to other ways of understanding reality, enriches students' cultural world and promotes the development of attitudes of openness and relativity towards other cultures" (Ministerio de Educación y Cultura, 1990:17). Since this statement was made such a long time ago, it is assumed that Spanish EFL teachers of the twenty-first century have moved in the direction of teaching intercultural communicative competence, instead of communicative competence. The fact that this assumption is more intuitive than based on actual research findings constituted the rationale for the international research project from which the data reported on here spring.

## 2. AN INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH PROJECT

The project aimed to investigate teachers' perceptions regarding the aims, contents and approaches characterising their teaching. More specifically, the project inquired into the extent to which teachers perceive their teaching in intercultural perspective, to what extent current teaching practice can be characterised as intercultural and to what extent it is possible to define an 'average foreign language-and-culture teacher' regardless of the national context (Sercu *et al.*, forthcoming).

To achieve these aims, an international research project was established and seven countries took part in it, namely, Belgium, Bulgaria, Poland, Mexico, Greece, Spain and Sweden. The main tool employed was a web-based questionnaire made up of mostly closed and some open questions. Such a tool made it easy to compare and contrast the different national data sets. More qualitative research methodologies, commonly used in research on teacher thinking (Freeman & Richards, 1996), were considered less appropriate on the basis of the nature of the project itself, essentially international and comparative.

Data were collected that allowed for answering the following subquestions:

- (1) How do teachers perceive the objectives of foreign language education?
- (2) How familiar do teachers consider themselves with the cultural backgrounds of the foreign language they-teach?
- (3) How do teachers perceive their students' knowledge and attitudes regarding the foreign cultures associated with the foreign language?
- (4) How do teachers describe their culture teaching practices?

- (5) How do teachers perceive the cultural dimension of teaching materials?
- (6) How do teachers perceive the effect of school trips and exchange projects on students' intercultural competence?
- (7) What attitude do teachers have vis-à-vis different aspects of intercultural competence teaching in foreign language education?
- (8) To what extent are teachers willing to interculturalize foreign language education and what factors appear to affect that willingness?

In the seven countries, a similar number of secondary school teachers was invited to take part in the research and they were all provided with the questionnaire. The samples were purposefully selected. Purposeful sampling aims to obtain information rich cases for in-depth study (Merriam, 1998; Creswell, 1994). The total number of respondents was 424, with Belgium having the largest sample (151) and Bulgaria the smallest (30). 79% of the respondents report to be primarily teachers of English, 9% teachers of German, 7% teachers of French and 2% teachers of Spanish. 2% mention still other languages to be the main languages they teach.

### 3. THE SPANISH PARTICIPATION

#### 3.1. Teachers

The sample of teachers consulted amounts to 35, all of them teachers of English as a foreign language in diverse areas in southern, central and northern Spain (Andalucía, Murcia, Castilla-La Mancha and Castilla y León). They are all, without exception, of Spanish nationality. Out of the 35 teachers surveyed, 25 (71.43%) are females and 10 (28.57%) males. Most teachers (64.71%) teach between 15 and 20 teaching periods per week; 11.76% teach less than 9 teaching periods, 23.52% over 26.

Most Spanish teachers hold a 'Licenciatura', the necessary degree for teaching at secondary school level (a five-year degree in the past reduced to four academic years at present), generally either a 'Licenciatura en Filosofía y Letras, Especialidad de Filología Inglesa', 'Licenciatura en Filología Inglesa', 'Licenciatura en Filología Germánica' or 'Licenciatura en Filología Anglogermánica'. Some of them hold a 'Diplomatura' (a three-year degree for prospective primary school teachers) in 'Educación Primaria' or 'Historia'. Only 2 of the respondents have decided to take a PhD by enrolling in PhD courses. The respondents' teaching experience varies from 2 to 26 years, with a mean of 11.2 years; the years of teaching are closely related to the instructors' age, which ranges from 28 to 54, with the mean age of 36.69 for the whole group.

#### 3.2. Schools

The institution Spanish teachers work for tends to be part of the public educational system and offer general secondary education, and in some cases also vocational education. The presence of ethnic minority community children in these schools is not very significant; most of the respondents (42.86%) underline their absence, a large number of them (40%) consider their presence scarcely noticeable (1-10%) and a minority (17.15%) deems their presence to be somehow representative (10-50% of school children).

### 3.3. Results for Spain

Our research pursued two main goals:

- To investigate the way in which teachers perceive themselves as professionals. What objectives do they pursue (with particular attention to the cultural component). How familiar do they consider themselves with the foreign cultural backgrounds of the language they teach; How often do they get into contact with the foreign culture(s)? How keen are they to introduce the intercultural in their classes?
- To investigate to what extent teachers' current culture teaching practice favours the development of intercultural competence on the basis of variables such as time devoted to culture teaching, culture teaching activities practised, cultural topics dealt with and perception of quality of teaching materials from an intercultural point of view.

