

**I wonder how I can do something like this  
with my students: Teachers' perceptions  
on the intercultural turn in English language teaching**

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### Abstract

Intercultural perspectives have become fundamental to revitalise language teaching and learning in educational contexts. Contemporary English language teaching (ELT) should provide learners with the analytical tools to promote Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) and cope with diverse sources of intercultural encounters universally. This leads to the necessity of ELT advance towards the *intercultural turn* and go under a systematic analysis of updated teaching roles, profiles and pedagogies to address the new complexities and implications of teaching a language in the 21<sup>st</sup> century for more diverse groups of people. This study aims at presenting critical reflections and insights on this topic from a Colombian perspective. Twenty-five English language teachers, guided by a qualitative interpretive approach, discussed their perceptions about culture and intercultural English language teaching (IELT). The findings indicate language teachers' incipient interest, a positive attitude towards IELT, and budding ICC pedagogical praxis despite frequent limited understanding, lack of guidance and resources to move forward intercultural approaches. This study makes a contribution to the field by prompting a discussion about English language teachers' perceptions about culture teaching and current or prospect IELT in their teaching praxis. In addition, an empirically-based *Statement of philosophy* to set IELT guidelines is proposed as per to promote concrete goals to foster IELT.

**Keywords:** culture, English Language Teaching (ELT), Intercultural Competence (IC), Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), Intercultural English Language Teaching (IELT).

## 1. Introduction

In today's societies subject to increased mobility, migration, and interconnectedness (Savva, 2017), individuals are challenged to become *citizens of the world* and experience intercultural encounters at any level (Byram, 2021; Guilherme, 2021). This intercultural competence (IC) is important to develop awareness that cultures are relative, and there is no one *correct* or *established* way of doing things, but that all behaviours are culturally malleable and variable (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). In the field of language education, a shift from the cultural to the intercultural turn in language teaching seems to be a major worldwide concern despite the fact that they are two converging spheres that interrelate to prompt language teachers' intercultural communicative competence (ICC) in action (Choudhury, 2014); ICC is the expected outcome of the insertion of interculturality in language learning and teaching as a vital resource in our contemporary world (Barany, 2016). An intercultural turn in language education implies that language teaching requires a critical emphasis on both the linguistic and cultural components of language (Calderón, 2015) and is no longer limited to the linguistic and communicative domains. Teaching and learning a language has transcended to include more analytical stances that encourage students not only to learn the language but also to pursue intercultural citizens who are critically aware of the contexts in which they are learning the language (Choudhury, 2014; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013).

ICC language education requires most teachers to rethink their own practice, to construct new classroom roles and ecologies, revise expectations about student outcomes, and overcome comfort zones of teaching (Corbett, 2022). An intercultural approach to language teaching does not leave out language development and improvement, but this aim is enriched by global educational objectives which address education for intercultural understanding and mediation with the principles and values of human rights and citizen education. (Kuzmichenko, Mikhailova, Korenetskaya & Matsevich, 2022; Veugelers, de Groot & Nollet, 2014).

The process of an individual becoming interculturally competent requires certain attitudes, knowledge, and skills that are not innate and need to be consciously promoted (Griffith, Wolfeld, Armon, Rios, & Liu, 2016). Consequently, it is suggested that language teachers have certain coresponsibility to adapt and/or create suitable language pedagogies to gradually promote ICC in their learners (Santana & Cely Betancourt, 2021) and accordingly, teachers and prospective teachers need to make efforts to learn about their own ICC during their teacher education and professional development so that they can infuse them in their language classrooms (Gazioğlu & Güner, 2021). Stronger views place evident and direct responsibility

on teachers as agents of change to develop ICC as foreign language educators are considered promoters of intercultural competence in their learners. (Ryan & Sercu, 2003).

### **Objectives and research questions**

This paper aims at discussing English language teacher's perceptions, opinions and queries about their existing or prospective intercultural English language teaching (IELT) in Colombia. Since English language teachers are major actors in this process, their voices on this phenomenon must also be made fundamental. For this reason, this qualitative study is teacher-based and was undertaken by 25 English language teachers who were each invited to provide in depth interviews about culture and IELT. The aim was to engage participants in reflection, understanding and analysis of their ELT practices with regard to culture, ICC, and intercultural English language teaching. The research questions which guided the study on which this article is based are:

- What are Colombian English language teachers' perceptions about culture and ICC in ELT?
- How do Colombian English language teachers' current practices and perceptions relate to an envisaged profile of the intercultural English language teacher?

Next, I begin with a brief overview of ELT in Colombia; second, I examine the literature on ICC and its relationship with language teaching. Third, I present the research design which draws on an interpretive, constructivist qualitative research method. Based on data-driven findings from interviews and some classroom observations, a thematic analysis was implemented to determine teachers' major concerns on the topic of IELT. Next, the findings from this study illustrate that participants may have evolving knowledge of the intercultural field, but a positive attitude and openness towards IELT teaching. However, the lack of support, scaffolding and clear guidelines on how to advance towards the intercultural dimension in ELT was identified as one of the major reasons for teachers to stay in their comfort zone in which their perspectives and practices are oriented towards communicative approaches privileging national cultures, factual culture, trivia and culture-as-content teaching. Lastly, as a major outcome of this research, a *Statement of philosophy* to set Intercultural English language teaching standards in Colombia is proposed.

## **2. Theoretical framework: The Intercultural Dimensions in English Language Teaching**

Syntheses of literature capture how intercultural perspectives have become fundamental to revitalise language teaching and learning in different contexts (Choudhury, 2014; Godwin-

Jones, 2013; Porto, 2019; Porto & Byram, 2015). This research strongly advocates that “adding a language and culture to an individual’s repertoire expands the complexity, generates new possibilities, and creates a need for mediation between languages and cultures and the identities that they frame” (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013, p.23). As suggested by Kramersch (2013), the teaching of any language should surpass the teaching of a linguistic code to inclusively teach meanings which do not replace traditional foci, but broadly add to them. In the same line of thought,

Byram, Holmes and Savvides (2013) state it simply by explaining the importance of teaching languages interculturally: “Teachers and learners now need to be «aware» of other people’s «cultures» as well as their own.” (p.251). In the following sections, first, a brief context about my home country, Colombia, will be examined to better understand ELT dynamics there. Second, some lines will be devoted to IC, ICC and CCA, to finally discuss ideas on the intercultural language teacher profile.

