
The need for intercultural communicative competence in the Costa Rican context: Strategies for a combined approach intervention

Karol Cubero Vásquez

National University, Costa Rica

Salamanca University, doctoral student , Spain

As individuals, as communities, as members of the human race, we must pursue and find humble ways to coexist with others to inherit new generations better communication practices, better societies.

Karol Cubero

Introduction

Urgent global problems call for a structural change in the way teaching is conducted. Traditional teaching ways lack opportunities for enriching students' formation to face present and future challenges. Recognizing the need for a transformational education is crucial to preparing individuals with essential skills and competences. It is undeniable that the world as we know it is continuously changing due to varied reasons and causes linked to human misconduct. Today, the whole world is being tested. Many nations are facing an invisible hazard that is unfolding how fragile and unprepared societies and individuals are when dealing with global issues. During uncertain times, confusion, fear, competition, individualism, and misunderstandings also join the table. The lessons taught in this global emergency due to COVID-19 are many, but one directs the need to enable citizens with essential skills and competencies to maximize a vision for international-intercultural collaboration, understanding, and empathy as a reassurance of the compromise to help others in need. Now, more than ever, it is clear that future generations should be better prepared to build better societies, better citizens, and a better world.

Education as a fundamental pillar must ensure a continuous and transformational process with mechanisms to continually shift according to what the world demands without neglecting social justice and human rights. In Costa Rica, steps can be motioned in the context of language teaching with the promotion of intercultural communicative

Cita sugerida:

Cubero Vásquez, K. (2020). The need for intercultural communicative competence in the Costa Rican context: Strategies for a combined approach intervention. En L. Habib-Mireles (Coord.), *Tecnología, diversidad e inclusión: repensando el modelo educativo*. (pp. 166-177). Eindhoven, NL: Adaya Press.

competence (ICC) to reach that goal. Recognizing the need to develop ICC in a continually changing and challenging world becomes necessary. Even though this position is not new, in recent years, there has been an increasing debate over the subject leading language educators and experts to consider research lines and teaching initiatives into the implementation of ICC in formal education.

Intercultural learning must be considered in any educational curriculum essentially in English as a foreign language teaching due to strong theoretical arguments favoring the development of skills required to conceive of an effective process of communicating and interacting with culturally different others. Consequently, as theory suggests, language learners need to acquire knowledge, skills, attitudes, and critical cultural awareness to interrelate in today's multicultural world. In that sense, educators are called to work as agents of change, creating and facilitating novel practices to mediate foreign language learning in a fruitful, active, experiential, and collaborative way.

This article intends to approach the need to implement ICC through active and experiential strategies in the foreign language classroom. The paper examines 102 university English language students' perspectives towards ICC. The survey was given in 2019 to elementary English students from two universities in Costa Rica: UNED and UNA. The objective was to identify their perspectives and the level of importance placed on ICC. The results from this instrument encouraged the interest in conducting a quasi-experimental study that is currently taking place with elementary English students at the National University of Costa Rica. This work is expected to stimulate reflection about the model needed and ideas to guide the process of implementing ICC in English language learning since preliminary findings have indicated that although students have a positive view about ICC, they negatively self-assess their ICC.

Literature review

The debate about connecting culture and language can be traced back to the 1950s. Whorf (1956) started giving the matter a particular emphasis, pinpointing that language is used to construct our reality by organizing concepts and shaping our worldview. Since then, many experts have taken a particular interest in the subject, contributing to the analysis, implementation, models, and research over the need to integrate it into language learning.

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2001) scopes a very useful and interesting new role for language learners, that of social agents. It presents a whole new idea inviting language teachers to become intercultural promoters or mediators. This role may guide educators to a transformational way of teaching, which is particularly essential and crucial in the interconnected global context in which we live. The inclusion of intercultural training in the English classroom is also supported by the demands of the 21st century through a calling for cultural sensitivity. This issue becomes urgent because, unfortunately, sensitivity to other diverse groups does not emerge naturally.

Then, formal instruction comes into play. The language classroom is a good start for complementing university students' instruction by offering the opportunity to integrate intercultural content that might serve as a standpoint to learn, relearn, participate, respect, understand, reflect, empathize and collaborate with an open mind towards different ways of perceiving and doing things by diverse people in multicultural settings.

