

Intercomprehension: a portal to teachers' intercultural sensitivity

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The development of opportunities for teachers' professional development in plurilingual and intercultural education is a focal point in language teacher education, and intercomprehension can be a potential portal for the development of teachers' intercultural sensitivity. In this context, particularly relevant is the creation of powerful learning environments in which language teachers can construct new structures of meaning and professional knowledge towards a more diversity-sensitive language teaching. This article reports on a research project that investigated the use of intercomprehension as a conceptual organiser of a teacher education programme, and the effects of such a programme on the intercultural sensitivity and professional learning of a group of student teachers. Methodologically, the study was informed by a biographical perspective, and consisted of the content analysis of the participants' narratives, considering them as contexts of personal and professional self-discovery/awareness. The results show the student teachers' growing intercultural sensitivity as they build knowledge about intercomprehension as a communicative and didactic approach, expand their critical cultural awareness and acknowledge the possibility of enacting an intercultural and plurilingual education. The paper concludes with a reflection upon possible ways in which to encourage language teachers to become more interculturally sensitive and more aware of and engaged in diversity.

Keywords: identity, intercomprehension, intercultural sensitivity, professional knowledge, teacher education

Introduction

Teacher education institutions face the responsibility of fostering opportunities for teachers' professional learning with respect to plurilingual and intercultural education. They need to respond to linguistically and culturally diverse students as well as simultaneously to expand learners' communicative repertoires in both plurilingual and intercultural components (Beacco and Byram 2007). Teacher education practices are

intended to “raise language teachers’ awareness of plurality and grasp of otherness at several levels – individual, societal and interpersonal – seeking to sensitize and motivate language teachers to engage with language/diversity, and to transform such commitment into pedagogical actions.” (Pinho et al. 2011, 43). For example, with reference to the cultural and ethnic diversity in the United States, Cushner and Mahon (2009) consider that teachers need to attain an intercultural sensitivity and competence in order to be able to develop their students’ intercultural competence. The authors argue that this is extremely relevant, as the majority of teachers’ backgrounds tend to be homogeneous in terms of colour, ethnicity and social status. In Australia, Ellis (2004) looks at the influence of language teachers’ biographical trajectories and points out how the teachers in her study develop their professional knowledge, manage students’ diversity and create classroom activities to foster learners’ plurilingual competence. She concludes that teachers’ awareness of students’ language repertoires and how they capitalize on them is intermingled with the teachers’ own representations as speakers and language learners.

Similarly, in a Portuguese setting, Andrade et al.(2007) reinforce this interconnection between teachers’ self-representations, their experience of linguistic and cultural diversity, and their engagement in professional learning for plurilingual and intercultural education. Their findings inter-relate teachers’ representations of languages, the limitations of their linguistic culture and their compartmentalised perspective of the language curriculum. Yet, the study also reveals teachers’ willingness to enter into contact with Otherness and to develop a style of language teaching that is more aware of linguistic and cultural diversity.

This article reports on a research project that investigated the use of intercomprehension as a conceptual organiser of a teacher education programme, and

the effects of such a programme on the intercultural sensitivity and professional learning of a group of student teachers.

Intercomprehension: a pathway to transformed professional identities

Complexities of defining intercomprehension

The common understanding of intercomprehension (IC) is of a practice in which people, with different language backgrounds and repertoires, communicate with one another, with each one using their own language(s) (usually, but not necessarily, the mother tongue) and understand that/those of the other(s), even when that means not having learnt the language(s) of their interlocutor(s).

Yet, IC is multidimensional and its complexity is perceivable in the theoretical perspectives and the pedagogical and research projects developed so far (see Redinter, www.redinter.eu; Tavares and Ollivier 2010). The main trends circulating in the literature can be briefly summarised as follows (see Degache and Melo 2008; Doyé 2005; Jamet and Spiță 2010; Gueidão, Melo-Pfeifer and Pinho 2009):

- IC as a person's attribute: IC is connected with the innate and intuitive capacity of individuals to deal with language(s) and make sense of them, not only in their mother tongue(s), but also in multilingual contexts. Thus, the individual is able to establish bridges between languages (and cultures), by resorting to his/her language repertoire and previous knowledge, which are managed in order to co-construct shared meanings. Here, the receptive capacity of individuals to understand one or several languages (particularly written and oral comprehension) is stressed as well as the collaborative dynamics of such mutual

comprehension. In a formal language learning situation, it is believed that such capacity can be fostered in order to evolve into a competence;

- IC in the context of communication: the interactive dimension of IC is emphasised. In the realm of inter-subjectivity, IC is seen as a dialogic and interpretative co-construction, a process of meaning negotiation, an “event” based on the linguistic, cultural and communicative identities and repertoires of individuals and also on the language choices for that same interaction. In this case, the idea of reciprocity is strongly stressed. IC is then dependent on the individuals’ willingness to communicate with one another, as well as on their conversational effort to socialise with other speakers;
- IC in the ecology of languages: the notions of language family and linguistic proximity are productive when theorising about IC, which is enhanced when the languages used belong to the same family, and individuals are aware of similarities between languages and potential transfer mechanisms. However, some authors don’t consider IC within a same language family, thus privileging a cross-linguistic perspective, depending on the individuals’ repertoires. Despite the different perspectives, meaning-making seems to take place using the following strategies: inferring and procedural, (meta)cognitive/linguistic, meta(pragmatic) and meta(cultural).
- IC in the societal scope: IC has also become a synonym for human understanding and it is associated with an ethical and humane stance of communication and language education. Thus, IC is considered as a value to be fostered as well as an opportunity for the individuals’ personal and relational development towards otherness. Authors sharing this understanding advocate IC

as a political concept, which can be a powerful resource to sustain linguistic and cultural diversity in communication.

