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The Difficulties of Teaching Intercultural Competence in the EFL Classroom

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Abstract

Because of the multicultural society that we live in today, it has become important to focus on developing students Intercultural Competence (IC). It is a competence that means being able to understand, relate to, and being open towards different cultures. This paper analyses research on English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers' beliefs and practices regarding the concept of IC. The paper focuses on three difficulties that have been shown to have impact on the efficiency of IC teaching. Firstly, it addresses the difficulty of evaluating material. Secondly, it looks at the extent of teachers' knowledge of the concept of IC. Lastly, it addresses teachers' negative attitudes towards IC teaching. The paper looks at what these problems might be due to and what possible solutions that research highlights. The findings indicate that these difficulties are, amongst other things, due to a lack of teacher training in the field, lack of emphasis regarding IC in curricula, lack of teaching material with an IC approach, and because of teachers' negative attitudes towards including IC in EFL teaching.

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1 Introduction

In the English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom, culture is usually taught by simply providing students with information about cultures, as, for instance, different countries' traditions (McKay, 2002, p.83). This traditional approach has been reported to usually exclude opportunities for students to reflect on the information about the culture introduced in the classroom (ibid.). However, McKay reports that in order for culture teaching to become relevant for students, they need to be given opportunities to interact with the cultural information that they are exposed to (p.83). She argues that this would enable a greater understanding and communication with people of different cultures (p.83). In a globalised world it has become highly relevant for the world's citizens to develop a cultural understanding, in order to be able to communicate with people properly and respectfully. Therefore, it could be argued that trying to develop students' understanding and openness to other cultures should be the aim of EFL culture teaching, rather than to merely provide students with plain cultural information.

In order to succeed with creating this type of understanding of other cultures, it has been argued that teachers should leave the traditional approach for a critical one, which would focus on developing students' intercultural competence (IC). This competence is, according to Perry & Southwell (2011), generally described as aiming to enable communication and understanding between people from different cultures (p.455). Furthermore, Byram, Gribova & Starkey (2002) explain that IC is the skill of having an openness to understand and reflect on different cultures, being able to relate cultural features from other cultures to one's own, and to be aware that an individual's identity consists of more than the culture he or she belongs to.

A number of intercultural approaches have been developed to implement IC in the language classroom (Perry & Southwell, 2011). However, research on EFL teachers' IC practice and beliefs shows that teachers still have difficulties with creating a classroom environment that would foster IC (Young & Sachdev, 2011). Thus, it is relevant to look at teacher practices related to the teaching of IC in order to discover these areas of difficulty, which could give information about where help for teachers is needed. Therefore this paper aims to identify main difficulties teachers face when introducing IC in the EFL classroom by looking at previous research carried out in the field. It will also discuss how these difficulties could be dealt with according to research.

First, this paper provides a theoretical background and then continues by defining IC in greater detail by looking at the concept from a European point of view. Secondly, it discusses the main difficulties of teaching intercultural competence that have been identified by research in the field. The three difficulties that will be discussed are the choice of material, teachers' lack of IC knowledge and the lack of teacher willingness. The reason for why the paper highlights these difficulties is mainly because it could be argued to have a great impact on the efficiency of the IC teaching. Lastly, the paper gives some concluding remarks on the findings and mentions possible areas for future research.

2 Theoretical Background

In this section, the paper first gives a short introduction to what is known about the traditional approach to culture in the EFL classroom: what is taught, whose culture and what type of cultural content. Furthermore, the paper discusses the criticism that has been given to this approach and mentions suggestions for how culture could be taught in a more critical way.

Culture in the EFL classroom is, as mentioned earlier, traditionally taught by presenting cultural aspects and topics to our students without including any sort of reflection on what is presented (McKay, 2002; Gomez Rodríguez, 2015; Young & Sachdev, 2011). In addition to this, Tupas (2014) mentions that teachers usually teach cultures as being limited to nationality and often focus on teaching easily presented cultural topics (Tupas, 2014; Gómez Rodríguez, 2015). A similar report of the traditional approach is given by Sundberg (2009) who argues that this type of culture teaching tends to present culture as knowledge of cultural facts (p.112). Tornberg (2009) adds to this and explains that the teaching of culture usually takes the approach of presenting cultures as national concepts, which she argues is due to the nationalism that has existed for the last centuries (p.69). According to her, this perspective has created beliefs that there is a typical type of behaviour associated with each nationality (p.69).