When teaching a foreign language from an intercultural perspective, students can enrich their learning process by reinforcing identity and appreciating and preserving their own culture. One's own culture has a critical functional role in the English learning process. Students can relate and connect to it while using the foreign language. Culture itself is meaningful content for ideas, activities, and project tasks to provide learners with a more holistic formation where the learning environment is not limited to the study of the language itself but to a source that opens different doors into the acquisition of a foreign language.

Experts have supported throughout the years that foreign language learning is definitely intercultural. Liddicoat and Scarino (2013, p.46) suggested that intercultural language learning involves developing in learners an understanding of their own language(s) and culture(s) in relation to other cultures.

In that sense, it is key to underline that learning a foreign language from an intercultural perspective requires learners to explicitly see its relevance. This is in the hands of educators when presenting class tasks and activities intended to change traditional modes for new views, new models of learning a foreign language linked to their reality. Consequently, integrating ICC is an invitation to set novel linguistic objectives in the foreign language classroom.

According to Byram (1997), knowledge, attitudes, skills, and cultural awareness lead students to communicate effectively with culturally diverse others. Embracing this conception involves the language learner acting as much more than a communicator, as a mediator, aware of the influence his/her own culture has on his/her thinking when interacting with multicultural interlocutors. Byram (2008), Kramersch (1998), and Deardoff (2006) have supported the move towards intercultural communicative language learning. They claim that foreign language learning situates the learner in a powerful role that redefines his/her position and identity in both the native culture and language and foreign cultures and languages.

Intercultural communicative competence framework

To set a context, a brief revision of one of the most influential theoretical foundations on the subject in question will be detailed. Byram's model of ICC is one of the most suitable because his model approaches the need to develop ICC in the context of foreign language learning and teaching. He links ICC to the development of critical cultural awareness, knowledge, skills, and attitudes while developing linguistic competence. Byram (1997) adds that attitudes such as empathy, flexibility, and respect for diversity as curiosity, open-

ness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures, and one's own should be encouraged. Likewise, the framework encompasses the development of skills that add more benefits to the learning environment like critical and creative thinking, scaffolding, and reflection. In Byram's model of ICC, key elements for an effective intercultural interaction to take place are needed. He lists the following:

- Attitudes: curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and beliefs about one's own (Byram, 1997, p.56).
- Knowledge: knowledge of social groups and their products and practices in one's own and in one's interlocutor's country (Byram, 1997, p.58).
- Skills of interpreting and relating: the ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents or events from one's own (Byram, 1997, p.61).

Skills of discovery and interaction: the ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes, and skills under constraints of real-time communication and interaction (Byram, 1997, p.61).

Critical cultural awareness: an ability to evaluate, critically and based on explicit criteria, perspectives, practices, and products in one's own and other cultures and countries (Byram, 1997, p.63).

University language students' perceptions

A survey was applied to 102 elementary English students from two Costa Rican universities during the second semester in 2019 to elementary English students. The objective was to identify students' perceptions of ICC. The data were collected through a questionnaire consisting of eight questions. The graphics show findings.

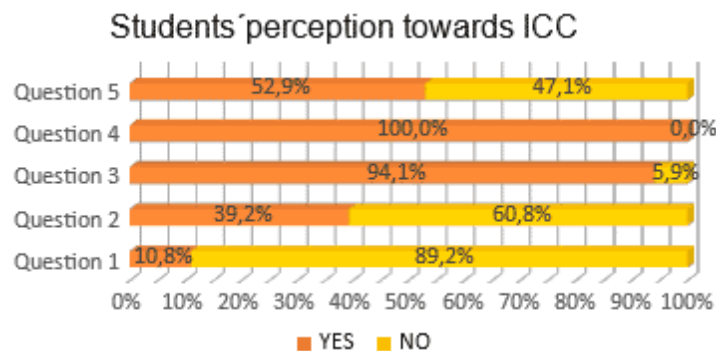


Figure 1. Students' perceptions towards ICC

First, students were asked if they knew the meaning and definition of ICC. Their answers showed that 89,2% of them admitted not knowing the meaning of ICC, only a 10,8% responded to know the meaning. For the second question, participants were asked if they had learned about culture in an English class before. Respondents showed