Intercomprehension, intercultural sensitivity and professional identity

Although research about IC has primarily privileged its linguistic component, studies have also stressed its intercultural dimension. Andrade (2003) states that processes of IC are dependent on: (i) the capacity to establish bridges between languages and cultures on the basis of own linguistic, cultural *savoirs* and learning awareness; (ii) a cognitive and communicative flexibility which helps individuals to deal with less known or unknown languages and cultures; (iii) openness and curiosity towards others, other languages and communicative experiences, as well as an intercultural sensitivity which guides individuals in such situations.

Morin (2002) considers that IC is a synonym for human understanding, which consists in a process of empathy, identification and projection, and requires openness, sympathy and generosity, in order to overcome obstacles such as indifference, egocentrism, and sociocentrism. Therefore, bridges can be established between IC and intercultural sensitivity. According to Cushner and Mahon (2009), when people are dealing with human complexity and especially conflict management in intercultural interaction, intercultural sensitivity addresses positive feelings such as the ones mentioned above. Such intercultural relationship building would also involve sensitivity to other languages and cultures (and their similarities and differences), and how they are embodied in each speaker. Intercultural sensitivity is also sustained by cultural knowledge and a broader worldview.

Pinho and Andrade (2008) believe that IC is enhanced when there is a conversational effort to understand the other not only in linguistic terms, but also in their identities. IC requires an intercultural sensitivity and includes an attitudinal, affective dimension in communication. This is perceptible in the willingness to construct shared meaning based on a reflective and contrastive reading of the individuals' linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Both differences and commonalities are seen as basis for dialogue.

Byram (2010), in discussing the overlaps between IC and intercultural competence, also stresses IC as a value and not simply as a competence. Consequently, IC should not only be a matter of “applying strategies and various receptive and discursive competences”, since “Skills of discovery, interpreting and relating [...] complement pragma-linguistic knowledge to plumb depths of meaning on which co-construction in intercomprehension can be founded.” (Byram 2010, 47).

Research points out the influence of (un)shared values, representations and stereotypes about languages and cultures in the management of conflict and disagreements in processes of IC (Araújo e Sá and Melo 2009). Hédiard (2009) stresses the development of intercultural competence towards a more successful IC, asserting that the inter-production of meaning requires knowledge, awareness and understanding of possible relations between distinctive worlds, as well as the management of own language repertoires.

In the context of initial and continuing teacher education, authors highlight the influence of language teachers' intercultural experiences not only in the construction of a notion of IC, but also in their intercultural awareness and competence. Consciousness of such influence seems to contribute strongly to the teachers' reflection on their

professional project and self-image as language teachers (Andrade and Pinho 2003; Bastos and Araújo e Sá 2008).

Thus, language teachers' cognitive and affective readiness to make intercultural understanding and competence central in their educational mission is highlighted (Cushner and Mahon 2009). Accordingly, processes of professional re-socialisation into other discourses about languages and cultures, as well as the construction of other worldviews which are more interculturally sensitive and diversity oriented, have become important steps in preparing teachers to embrace a plurilingual and intercultural education.

Following these ideas, IC emerged as a possible portal to act upon teachers' thinking, acting and being. Since it is networked with other concepts and terms in the discourse of language education (namely, plurilingual and pluricultural repertoire, transfer, partial competence, plurilingualism as competence and value, intercultural competence), Pinho et al. (2010) believe that IC would enable teachers to "construct conceptual networks which can be transformed into a global pedagogical theory that guides their pedagogical practice. Moreover, [it] may provoke intellectual shock and conflict with personal representations about teaching/learning processes and unchain an affective response from the language teacher" (p. 46). This panorama demands the study of the relationship between IC, intercultural sensitivity and competence and professional learning in language teacher education.