There are a number of issues that are highlighted regarding this type of culture teaching. Firstly, Tupas (2014) raises the issue of presenting culture as a concept tied to one's nationality, which according to him fosters a stereotypical mind set, since it implies that individuals are passive reproducers of their nations' cultures. Hence, he argues that it does not take into consideration the complexity of the term *culture* (Tupas, 2014). He instead argues that teachers should present and discuss the many cultures that an individual could belong to, for instance, gender and class, and not only the culture that depends on the individual's national background (p. 245). Tornberg (2009) further discusses the problem with this perspective by explaining that because of the globalisation and the multicultural society of today it is no longer possible or realistic to present culture in this manner. She argues, as Tupas (2014), that students might need to be exposed to culture as a concept that covers many social communities. However, she also mentions that not seeing culture as tied to national borders would create difficulties if wanting to present English culture. English is a language that is spread all over the world, which means that it would be nearly impossible to include all types of English cultures, if not categorising them in some way. Furthermore, she says that it

would be difficult to be able to compare and contrast cultures if not talking about them as fixed national concepts (p. 71).

This issue is also discussed by Byram et. Al. (2002) who explain that the danger does not lie in looking at culture from a national perspective, but rather in not making students aware that an individual belongs to several cultural communities, and that national culture is only one of those (pp.9-10). Hence, they propose that EFL education should focus on making students aware of this instead of not teaching national cultures. They further add that an additional danger would be to not let students engage with the new culture they are discovering (p.13). They report that if students do not get that possibility, they are likely to not understand the target culture. Hence, the culture would continue being unfamiliar and unfathomable to the students who would merely perceive it from national stereotypes since they cannot see the complexity of it.

An additional identified problem with the traditional culture approach is that the topics that teachers tend to include in their teaching have been argued to create a stereotypical mindset. This has been discussed by Gómez Rodríguez (2015), who distinguishes between *surface level* and *deep level* culture. He reports that in EFL teaching, teachers mainly focus on cultural topics that are included in the *surface level* category (p.45). He criticizes this and explains that the *surface level* topics, such as traditions, food or landmarks, are topics most easy for teachers to include in their culture teaching since they could be difficult for the students to discuss or reflect upon (p.45). By merely teaching this kind of cultural content, stereotypes are more easily created which would inhibit students' ability to develop a cultural understanding (p.45). In contrast, he explains that *deep culture* topics include more complex phenomena, such as gender roles or politics, which he states are more appropriate topics to include in the culture teaching in order for students to get a deeper understanding of the target culture (Gómez Rodríguez, 2015, p.45).

In light of what has been discussed, one could say that the traditional approach has come under a lot of criticism. In addition to this, it has been argued that teachers should implement a critical teaching approach where students get the possibility to interact with cultural information and where cultural stereotypes could be dealt with to a greater extent. An intercultural approach has been suggested to instead be the foundation for culture teaching, which rather than merely providing students with cultural facts sets out to develop student intercultural understanding and competence. However it is worth asking why it is important

for students to be exposed to an intercultural approach, why it would be relevant to include in EFL education and moreover, why it should be taught in Sweden.

Why IC is important to teach in the EFL classroom becomes evident when taking into consideration the fact that English is an international language and a lingua franca. Hence, speaking English could involve communication with people from other cultures and countries. It therefore becomes important for our students to be able to understand and interact with people from different cultures, and doing so in a respectful way (Byram et. Al., 2002). Another reason that rather speaks for why IC should be included in education at all is that we, today, live in a globalised world where encounters with different cultures most likely will be the reality for our students every day. One of the school's purposes is to make our students democratic citizens who meet all people with the same respect, regardless of their cultural belonging (Tornberg, 2009). This objective would be easier to approach if the students got to develop IC.

Moreover, the same reasons could be used to argue for why IC should be included in Swedish EFL teaching. However, an additional reason is that the curriculum for English courses mentions this as an objective for EFL teaching, even though the term IC is not used in the descriptions. In the syllabus it is stated that the students should get the possibility to develop "The ability to discuss and reflect on living conditions, social issues and cultural features in different contexts and parts of the world where English is used" (Skolverket, 2011). Hence, it gives the idea that IC is a concept that teachers need to try to develop in English teaching in Sweden.