#### 3.3.1. Teachers' professional self-image

##### 3.3.1.1. Teachers' perceptions of the objectives that guide their instruction

It is assumed that teachers' everyday practice is highly determined by the aims they intend to achieve. The underlying hypothesis is that teachers who define the objectives of their teaching in terms of intercultural competence will be more willing to interculturalise their education than those who aim at promoting linguistic and/or communicative competence.

With a view to gaining insight into the way in which Spanish teachers define the aims of foreign language education, teachers were offered a list of 8 possible objectives, addressing the linguistic, cultural or learning skills dimension of education and which they had to rank in order of decreasing importance. These objectives are given below in figure 1, with the mean scores obtained for all Spanish teachers between brackets:

- 
1. Promote my students' enthusiasm for learning foreign languages (6.83).
  2. Promote the acquisition of a level of proficiency in the foreign language that will allow the learners to use the foreign language for practical purposes (5.34).
  3. Promote my students' familiarity with the culture, the civilization of the countries where the language which they are learning is spoken (culture learning objective) (4.80).
  4. Promote the acquisition of learning skills that will be useful for learning other foreign languages (4.47).
  5. Help my students to acquire a level of proficiency in the foreign language that will allow them to read literary works in the foreign language (3.83).
  6. Promote the acquisition of an open mind and a positive disposition towards unfamiliar cultures (3.83).
  7. Help my students to acquire skills that will be useful in other subject areas and in life (such as memorize, summarize, put into words, formulate accurately, give a presentation, etc.) (3.46).
  8. Help my students in developing a better understanding of their own identity and culture (3.23).
- 

*Figure 1. Teachers' views regarding the objectives of foreign language education*

The ranking suggests that, on the whole, Spanish EFL teachers appear to mainly try to achieve linguistic goals and consider the promotion of general learning skills or cultural awareness in their pupils less important.

It is worth pointing out that Spanish teachers aim to attain linguistic objectives, the most relevant one, 'enthuse my pupils for learning foreign languages' (ranked first), a clearly motivational in nature. The second, fourth and fifth objectives in order of importance are similarly linguistic in their orientation: 'promote the acquisition of a level of proficiency in the foreign language that will allow the learners to use the foreign language for practical purposes', 'promote the acquisition of learning skills that will be useful for learning other foreign languages' and 'assist my pupils to acquire a level of proficiency in the foreign language that will allow them to read literary works'. Apart from the fact already highlighted that teachers give more prominence to teaching the foreign language than the foreign culture, a further interesting conclusion that can be drawn from these data concerns the linguistic objectives in themselves: teachers do not attach great importance to helping students read literary works in the foreign language, focusing rather on favouring the development of linguistic proficiency in the target language, up to a level necessary for communication for practical purposes.

It is similarly noticeable that cultural objectives are deemed less important than linguistic objectives as the respective sixth and eighth position of 'promote the acquisition of an open mind and a positive disposition towards unfamiliar cultures' and 'assist my pupils in developing a better understanding of their own identity and culture' reveal. However, a significant finding is the fact that the culture-bound goal 'promote my pupils' familiarity with the culture and the civilisation of the foreign culture(s)' was ranked third. As a consequence, Spanish teachers appear to define culture teaching mainly in terms of familiarising students with the foreign cultural context, a cognitive aim.

### 3.3.1.2. Teachers' conception of "culture teaching" in EFL education

In order to investigate how teachers perceive culture teaching, a second ranking question was designed with 9 statements, pertaining to the cognitive, attitudinal or skills dimension of intercultural competence (Byram, 1997). They are shown in figure 2. Between brackets, the mean scores obtained for all teachers have been provided, as well as an indication of the dimension of intercultural competence addressed. The statements with which teachers agree most are listed towards the top.

- 
1. Provide information about daily life and routines (knowledge) (7.94)
  2. Develop attitudes of openness and tolerance towards other peoples and cultures (attitudes) (7.37)
  3. Promote reflection on cultural differences (knowledge and skills) (6.34)
  4. Provide experiences with a rich variety of cultural expressions (literature, music, theatre, film, etc.) (knowledge) (6.11)
  5. Provide information about shared values and beliefs (knowledge). (6.06)
  6. Provide information about the history, geography and political conditions of the foreign culture(s) (knowledge) (5.49)
  7. Promote the ability to empathize with people living in other cultures (skills) (5.40)

8. Promote the ability to handle intercultural contact situations (skills) (4.94)
  9. Promote increased understanding of students' own culture (skill to compare cultures) (4.83)
- 

*Figure 2. Teacher ranking of objectives for culture teaching*

Spanish teachers appear to perceive culture teaching mainly in terms of passing on information regarding the foreign culture(s) associated with the foreign language they teach, and thus in terms of increasing their learners' familiarity with the foreign cultural background. Priority is given to passing on information regarding daily life and routines.

The attitudinal component, however, is not underestimated as its second position in the ranking indicates. Spanish teachers, along the lines of the National Curriculum, are very much aware of the necessity of promoting attitudes of openness and tolerance towards other cultures and people.