Description of the research context

The present study is based on a research project (Pinho 2008) about the strengths of IC as an organising concept of professional learning scenarios in initial language teacher

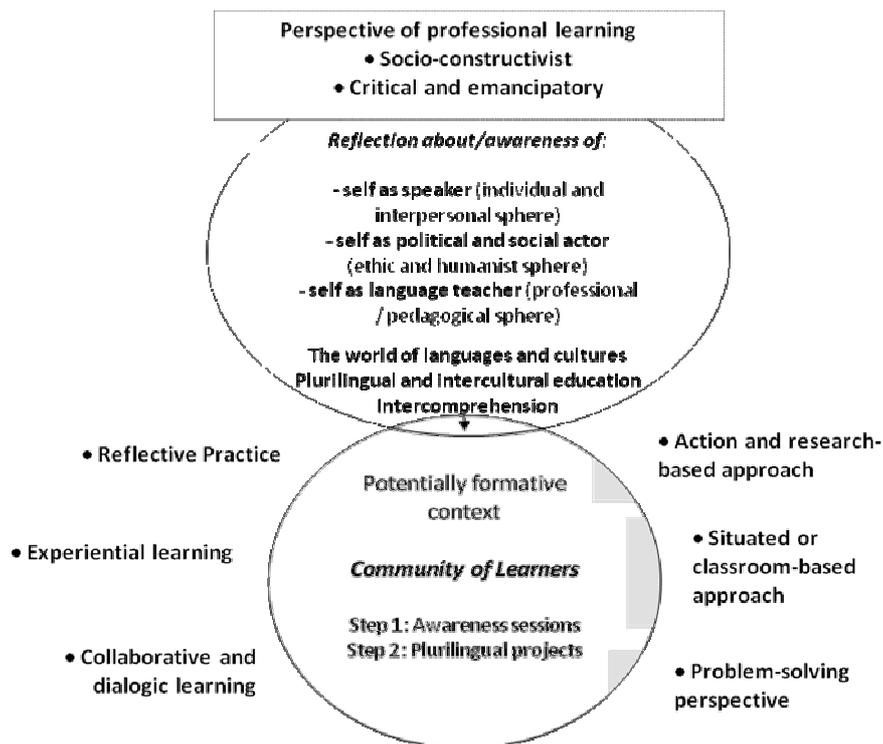
education.

The research was based on an educational programme, entitled “Education path in intercomprehension” (EPI), which followed a humanistic, political perspective of language teacher education (Byram 2008; see Pinho et al. 2010). The EPI was anchored in a socio-constructivist perspective of learning and privileged the reflective, experiential and action-research dimensions of professional learning (Schön 1987; Carr and Kemmis 1993). The objectives were:

- to foster student-teachers’ understanding of the educational value of linguistic and cultural diversity;
- to promote their identity as teachers of IC within plurilingual and intercultural education;
- to transform their representations of language teaching;
- to develop their plurilingual and intercultural awareness; and theoretical and didactic knowledge of IC;
- to foster a personal professional learning project as language teachers.

This is represented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Education scenario



The EPI created a learning community and was organised in two phases: (i) sessions about plurilingual and intercultural education and IC, and (ii) the development of and reflection about action-research projects.

The sessions privileged a reflective and conceptual dimension of professional learning and were based on the Portuguese ILTE (*Intercomprehension in Language Teacher Education*)¹ modules (Andrade and Moreira 2002):

- *Linguistic and cultural diversity* (of today's world, at both social and individual levels; educational value of IC and involvement in new communicative situations).
- *From communicative awareness to intercultural competence* (myself in intercultural encounters; characteristics of intercultural communication; development of intercultural communicative competence at school).

- *Language Awareness and pedagogical grammar* (the relevance of grammatical knowledge, meta-linguistic awareness and transfer skills in the development of the individuals' comprehension of languages).
- *Reading strategies and intercomprehension* (development of written comprehension skills and reflection upon language transfer strategies).

All modules had three common axes:

- *The world of languages and cultures* (information to support the individuals' awareness, understanding and justification of their pedagogical options);
- *The individual and languages* (focus on the awareness raising of individuals' relationship with languages and cultures, in terms of attitudes, strategies and behaviours);
- *The classroom* (focus on the re-construction of teaching practices based on IC within a plurilingual and intercultural education).

Moreover, the EPI involved a module about *Action-research*, as a support to the development of the student teachers' didactic projects.

Table 1. Summary of the EPI topics and contents.

Modules	Topics/contents		
	The world of languages and cultures	The individuals and the languages	The classroom
Linguistic and cultural diversity	- diversity in the world of today; languages of the world and endangered languages; status and functions of languages; European and Portuguese language policy.	- plurilingual scenarios, linguistic and professional biographies (analysis of); communication and learning strategies.	- didactic tasks and materials on intercomprehension.
From communicative awareness to intercultural competence	- obstacles to intercultural communication; lingua franca; the intercultural speaker and intercultural communicative competence; intercultural communication strategies.	- myself as intercultural speaker and teacher (self-profile).	- interaction in plurilingual chats.
Language awareness and pedagogical grammar	- language and languages; grammar; metalanguage and grammatical terminology; interlinguistic awareness.	- language acquisition/learning path.	- activities of (meta)linguistic reflection.
Reading strategies and intercomprehension	- the concept of reading and the comprehension of written texts; literacy in Portugal.	- reading strategies of multilingual texts.	- activities for the development of plurilingual reading strategies.
Action-research	Principles, methodological procedures and instruments.		

Each EPI session had two parts: (a) the student teachers completed the activities individually and wrote in their reflection notebooks; (b) sharing phase, which promoted dialogue and co-construction of knowledge. These sessions were followed by the development of action-research projects in pairs in the context of the teaching practice. The EPI took a school-year (30 hours of contact time, plus about 30 hours of autonomous work).