### **2.1 A brief context about Colombia and ELT**

Colombia, the third most populous country in Latin America, is located in the northwest corner of South America. Colombia’s linguistic heritage is rich and diverse; from a sociolinguistic approach, minority language groups in Colombia generally speak Spanish as a second language and have a minority community language as their mother tongue: either a native Amerindian language, an English or Spanish-based Creole (Islander and *palenquero*) (Bonilla & Tejada, 2016), Romanesque from the Roms or Gypsy migrations and Colombian sign language. In Colombia English has considerable prestige and is taught as a foreign language because it holds no official status in the country, and it is not a local medium of communication either. English can be considered a pillar in Colombian education required by many universities to graduate. Employers at almost every level are requesting a basic or intermediate command of English; a fact that can deepen social inequalities increasing unbalanced power relationships and exclusion.

Communicative language teaching (CLT) has been the most acknowledged method in the different levels of ELT education in Colombia (Sánchez & Obando, 2008). However, the research aligns with Porto and Byram’s (2015) views about how CLT “[has] pushed language teaching into the utilitarian direction and, in modified versions, is now dominant in most teaching situations” (p.227). CLT has had a profound impact on teachers’ views, on how English should be taught and the ways to approach culture. Accordingly, CLT belongs to the modern language paradigm in which English is learnt to communicate with native speakers and learn about aspects of the foreign language culture. Osorio and Insuasty (2015) confirms that

teachers and learners of English pursue an overall instrumentalist communicative style without much reflection on the ways intercultural relationships culture and the intercultural, Finally, a major concern of my research addresses the fact that CLT has become a comfort zone in ELT in Colombia which limits the language to instrumental, structural, skill-centered approaches that restricts the ability to experience and mediate intercultural encounters. In this line of thought, this research purports that ELT, seen through an intercultural lense, empowers both language teachers and learners with analytical, reflective stances to understand the language as as a cultural third space of constant collaborative meaning making and mutual recognition.

The integration of culture and language teaching in Colombia seems to be advancing as intercultural approaches become more popular in ELT. Studies revolve around pedagogical experiences in the language classroom, materials design, ICC development, language teaching programmes and similar related topics ranging from instrumental, functional interculturality to more postcolonial critical views. Agudelo (2007), for example, presented a qualitative pedagogical experience by implementing an optional course to demonstrate that an intercultural approach was an effective alternative to developing students' critical cultural awareness. In the same lines of thought, Posada (2004), Cruz (2007), Gómez Rodríguez (2015), and Ramos Hoguin (2013) explored the significance of giving foreign language learners the chance to become aware of other cultures while becoming proficient in the target language by implementing different types of pedagogical strategies and intercultural components (e.g., workshops) in the classroom.

Based on six local journal publications, Alvarez Valencia (2014) carried out research on interculturality and language teaching and concluded that the intercultural dimension was "still in its infancy in the Colombian scholarship." (p.226). This finding confirmed previous qualitative studies' outcomes (e.g., Ariza, 2007; Barletta, 2009; Quintana Soler, 2012) about teachers' perceptions on language and culture teaching which unveiled essentialist, structural definitions of culture as knowledge or nation-based cultures. More recent works include Cano Barrios, Ricardo Barreto and Del Pozo Serrano's (2016) who quantitatively analyzed the intercultural competences of higher education students in online learning courses provided with an intercultural component. Students declared their proficiency in respect and understanding of diverse cultures. With regard to language teacher education, Similarly, Moya-Chaves, Moreno-García, and Núñez-Camacho (2018) examined three language teacher education programs in the light of a reflexive and intercultural teacher education model in which prevalence of relational interculturality was made evident.

Last but not least, Esteban-Nuñez (2021) reports a descriptive case study developed in an English language teaching program at a public university in Colombia and analysed how pre-service teachers understand this competence as learning about other cultures different from the Colombian one, and as an important adds-on to the language curriculum. Based on this brief research outline, studies demonstrate a genuine interest on interculturality, ICC and English language teaching in Colombia. In a nutshell, some research address pedagogical experiences and classroom resources to bolster ICC in the language classroom. Some others explore ICC publications or English language teaching programs involving intercultural perspectives, but few point to language teachers and their inner conceptualizations about culture and IELT, which is the main focus of this study.

A major need expressed by some Colombian English language teachers is the need to become reflective practitioners (Olaya Mesa, 2018) able, among other skills, to motivate learners to engage in critical and dynamic learning processes; this contrasts with the nature of ELT in Colombia based on imported discourses and materials, and hegemonic ruling concepts on what and how should be taught in the classroom (Le Gal, 2019). Colombian ELT programmes should facilitate teachers' reflective inquiry rather than "constrain reflectivity, authenticity, dialogical interaction, openness to innovation and autonomy" (Fandiño, 2013, p.17). Porto and Byram (2015) seem to validate this view when advocating that language teachers as educators should instruct in both the skills of communication and in the values of humanistic education and criticality and should become transformative intellectuals able to engage and act in the world.

Finally, to finish this section, an interesting concern for this research is that thinking critically as a part of the language curriculum should entail critical cultural awareness or *savoir s'engager* through which teachers need to question and problematize their own and others' assumptions (Byram, 2021). However, in Colombia, according to the literature, there is limited empirically-based documented experience with both concepts as a part of the language curriculum. Intercultural language teaching contributes to reflective teaching by placing the teacher in a space that permanently constructs cultural practices, pedagogical identities (for both the student and the teacher) and changing discourses and realities, and consequently, this study aims to demonstrate that ELT and of course teachers should move towards IELT.