This appears in direct conflict with the finding presented in the previous section, namely that teachers appear not to attach much importance to the promotion of an open mind and a positive disposition towards unfamiliar cultures (ranked sixth). Considering these two findings together makes it clear that teachers deem teaching the foreign linguistic code and communicative competence more important than the promotion of an open mind. Yet, with respect to the cultural domain of foreign language education, they are aware of the importance of trying to enhance their learners' familiarity with the foreign culture, from which hopefully more open minds will result.

A further remarkable finding concerns the culture teaching objective ranked last. It appears that teachers define culture teaching mainly in terms of familiarising their learners with the foreign culture, failing to use the opportunities inherent in foreign language teaching to help their learners' reflect on their own culture and cultural identity, and thus also omitting to help them acquire the skills necessary to deal with intercultural contact situations. The fact that 'promote reflection on cultural differences' is ranked third is interesting in this respect. This relatively high ranking position appears to suggest that even when teachers say they want their pupils to reflect on cultural differences, this really means they want their learners to enhance their understanding of the foreign culture and of how it differs from their own.

Finally, it is noteworthy that the objectives pertaining to the skills dimension of intercultural competence tend to be given low priority only. Might this be interpreted as an indication that teachers do not know how to promote the acquisition of intercultural skills? Does this mean that Spanish secondary EFL teachers have not yet realised the importance of providing practice in intercultural contact management?

### *3.3.1.3. Teachers' awareness of their sociocultural background knowledge*

The assumption here is that the more familiar a teacher is with the foreign culture(s) associated with the foreign language s/he teaches, the more willing s/he will be to promote the acquisition of intercultural competence in her/his learners.

In order to gain insight into teachers' perception of the extent of their familiarity with the foreign sociocultural background, the participants were asked first to list the countries primarily associated with the English language and then to indicate their degree of familiarity

with a number of cultural topics. They were instructed to choose ‘very familiar’ when they felt they were so familiar with the topic that it would be very easy for them to talk about it extensively in the foreign language classroom, ‘sufficiently familiar’ when they felt they were familiar enough with a particular topic and could say something about it in class, ‘not sufficiently familiar’ when they considered themselves not well informed about a particular topic, and ‘not familiar at all’ when they felt they didn’t really know anything about that particular cultural aspect.

Since English is such a world-spread language, it is not surprising to see that the 35 Spanish teachers of English who took part in the survey mentioned more than one country as being linked to the foreign language they teach. Figure 3 below interestingly shows that the United States and the United Kingdom keep being the countries generally linked with the English language, but that other nations, habitually not considered in EFL teaching, are beginning to play a new albeit sometimes modest role: Australia, Canada and South Africa, mainly.

USA	UK	Australia	Ireland	Canada	South Africa	New Zealand	India	Jamaica
35	34	20	15	8	5	3	2	1

*Figure 3. Countries teachers associate with the foreign language they teach*

As to teachers’ familiarity with specific cultural issues, figure 4 shows the order in which the topics could be listed on the basis of mean scores for all teachers.

- 
1. Daily life and routines, living conditions, food and drink etc. (3.57)
  2. Literature (3.37)
  3. Youth culture (3.09)
  4. Traditions, folklore, tourist attractions (3.03)
  5. History, geography, political system (3.00)
  6. Different ethnic and social groups (2.80)
  7. Education, professional life (2.77)
  8. Values and beliefs (2.71)
  9. Other cultural expressions (music, drama, art) (2.63)
  10. International relations (political, economic and cultural with students’ country and other countries) (2.43)
- 

*Figure 4. Teachers’ perceptions of the extent of their sociocultural background knowledge*

The aspect of the foreign culture Spanish EFL teachers appear to be most familiar with is ‘daily life and routines’, an aspect which appears prominently in most EFL textbooks used in Spain (Méndez García, 2003) and of which teachers can get first-hand experience when they plunge into the foreign community/ies. Their familiarity with the foreign literature stems from a different source, namely their course of study taken in order to obtain the degree required to teach in secondary education.

Other topics such as youth culture, traditions and tourist attractions, history and geography, different ethnic and social groups, education and professional life, and values and beliefs are

in the middle-ground. Finally, the least familiar topic is the foreign country's position in the international arena, a fact certainly surprising in view of the fact that Spanish news media cover this aspect extensively.

No teacher stated that s/he considered himself/herself not familiar at all with any of the topics listed, except for 11.43% of the teachers who acknowledged their complete ignorance regarding the international context in which English-speaking countries operate. Thus, with this exception, all Spanish EFL teachers seem to be familiar enough with most relevant sociocultural issues of the country they primarily associate with the English language to be able to deal with them, at least superficially.