that 60,8% of the students have not learned about culture while 39,2% claimed to have received cultural content in English classes. The third question intended to know if they believed learning about culture benefits their learning academically and professionally to which 94,1% of the participants believe culture adds benefits to their learning process and 5,9% believe it does not. For the fourth question, they were consulted about their level of interest in learning about ICC in the language classroom; it was surprising to find out that 100% seem to be interested. When asked if ICC should become part of the curriculum, students' opinions become divided; 52,9% of them believe culture learning should become part of the curriculum compared to 47,1% who do not consider it to be an option.

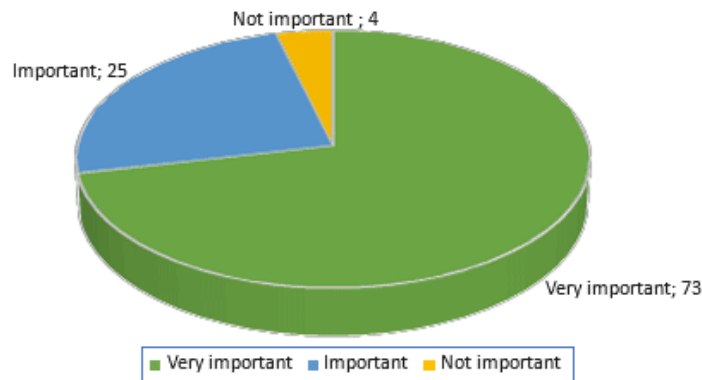


Figure 2. Level of importance given to ICC

To know more about their perceptions over the subject, they were also asked about the level of importance they would give ICC. For that question, 72% believe ICC is very important, 24% rank it as important, and 4% believe ICC is not important.

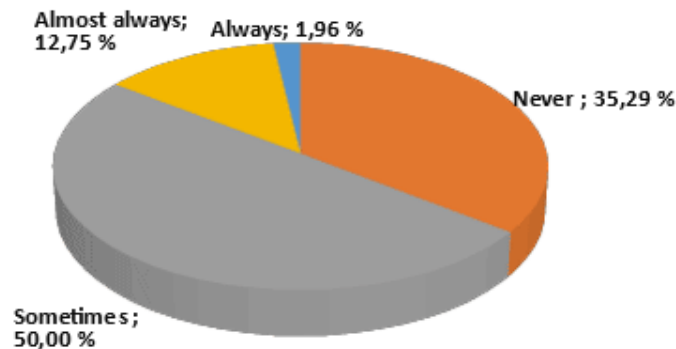


Figure 3. Frequency of reading about culture

Another question examined the frequency with which they consult resources in English to learn about their own culture or foreign ones. Their answers show that 56% of the students admit that they sometimes use English to learn about cultures, 36% claim they never do, and only 2% admit doing it always.

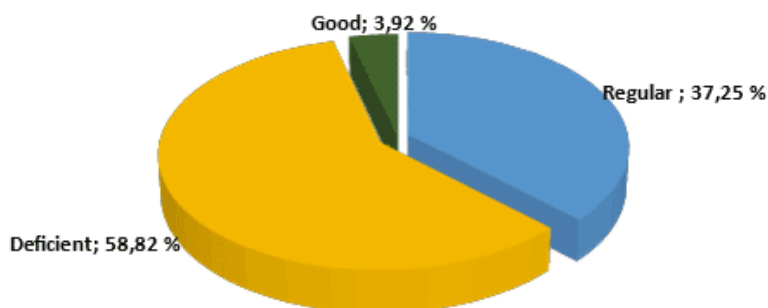


Figure 4. ICC self- assessment

The last question asked participants to self-assess their ICC. The graphic above illustrates that a total of 96% place their ICC in negative terms, 59% as deficient, 37% as regular, and only 4% rate it as good. The data collected show that students are well aware of the need to advance in the integration of ICC under a formal instruction at tertiary education. The results indicate that students perceive a generalized interest in upgrading foreign language instruction to one that can prepare them to be intercultural and linguistically competent.