Each student teacher had their own portfolio which included learning journals, reflective notebooks, individual and group reports and assignments, lesson plans and didactic resources resulting from their action-research projects. Besides the transcriptions of the initial and final interviews, these were the main data collected.

Participants

The project involved a group of four female student teachers aged 21-22 taking a degree in the teaching of Portuguese (mother tongue) and English (foreign language) at the University of Aveiro, Portugal. Their degree course began in 1998/1999. Until the 5th and final year of the degree course (2002/2003), the participants had never had any teaching experience. The EPI was not part of the official curriculum of their degree. It took place in the 5th year of the degree course, when they were engaged in teaching practice at a local secondary school.

The criteria for selecting the participants were:

- Academic trajectory and teaching practice: all participants should be trainee teachers at the same school and in the same teaching practice group, which would foster collaborative practices during the action-research projects. In the 4th academic year, they attended the curricular subjects of Education in Languages and Foreign Language Didactics, in which a sensitisation to IC took place.
- School mentors' profile: the development of action-research projects would require the agreement, support and involvement of the student teachers' school mentors. These should be familiar with plurilingual and intercultural education.

After identifying the group of potential participants, we contacted the school mentors to explain the project and the EPI, and get their support. We then presented to the student teachers the research project and the outlined EPI, which was negotiated with them, according to their teaching practice agenda and learning interests. The planned data collection was explained, namely that there would be both audio and video

recording. For ethical reasons, the student teachers were assured that their identities would remain anonymous.

The study: research methodology

The aim of the present study is to understand the relationship between the student teachers' learning about IC and the development of their intercultural sensitivity in the context of plurilingual and intercultural education. This analytical viewpoint was not so directly addressed in Pinho (2008). In the EPI, student teachers learnt about IC and intercultural competence and communication in a more detailed and intertwined perspective, namely in the context of module 2 (see Table 1). We therefore decided to re-analyse the data regarding the relationship between IC and intercultural sensitivity and competence in professional learning in initial teacher education.

We do not follow a developmental model of intercultural sensitivity and competence (Spitzberg and Changnon 2009), as we are not interested in identifying stages of development as our purpose is to highlight the dimensions of intercultural competence that emerge in the student teachers' discourse as a sign of their intercultural sensitivity, particularly with respect to intercultural understanding and competence, central to their educational mission while learning about IC.

This study's guiding questions are:

- What evidence of intercultural professional sensitivity and competence can be found in the student teachers' narratives?
- Which learning processes or transformations can be identified in this sphere?

The data for this study include learning journals, reflective notebooks and the

transcriptions of the interviews carried out with the student teachers before and after the EPI.

The analysis took a hermeneutic perspective in order to provide an interpretative system of the student teachers' thinking, seeking to unveil their intercultural sensitivity and their meanings regarding IC and then placing those same meanings in an evolving and complex personal and professional context and learning trajectory (Dufays 2010). We therefore followed a narrative perspective on teachers' professional learning (Clandinin and Connelly 2000), which focuses on the individuals' experience and meaning-making processes.

With this in mind, we carried out a content analysis (Bardin 2000) of the data. We coded the data and identified major themes and topics related to intercultural issues and IC. Following the criteria of significance (Clandinin and Connelly 2000), we focused on those topics in personal significant episodes that would indicate the existence of tensions, continuities or discontinuities. The purpose was then to identify different subject positions, which could be indicative of transitions in student teachers' intercultural sensitivity in articulation with the concept of IC.

We used Byram's (2008) dimensions of intercultural (communicative) competence as a reference to interpret the student teachers' discourse. The study's interpretative reliability was assured by semantic and sampling validity criteria (Bauer 2000), according to which we chose illustrative excerpts of the student teachers' thinking, paying attention to the internal consistency of their discourse.

Findings from the storytelling

The teachers' first contact with IC occurred in the fourth year of the teaching degree, when studying Language Didactics, and was intensified in the EPI, which fostered the student teachers' reflection in terms of: *their life trajectory* and self-knowledge regarding otherness; the *social and communicative* aspect, becoming more critically and culturally aware; and the *pedagogical and didactic* context, in articulation with an expanded notion of IC as didactic approach. Their reflections in these three spheres progressively illustrate an emerging intercultural sensitivity. The following subsections and episodes exemplify this.

Recollection of life episodes – encounters with diversity

During the EPI, student teachers spontaneously revisited previous encounters with linguistic and cultural diversity, in an attempt to understand the IC conceptually. Some of these reflections were triggered by readings about plurilingual and intercultural education. This 'recalling of life' is a process of meaning-making of the self, others and social settings, and seems to have contributed to the development of their intercultural sensitivity. This becomes evident in the way they critically analyse their personal experiences and frameworks.

Example 1- A trip to New York

In this episode, the student teacher recalled her visit to New York and re-analysed the situations of diversity she encountered. In doing so, she reflected about herself and her representations:

In New York [...] we can find peoples from all nationalities, ethnic groups, religions, etc. [...] What impressed me [...] was that in the streets of NY one **could listen not only to English but also to a set of languages that you wouldn't associate with the United States** (LJ, 04/03/2001).