### *3.3.1.4. Teachers' perceptions of the frequency of their contacts with foreign cultures and countries*

It is likewise relevant to investigate to what extent the respondents' cultural knowledge is determined by their actual contact with the foreign cultural background. Teachers' contact was looked into from a twofold perspective: while at home and abroad; a number of possible contacts was included under each heading and the participants were asked to specify how frequently they resort to each type of contact: 'never' (scores between 0.01 and 1.00), 'once in a while' (scores between 1.01 and 2.00) or 'often' (scores between 2.01 and 3.00). An open ended question was similarly introduced allowing the respondents to record further contacts they may have.

Figure 5 shows teachers' responses connected to the contacts they have with the foreign community/ies in their different visits and stays in it/them:

- 
1. Tourist trips (2.40)
  2. Participation in a teacher training programme or a language course (2.09)
  3. Visits to relatives or friends (1.57)
  4. Work visits, within the framework of an exchange project (1.34)
  5. School trips (1 or 3 days) (1.31)
- 

*Figure 5. Teachers' perceptions of the frequency of their direct contacts with the foreign country*

Spanish teachers are noticeable for their relatively high frequency of direct contacts with the foreign country, a relatively new circumstance in the Spain of the last quarter of the twentieth century and the twenty-first century. Indeed, two of the five types of contacts contemplated appear to take place regularly, tourist trips and participation in teacher training programmes or language courses. Obviously, the kind of relationship established with the foreign community and the kind of cultural knowledge gained differs in both instances. Tourist trips give way to a certainly superficial and external intercultural experience, being the contact with the members of the foreign country highly punctual and reduced. On the other hand, a professional and/or instrumental type of knowledge is derived from participation in a teacher training programme or a language course.

The remaining three contacts occur more sporadically, being visits to relatives or friends the most popular of them. Lastly, visits to the foreign country other than teachers' personal



participation in a course turn out to be the least popular option: work visits, within the framework of an exchange project, and school trips seem to be considered by teachers to not be part of their professional duties.

Finally, no teacher expressed never to have any of these contacts and the mean scores reveal that no contact is never said to take place, a clearly positive finding.

Teachers were likewise instructed to specify the frequency of their contacts with the foreign culture while at home.

- 
1. Media contacts (TV, newspapers) (2.94)
  2. Contacts with people originating from the foreign country who live in my country (2.43)
  3. Contacts with foreign language assistants (usually natives from the foreign country) in my school (2.17)
  4. Contacts with foreign teachers or students who visit my school (1.86).
  5. Visits to the cultural institute representing the foreign country in my country (1.29)
- 

*Figure 6. Teachers' perceptions of the frequency of their contacts with the foreign culture while at home*

The data presented in figure 6, leaves no room for doubt. The majority of the respondents (94.29%) express their more than habitual contact with the foreign community through the media, no single teacher reporting never doing it.

Relatively high are also the contacts with people originating from the foreign country and with foreign language assistants at school, as the mean score shows. The former is not a surprising event in Spain, because this country is the home of thousands of foreigners, diverse native speakers of English included; the latter reflects the recent relevance of foreign language assistants in public and private schools.

On the light of the preceding findings, it is not surprising to discover the occasional contacts teachers have with foreign teachers or students at school. Visits to the cultural institute representing the foreign country in Spain is the source of information least drawn upon, mainly due to the fact that cultural institutes tend to be located in large cities and are not easily reached by teachers living in areas further removed from these cities.

Only 6 teachers acknowledge having additional contacts (answer to an open-ended question). The preferred means is the internet, 3 out of 6 highlighting it; further circumstances mentioned are 'Socrates and Lingua Programmes', 'friends from the foreign country who live there' and 'contact with foreign university teachers who visit my country'.

All in all, if both abroad and at home contact data are considered together, the kinds of contacts teachers appear to have most often are, undoubtedly, media contacts, followed by contacts with people originating from the foreign country who live in Spain, tourist trips, contact with foreign language assistants in teachers' school and participation in a teacher training programme or language course. This wide range of habitual contacts is a determining factor in the kind of information teachers will dispose of: media contacts which may be one-sided, but personal contacts with people originating from English-speaking countries provides a valuable insider view.

### 3.3.1.5. *Teachers' willingness to teach intercultural communicative competence*

The extent of teachers' willingness to interculturalise foreign language education was investigated through asking teachers to score 24 statements on a 5-point scale focusing on a number of different specific circumstances that might cause teachers to be favourable or disfavoured towards intercultural competence teaching. In order to validate the respondents' answers, two statements addressed each circumstance. Teachers were instructed to specify whether they 'agreed completely', 'agreed to a certain extent', were 'undecided', 'disagreed to a certain extent' or 'disagreed completely' with the statements.

The two statements that specifically concentrated on teachers' willingness to teach intercultural competence were 'I would like to promote the acquisition of intercultural skills through my teaching' and 'I would like to teach intercultural competence through my foreign language teaching', which obtained scores as high as 4.40 and 4.54 respectively. The results leave no room for doubt: Spanish EFL secondary teachers express their clear willingness to incorporate the intercultural dimension into their foreign language classes.