In light of the interest and positive perspectives, English language students show about the idea of ICC as well as considering their negative ICC self-assessment, a quasi-experimental analysis has been proposed to study the effectiveness of a combined language approach (CLIL and PBL) intervention to promote ICC at tertiary education in the Costa Rican context. The participants will be first-year elementary students taking integrated English I at UNA during the first semester of 2020. The intervention proposal has been designed by integrating theoretical foundations, selecting activities and strategies framed under the combination of two language approaches to foster ICC.

For the intervention phase (currently taking place), the process of English learning intends to expose students to a series of tasks and activities to make them aware of their own history, identity, cultural context as well as helping them understand how their identity, experiences, opinions, and attitudes interfere in every interaction and communication encounter. As recommended by experts, previous to any intercultural instruction in a language classroom, clear objectives, content, and teaching procedures were set. The quest to develop ICC in English learners for this particular intervention proposal explicitly presents culture as dynamic and intrinsically linked to language learning.

The intervention plan is designed to be holistic and integrates students' context in favor of the development of learners' ICC (i.e., knowledge, skills, attitudes, and awareness of both target cultures and native ones). Opportunities are given for students to reenounter their roots, and national history, world view, and from that reflection, prepare the scenario for comparisons among other cultures.

Classroom activities to foster intercultural communicative competence

What kind of activities can be used in a language class to promote ICC? As there is no perfect model (Byram, Gribkova, & Starkey, 2002), a holistic approach to the development of intercultural competence seems a good option. It needs to be integrative, culture-oriented in a combination of content and language integrated learning, along with project-based learning, seems to be a suitable fusion approach to set an ongoing proposal intervention to approach ICC. The intervention activities unfold specific factual knowledge (i.e., culture-specific and culture-general information) about cultures because knowledge becomes a platform to light up discussions, reflections, and comparisons to boost the development of skills, attitudes, and awareness to reach the goal of effective intercultural interactions.

Some of the activities proposed in the intervention plan guide learners to think beyond their cultural worldview; analyze and describe cultural images, symbols, and diversity; as well as compare and contrast differences and similarities in everyday behaviors, values, and beliefs in their own and other cultures.

Some strategies to be developed include cultural dialogues, cultural misunderstandings, critical incidents, intercultural video interviews, songs, films, role-play, live interviews, articles, videos, culture-specific apps, photovoice, legends, cultural facts, stories, and community projects. Selecting and planning these kinds of language tasks should promote participation, intercultural reflection, and cognitive activation at the time that language demands are met. During the designing stage, content related to the students' interests is also being considered. The integration and holistic vision of the proposed activities respond to the needs identified in the survey applied.

The intervention currently taking place is framed under the combination of two theoretical approaches that gather core principals from content- and language-integrated learning and project-based learning. In the following table, some key aspects of each learning approach described by Coyle, Marsh, Stroller, and Fried-Booth (2007, 2002, 2006, 2002) are highlighted. These aspects are the ones that have motivated the design of the activities and tasks to foster ICC in English learners at the tertiary level.

Table 1. CLIL and PBL principles combined

	CLIL (content and language integrated learning)	PBL (project-based learning)
Language	Students are driven to use English through content. Language acquisition occurs naturally due to a natural need for communication. Language learning becomes concrete and functional.	It is used in varied ways for a real purpose improving through monitoring and feedback in areas like listening, speaking, reading, writing, and vocabulary. Language is functional.