[Highlights in bold indicate key notions here and below]

The reflection about this experience unchained a process of self-awareness and greater self-knowledge, as she clarified:

The truth is that at the time **I had little or no conscience** of the complexity of the population of the United States. With [...] a somewhat **misrepresented view** of NY City (a consequence of the American films), I thought that **I would find that prototypical American citizen**. To my surprise, I [...] **came across people that didn't correspond to the image I had constructed** (LJ, 04/03/2001).

As the excerpts highlight, she became more aware of her representations and biased perspectives on the country, particularly that her misconceptions were a result of how American society was portrayed in the media, and that she needed to look at things more critically. At the attitudinal level, this seems to be a sign of readiness to question her presuppositions, and of intercultural awareness (Byram 2008: 230).

Moreover, she established a link between this experience and the myth of the Babel tower, in the context of module 1 of the EPI.

The building of new 'Babel Towers' is not a plague, but rather something **inevitable and crucial to the survival of humankind**. [...] it is not the linguistic barriers that cause more obstacles to the relationships between peoples. On the contrary, it is **our incapacity to put ourselves in the others' shoes that compels us many times to refuse to dialogue with them** (LJ, 04/03/2001).

Formerly, the co-existence of linguistic and cultural diversity was seen as a barrier to communication. More conscious of social plurality, she recognised that such co-existence may not necessarily be a stumbling block for dialogue. She began to realise the limitations of a simplistic worldview, and understood the importance of looking at things from the perspective of the others and to be able to engage with difference. This may be a step to intercultural sensitivity. She became aware of the crucial role of the capacity to open towards others and to relativise in communication, which can be an indicator of an evaluative orientation of her discourse (Byram 2008).

Example 2 – Myself as a language learner

In this episode the student teacher revises her language learner profile, her relationships with languages and ultimately, with other peoples and cultures. Namely, she says that

[There was] the curiosity concerning languages [...]. In fact, there has always been in me a **willingness to understand a little more not only about my own language and culture, but also about other countries, and to establish contacts with people that don't speak the same language**. This might have to do with the fact that, from a young age, I have been in contact with emigrants

originating from both the United States and France (LJ, 22/12/2001).

She pointed out the effects of former intercultural encounters in her socio-affective dimension as language learner, namely her curiosity and readiness to discover and to build knowledge of/about other cultures. This can be important to the development of her skills of interpretation and to relativise her own cultural background (*savoir comprendre*) (Byram 2008). As Spitzberg and Changnon (2009) explain, openness to novelty and new information, open-mindedness and an interest in acquiring new cultural practices and understandings are important traits of intercultural sensitivity.

In her next writing she established a bridge with the pedagogical sphere and realised the importance of developing those same dispositions in learners, and “helping [them] to discover new realities, cultures and peoples” (LJ, 10/03/2002). The theme of interculturality in the EPI seemed to help her realize that the challenge nowadays was “to develop above all the pupils’ capacity to interact with otherness” and their “understanding of the dimension of otherness. That is, to develop the principles of respect, understanding, openness, empathy...among others.” (LJ, 10/03/2002). This discourse is connected with a political dimension of language education, which goes beyond the mere development of competences and techniques in order to promote crucial values of a democratic society (Byram 2008, 2010).

The world’s linguistic and cultural landscape – a setting for new understandings

In the EPI the student teachers could discuss several topics, depending on the modules and chosen activities, which enabled them to expand their thinking about the world of

languages, cultures and communication. This seemed to have an effect on the student teachers' critical cultural awareness (Byram 1997, 2008), which can be seen most clearly when student teachers reflect upon English as an international language (example 3), or the status of languages in communication and society (example 4).

Example 3 – Awareness of English as lingua franca

Based on her readings, the student teacher reflected about the topic of linguistic imperialism and English as a lingua franca. Taking on a critical positioning, she recognised that under certain circumstances, other alternative ways of communication are possible by means of IC.

it is **not necessary to resort to a lingua franca so that speakers of different languages can communicate with efficacy** [...]. If they have the same common route and consequently share many similar characteristics, the theory states that speakers are able to communicate between themselves (understand and produce) without resorting to another language (RN, 16/01/2003).

As a future English language teacher, this theme fostered her thinking about the status and functions of languages in general, and of English in particular. She considered the implications of an international language of communication, and reflected upon the danger of English teaching being based on functionality and instrumentalism to the detriment of a cultural dimension. She states that,

Empty of any cultural component, foreign language learning/teaching many times promotes the creation of stereotyped (and prejudiced) opinions concerning other peoples/cultures, but also the incapacity to fully understand a series of statements which we may be confronted with. For instance, a pupil whose mother tongue is Portuguese will only fully understand the American proverb ‘a penny saved is a penny earned’ if he/she has a reasonable knowledge of the American culture (LJ, 25/11/2001).

