


ACROSS LANGUAGES AND CULTURES
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**Intercultural Narratives and Intercomprehension:
Steps to Teachers' Sensitivity towards Diversity-oriented
Teaching**

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Research interests

Language Didactics & Teacher Education
(dialectical nature of my observation)

Line of inquiry:

- (Student) teachers' learning to draw on linguistic and cultural diversity in their teaching;
- Focus on language teachers' professional knowledge, thinking and acting, and learning over time (professional development);
- Language teacher education (processes, strategies, contents...).

Plurilingualism, Intercomprehension, Intercultural education

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Teacher education for a diversity-engaged teaching

- Fostering of opportunities for teachers' professional development in the scope of plurilingual and intercultural education – enduring question

(Beacco & Byram, 2007; Cushner & Mahon, 2009; Cochran-Smith *et al.*, 2008).

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 sensitise and motivate language teachers to engage with language/diversity, and to transform such commitment into pedagogical actions.”

(Pinho *et al.*, 2011).

- Relevance of 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

(Pinho *et al.*, 2011; see as well Arnesen, Allan & Simonsen, 2009; Breidbach, Elsner and Young, 2011).

Pinho (2008)

Intercomprehension, identity and professional knowledge in language teacher education.

Aveiro: Universidade de Aveiro (non published doctoral thesis)

Conference theme:

- Intercultural communicative competence and foreign language teaching. Teacher training to intercultural sensitivisation.



Intercomprehension - pluralistic approach to languages and cultures (Candelier *et al.*, 2007) – potential *portal* to the development of **teachers' intercultural sensitivity**.



Identity: professional project and self-image as language teachers

Talk's structure

- Intercomprehension: an overview
- The study: background and methodological details
- Findings
- Concluding remarks

Intercomprehension: an overview

Complexities of defining IC

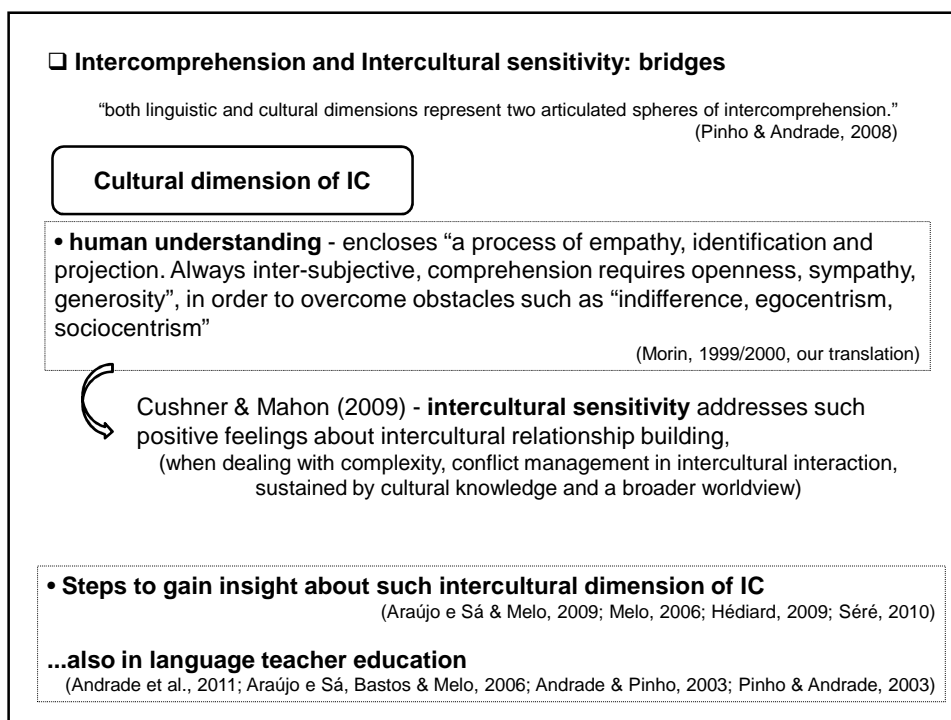
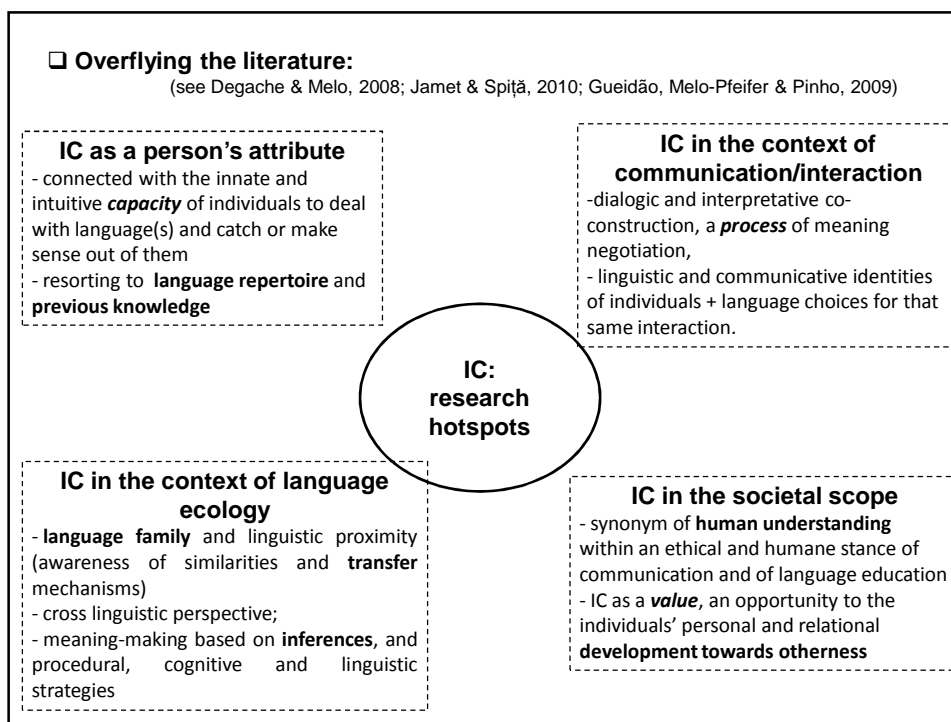
- multidimensional concept – diverse theoretical perspectives have guided the several didactic and research projects developed so far
(see Redinter, www.redinter.eu; Tavares & Ollivier, 2010)