## 2.2 Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) and Critical Cultural Awareness (CCA) in ELT

To understand the current study, examining key concepts such as IC, ICC and CCA is fundamental. IC may be seen, in very general terms, as the ability “to cope with one's own cultural background in interaction with others” (Beneke 2000, pp.108-109). It is used to promote dialogue between cultures to co-build knowledge, values and interactions, or in words of Hartikainen and Mattila (2011), IC is understood as dialogue that offer a place for learning from each other. To achieve this competence, Byram (2009) advocates for the transitory validity of models and continuous construction of concepts and endorses that “specific theories or models have the advantage of helping teachers to teach but also have the disadvantage that they must change to meet new societal circumstances and the new demands made of teaching as a consequence” (p.329). Under this assumption, Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) is a dynamic context-bound concept that is inherently integrated to language teaching and learning to communicate and support cultural understanding and mutual enrichment. From a byramian perspective, ICC is at the core of foreign language education and is presumed to be experimental and malleable, even for the Colombian context in which English has been prescriptively taught for decades. ICC is key to relationship building and conflict management (some say conflict resolution, but not always a feasible thing to do) between cultural groups. Regarding ELT, ICC emphasizes learning to communicate with cultural groups beyond linguistic competence (Byram & Peiser, 2015).

Critical Cultural Awareness (CCA) or the “*ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries*” (Byram, 1997, p.53. Authors' own italics) is the ground of *savoir s'engager*, and integrates *action* and engagement into language education. As a result, because education is never neutral, language teachers should assume social and political responsibilities in the classroom (Byram & Feng, 2005; Guilherme, 2021). In language education, CCA highlights the need for a reflective and analytical stance towards culture (one's and others'), which leads to the relativisation of cultural appraisals that expand their interpretative frameworks beyond mono-culturalism and ethnocentricity or from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism. CCA scaffolds ELT towards action-oriented and participatory engagement with the target language to understand and (re) create juxtaposed universal realities. In this way, teaching and learning English overcomes method and skill-based dynamics to further take action in the world with and through language being taught.

Byram's CCA in this study provides critical and reflective stances that are fundamental to advance towards the future of ELT (e.g., Bonilla Carvajal & Tejada-Sánchez, 2016; Granados-Beltrán, 2016; Rojas-Barreto, 2019). One assumption in this research is that gradual advances towards teachers' CCA may help rethink ELT towards IELT. The notion of CCA may also empower Colombian language teachers to assume more proactive roles in the creation of a critically aware and reflective citizenry for the future. Through the teaching of English, teachers can encourage learners to build new spaces for exploration, cultural mediation and dialogue with the language. This will make an important shift from traditional approaches to the intercultural turn in ELT in the country.

### **2.3 The intercultural English language teacher**

IELT implies that teachers should become intercultural themselves with constructivist views of social phenomena and should understand the new challenges of ICC language education (Li, 2016; Piątkowska, 2015). Intercultural language teaching as a desired aim offers feasible relations with issues such as human rights and citizenship education (Dervin & Gross, 2016), which are part of the cultural complexity that learners cannot just pick up by themselves when meeting with diversity (Liddicoat, 2008). IELT bolsters reflections on ELT and on the role of culture in the language curriculum (Savva, 2017). Developing IELT coincides with a general shift towards international educational goals, which recognise that, "through the process of learning a new foreign language [...] students [and teachers] are also encouraged to get involved in the construction of the world around them" (Vez, 2001, p.17). In this way, the process of overcoming instrumental views of learning languages involves teachers and learners in the on-going transformation of the self and in their ability to communicate and understand communication within one's own culture and across those of others and their languages.

IELT views language as a complex net of related abilities that are needed to perform effectively and appropriately when interacting with others who are linguistically and/or culturally different from oneself (Porto & Byram, 2015; Risager, 2007; Savva, 2017). It is about "seeing the world through others' eyes" (Sercu, 2005, p.14), knowing that individuals cannot be reduced to their collective identities. In this way, establishing open-mindedness, tolerance of difference, and respect for the *Self* and the *Other* is part of promoting ICC in English language classroom (Porto, 2019). This underscores the importance of preparing individuals to engage and collaborate with a global society by discovering appropriate ways to interact and co-build meanings and realities with people from other cultures

A fundamental theory to inform understanding of ICC teachers was Sercu's and colleagues' (2005) earlier advocacy for the Foreign Language and Intercultural Competence teacher or the *FL&IC teacher* who may offer broader possibilities to promote a more international approach and teacher/learner world citizenship (Sercu, Bandura, Castro, Davcheva, Laskaridou, Lundgren, Ryan, 2005; Sercu, 2006). Sercu (2006) makes claims about the existence of specific characteristics that constitute a proficient profile of a good foreign language and intercultural competence (FL&IC) teacher:

They should know both what stereotypes pupils have and how to address these in the foreign language classroom. They should know how to select appropriate content, learning tasks and materials that can help learners become interculturally competent. With respect to skills, we stated that teachers should be able to employ teaching techniques that promote the acquisition of *savoirs*, *savoir-apprendre*, *savoir-comprendre*, *savoir-faire* and *savoir-être*. [...] They should be able to select appropriate teaching materials and to adjust these materials [...] In addition to being skilful classroom teachers, teachers should also be able to use experiential approaches to language-and-culture teaching. (pp.57-58)

FL&IC teachers should be ready to make sense of their students' perceptions and attitudes regarding cultures as a starting point to design more successful learning processes. Following these lines of thoughts, I would add that the interculturally-engaged language teacher should question method and skill-based language education and should provide learners with opportunities to (re)create new realities to take action in the world by developing intercultural communication.

In Colombia, English language teachers developing ICC and becoming intercultural teachers can significantly enrich their knowledge, skills and teaching praxis as their understandings and appraisals of their own and other's languages and worldviews to reshape traditional language classroom developments. IELTS demands radical changes in teachers' praxis (Tran & Duong, 2018). However, the Colombian context comprises some indisputable challenges.