To summarize, this section has mentioned some limitations regarding the traditional culture approach and given some suggestions for how it should be introduced instead. The main proposal that is given is that teachers should try to develop students' IC, and take an IC approach to culture. Furthermore, this section has explained why IC should be included in EFL teaching and, more specifically, why it should be included in the Swedish English teaching. The European and Swedish perspectives will also be the ones that this paper will be based on when giving a longer definition of the concept of IC, which will be done in the next section (2.1).

2.1 Intercultural Competence

In this section, a deeper definition of Intercultural Competence (IC) will be given. The definition will mainly be the one that has been given by the Common European Framework of

Reference (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001) and from a teacher's guide to IC (Byram et Al. 2002). The reason for using these sources is that they both have a European perspective on IC, which this paper aims to have.

When looking at what the CEFR says on IC it firstly mentions *Intercultural Awareness*, which basically lies as the foundation of a person's IC (Baker, 2015). It means that you are aware of the fact that people belong to many social communities, where national culture is one of these (Council of Europe, 2001 p. 103). Briefly put, it refers to an understanding that two people from the same country do not share the exact same beliefs or traditions because of merely sharing the same national culture (p.103). This type of thinking promotes the perception of people from other countries as complex individuals and aims to inhibit a way of thinking in which people are perceived through national stereotypes (p.103). To summarize, IC simply means, according to the CEFR, implementing this awareness to one's communication practice.

Byram et al. (2002) give a more detailed definition of IC by first explaining the concept and by mentioning the components of IC, hence what is needed in order to say that someone is interculturally competent. They describe IC communication as based upon respect and understanding of different cultures without only judging the conversational partner from the culture he or she comes from. To be able to perform this type of communication, they argue that the individual needs to develop a competence within three components, which are considered to be the IC components: skills, knowledge and attitudes (Byram et al., 2002, p.10). The knowledge component refers to knowledge about cultural aspects of the target culture (p.12). The attitudes refer to the willingness of the individual to understand, which is argued by Byram et al. to be the base for achieving IC, since negative attitudes towards exploring and familiarizing yourself with different cultures will result in not actually understanding them (p.12). The third component, skills, refers to the procedural knowledge of IC that the individual needs to develop. It includes the competence of being able to relate different aspects of one's own culture to aspects in the target culture, and in that way get a better understanding of the target culture (p.13). Furthermore, it refers to knowing how to implement the attained intercultural knowledge into actual communication and interaction (p.13).

Later in the text, where teachers' lack of IC knowledge is discussed, the IC components will once again be mentioned, when discussing a study carried out by Gu (2016). Then it will, however, mention two additional components which Michael Byram also includes as IC

components, in his own model of IC. The additional two components mentioned in Byram's model (as cited in Gu, 2016, p.261) are language and awareness. It should be taken into consideration that there are several definitions and models of IC, and that the chosen definition is mainly given because wanting a European perspective, in which this definition could be argued to be established, as in the European Framework of Reference (Council of Europe, 2001).

To summarize, IC is described as a skill needed to interact with people from different cultures in a more respectful way. It emphasizes knowledge about cultural facts in order to get a perception of different cultures, but challenges individuals to not only see their conversational partner from the perspective of the culture he or she belongs to. Instead this competence creates an understanding that people belong to many social communities where the national culture only plays one part. It could be argued, that this is an essential skill for EFL students of today, due to the globalisation and the multiculturalism that exist in today's society.

3 Findings

In this section the aim is to discuss the findings from research in the field. The findings that will be focused on are the main difficulties that teachers tend to face when implementing an intercultural approach in their classroom practice. It firstly discusses teachers' lack of skills regarding choosing teaching material for their IC teaching. It has been noted in a number of studies, that teachers have problems with evaluating whether their material is useful for developing IC. This problem might be due to the second challenge that will be mentioned in this section, namely teachers' lack of IC knowledge and how that affects teaching practice. This lack of knowledge could be argued to have an impact on teachers' willingness towards implementing a critical intercultural approach, which will be the third and last issue discussed in this chapter.