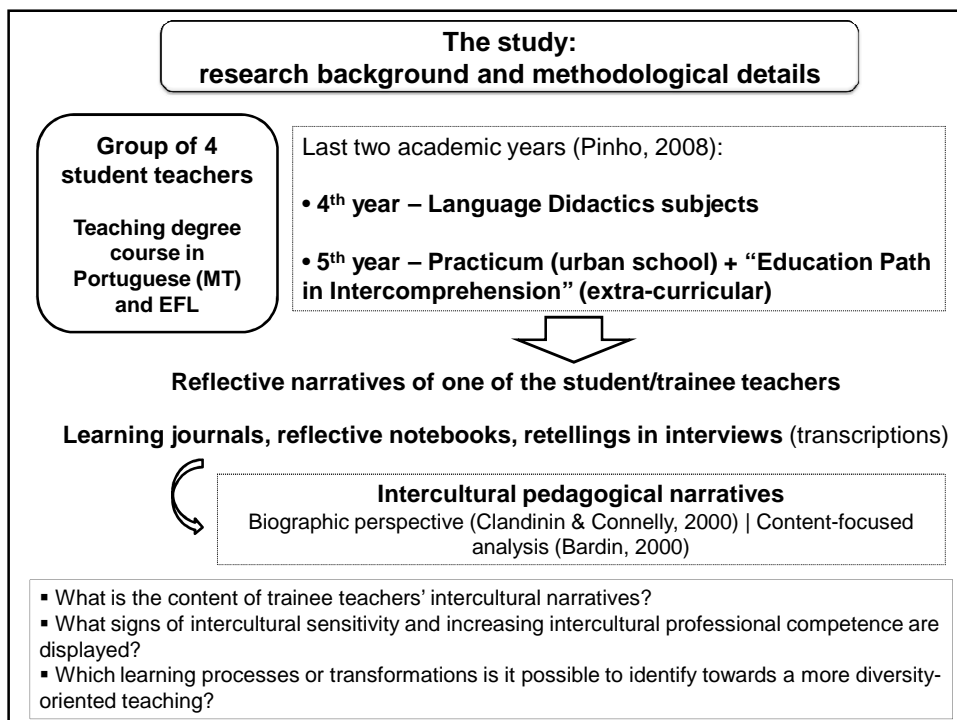
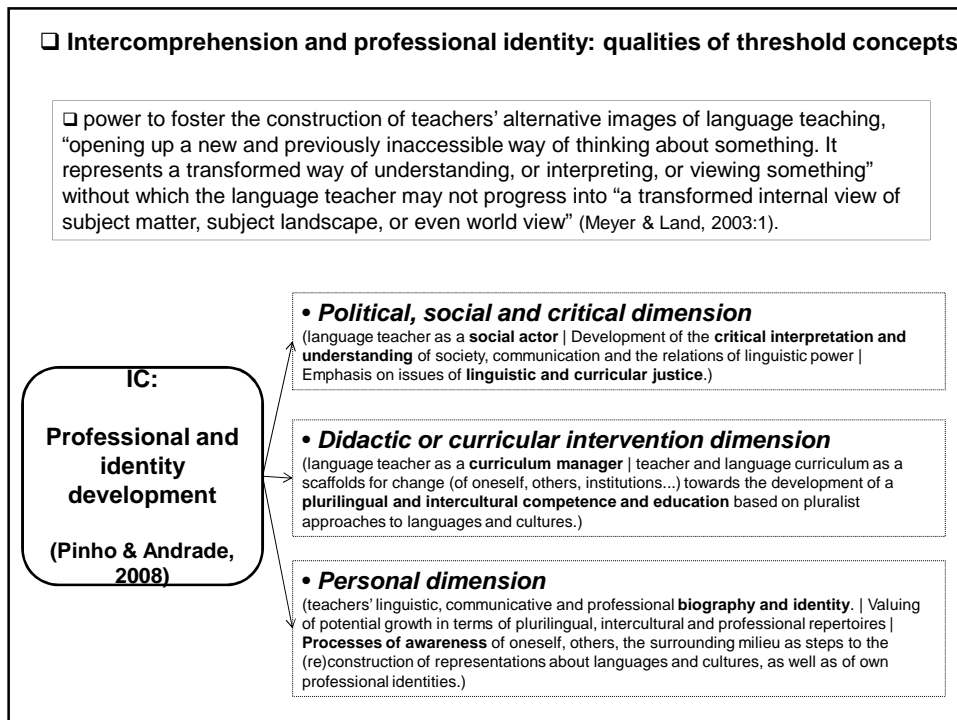