### **3. Methods**

#### **3.1 Research design**

In the research design of my study, participant language teachers tried to make sense of their language teaching with regard to intercultural competence. In this way, the teaching of

English is seen as a process rather than a final product. Observing, describing and making sense of English language cultural and intercultural teaching in Colombia and the importance of the teachers' frames of reference are central aspects to this study. Accordingly, this research is an exploratory, interpretive study that responds to current enquiries about the importance of enriching ELT by promoting teacher ICC that can later be taught in the classroom. To achieve the research goal, English language teachers from the public sector were invited to enroll interviews leading up to data subsequently analyzed from an interpretive perspective of thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2013). The triad of social constructivism, an interpretive approach and a qualitative research paradigm provided the grounds to be able to understand English language teachers' existing or prospective ICC as a social phenomenon that is continually in state of revision (Bryman, 2012)

### **3.2 Data Collection methods**

To achieve a deep understanding of how Colombian English language teachers view ICC and IELTS, qualitative interviewing or in-depth interviewing (Taylor, Bogdan & DeVault, 2016) was selected as a main data-gathering tool. Also, short-term qualitative observations (Lichtman, 2006) were an *in situ* approach to reality considered to be particularly valuable.

Regarding interviews, face-to-face encounters between the researcher and participants were directed toward understanding participants' perspectives on their lives, teaching experiences, and pedagogical situations (Taylor, Bogdan & DeVault, 2016). The main objective in undertaking face-to-face semi-structured interviews with the participants was to gain a deeper insight into the research questions and look closely at complementary emerging perspectives. Interview questions addressed issues on culture, interculturality, culture and language teaching pedagogies in the ELT classroom. Complementarily, short-term qualitative observations (Lichtman, 2006), as an *in situ* approach to reality, were considered to be particularly useful. These observations were fundamental in determining, along with the face-to-face interviews, language teachers' current teaching practices with regard to culture and interculturality.

Prior to data collection, all the research ethics protocols were developed (e.g., information and invitation letters, informed consent forms, a schedule of interviews and of observation sessions and an interview guide). Central ideas on minimising harm, respecting autonomy, protecting privacy, justice, avoiding deception, and accuracy of data and their interpretation were fundamental in this research. (Springett, Atkey, Kongats, Zulla & Wilkins, 2016). The ethics of researching multilingually was also established (Holmes, Fay, Andrews, & Attia, 2013) to balance power relations. English and Spanish were actively used with clear roles from the very beginning of the research and transcriptions and translations were member

checked. Personal data were secured and were made public only behind a shield of anonymity to offer privacy and confidentiality (Christians, 2011; Denzin, 2009).

### **3.3 Participants**

Purposive sampling or information rich cases were selected so that teachers could provide a wealth of information for the study because they have experienced the central phenomenon of interest (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2015). A total of 25 interviewees engaged in the whole data gathering process, Sixty percent of participants had a master's degree (some from foreign universities). In general, all participants ranged from 20 to 54 years old (average age: 36 years old) and were mainly female teachers (68%). Forty-five percent of teachers had 10 or more years of teaching experience. Participants, in general, belonged to Spanish-speaking mainstream white mestizo Colombian culture (84%), very few were Afro Colombian (16%), and all were educated with Spanish as a first language during their schooling. Participant teachers (82%) were all working in higher education public institutions in Bogotá and were either teaching English or developing student teachers' skills at the time of the data gathering process.

### **3.4 Data analysis**

According to Braun & Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is beneficial to identify, analyse and report patterns (themes) within data. Ddata extracts were grouped around relevant research questions as guiding principles (in a theory driven or concept-driven fashion), and data analysis was mainly approached in an inductive, open-ended fashion (data-driven) (Clarke & Braun, 2013). However, having conducted the interviews myself, I acknowledged initial codes, topics and potential themes Computer assisted qualitative data analysis (Seale, 2005) and computational content analysis (Burton, Brundrett & Jones, 2008) were selected, and the ATLAS-Ti was used. ATLAS-Ti helps to store, organize, group and retrieve data in such a way that it is less time consuming to manage all data in a singular and cross analytical way. Codes were selected, commented, ordered, filtered, moved, renamed, split, and linked to each other. When browsing the data, they could be viewed in lists, hierarchies, as network views or particular occurrences (instances).

## **4. Findings**

My analysis of the findings suggests that English language teachers—particularly those who feel closer to culture teaching—feel positively disposed to IELTS. Some teachers conceptually understand IELTS objectives related to cultural understanding, dialogue and tolerance, but their practices frequently shift towards culture teaching from communicative

teaching approaches. As participant teachers answered the interview questions and their lessons were observed during programmed sessions, the following themes emerged with regard to the two research questions guiding this article: 1) Teachers' approach to culture and culture teaching in the English language classroom; 2) ICC and the teaching of English; and 3) Intercultural English language teachers' profile. These themes revealed teachers' own approaches to culture and IELTS and their teaching profiles associated to teaching English interculturally.

#### **4.1 Teachers' approach to culture and culture teaching in the English language classroom**

In general terms, participant teachers seem to value the idea of culture and culture teaching in the English language classroom. However, what this actually means in real classroom practice still seems challenging. Definitions appear to favour essentialist conceptions of culture (Rojas-Barreto, 2019). There was a common tendency among teachers to denominate culture as a type of "all" or "whole"; as a participant expressed: "Culture is everything that people have, think, and do as members of a society." [Participant 3 = P3]. This definition of culture as a whole or "*everything*" was sometimes perceived as a shortcut to avoid the complexity and multidimensionality of the concept (Risager, 2007).

The common features of the participants' definitions of culture were: Culture being related to traditions, habits, behaviours and group membership; as well as lifestyle, gastronomy, history, beliefs and value systems, norms, music, dance and language of a group of people living in a particular geographic region. One participant's definition of culture represented a generalized consensus as culture included, "All aspects characterizing a specific population in a specific place, region, city, country; these include customs, folklore, language, oral and written traditions, celebrations, holidays, social conventions, etcetera." [P17]. From participants' opinions, culture is also seen as a static phenomenon related to the nation state (US, UK culture), ethnicity, geography, language, and other aspects in which the teaching of culture is imparting information on the culture since individuals are taken as typical of the larger domain and their individual identities considered to be finished products (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013).