The growing pedagogical intercultural sensitivity is visible when she stresses the danger of English as a “culture-free” language, by stating that “most of the times the English language has made the verbal exchanges possible, but many other times it has made the cultural exchanges difficult” (LJ, 25/11/2001). She realised that language is culturally embedded, and that this needs to be considered in classroom activities. Although she was not very clear, she recognised the narrowness of a grammatical language teaching, by stating that the (inter)cultural dimension should concentrate on the attitudinal sphere from the start, namely on pupils’ stereotypes and misrepresentations of others. From her perspective, the development of pupils’ cultural awareness should be complemented with (outside) classroom activities that promote skills of interaction and discovery, key components of the intercultural communicative competence (Byram 1997, 2008).

Example 4 – Power relations based on languages

Another example of the student teachers’ growing intercultural sensitivity is seen when

they associate languages with conflicts that happen worldwide, and realised the importance of promoting dialogue between peoples, and mutual understanding, which they see as a synonym for IC.

After a century of so much violence, as it was the 20th Century, there seems to be now **an urgent need for mutual understanding**. This where the main question is, in the UNDERSTANDING BETWEEN PEOPLES, or as we would didactically say, in the INTERCOMPREHENSION. But how is this intercomprehension promoted? It is clear that **behind all this there are simply economic and political interests**, but for intercomprehension to come true, there will have to be an open understanding, **by respecting the other with the legitimacy to wish that very same respect towards ourselves** (LJ, 21/11/2001).

This excerpt is also illustrative of this student teacher's growing critical awareness, in which macro- and micro-contexts are evermore seen as interconnected (Byram 2008: 146). That is, she acknowledged the societal relevance of mutual understanding and IC to a more peaceful world, within a more humane dimension of language teaching. Also, the reflection upon the concept of IC corresponded to the questioning and analysis of different layers of 'reality', in which economic, political and societal spheres may bring intermingled implications.

I think that foreign language learning should, before anything else, foster the **questioning of our version of 'truth'** (for instance, is my notion of truth the same as that of the Afghan people?). We should question ourselves about the **price to pay for belonging to a certain linguistic community** [...]. More, we should ask ourselves if **the way we use the languages and cultures we know is in favour of tolerance and understanding** or, contrarily, **in favour of our own**

political, economic and social interests (LJ, 25/11/2001).

Furthermore, such critical cultural awareness is visible in the way she realised that ‘truth’ is a cultural construction, namely biased by political and economic forces. She perceived that languages are often powerful tools and that belonging to certain speech communities may be of advantage. In this particular case, she was referring to how minority communities may be deprived of their right to be active citizens because they do not master the dominant language(s).

This analysis is reinforced when she refers to the different statuses of languages within a particular social order in the next quotation. Her criticality is visible when she stresses that languages *per se*, and consequently their speakers, should not be seen in hierarchal terms, that they all have equal value.

I will **refute the idea of existing ‘first class languages’ and ‘second class languages’**. [...] languages are given different status according to the number of their speakers, **the place they have in powerful administrative, economic and political centres**, among other criteria. Yet, these demarcations are nothing but mere conventions created by individuals to ‘compartmentalise’ the several languages. As a matter of fact, this is a characteristic of human beings: create categories, statistics...in **an attempt to create a certain social, political, economic or linguistic order** (LJ, 25/11/2001).

What has been said so far may be a sign of the student teacher’s capacity to relativise as well as her disposition to move away from her own viewpoints and to evaluate them critically. Summing up, she realised her responsibility as teacher in the development of

learners' critical cultural awareness, and not only their language skills. Excerpts like the ones presented so far seem to point towards what Byram (2008) describes as political education (*savoir s'engager*). The student teacher's capacity to be more evaluative may be an important step to a more intercultural teaching.

The intercultural sphere in defining intercomprehension

During the EPI, the student teachers could enrich their notion of IC in a dialogue with their role as language teachers and their professional identity. In the next excerpt (example 5), the student teacher connected her knowledge about IC, and the school and teaching context. She recognised the diversity of the school landscape and the need to develop learners as intercultural speakers (Byram 2008), which was perceived as a challenge for a language teacher.

Now that I know a bit more about the **topic of linguistic and cultural intercomprehension**, I realise that it won't be easy to be a language teacher. [...]
If we look at our schools, we clearly perceive the heterogeneity inside the classroom. [...] In order to respond to the **demand of educating the intercultural speaker**, the language teacher should enact **interdisciplinary practices**. It is important to show that all languages are necessarily bounded [...] to show that each language presents reality in a particular way (LJ, 15/12/2001).

Although she did not clarify what she meant by intercultural speaker, she understood that new action principles should be adopted in her future teaching. She acknowledged that curriculum management and teaching practices should be more interdisciplinary, in

order to overcome a compartmentalised view of language teaching. The ultimate purpose of IC was considered to be the promotion of intercultural communication.

Intercomprehension requires, before anything else, the **development of a set of values, such as openness and respect towards otherness**, the unknown, the difference. It demands a **predisposition to build knowledge about the other** and everything that surrounds him/her (experiences, languages, cultures...). This attitude is dependent on the **individuals' attitude towards language learning, which is crucial to the establishment of an intercultural communication**. (LJ, 30/01/2003).

A step to intercomprehension is to become aware of the fact that to come close to the others, it is **essential to have knowledge about ourselves and our languages**, so that subsequently we can **resort to that knowledge in the process of intercultural communication and comprehension**. (LJ, 30/01/2003).