Projecto nº 143339 – 2008 – LLP – PT – KA2 – KA2NW

Canonical perspective:

communicative act and practice that happens in contexts in which people, with different language backgrounds and repertoires, dialogue with each other and each one speaks his/her own language (usually, the mother tongue, but not necessarily) and understands that/those of the other(s), even when that means not having learnt the language(s) of the interlocutor.





Findings

Recovery of life episodes – encounters with diversity and oneself

Example 1 – A travel to new York

“...we can **find peoples proceeding from all nationalities, ethnic groups, religions**, etc. As an example, in the lift I took to reach the top of the towers (WTC) I could **identify people coming from different countries** (such as Portuguese, Spanish and Italian, whose languages I recognized and helped me to such identification). I also noticed the presence of diverse religions (in this case in particular I am referring to a group o Jews that was easily identifiable by the way they were dressed, and handcuffed the brief-cases). [...]

What impressed me the most [...] was the fact that in the streets of NY one could not only **listen to English but also hear a set of languages** that from a starting point you **wouldn't associate with the United States.**” (LJ, 04/03/2001).

"The truth is that at the **time I had little or no conscience of the complexity which the population** of the United States is made of. With only 17 years old and a somewhat **misrepresented view of the NY city** (a consequence of the American films with which we are 'bombed'), I thought that I would find that prototypical American citizen only.

To my astonishment, I got to know areas such as Little Italy or Little China, and **came across people that didn't correspond in anything to the image** I had constructed" (LJ, 04/03/2001).



"The building of new '**Babel Towers**' is **not a plague**, but instead something inevitable and on which the **survival of humankind is dependent**. [...] This small reflection about this topic makes me conclude that **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 establish a dialogue with them" (LJ, 04/03/2001).

Example 2 – Language learning at school: a grammar-based memoir

"because I think I have always learnt that **learning a language was learning the language's grammar**/ ALWAYS until my 12th grade...I think that the way the education system is structured, the way the curricula are structured, or were structured at the time, [has influenced it]" (INT, #70)



"I begin now, **after going deeper into the theme of linguistic and cultural intercomprehension**, to understand that in fact **it won't be easy to be a language teacher**. As I said before, it **is not enough to teach grammar**.

When we look at our schools nowadays, we notice the **clear heterogeneity of classrooms**. We have the increased challenge of having, in the same classroom, children and young people from different nationalities and ethnic backgrounds.

To **manage a Portuguese or English language class** is not so easy now, since we have students with **different competences and needs**. The process of teaching/learning is, as it seems, **far more delicate**" (LJ, 15/12/2001).

The concept of IC – a setting for new understandings

Example 3 – Awareness of ecology of languages in communication

“...the world saw the **emergence of English as a lingua franca**, an universal language, whose purpose would be to bring the different peoples together, but it **ended out to be the (almost) ‘imposition’ of a linguistic system**, which is shared by a large majority of speakers in the world nowadays. Yet, and despite considering that the **English language has facilitated the communication** between peoples, I **must agree** with the author when she stresses the **mere instrumental nature** of what she refers to as ‘global English-Esperanto’” (LJ, 25/11/2001).