3.1 Choosing material for effective IC teaching

In this section the material used in the EFL classroom in order to teach IC is discussed. By discussing *material*, the paper refers both to the type of texts and the topics that the material addresses. It was earlier mentioned that, according to research, EFL teachers who try to apply the intercultural approach have problems with evaluating what material and topics are suitable for their IC teaching. This regards both the textbooks used in the classroom, and also the authentic material that teachers choose to include. However, this is argued to be an important skill in order to be able to develop students' IC. This section aims to identify in what ways teachers have problem evaluating material and what their problems might depend on.

The issue of teachers not being able to evaluate teaching material, such as textbooks, has been addressed in a study carried out by Sercu (2006). This study focuses on teachers' beliefs about their teaching, of IC, and then evaluates what the teachers' reports of their IC practices can say about IC practice in FL classrooms. Since an international perspective on teacher beliefs was wanted, the study has 424 participating FL teachers from countries spread over the world. 79 % of the participants were teachers of English and a minority of the participants were teachers of French, Spanish, and German. Since being a study internationally spread, the chosen method was a questionnaire that consisted of both open and closed questions regarding teachers' perceptions of the cultural aspect of their teaching. What Sercu mainly wants to answer in this study is whether teachers could be called competent in

teaching intercultural competence or if they mainly teach from , and have the competence to teach from, the traditional culture approach.

Sercu (2006) draws the conclusion that teachers do not have a problem with reflecting upon what they include in their teaching, which she reports as an essential skill for successfully teaching IC (p.63). However, she explains that when teachers criticize teaching material they rarely focus on how well it could be used in order to foster IC. Instead, Sercu reports that they tend to evaluate it from a traditional culture teaching perspective where teachers are “pointing out where the information regarding the foreign culture had been incorrectly selected or presented” (Sercu, 2006, p.64). Even though this type of evaluation could also be argued to be important, Sercu reports that teaching material needs to be evaluated in greater detail, with a focus on how it could be used to teach IC (p.64). By not evaluating material into more detail with consideration to other aspects, she reports that teachers do not make good use of the material that textbooks provide, which, if adapted to this purpose, could be regarded to be appropriate as IC teaching material.

What, however, needs to be taken into consideration when looking at the results in Sercu’s study is that the results do not point at the teachers being incompetent in adapting their material or choosing material to foster IC. The results regarding teaching material mainly give an image of how they evaluate it. Since it does not investigate what material they use, to specifically teach IC, one cannot simply draw the conclusion that they have difficulties with evaluating material from an IC approach. It merely says that this is something that they do not do.

In addition to what has been discussed, a problem with teachers’ evaluation of material is how they perceive and approach authentic material. This has been highlighted by Sachdev & Young (2011) who have conducted a study of EFL teachers’ IC beliefs and practices, in which the participants are teachers in the UK, France and the US. In the study, Sachdev & Young found that the teachers who participated in their study perceived authentic material as automatically creating validity for its inclusion in the classroom, just because it is authentic. This perspective highlights that the content of the material does not matter. In Young & Sachdev’s study, they report that because teachers had this approach to authentic material, the material that teachers reported to include was stereotypical and merely included British or American culture contexts. Hence, other contexts where English is used as an official language was almost altogether excluded from their teaching (Young & Sachdev, 2011, pp.92-93).

In addition to what has been discussed earlier, more detailed attention deserves to be given to the topics presented by teachers in IC teaching, since research has suggested that there are specific topics that could be categorised as suitable IC topics. Young & Sachdev (2011) have found that the majority of the participants in their study thought that they all used material that could be considered to be critical and suitable for IC teaching (p.92). However, when getting the opportunity to give examples of the topics included in their culture teaching it was discovered that it mainly consisted of surface level topics that are usually found in a traditional culture approach (pp.92-93).

From the discussion carried out by Young & Sachdev it is evident that these superficial cultural topics are, according to them, considered to not be important for students' development of IC. However, it might be worth noting that being interculturally competent means that one is aware of, and able to function in, a range of varied situations and contexts (Council of Europe, 2001, p.104). Hence, it would also be essential for our students to be familiar with the cultural topics that are argued to be easy to problematize. Furthermore, as mentioned in the theoretical background, it has been argued that the problem rather lies in presenting cultural phenomena uncritically. An example of this could be when presenting a type of cultural tradition as a typical trait that everybody in a specific culture celebrates, without taking into consideration that the celebration of it would depend on the many other cultures an individual belongs to.