The EPI tried to provide a rich theoretical context by means of which the student teachers could make their own path in terms of conceptual development about IC, in order to build their own practical theory, and critically decide on the most adequate perspective(s) to their teaching contexts.

In this setting, the student teachers tended to approximate the concepts of IC, and intercultural competence. As the excerpts indicate, either as a component of or as a condition for IC, the student teachers referred to some of the components of Byram's (1997) model for intercultural communicative competence: *savoir être* (when they refer to particular values and attitudes of openness and predisposition to learn with/about the other, which are crucial for IC and intercultural interaction), *savoirs* (knowledge of self and of others – in terms of languages, experiences... – , thus recognising the role of declarative knowledge in intercultural communication). To a lesser extent, their words

also evidence an awareness of the role of skills in intercultural communication; particularly, being able to find a common ground for intercultural dialogue. Finally, they saw IC as a platform to

act in several areas: in terms of personal edification (development of positive values and attitudes to intercultural communication) and in the more diverse domains of language learning (written and oral comprehension/production, language functioning) (RN, 16/01/2003).

The role of didactic projects

In the action-research projects the student teachers tried to enact a plurilingual and intercultural education by means of IC. Although over time they evidenced a more complex professional discourse, which included different components of intercultural communicative competence, they were facing difficulties at the practical level and felt that IC and intercultural education were not compatible with their teaching realities (examples 6).

I didn't come up to my expectations, because...it is easier to say...when we look at the future. But then we **find so many difficulties** on the way [...] **intercomprehension, interdisciplinarity, intercultural speaker**...all this is very interesting, but when we are in a classroom and say a simple word in the foreign language [...] and only two out of nine students understand you, this is very preoccupying. **Our educational project cannot be accomplished.** (LJ, 10/10/2002).

Although brief, the projects helped them become more aware of the *situated possibilities* of developing teaching practices based on IC and becoming an

‘intercultural teacher’.

The implementation of these projects is perfectly **feasible in our school context**. We didn’t have big problems in adapting the activities to the themes without ‘running away’ from the objectives of our annual planning. The students were highly motivated and interested in the activities... Plus, as long as we believe in the strengths of these projects and have with us people who are determined to help us reach ‘a safe port’, there is **no reason not to implement such projects** (IR, 09/2003).

They realised that IC and intercultural practices were not an extra topic in the language curriculum. Instead, they acknowledged that IC would help them to interpret official regulations, the contents to be taught and the aims to be attained. The projects expanded their didactic repertoire, since they learnt to integrate other aims in the lesson planning, and pedagogical strategies they could use in the classroom. In the classroom interaction, their main achievement was in capitalising on the learners’ plurilingual and pluricultural repertoire, particularly in the way they guided them in the activities and helped them to establish bridges between different languages. Nonetheless, the student teachers recognised some of their difficulties as a result of their teaching inexperience.

The main difficulties had to do with the competences that would help me to enact in the classroom everything that I had learnt. [...] Such activities **demand a good cultural and linguistic knowledge** and most of all an **interactive strategic competence** (to manage all the activities) that I didn’t have at all (IR, 09/2003).

Since this was a brief experience, there is no evidence of a lasting effect on the student teachers' teaching methods and approaches. Although they acknowledged new professional knowhow, a growing attentiveness to linguistic diversity and intercultural sensitivity, they also admitted that both theoretical and practical knowledge about IC and plurilingual and intercultural education need to be nurtured and expanded in a lifelong professional learning perspective. They recognised that this would firstly depend on their own commitment to such professional development, as well as on the opportunities offered by the workplace and teacher education contexts.

Discussion and conclusions

As this study shows, student teachers underwent transformations particularly in terms of intercultural sensitivity and knowledge about more diversity-oriented teaching methods. Although it is not possible to ensure the sustainability of such changes, they seem to have developed in terms of:

- (i) *critical cultural awareness*, which is fostered by a growing evaluative capacity and the questioning of own learning, the world and society in general, and the role of language teaching/education. There is evidence of teachers' trying to overcome simplistic notions of reality and become more critical about the world, communication, and themselves;
- (ii) *interpretation and relation skills*, by being more capable of interpreting the world, and the purposes of language education; by displaying a willingness to overcome ethnocentric perspectives, an expanded consciousness of the

cultural nuances of their worldview, and the intentionality to become mediators between cultures in their teaching (Byram 2010). Namely, when they reset their ultimate aims as language teachers or when they realise the importance to help their pupils to interpret other speakers from other languages or cultures (see example 3);

- (iii) *attitudes*, by revealing openness to linguistic and cultural diversity, readiness to develop professional knowledge about plurilingual and intercultural education, and willingness to work on their *savoir-être* as speakers and teachers.