Some teachers' definitions showed a progression towards anti-essential views of culture, which have a strong basis in constructivist thinking; they included interrelationships, which acknowledged the highly complex and dynamic nature of culture. The participants who advocated anti-essentialist definitions manifested that: "Culture is not what we were taught at the university [...] We have only been educated with a limited concept of culture." [P7]. These comments indicate critical reflection on this topic based on their educational processes or personal biographies. Trying

to deconstruct the concept of culture can be understood as a first step in making sense of the openness and flexibility of ICC. In this research, generally speaking, participants acknowledged unity between language and culture. Interestingly, in practice, however, culture was separate from language and was predominantly equated to content-based lessons or a thematic common thread (cultural aspects) to achieve the functions of language through compare-contrast strategies [e.g., classroom observations 1, 2, 5, 6, 11, 17, 21].

Attempts to increase learners' cultural awareness through deeper reflection and analysis were few (e.g., guiding students into research, ethnographic strategies by interviewing other English language teachers about their experiences within the country and abroad; inviting cultural informants to the classroom). The teaching of culture in the language classroom was also associated within a specific teaching approach and methodology, the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which has predominated in Colombia for decades (Jaime Osorio & Insuasty, 2015). According to participants, culture is a framework for communication and can be used as something that enables the language learner to interact with native speakers.

As per the importance of the relationship of language-culture in ELT, teachers expressed that culture serves as a background that motivates learners to develop language skills. They also advocated for the knowledge dimension and how learners *should know* about the culture of the language they are learning [P1, 18]. Few participants expressed that culture was fundamental to bolster cultural sensitivity and tolerance to improve communication in the target culture [P12, 23]. Data gathered from classroom observations led me to contemplate that, implicitly, another factor was to promote cultural awareness through reflective questions during the lessons, albeit not consciously planned or included in the lesson objectives.

Lastly, from interview responses and classroom observations, findings were conclusive in that teachers introduced culture in their lessons in three different ways: 1) by using casual approaches in which culture information seems to be inserted as *knowledge* into the lesson to enrich it and provide some background; 2) through EFL teachers' own initiatives and planning (generally, culture topical contents to support the unit's proposed language); and 3) culture teaching as a part of the institutional syllabi and curriculum. In the first two cases, inner-circle Anglo-speaking culture teaching and cross-cultural perspectives are overly fostered by participant teachers who rarely write classroom objectives related to culture in order to achieve critical cultural analysis [P2, 3, 9, 15, 25]. ELT culture-based courses could be equated to *civilization* but, as some participants suggested, the syllabi will promote a gradual development of the language while, at the same time, develop cultural knowledge, sensitivity and cultural awareness. Although sometimes superficial, the knowledge-based culture in ELT may represent

an opportunity: A first-step to advance towards and reach deeper understanding and avoid trivialising culture's complex nature (Banks, 2004).

#### **4.2 ICC and the teaching of English**

In this study, English language teachers infrequently seem to acknowledge interculturality in its broadest meaning: Cultural interactions, which allow not only equitable relationships, but also learning and mutual enrichment (Risager, 2007; Kramsch, 2013). Findings about definitions of interculturality related with ELT often unveiled an important conceptual inaccuracy sometimes equating the term interculturality with multiculturalism or acculturation (Dervin, 2010).

Some participants provided an approximate or full understanding of the concept of interculturality and ICC. It was also referred to as “relationships amongst cultures” [P13], which might indicate the concept in evolution and in process of maturation by EFL teachers through experiences and personal biographies. Some expressed that, “Interculturality is an individual's ability to become aware of her/his own culture as well as the foreign/second language culture so as to compare, contrast and judge them” [P19] or, according to other participant, “It is the process of gaining a knowledge of, acknowledging and accepting another culture.” [P5]. These skills and *know-how* definitions are in congruence with postulations coming from Byram's (2021) and Byram and Zarate's (1997) early perspectives of ICC, which advocate that ICC requires the importance of bringing L1 culture and L2 culture together to understand and judge them respectfully: “Knowledge of the shared values and beliefs held by social groups in other countries and regions, such as religious beliefs, taboos, assumed common history, etc., are essential to intercultural communication.” (Council of Europe, CEFR, 2001, p.11).

A group of teachers considered interculturality to be important in ELT. Responses focused on the criticality and reflection it could foster (Romijn, Slot & Leseman, 2021) in addition to the mutual tolerance and respect between the cultures of the languages involved. Some others propounded IELTS might help deconstruct stereotypes, and guide learners towards “experiencing culture” [P7]. First, when referring to intercultural English language teaching as promoting criticality and reflection, a participant expressed what summarized a shared view amongst teachers: “Intercultural foreign language teaching promotes more critical and participative pedagogies.” [P23].

Second, IELTS that contributes to mutual tolerance and respect between the cultures involved was another frequent perception: “In terms of interculturality and English, you can explore culture and promote values such as respect for other's ideas and way of being.” [P15]. Another participant further explained as supported by Porto (2014) that English language

teachers should teach language and motivate the respectful interrelation of cultures as a systematic goal in the curricula as IELTS helps teachers and learners identify, analyse and deconstruct stereotypes. [P7]. Few participants put forward IELTS teachers as providing students with more analytical tools to approach a language where taken-for-granted assumptions should be challenged. Through critical self-reflection coming from IELTS, “students gained awareness of their own values, presuppositions, prejudices, stereotypes, etc. as well as a critical and reflective view upon them” (Porto, 2014, p.253). A participant directly advocated “being amazed by culture” or developing curiosity and discovery through *savoir être* and *savoir apprendre* skills. He further explained that:

To attain intercultural competence in EFL classrooms, the teacher first has to be interculturally competent in order to teach intercultural competence by modelling through her/himself. S/he needs to be an example demonstrating that culture and the intercultural are open, flexible and in constant change to navigate diversity. [PIT7].

This participant underscores the importance of teachers getting ready to engage in new intercultural pedagogies to understand and cope with diversity *with* and *through* the language they are teaching in the classroom (Papadopoulou, Palaiologou, Karanikola, 2022).