“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 enunciations** 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 detains a reasonable knowledge of the American culture.” (LJ, 25/11/2001).

“it is **not necessary to resort to a lingua franca so that speakers of different languages can communicate** with efficacy (mainly if the languages in question belong to the same linguistic branch, as it is the **case of Romance languages**).

Since they have the same common route and consequently share many similar characteristics, the theory [IC] reckons that speakers are able to communicate between themselves (understand and produce) without resorting to other language.” (RN, 16/01/2003).

“the **foreign language learning** should be directed to **another aim**, which is much more ambitious: **the understanding of the dimension of the Other**.

In other words, to develop the individual's principles of tolerance, respect, understanding, openness, empathy...among many others aspects” (LJ, 25/11/2001).

Example 4 – Languages and Power

“I think that **foreign language learning** should, before anything else, concur to 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** (will the linguistic communities that don’t have access to a particular language be forgotten or discriminated against?).

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).

“**languages cannot be described in hierarchical terms, since all of them play a prominent/leading role in this global project of intercomprehension.** As such, the ‘linguistic universe’ of the present world is but a **gigantic ‘puzzle’** in which each piece (=language), independently if its size, format or position has a essential and **irreplaceable value**” (LJ, 25/11/2001).

Example 5 – Intercomprehension: a definition in progress

“...**independently of how we define it**, intercomprehension has always as **aim** the development of a larger and important competence – the **plurilingual and intercultural competence.**” (RN, 30/01/2003).

“**act in several areas:** in terms of **personal edification** (development of favourable 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).

“I think that *intercomprehension* becomes important as a **tool** through which the individual becomes **aware of the linguistic and cultural diversity of today’s world.**” (RN, 16/01/2003).

Example 6 – Intercultural sensitivity and diversity-engagement in action: didactic projects on intercomprehension

Professional identity: between idealised self-image, dilemmas and the reign of possibility

Moment 1 - Discovery

“I **don't see myself as the teacher that simply helps her students to interpret a text anymore**, but as a teacher that helps her **students to discover new realities, cultures and peoples**. [...] I have radically changed my opinion. Actually, I now consider that this is one of the greatest challenges posed to language teachers nowadays: **to develop before and foremost the students' capacity to interact with Otherness**.” (LJ, 10/03/2002).

Moment 2 - Dilemmas

“...I have other priorities [...] Therefore, I **never thought of activities to promote intercprehension** as regards my school community, my language department and group, my teaching practice team or my classes” (INT, 10/10/2002).

Moment 3 – Looking back and forwards

“The **implementation of these kinds of 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 that were delineated in our annual planning. The **students were highly motivated** for and interested in the proposed activities...” (IR, 09/2003);

“**I became more self-assured** about working in the classroom with languages I don't know; the pupils and I were on equal terms.” (IR, 09/2003).

“The **main difficulties** were in the realm of **competences** that would help me to **put into action** in the classroom everything I had learnt. [...] Such kinds of 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).

“I feel **I have just started** and...I should **continue to work** on this...and talk about this experience with other teachers.” (IR, 09/2003).

Some preliminary conclusions

The analysis of the student/trainee teachers' intercultural pedagogical narratives puts in evidence that they have developed their professional identity as language teachers, particularly their intercultural sensitivity, in terms of:

- ❑ **political education and critical cultural awareness**, fostered by a growing evaluative capacity and the questioning of own learning, education system, the world and society in general, and the role of language teaching/education (*political and critical dimension of IC*)
- ❑ **interpretation and relation skills**, being more capable of interpreting and relating their own culture with that of the others, displaying willingness to overcome ethnocentric perspectives and becoming mediators between cultures within their language teaching practices (*didactic, curricular intervention dimension of IC*)
- ❑ **attitudes**, disclosing openness to linguistic and cultural diversity, readiness to develop professional knowledge about pluralistic approaches to languages and cultures, and willingness to work on their *savoir-être* as speakers and teachers (*personal dimension of IC*)

Byram (2008), Pinho & Andrade (2008)

Final remarks

The development of more intercultural sensitive and diversity-engaged language teachers would depend on creating times and spaces in teacher education programmes and courses so that student teachers may (Pinho, 2008):

- ❑ *Self-discover their plurilinguality and intercultural sensitivity*
- ❑ *Become aware of language as a pedagogical object*
- ❑ *(Didactically) Experiment plurilingualism and intercomprehension*
- ❑ *Foster a critical and praxiologic reflexivity*



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Obrigada!

Thank you!

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