IC seems to have the power to develop teachers' alternative images of language teaching, and new ways of thinking, understanding, interpreting and viewing languages, cultures and speakers, which may lead to a transformed representation of the language curriculum, and hopefully other ways of teaching languages. The EPI mainly had effects on the student teachers' reflectivity and consciousness in the three dimensions of Figure 1: self as speaker (examples 1 and 2), self as political and social actor (examples 3 and 4), and self as language teacher (examples 5 and 6). In this sense, they seem to have developed more expanded frameworks for action, in so far as they have built knowledge (though mainly declarative) about several concepts (see Table 1), and seemed to be able to establish connections between them. Yet, due to the EPI characteristics, effects were feebler in the action dimension or intercultural pedagogical sphere, and consequently on their didactic repertoire and knowhow as language teachers. Moreover, their intercultural sensitivity may have profited from opportunities to interact with speakers of other languages and cultures, in order to enrich their intercultural acting and being (Byram, 2008).

Based on these results, some recommendations can be made. IC can be a

pathway to develop teachers' intercultural sensitivity and professional identity within three dimensions, which Pinho and Andrade (2008) consider a rationale for language teacher education curriculum and practices:

- *Political, social and critical dimension*, in which the language teacher is viewed as a social actor. This dimension privileges the development of the critical interpretation and understanding of society, communication and the relations of linguistic power. It considers the promotion of knowledge and reflection about the range of one's own actions in social, communicative and educational contexts, also encompassing the consequences and implications of communicative behaviours. This dimension refers to the awareness-raising of teachers' roles in plurilingual, intercultural and educational interactions. It emphasizes issues of linguistic and curricular justice, considering individuals' plural identities and the valuing of languages and cultures in general;
- *Didactic or curricular intervention dimension*, in which the language teacher is seen as a curriculum manager and decision-maker, with the power to re-interpret and adjust the curriculum to create opportunities towards a plurilingual and intercultural education. This dimension highlights the relevance of enriching teachers' didactic repertoire and their capacity to interpret and redesign the curriculum locally and thus foster other dynamics in their work contexts based on a diversity-oriented teaching. Informed by the political dimension of language education, teachers need to understand the practicality of new teaching approaches and the variability of contexts;
- *Personal and relational dimension*, which is connected to the teachers' linguistic, communicative and professional biography and identity. The unique

trajectory of each teacher is valued and the potential growth of each one in terms of their plurilingual, intercultural and professional repertoires is considered, namely in interaction with others. The focus on this dimension fosters processes of the awareness of oneself, of others, and of the surrounding milieu which are perceived as steps to the (re)construction of representations about languages and cultures, as well as of own professional identities.

Finally, we believe that the development of more interculturally sensitive teachers is dependent on learning opportunities in which (student and in-service) teachers may (Pinho 2008):

a) discover their plurilinguality and culturality

In this domain we refer to the I-speaker in relation to (speakers of other) languages and cultures, and to how such a relationship is transferred to the pedagogical context. The work based on teachers' language biography or intercultural narratives should be privileged. Such trajectories can be retold, reinterpreted and reframed to trace new paths as speaker and teacher. This seems to be important so that teachers make meaning out of their plurilinguality, linguistic identity, and cultural subjectivity, and become aware of their plurilingual and pluricultural repertoire and language competences. Besides fostering the awareness of their professional communicative competence, the use of biographic narratives in teacher education is considered crucial to teachers' professional knowledge construction and critical reflexivity about their teaching philosophy and practice.

b) (pedagogically) experience plurilingualism and intercomprehension

This is particularly relevant to those student teachers who don't have much contact with linguistic and cultural diversity in their personal trajectories. As Byram (2008) claims, education and curriculum should be planned for intercultural experience. Therefore opportunities in which the teachers develop their plurilingual and intercultural *savoir*, *savoir-faire* and *savoir-être* should be fostered, both pedagogically and in communication. Teachers should be educated in plurilingualism, interculturality, but also in approaches such as IC. It is crucial that teachers develop teaching skills concerning the development of plurilingual and intercultural approaches, their rationale, aims and methodologies, so that they can critically analyse the curriculum (in order to identify bridges between linguistic and content subjects). Another important factor is their ability to identify doorways to the development of innovative pedagogical projects, such as the student teachers in this study.

The teaching degree of the student teachers in this study followed a consecutive model of teacher education, in which the professional dimension is subsequent and not simultaneous with the more theoretical-conceptual dimension. Using action-research projects as a strategy in the EPI has shown how important it is that student teachers are given the opportunity to articulate theoretical and practical knowledge earlier on in their teaching degree, and on a regular basis, either to observe or to experiment new perspectives and practices. This seems crucial to the reinterpretation of one's own teaching models, to the development of a more realistic professional identity as a language teacher, and the awareness of the feasibility of plurilingual and intercultural education.

c) engage in critical and praxiologic reflexivity

Teacher education should be a space of reconstruction and reflexivity, underpinned by knowledge about the present aims of language education. Processes of professional learning that benefit from the diversification of reflection in integrated ways (technical, practical and critical dimensions) (Carr and Kemmis 1993), as was the case in the EPI, seem to facilitate the construction of new ethical, theoretical and practical reference frameworks, which consequently leads to the increasing development of a more complex view of language education. The use of devices that foster teachers' reflexivity regarding their plurilingual, intercultural, professional competences and identity have been pointed out as privileged spaces and times for a deeper meaning-making, and the construction of new conceptual repertoires about diversity. Such meaning-making processes can be fostered when student teachers are involved in learning communities.

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