Teachers' willingness was found to covariate with a number of convictions regarding the way in which intercultural competence teaching should take place. Teachers' degree of willingness to interculturalize foreign language education was found to be significantly (level of significance set at 0.01 (\*\*)) and positively correlated to the conviction that:

- Providing additional cultural information makes pupils more tolerant towards other cultures and peoples ( $r = .548$  (\*\*))
- Culture teaching is as important as language teaching in foreign language education ( $r = .502$  (\*\*))
- All pupils should acquire intercultural competence, not only pupils in classrooms with ethnic minority community children ( $r = .501$  (\*\*))
- The teaching of intercultural competence should be undertaken cross-curricularly ( $r = .495$  (\*\*))
- Teaching culture promotes tolerance amongst learners ( $r = .480$  (\*\*))
- Every subject, not just foreign language teaching, should promote the acquisition of intercultural skills ( $r = .475$  (\*\*))
- Foreign language teaching should also enhance students' understanding of their own cultural identity ( $r = .436$  (\*\*))

In addition, willingness was found to correlate negatively with the conviction that:

- Intercultural education has no effect whatsoever on pupils' attitudes ( $r = .514$  (\*\*)).
- It is impossible to integrate language teaching and culture teaching' ( $r = .514$  (\*\*)).
- Language and culture cannot be taught in an integrated way. You have to separate the two ( $r = .496$  (\*\*)).

These findings reveal both the kinds of reasons teachers who are in favour of intercultural competence teaching adduce and the objections those who are not in favour might formulate.

Spanish EFL teachers who favour an intercultural competence approach are persuaded that it should be implemented cross-curricularly and that every subject has a bearing on the matter. They are convinced that it is possible to integrate culture-and-language teaching and that enlarging learners' knowledge of the foreign culture will increase their tolerance towards

otherness. These teachers are also aware of the value of assisting learners to reflect on their own cultural identity in order to foster their intercultural competence. What is more, Spanish teachers in favour of the intercultural believe that all pupils should be offered intercultural foreign language education, not just those in classes with ethnic minority pupils. Finally teachers believe that this type of teaching has an effect on pupils and leads to greater tolerance.

Our findings, likewise, suggest that teachers who are more hesitant to introduce intercultural approaches to foreign language teaching will not share the above convictions. Rather, they will point towards the lack of evidence of the effect of intercultural competence teaching on learners' attitudes and intercultural skills, the impossibility to integrate language-and-culture teaching, or the difficulty to co-operate with colleagues of other subjects to teach intercultural competence.

### ***3.3.2. Teachers' perceptions of the role culture plays in their foreign language class***

Having shown how teachers perceive their role as mediators of language and culture, we can now turn to the investigation of the extent to which teachers' current culture teaching practice favours the development of intercultural competence.

#### *3.3.2.1. Teaching time devoted to culture teaching*

A significant element in itself to gain an insight into the extent to which current teaching practice can be said to be oriented towards the teaching of intercultural communicative competence instead of communicative competence is the distribution of teaching time over 'language teaching' and 'culture teaching'. Teachers were asked to pick the option that best reflects their teaching from a list of six options, namely 100% language teaching, through a wide range of different degrees of culture and language teaching frequency (80% language – 20% culture, 60% language – 40% culture, 40% language – 60% culture, 20% language – 80% culture teaching) to 100% integration of language and culture.

As expected, no teacher admitted dealing exclusively with language and excluding culture from the foreign language class, whereas just one participant (2.86%) expressed integrating the linguistic and the cultural component on equal terms. With the exception of 2 teachers (5.71%), who acknowledged a 60% language – 40% culture teaching distribution, our data suggest that the average Spanish EFL teacher (91.43%) devotes most of his/her teaching time (80%) to the linguistic domain and resorts to the cultural domain occasionally.

When asked if they would like to allocate more time to culture teaching, most respondents (74.29%) answered that they would like to do so to a certain extent and a few of them (11.43%) showed even a greater interest by ticking the 'very much so' option. How is it then, that Spanish teachers do not get round to culture teaching more often? One is the main reason they asserted in an open-ended question: time constraints, even though this constraint stems from aspects as varied as the few hours assigned to teaching of English teaching, the predominance of language teaching in the Spanish educative system, curricular requirements, lack of suitable material, poor first-hand experience in English-speaking culture and a deficient teacher training programme in this respect.

### 3.3.2.2. *Kinds and frequency of the culture teaching activities practised*

Another indication of the way in which teachers implement language-and-culture teaching concerns the kinds of teaching activities which teachers practise in their foreign language classrooms and the frequency with which they do so.

Figure 7 below shows which activities teachers appear to practise most often. The results obtained are presented in order of decreasing importance and on a 3-point scale, scores between 0.01 and 1.00 meaning 'a teacher never practises this activity, between 1.01 and 2.00 that s/he practises it 'once in a while' and between 2.01 and 3.00 that s/he practises it 'often'.