What are considered IELTS practices according to participants was also explored in this study. Some teachers expressed that they included some intercultural aspects in their English teaching, yet they declared it was not an easy task. These queries evoke concerns shared by scholars such as Fiorucci (2015) and echoed by Reid (2015, p.939) who claims that “teachers find it difficult to identify themselves with and apply intercultural aspects of the target language.” Few participants’ IELTS practices seem to be aligned with intercultural views, but caution is necessary when the approaches and procedures tend to evolve towards essentialist, nation-bound culture that promotes the learning of native speakers’ cultural aspects. As one participant advocated: “I foster cultural exchange in the classroom by using presentations on our Colombian and Latin American culture and Anglo-speaking cultures. In addition, they work out similarities and differences for customs, lifestyles and socio-political systems.” [PPT, 2].

Some participants reported other teaching practices with regard to language and culture teaching, including cultural projects and meetings with cultural informants that could have the potential to widen teachers’ ability to motivate IELTS. In the first case, cultural projects can entail more (self) ethnographic views by taking advantage of the curiosity and engagement with otherness during the research process that is fundamental to reaching an intercultural state. Likewise, guest tutors’ academic visits that are currently not oriented towards ICC experiential

learning can shift from the passive role of the guest teacher as culture-bearer or a living sample of their own culture to a *Cultural Other* with whom one can promote mutual reflection, otherness experience, dialogue and *Third Space* construction (Holmes & O'Neill, 2012), and who can fulfil the role of cultural intermediary between one's own culture and the *Other's culture* (Bodrič & Stojičić, 2013).

Based on the above perceptions that summarise some teachers' IELTS practices, findings reveal teachers view the intercultural as something similar to culture teaching, or as enlarged objectives of culture teaching and cultural awareness. Some teachers expressed that their main objective of IELTS was to offer students tools that allow them to widen their world view and access concepts such as tolerance and understanding in an emphatic context. They also emphasized that ICC helped learners enlarge their vision from the local to the global. However, these findings on IELTS practices allow the conclusion that despite conceptually showing actual intercultural objectives, teaching practices were frequently restricted to culture teaching, which may serve as a starting point for discussion on how to capitalise pedagogical practices related to culture and reshape them into pedagogical practices of IELTS. If appropriately redirected, these practices could represent an emergent phase of IELTS (Fiorucci, 2015).

#### **4.3 Intercultural English language teachers' profile**

With regard to intercultural English language teachers, a group of participants agreed that for their learners to develop ICC through English, they as teachers needed to become interculturally proficient. Thus, English language teachers should aim at some characteristics in order to support their students' intercultural learning process. Accordingly, data showed that teacher's attitudes, knowledge and capabilities are fundamental for IELTS (Cuartas Álvarez, 2020). This idea is strongly congruent with Sercu's et al. (2005) and Atay's (2009) research, which advocate that to support the intercultural learning process, language teachers need the willingness, additional knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary and sufficient for teaching ICC in ELT. According to Byram (2021) and Fleming (2009), personal attitudes, together with language skills and readiness to revise cultural values and beliefs to interact and engage with otherness are antecedents to being able to develop the necessary intercultural competence or a pre-condition for successful intercultural interaction (Byram, 2021).

This finding echoes the point made by Sercu et al. (2005) that "FL&IC [Foreign Language and Intercultural Competence] teachers' attitudes should be favourable towards the integration of IELTS. However, my findings suggest that a positive attitude is not enough, but an action orientation leading to IELTS is needed (Cuartas Álvarez, 2020) Barrett, 2008). In this way, this research is in congruence with Sercu et al.'s (2005) transnational research and findings

that some teachers may have a positive attitude towards interculturalising ELT, but an important sector are not yet doing it (Zhao, 2016).

Regarding knowledge, findings refer to the idea that teaching English intercultural requires a teacher with specific knowledge (Sercu *et al.*, 2005). The knowledge teachers overly referred to was related to, on the one hand, topical knowledge of cultures or types of civilization studies (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). One teacher expressed the need to acquire knowledge on intercultural theories and language teaching and learning or to study topics on interculturality and ICC relating to the teaching of foreign languages: “It is high time we are offered these kinds of topics in language teaching programmes and professional development by updating courses and workshops because, often, autonomous study is not enough.” [P7]. This teacher’s remark seems to agree with empirically supported ideas from Sercu (2005) who advocate the importance of this theoretical knowledge by saying that if they are willing to teach within this approach, teachers need to be acquainted with basic insights from cultural anthropology, culture and intercultural teaching and learning, and intercultural communication.

About their potential ICC teaching profile, some novice teachers see current language teacher education in Colombia as perpetuating traditional teaching models. The data recurrently pointed to issues of dissatisfaction with regard to language teacher education programmes and with regard to language policymaking, both lacking critical, reflective stances and goals that approach contemporary challenges in the ELT profession (British Council, 2015). In many cases, initial teacher education and professional development principally aims at building on their linguistic and methodological proficiency by providing formal academic experiences based on knowledge transmission and development of abilities that derive from traditional theoretical procedures. Teachers’ perceptions revealed undergraduate degrees’ lack of evolution and updating according to changing times. ICC development is declared as almost absent from teacher education. Some admitted, however, the inclusion of courses such as “American Culture”, “The UK in the World”, “Linguistics” and “Sociolinguistics which may provide some basic grounds to the field of ICC and language teaching.

When discussing ELT policymaking in the country, claims emerged from participants about the update of English language teaching guidelines or national standards for ELT to align with more international objectives like ICC teaching. A participant expressed that:

The government itself does not even know what it wants with English. There are no standards, but outdated guidelines or suggested curricula; now they are talking about culture, ICC and teaching English, but they do not state clear

objectives, and they do not say how teachers should integrate this into English language teaching. And this is how we always are: Well lost. [P22].

Lastly, a call for action and a need to start from somewhere with regard to IELTS were participants' legitimate concerns in this research. One participant stated: "I wonder how I can do something like this with my students [developing ICC in the EFL classroom]. Of course, I should first learn how to become an intercultural individual, but from who? How? Which direction should I follow?" This participant's query reflects what many teachers question in light of advancing towards more critical, reflective approaches to ELT.