Skills	<p>Students develop skills for future working life. It helps developing interdependence, creative, and critical thinking skills. It engages and challenges students with concepts of knowledge and opportunities to solve problems.</p>	<p>Learning through projects helps students to connect the classroom to the real world. Critical thinking, curiosity, reflection, autonomy, collaboration, and real tasks are encouraged. Students deal with challenges, questioning, and problems. Students develop communication, self-assessment, and inquiry skills. The content topic is needed for meaningful understanding and reflection.</p>
Learning	<p>Learning under CLIL becomes authentic, dynamic, and motivating for students and educators. CLIL combines content, communication, cognition, and culture. Learning is holistic, varied teaching methods, learning styles, and context are considered. It promotes cognitive scaffolding. There is constant interaction that increases confidence. Previous knowledge is activated.</p>	<p>Learning under PBL increases academic achievement. Students understand, apply, and retain information. How to learn is empathized. The learning atmosphere is experiential, goal-oriented, planned to explore a task from different perspectives. Inquiry sparks curiosity, scaffolding, and ongoing reflection. An authentic experience is encouraged to increase motivation and personal growth.</p>
Culture	<p>The cultural dimension is essential. Intercultural understanding and communication skills raise awareness of mother and target language.</p>	<p>There are several chances to explore culture and develop cultural awareness.</p>

Source: Designed by the author based on Coyle, Marsh, Stroller, and Fried-Booth (2007, 2002, 2006, 2002).

Sample activities

QR codes in the EFL classroom: A very particular, novel, and interesting way to develop motivation and curiosity towards ICC is by using QR codes. A QR code is a type of dimensional code that provides easy access to information through a smartphone with a camera and a QR reader app or software. QR codes can be an attractive element to promote active learning activities. They expand the learning experience and set room for critical and creative thinking. QR codes in the language classroom can be an opportunity for students to discover key elements of their native culture and establish comparisons among other cultures. A sample activity can be done by giving a QR code to each student

to incite curiosity to discover the information hidden. It serves as a tool to make students describe and investigate particular cultural photos or facts from different cultures, including their own.

VIOBAC project: Students become familiar with the concept of global citizenship (Cubero, 2014). In groups, students explore their communities as an extension of the class. They are on a quest to provide answers or actions to identified problems in their community. In general terms, students visit, observe, and act upon some of the issues that require attention in their communities. Guiding students to work in their communities opens a window for them to understand that many other places around the world suffer or face the same problems. Educators should inspire students to see that despite cultural differences, all of us inhabit the same planet, so all of our actions matter.

Films and role plays: The educator encourages students to act out some film scenes that portray intercultural interactions and dialogues. The intention is to acknowledge certain behaviors and attitudes to critically analyze them. After role-playing the scenes, students are asked to suggest ideas by comparing and contrasting intercultural content extracted from the film. They can also be asked to promote better alternative intercultural practices to the film.

Mobile learning through apps: The use of different culture apps can add to the class invigorating positive energy among students. One useful app that students can use to discover facts, information, culture comparisons, and culture overviews about many different countries around the world is called culturemee. The educator can design active tasks such as mini-projects or the design of infographics about a specific culture or their own culture to enrich their vision of diversity around the world.

The critical incidents: critical incidents are based on authentic situations gathered from some specific cultures and their own. Students can role-play intercultural interactions using common Costa Rican behaviors to explore their own cultural orientations as a way to understand some causes of misunderstandings.

In their shoes: Students can be given a chance to experience experiential learning and understanding by putting into practice foreign ideas and beliefs. For example, the educator can suggest students be part of the Holi festival, celebrated in India. On the campus, in an appropriate spot, students can experience the meaning of this celebration. The educator gives colored powder to the students and lets themselves enjoy throwing it at each other. Another idea can be asking students to experience walking Zen by inviting the students to calm their minds and place themselves in a position that allows them to embrace new perspectives and understanding of other worldviews. This Zen walking practice is about filling an eight-inch bowl of water to the top and while holding it to the chest, begin walking. By doing this, it can be observed that concentration and gazing at the water make it shake and drip, but when the mind is detached from the water, it becomes still.

Four eyeglasses: This activity invites students to perceive and feel four different intercultural attitudes. The educator presents four pair of eyeglasses, each one linked to a specific color and mode of thinking. The gray pair refers to a double-check and cultural

sensitivity mode, the black ones represent the ability to acknowledge prejudice and bias, the red ones show awareness and consciousness of multicultural perspectives and the blue ones view enthusiasm and self-motivation to use cultural knowledge when required. Students are asked to wear one pair of glasses and express ideas according to what the color dictates, then they can tell anecdotes referring to the mode of thinking or attitude.