- 
1. I talk to my students about my own experiences in the foreign country (2.69)
  2. I tell my students what I heard (or read) about the foreign country or culture (2.69)
  3. I ask my students to compare an aspect of their own culture with that aspect in the foreign culture (2.60)
  4. I tell my students why I find something fascinating or strange about the foreign culture(s) (2.54)
  5. I comment on the way in which the foreign culture is represented in the foreign language materials I am using in a particular class (2.46)
  6. I ask my students about their experiences in the foreign country (2.34)
  7. I talk with my students about stereotypes regarding particular cultures and countries or regarding inhabitants of particular countries (2.31)
  8. I use videos, CD-ROMs or the internet to illustrate an aspect of the foreign culture (2.31)
  9. I ask my students to think about what it would be like to live in the foreign culture. (2.20)
  10. I ask my students to participate in role-play situations in which people from different cultures meet (2.20)
  11. I ask my students to describe an aspect of their own culture in the foreign language (2.17)
  12. I decorate my classroom with posters illustrating particular aspects of the foreign culture (2.09)
  13. I bring objects originating from the foreign culture to my classroom (2.03)
  14. I ask my students to think about the image which the media promote of the foreign country (2.00)
  15. I ask my students to independently explore an aspect of the foreign culture (1.83)
  16. I touch upon an aspect of the foreign culture regarding which I feel negatively disposed (1.60)
  17. I invite a person originating from the foreign country to my classroom (1.46)
- 

*Figure 7. Kinds and frequency of culture teaching activities in the foreign language classroom*

Teachers' anecdotes in or about the foreign country, students' comparisons between the mother and the foreign culture and the fascinating or strange element (1-4) are the activities practised most often, whereas more critical, independent and thorny issues (14 to17) are least

often touched upon. It is worth pointing out that no teacher asserts never resorting to activities 2, 3 and 4, which accounts for their popularity in the foreign language class. On the contrary, activity 16 turns out to be the least popular source from this perspective since no respondent makes use of it often. On a similar ground, relatively large groups of teachers indicate they never practise three of these activities: 25.71% of the teachers never ask their students to independently explore an aspect of the foreign culture (task 15), 40.00% never contemplates an aspect of the foreign culture towards which they feel negatively predisposed (activity 16) and a revealing 60% never invites a person originating from the foreign country to their classroom (task 17).

If the first five most commonly practised activities are scrutinised, an interesting fact is discovered, the teacher-directed orientation of all except the third option. This implies that when culture is contemplated, its study is generally undertaken by the teacher. More demanding student-focused activities such as 3, 6, 9, 10, 11, 14 and, particularly, 15 take place on a much more infrequent basis. 3 and 11 helps students become aware of what being a culturally determined person means, 9 and 10 asks for the necessary dose of 'imagination' in understanding otherness, and 14 and 15 promote a critical stance in students and an independent approach in the treatment of culture.

The low ranking of activity 16 suggests that teachers prefer to present a one-sidedly positive image of the foreign culture, not a neutral one. This finding confirms the finding regarding the relationship between the degree of teachers' willingness and their conviction that a positive image of the foreign culture should be presented.

Finally, the low frequency of 17 implies that most Spanish secondary school teachers fail to use the opportunity to bring an insider view into the foreign language classroom.

These findings have to be linked to the findings regarding teachers' perceptions of culture teaching. It was found that teachers deem passing on information more important than promoting the acquisition of intercultural skills, a fact that is corroborated by the type and frequency of the activities implemented in class as shown in this section.

### *3.3.2.3. Extent to which cultural topics are addressed in the foreign language classroom*

The extent to which teachers deal with different cultural aspects during foreign language teaching constitutes our third indicator of the degree to which current foreign language teaching practice can be assessed as promoting the acquisition of intercultural communicative competence.

Data regarding this indicator were collected through asking teachers to choose between 'I deal with it extensively', 'I only touch upon it once in a while' or 'I never touch upon it' with respect to the cultural topics included in figure 8.

- 
1. Daily life and routines, living conditions, food and drink, etc. (2.86)
  2. Youth culture (2.43)
  3. Traditions, folklore, tourist attractions (2.40)
  4. Literature (2.26)
  5. Education, professional life (2.09)
  6. History, geography, political system (2.03)
  7. Other cultural expressions (music, drama, art) (2.00)

8. Values and beliefs (1.80)
9. Different ethnic and social groups (1.71)
10. International relations (political, economic and cultural) with students' own country and other countries.) (1.51)

*Figure 8. Cultural topics addressed in the foreign language classroom*

Six topics appear to be touched upon frequently; 'Daily life and routines' is by far the commonest one, together with 'youth culture', 'tradition and folklore', 'literature', 'education and professional life' and 'history, geography and the political system'. Nonetheless, only 'daily life and routines' is stated to be dealt with extensively by the majority of the teachers (85,71%), followed by far by 'youth culture', examined extensively by 48,57%. There seems to be a consensus on the infrequent focus on 'history, geography, political system' (97,14%), 'education and professional life' (74,29%), 'literature' (62,86%) and 'traditions folklore and tourist attractions' (60%). Of the six topics most extensively considered, 'daily life and routines', 'traditions and folklore' and 'history and geography' have a somehow different status for no teacher indicates never touching upon them.