## 5. Discussion

My analysis shows that teachers' understandings of culture and culture teaching in the language classroom tend to subsume structural views that see culture as a subject of study or background to teach language features. In such a manner, as derived from their beheld concept of *culture*, conceptions about interculturality and IELTS are *a work in progress*. Taking this into account, now I return to the two research questions selected for this article.

### 5.1 What are Colombian English language teachers' conceptions and beliefs about culture, interculturality and ELT?

Colombian English language teachers consider integrating culture in their English language lessons important and advocate the indivisibility between language and culture (Naveel, Kantara & Cserző, 2016). However, there is a radical difference between what they perceive of culture and culture teaching, and how they actually tackle the issue in the classroom: They generally see culture as something that supports language teaching (Nguyen, Harvey & Grant, 2016) and that is taught separately. Participants see culture as content, aspects that are taken-for-granted or optional since the concept is not seen as a primary goal for nationwide ELT. The findings demonstrated that teachers seldom fostered cultural awareness by trying to motivate learners to re-evaluate dynamic and internal perceptions of culture. Culture teaching was overwhelmingly perceived as something subordinate to language teaching that contributed to learners' language learning within CLT. This view of culture in ELT has, in my view, important repercussions when participants approach IELTS.

English language teachers perceived interculturality and IELTS as interesting, challenging, complex, and few of them, a distant concept to EFL teaching. Understandings of interculturality and IELTS were sometimes limited and, generally speaking, teachers' unfamiliarity with the concepts made them perceive it as a demanding experience that needed more exploration in order to be fully grasped and incorporated into the classroom. General

characteristics of an ICC approach to teaching English (e.g., tolerance, understanding of other cultures, flexibility, openness) were provided. Others tried to offer definitions that tended to equate interculturality with other concepts such as culture, multiculturalism (Boyé, 2016), assimilation and acculturation (Byram, 2010). A closer look at the data indicated that participants shared positive attitudes towards IELT, which was understood as a positive disposition to move forward toward more critical language and culture teaching, no matter the intensity and depth in English language teaching lessons.

One key assumption by teachers was that advancements towards IELT could not be made possible without a clear understanding of how to move forward to the intercultural. Because this knowledge is currently infrequent in language teacher education in Colombia, teaching culture (when it happens) based on essentialist definitions devoted to accumulating knowledge-based facts of culture will continue to predominate. As such, teachers often reach a conceptual and pedagogical bottleneck that needs systematic instruction to be alleviated: “The question lingers as to how such cultural teaching should and could most effectively occur at the classroom level” (Dema & Moeller, 2012, p.76), and in teacher education programmes in Colombia, as this is one of teachers’ major concerns.

Few teachers advocated that ICC was enriching for ELT (Smakova & Paulsrud, 2020), provided there was the necessary support and time to achieve a successful gradual process. Participants also identified the need to reconsider how English is being taught in light of more global educational goals and challenges. Some declared having ideas but felt that they were not actually prepared to teach English interculturally because of they lacked conceptual knowledge about interculturality and IELT (Pajak-Wazna, 2013).

## **5.2 How do Colombian English language teachers’ current practices and perceptions relate to an envisaged profile of the intercultural English language teacher?**

Colombian English language teachers feel positively disposed to IELT. Some teachers conceptually understand IELT objectives related to cultural understanding, dialogue and tolerance, but their practices frequently shift towards culture teaching from communicative teaching approaches. As a result, understandings of IELT seem to be equated to culture teaching or sometimes show a continuum between culture teaching and IELT; this may suggest that teachers are slowly moving towards becoming a foreign language and intercultural competence (FL&IC) teacher as Sercu and colleagues (2005) advocate, but at present their IELT profile is a work in progress. Teachers showed, to some degree, manifestations of IELT, but their teaching profile does not meet all the expectations pertaining to the knowledge, skills and attitudes that are all desirable in the foreign language intercultural competence teacher. Some

individual teachers are already working on the desired FL&IC teacher profile due to their individual biographies. However, participants often struggle to advance towards becoming intercultural in their English language teaching as a result of conceptual limitations and a lack of instruction, and a clear guidelines on how to proceed. At present, some teachers either continue with the CLT approach in which they are English language instructors, or their teaching practice ranges within the continuum of culture-and-language teaching; the latter could be cautiously understood as the early stages of ICC teaching.

Some other major findings demonstrate that the concept of culture on which teachers might base their IELT approaches are primarily essentialist, placing culture as an add-on to language teaching. In this way, IELT tends to develop within this perspective of culture and stays at the level of teachers' attitudes and knowledge (as primarily knowledge). Further analysis showed that knowledge-based culture teaching (e.g., lecturing, sharing anecdotal experiences, etc.) and the compare-contrast paradigm of culture teaching from CLT are replicated in teachers' efforts to teach intercultural (Piątkowska, 2015). Teachers demonstrated interest in IELT advancements and felt that they were given lack of institutional support to be able to fulfil intercultural goals.

The findings in this research have important implications for Colombian English language teachers and their teaching praxis. Intercultural awareness and competence require an action orientation. As a result, in addition to attitudes, knowledge, skills of discovery and interaction, interpreting and relating skills and critical cultural awareness, action orientation should be encouraged to pursue and attain ICC development as an individual and professional goal (Barrett, 2011). Conscious decisions need to be taken towards diverse realities that embrace reflection, criticality, mediation and responsible judgements. Accordingly, more holistic intercultural approaches—*the intercultural turn* (Dasli & Díaz, 2017)—requires the communicative language teaching instructor become intercultural mediators who are able to motivate intercultural communication by building *Third Spaces* of negotiation and dialogue. An intercultural competence foreign language teacher can emerge from CLT if this is considered to be an early stage of the intercultural L2 teaching.