Rediscovering my own culture: in an open discussion, the professor and students highlight a topic that seems to be unknown to them but of global interest. For example, in the specific case of Costa Rica, there is one community identified as a blue zone. The term refers to some communities where people live up to a hundred years and stay healthy. This seems particularly relevant to highlight because it guides students to rediscover their own culture, lifestyles, time orientation, and relationships.

Story circles: Deardoff (2020) invites students to sit in a circle and share personal intercultural experiences within groups of three or more people. It focuses on respect, understanding, openness, and learning from each other. The reflection encourages students to think and engage in a transformational process by asking themselves three questions around the conversation: What? So what? Now what? What did I learn from this experience (about myself, about others), Why is this learning important? and What will I do now as a result of this learning?

Conclusion

The instrument applied confirms that learners acknowledge how the world is changing directing the attention over the need for the development of essential competences. Students place ICC as a very important competence to develop in face of the global intercultural reality.

This has led to the planning of an intervention proposal which activities' objective is to explicitly approach and integrate culture while learning the foreign language. The framework proposed in the intervention here combines approaches and considers principals from CLIL and PBL that serve as a platform to teach cultural issues explicitly. Central to the activities rests the idea that culture as facts cannot be viewed in isolation. Cultural dialogues, understanding, and awareness to native and foreign cultures are needed for reflection in each language task. That is why all the activities suggested set opportunities for students to interact, question, experience, reflect and react in their own way of perceiving things for a later understanding and comparison of other ways.

The intervention is currently being conducted with an experimental group taking the intervention proposal every week for two hours through a contextualized unit that combines tasks from both the approaches: CLIL and PBL. On the other hand, the control group is following a traditional method of learning English using a textbook. Both groups took a pretest, which consisted of three parts, a questionnaire, an ICC self-assessment scale, and an intercultural quiz. At the end of the intervention, both groups will take a posttest to statistically understand the scope and extent of the study.

A proposal of language activities is being used as a platform to facilitate intercultural information, reflection, analysis, input, and production to reinforce language skills. For this proposal principals from CLIL and PBL are considered when designing language activities as a mean to facilitate opportunities for students to reflect about their own culture, their identity, and their systems to subsequently appreciate, understand, and respect other individuals from diverse cultures.

Since the intervention is in an early stage, what initially has been observed in student's classroom interactions are the effects on students' interests. They seem curious, appreciative, and willing to communicate in English as a foreign language. The activities proposed seem to facilitate joyful interactions, active learning, collaboration, and reflection. Thus, they take more chances to improve pronunciation, reading comprehension, vocabulary, and grammar structures because they are more open to express what they know about their culture.

What can be learned so far, is the positive outlook that this kind of shift in foreign language learning adds benefits to the language classroom that can be as small as changing preconceived ideas based on inaccurate information towards others, or more significant, such as experiencing and recognizing the need to get involved in a formal, explicit, intercultural learning process.

Accordingly, foreign language teachers should be intercultural experts and culture promoters. Educators' agendas should highlight ICC as a vital core to inspire students. Language educators need to shift from traditional language views to intercultural ones to develop both linguistic and ICC in language learners. When varied learning scenarios are offered to students, there are more opportunities for advancing and achieving greater learning goals. In the quest for new teaching practices, key factors come into play, the educator's teaching views, views on language, culture, content, projects, and technology. If they are combined to support a student-centered focus, then meaningful and significant learning experiences can be enhanced. When the language is used as a vehicle to mediate intercultural insights it seems that the learning invigorates. Finally, teaching a foreign language should be dynamic, not rigid; an integrated view where multiple approaches meet can increase chances to actively engage students in their learning process to learn much more than the language itself. Then, what is needed is the willingness to readapt teaching methodologies to guide students to better equipped students so they can perform successfully in an interconnected world.

Acknowledgments

To all the students who are participating in the quest to foster ICC at UNA campus Liberia, Costa Rica. Special thanks to the National University of Costa Rica, SRCH and to my colleagues who are supporting this study.

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Karol Cubero Vásquez is a professor at the National University of Costa Rica. She is conducting a doctoral study at Salamanca University, Spain.