Hence, it could be argued that there is no specific type of topic that is typically appropriate for IC, but need to be adapted to an intercultural approach. Göbel & Helmke (2010) who have done a study on IC teaching in German classrooms rather look at *how* teachers use the cultural material that they choose to include in their course to teach IC, instead of focusing on *what* type of material and on what topic they use (Göbel & Helmke, 2010). What they noticed in their study is that the participating teachers who had been exposed to the target culture to a greater extent succeeded better with teaching culture from an intercultural approach, to problematize cultural topics and let students discuss and interact with the culture that is presented (Göbel & Helmke, 2010, p.1577). In light of this finding, they argue that teachers' experience of the target culture would have an impact on their IC teaching and how they use cultural material in the classroom (p.1577). However, it is worth taking into account that this study does not focus on EFL teaching, but merely FL teaching. There could be argued to be a difference between these two types of teaching. There is no single English culture; it is a language that is spread globally, which could make it difficult to

speak of a single target culture. A language whose culture is tied to only one nationality would be easier to have a greater knowledge of, whilst having knowledge of all English cultures that exist could be argued to be difficult. On the other hand, there are other foreign languages whose spreading is international, which could argue for these results to be the relevant for EFL teaching as well.

Even though Göbel & Helmke (2010) focus more on how teachers make use of cultural material, they also mention that there are certain topics that could be argued to be more appropriate for the teaching of IC, but in the study there is a lack of examples of what a typical IC topic would be. Despite this, it has been shown in this section that research argues that teachers do not include appropriate IC topics, and that the reason is a lack of IC knowledge. Lack of knowledge could be supposed to become a major problem when it is time for teachers to implement an intercultural approach in the classroom. Gu (2016) reports that teachers lack knowledge of what IC is (p.263). She reports that without any knowledge of possible ways to teach it and how to introduce material from an IC approach, it could be argued to be nearly impossible to implement an intercultural approach in the EFL classroom. In the next section the lack of teachers' IC knowledge will be evaluated to a greater extent.

3.2 Teachers' lack of IC knowledge

In this section the paper will address what research says about teachers' knowledge of the concept of IC. Furthermore, it will discuss what research says on the impact that this has on their IC teaching. This discussion is relevant considering what has been discussed in the previous chapter, that there is a wish for teachers to include material that could be categorised as promoting IC. It is shown in section 3.1 that teachers have trouble evaluating what material they should include in their IC teaching, which, amongst other things, could be argued to be due to a lack of knowledge regarding this concept. Young & Sachdev (2011) report that it is evident that teachers have trouble grasping what is meant by IC. This conclusion is drawn because of the way the participating teachers in their study implemented the intercultural approach in their culture teaching, which was earlier discussed in this paper. .

The lack of teachers' knowledge regarding IC is something that has been explored by a number of researchers in various ways. Gu (2016) who has conducted a study where she looks at teachers' IC practice in a Chinese context, in which 1170 teachers participated, evaluates how well teachers are familiar with the concept. In one part of the study she asks the participants to give three important aspects each in order to see how teachers define IC (Gu,

2016). The aspects that were given were then put into five categories, which according to Michael Byram's model of IC are the five main components of IC: knowledge, skill, attitude, awareness and language (p.261). The results of the survey show that, according to the participants, knowledge of cultural topics in the target culture is one of the most important parts of IC (p.261). Gu (2016) reports that the fact that teachers consider facts about culture the most important aspect would suggest that teachers still have a traditional approach to the topic (p.261). In addition to this discovery, it is worth mentioning that 10% of the teachers that participated in the study could not give three aspects on the concept. The teachers reported that this was due to the fact that they had not been exposed to it and therefore could not give their opinion of what IC was (p.261). These results are argued to prove that teachers lack knowledge regarding the concept and that teachers still see it through the traditional culture teaching perspective where the focus lies on cultural facts instead of the understanding of, and the open-mindedness towards different cultures (p.264). Gu (2016) suggests that in order to implement IC in the classroom and to reach an effective IC teaching the concept needs to be specified and clarified (p.264). In addition to this she argues that teacher training regarding IC teaching is needed, which would help to clarify the concept and give all teachers the possibility to familiarize themselves with the concept (p.264).