### **5.3 A proposal to build a “Statement of philosophy for IELT”**

In Colombia, there is no national language policy on foreign language education, but suggested standards to guide ELT learning and teaching. These standards very superficially dedicate a few lines to interculturality but does not propose a way to operationalize it in the language curriculum. The research also aimed at bridging this gap. In the end, arising from participants' appraisals on what is needed to move forward towards IELT, I propose the

following *Statement of philosophy* to set IELTS guidelines as a necessary next step in creating a comprehensive ELT national curriculum, which incorporates ICC in English language teaching or more precisely, the foregrounds for IELTS:

One of the most significant changes in language education worldwide has been the recognition of the cultural and intercultural dimensions as key components in language teaching and learning. The inextricable relationship between language and culture, and how foreign language teaching objectives are insufficient without reflection on building Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) in language teaching must be a major concern in a globally interconnected world. Language teacher education in Colombia should embrace a multi-perspective approach in which, in addition to linguistic and pedagogical knowledge, the development of intercultural competence and critical cultural awareness, leading up to intercultural citizenship, are at the core. In an envisaged near future, ICC forms an integral part of the language curriculum. Language teachers become intercultural mediators able to develop a new vision of the language in their learners, which can help them access cultures, experience intercultural encounters and participate in national and international intercultural dialogue as they become citizens of the world.

Ideally, ICC should permeate all social institutions (Kuzmichenko et al., 2022), but the challenge for language education stakeholders in Colombia is to understand that nowadays there is a necessity to transform language teaching into a more political achievement and a call for action to build intercultural citizenship (Martin, Esteve-Faubel & Esteve-Faubel, 2021). It must be acknowledged that language teachers deal with language and education, two of the most fundamentally political aspects of life (Pennycook, 2000), and IELTS can help build on this transformation.

## 6. Conclusions

This study aimed to gain an understanding of Colombian EFL teachers' current thinking in relation to language and culture teaching to explore interculturality, ICC and IELTS. It also aimed to shed light on an existing or prospective teacher profile with regard to IELTS. Findings are conclusive that English language teachers infrequently consider an individual systematic revision of the definitions of culture, interculturality, ICC and of the processes that shape intercultural communication and dialogue as societal actions associated with language teaching and learning. Research outcomes share similarities with Sercu's et al. (2005) canonical research

in that participants generally have a positive attitude towards IELTS teaching; however, the lack of knowledge, support and scaffolding on how to advance to the intercultural dimension were identified as some of the major reasons for teachers to stay in a comfort zone of communicative approaches to language and culture teaching.

About teachers' IELTS profile, participants claimed to have the *knowledge* (as primarily knowledge) to teach culture; however, knowledge about cultures tend to be superficial and does not transcend to *savoir*, or the knowledge necessary to understand intercultural interactions. Their understanding of IELTS seem to derive from enlarged objectives of culture teaching or display a continuum of language and culture teaching; this is what Piątkowska (2015) sees as a progression from a *knowledge-based approach* to a *contrastive approach* to an *ICC approach* to foreign language teaching. Drawing on Piątkowska (2015), participant teachers in this research can be experiencing advancements in the continuum. To support this progression, opportunities for the own ICC growth from early pre-service language teacher education, direct awareness and instruction on IELTS are suggested.

Language teachers showed, to some degree, manifestations of IELTS, but their teaching profile does not meet all the expectations pertaining to the knowledge, skills and attitudes that are all desirable in the foreign language intercultural competence teacher. As a result, there is no such thing as an IELTS teaching profile (Sercu *et al.*, 2005; Israelsson, 2016), but instead incipient attempts to create one. From data, it can be concluded that English language teacher education programmes and language policymaking processes in Colombia share some responsibility in the frequent omission or inexistence of intercultural studies in English language teachers' praxis. Finally, in Porto's (2019) words, interculturally oriented language teaching and learning focus on teachers' and learners' attention to otherness. Both language teachers and learners find themselves in a zone of *in-betweenness* of languages, cultures and funds of knowledge in which linguistic and communicative competence become insufficient to navigate these overlapping realities (Porto, 2019). In this way, IELTS can contribute to intercultural communication and mediation while English is used in real contexts where understandings of otherness and negotiation of meaning are made central.

Some limitations could have influenced the results obtained. The most salient one was working with one group of teachers who belonged to the mainstream Spanish-speaking population. Although there was no expressed intention to select mother-tongue Spanish-speaking bilingual teachers, those who responded to my call fell within this profile. Teachers from other local cultures, with other mother tongues different from Spanish were not present. Another problematic issue in this investigation had to do with classroom observations as a data

gathering strategy. Traditionally, according to experiential data, Colombian teachers do not like their lessons being observed or filmed. For this reason, recruiting volunteers who allowed their lessons to be observed in addition to getting gatekeepers' permissions were hard tasks. As a result, only a small amount of observation data was collected, and a valuable opportunity to see teachers in action was lost. The last acknowledged limitation had to do with trying to establish academic debates to share findings with colleagues because the primary interest in ELT still seems to be attaining assessable CEFR proficiency levels and developing language abilities; teaching culture or developing ICC did not seem to be much of a priority.

Last but not least, research directions may point to systematic revisions of ELT education programme goals and objectives as a priority if pre-service and in-service language teacher education aims for intercultural dialogue, communication, and mediation. Also, learners' conceptions elucidating how they approach ICC foreign language learning could serve as complementary research to the present study for a more robust understanding of foreign language teaching and IELTS in the country. This may provide a clearer picture of how students perceive instruction and training of ICC in the English classroom led by an ICC language teacher. Further research could involve qualitative and quantitative studies from different regions of Colombia, which may shed light on how English language teachers nationwide are evolving (or not) towards IELTS. This could provide valuable information to formulate culture and IELTS standards. In the same way, research which draws on this study can examine how intercultural competence may be explored in other school subjects different from ELT (e.g., Ethics, Human Rights Education, Peace Education, etc.).

Finally, this study shows the need for an intercultural English language teaching approach (IELT) that enables English language teachers and learners to advance toward the construction of ICC to build on language education in Colombia. This research also calls for a definition of the role of the intercultural English language teacher who is seen as a major actor in the process of interculturalising ELT and who should develop her/his own path to an IELTS profile. Findings offer insights into how English language teachers in Colombia approach the concept of ICC and language teaching, and how their views impact their efforts towards a more IELTS based approach.

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