The mean score for the remaining four topics reveals that they are generally treated once in a while, being 'different ethnic and social groups' and 'international relations' the least favoured issues at secondary school level. It is significant that a remarkably high percentage of teachers admits never considering them. It is particularly high in the case of 'values and beliefs' (28,57%), 'different ethnic and social groups' (31,43%) and 'international relations' (57,14%).

On the whole, the topics teachers address in the foreign language class are similar to the topics they seem to be more familiar with: 'daily life and routines' was similarly ranked first, and 'youth culture', 'traditions and folklore' and 'literature', although in a somehow different order, also occupied the second, third and fourth positions in 3.3.1.3. The least habitually examined topic, 'international relations' was equally the least familiar topic. ELT textbooks in Spain (Méndez García, 2003) seem to have a bearing on this state of the art, since the topics most commonly addressed in the classroom are likewise included in this teaching material, whereas issues such as 'international relations', scarcely dealt with in the foreign language class, do not generally appear in textbooks. Literature, however, does not occupy a prominent position in ELT textbooks, so their popularity stems from teacher training programmes, loaded with courses on literature. Literature does indeed play a more than secondary role in textbooks and it is only through graded readers that it tends to enter the foreign language class in abridged versions of well-known works.

#### *3.3.2.4. Criteria for the selection of teaching materials*

A final insight in the extent to which current EFL teaching can be said to be oriented towards the acquisition of intercultural communicative competence instead of communicative competence was gained through asking the teachers what criteria they observe when selecting their teaching materials. The textbook and its accompanying material are of utmost importance in the learning and teaching process due to their predominance as teaching tools (Sercu, 1998;

Méndez García, 2003). Teachers in Spain can choose from textbooks marketed in Spain and published either by Spanish or foreign (mainly British) publishing houses.

In order to find out which criteria teachers employ when selecting teaching materials, they were offered a list of possible aspects and asked to tick the six criteria they deemed most important. Figure 9 lists the aspects which teachers ticked most often in decreasing order of importance.

- 
1. The degree to which the book can motivate my students
  2. The degree to which the book is attuned to the level and the age of my students
  3. The fact that additional materials come with the book (Workbook, listening materials, texts, video, etc.)
  4. The degree to which the textbook meets the curricular requirements
  5. The degree of matching between the amount of materials offered and the number of teaching periods assigned to my subject
  6. The quality of the teacher's manual
  7. The amount of cultural information the book offers
  8. The pace of the book, the speed with which the book progresses
  9. The lay-out
  10. The price
  11. The textbook authors' nationality
- 

*Figure 9. Criteria observed when selecting teaching materials*

The results cannot be more explicit: cultural information is just ranked seventh, being therefore a marginal criterion in textbook selection. These findings suggest that Spanish teachers do not consider culture teaching all that important. This finding can be linked to the distribution of their teaching time over culture teaching and language teaching and to the way in which they perceive the objectives of foreign language education.

#### **4. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

From the presentation of our research findings, it will have become clear that, although teachers support intercultural objectives and deem it important to promote the acquisition of an open mind, their teaching practice can as yet not be characterized as intercultural. Even though cognition is the first step in intercultural understanding, there seems to be a clash between the way teachers undervalue the other intercultural objectives -developing an open mind towards otherness and a better understanding of one's self-consciousness as a culturally determined being- and the prominence conferred to them by the Spanish National Curriculum as general educational objectives at all levels. Little importance is attached to promoting the acquisition of intercultural skills that will be useful in intercultural contact situations. Low importance is given to help students reflect on their own cultural identity and on how it relates to foreign cultural identities. Teachers do not seem to realise that foreign languages are excellent vehicles for intercultural communication – or perhaps they do realise but may

still think the attainment of linguistic objectives is more important than the attainment of intercultural objectives – and that getting to know oneself and one's own culture is a vital stage in the understanding and appreciation of otherness.

The teaching activities practised most frequently are mainly teacher-directed activities, though some teachers also ask their students to explore aspects of the foreign culture, to compare cultures or to reflect on cultural differences. When selecting a textbook, teachers tend to not consider the quality of the cultural materials, and at any rate only after having considered whether the textbook meets the curricular requirements, can motivate the students and is attuned to their level of language proficiency. Importantly, teachers indicate to devote their teaching time mainly to language teaching and to have little time to also teach culture or intercultural competence. Teachers who believe language and culture can be taught in an integrated way are the teachers most in favour of intercultural competence teaching in foreign language education. Those who believe that culture teaching and language teaching cannot be integrated are not.

Before briefly commenting on some of the most notable findings, it should be acknowledged that the results, which we obtained, share the limitations of any self-report indices. With respect to a number of questions, it was relatively easy for the respondents to give desirable answers rather than answers which are fully true to reality. Thus, teachers may have overstated the frequency with which they employ particular culture teaching techniques or address particular aspects of culture. To our mind, the results should be interpreted in the light of this possibility, which seems to imply that the (inter)cultural dimension may be even less well represented in foreign language teaching in Spain than our data suggest.

We may wonder why this is so. Teachers can hardly deny the fact that they have a responsibility in preparing their learners for a world in which intercultural contacts will be frequent, especially in situations where foreign languages are used. However, they may be convinced that it is not *their* job to assist learners to acquire intercultural competence, but rather that it is the responsibility of other teachers or other authorities. They may not know that they too are expected to teach for intercultural competence. The textbooks they use may have been written with a view to helping learners to acquire communicative competence in the foreign language, not intercultural communicative competence. Teachers may not be convinced of the effect of intercultural competence teaching on their students. Most probably, teachers feel their first responsibility is to make sure their students have a good command of the foreign language, and consequently, that time devoted to culture teaching is time lost for language teaching and learning.

One of the reasons for investigating teachers' perceptions regarding teaching intercultural competence in foreign language education was to be able to provide teachers with professional development opportunities that build on their existing beliefs and teaching practices. The findings of research on teachers' beliefs indicate that teachers' beliefs affect their conceptions of specific teaching situations and, ultimately, their teaching practice (see e.g. Carter & Doyle, 1995). Departing from teachers' beliefs and trying to alter them, therefore, seems to hold the best promise for altering teaching practice. In Spain, professional training needs to be offered that can provide teachers with opportunities to evolve their beliefs so that they may be more compatible with teaching intercultural competence. To change teachers' beliefs regarding culture teaching, they need to be exposed to alternatives for current teaching approaches.



Apart from building on teachers' existing beliefs, teacher development sessions should also build on teachers' existing teaching practices and on their beliefs regarding intercultural competence teaching. The findings of our study suggest that teachers who do not believe that language and culture can be taught in an integrated way are also the teachers who are not willing to integrate intercultural competence teaching in foreign language education. Providing these teachers with examples of how language teaching and culture teaching can be integrated may help these teachers to explore alternative ways of culture teaching and to change their negative disposition. Helping teachers to integrate teaching activities directed towards the acquisition of culture learning skills in day-to-day teaching may help to win over teachers who are in doubt. In view of the fact that textbooks play a prominent role in foreign language education and given most textbooks adopt foreign cultural approaches, not intercultural approaches, teacher training should provide opportunities for teachers to reflect on the quality of their teaching materials for promoting the acquisition of intercultural competence in their learners, and assist teachers to adapt existing teaching materials. Finally, teacher development programmes may help teachers realise the opportunities to enhance learners' intercultural competence inherent in experiential learning activities, such as exchange projects and school trips, and show ways to avoid possible pitfalls which can lead to reinforcement of already existing stereotypes.

A new National Curriculum has recently been released in Spain after the data for the present investigation was collected. In the new National Curriculum, starting to be implemented, the block of contents termed "sociocultural aspects" has remained identical. However, the importance of learning at least two foreign languages is highlighted, as is the need to develop in learners a sense of "European citizenship". If learners need to develop a sense of European citizenship foreign language learning as it has traditionally been conceived will not suffice to interculturalize teachers' thinking. What is needed is a more extensive proliferation of the idea that there is a need to move towards the integration of an intercultural dimension in foreign language teaching, and full support for any initiatives taken to interculturalize pre-service and in-service teacher training, and foreign language education.

## REFERENCES

- Byram, M. (1997). *Teaching and assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Byram, M. (ed.) (2000). *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Language Teaching and Learning*. London: Routledge.
- Carter, K., & Doyle, W. (1995). "Preconceptions in learning to teach". *The Educational Forum*, 59, 186-195.
- Council of Europe (2001). *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Creswell, J. (1994). *Research Design: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*. London: Sage Publications.
- Freeman, D. and Richards, J. (1996). *Teacher Learning in Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Guilherme, M. (2000). "Intercultural competence". In M. Byram (ed.), *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Language Teaching and Learning*, 297-300.

- Méndez García, M. C. (2003). *La Cultura Extranjera en los Libros de Inglés de Bachillerato*. Jaén: Servicio de Publicaciones de la Universidad de Jaén.
- Merriam, S. (1998). *Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Ministerio de Educación y Cultura (1990). *Lenguas Extranjeras. Secundaria Obligatoria*. Madrid: MEC.
- Sercu, L. (1998). *Acquiring Intercultural Competence from Textbooks. The Case of Flemish Adolescent Pupils Learning German*. Leuven: Leuven University Press.
- Sercu, L. *et al.* (forthcoming). *Intercultural Competence Teaching in Practice. An Investigation in 7 Countries of Foreign Language Teachers' Views and Teaching Practices*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.