What Gu (2016) highlights in her study is that the concept needs to be specified, which means that it could be argued to be too vague for teachers to grasp. Hence, it could be considered difficult for teachers to have sufficient knowledge of the concept. This is also noted by Leeman & Ledoux (2005) who further add that IC is a concept that is important to include in many aspects of language learning (p.583). With this in mind, it could be argued that in order to include the concept in EFL teaching, there is a need for teacher IC-training and for a clarification of the concept.

A number of studies have been conducted on how teachers perceive the concept of IC and how well they are familiar with it. Tian (2013) who has done a dissertation on the subject of IC practices of university English teachers from China, explicitly asked the participants in the study to describe and explain the concept of IC. She noticed, however, that teachers tended to rather discuss how it could be developed, than directly discuss *what* IC is (p.77). Furthermore, teachers had different definitions of IC, from one another (Tian, 2013, p.78). This could explain that there is an uncertainty amongst teachers regarding the concept of IC. That they have problems with defining the concept could be argued to mean that teachers do not actually have explicit knowledge of what it is. Tian (2013) states that this problem might be

due to the fact that many of the teachers have not been exposed to the target culture, to a great extent (p.88). As mentioned in 3.1, it has been reported by Göbel & Helmke (2010) that teachers who have not been exposed to the target culture have trouble with presenting cultural features in a more critical way. They argue that because of the lack of teachers' IC training and because of the lack of material that is aimed to teach IC, teachers need to rely on their own intercultural experience (Göbel & Helmke, 2010, p.1580).

Similar results, on how teachers' knowledge of the concept depends on their own experience, have been reported in a study carried out by Sercu (2005). She has carried out a study where she investigates the beliefs of Belgian teachers of English, French and German beliefs about their cultural teaching (Sercu, 2005). She has found that cultural aspects that teachers feel least comfortable to teach, are the ones that they have not been much exposed to either in their teacher education, in teaching material or in general (p.101). In Sercu's study it is reported that the cultural aspects that teachers feel least prepared to teach are the ones that, according to Sercu (2005) are the intercultural topics (p. 94). However, it is once again questionable whether one can talk about some topics as more interculturally appropriate than others. It is also worth mentioning that the results from Sercu's (2005) study merely depend on teachers' own beliefs about their own cultural knowledge which consequently could lead to incorrect information about what teachers are actually knowledgeable of.

In another study carried out by Sercu (2006), which is mentioned earlier in my text, it is also concluded that teachers have a lack of knowledge on how to teach IC. From the results shown in the study, Sercu concludes that teachers do not know how to teach culture from the intercultural teaching approach (pp. 62-64). She reports that teachers do not possess the skills that have been pointed out as needed in order to teach IC (p.63). In her discussion she tries to give an explanation for why this is the case, and comes to the conclusion that it is probably due to a number of factors, such as the lack of IC training in teacher's education (p.68).

Moreover, she offers suggestions for what could be done in order to assist teachers applying an IC approach (p.69), which also implies that it is something that teachers need assistance with, and are not capable of handling on their own. Something she argues for is that teaching material, such as language textbooks, need to take an intercultural approach, which could help teachers to get a comprehension of how IC could be implemented in classroom activities (p.70). If one looks at the results from the study conducted by Sercu (2005) a year earlier, it could be argued that material in textbooks guide teachers on how to present cultural topics. It was noticed that teachers tend to feel the most prepared to teach the cultural aspects

that have been shown to be the most included in textbooks (p.101), which argues that the approach and material of a textbook could help teachers to actually include something in particular in their teaching.

The influence that textbooks have on teachers' knowledge on certain topics has also been acknowledged in other research. Cheng (2007) who has studied eight teachers in Taiwan notes in her study that textbooks in the Asian context have a great impact on what is taught and what not, since teachers basically design their whole course in relation to a book (p.123). She reports that the teachers who participated in the study feel that textbooks give them a base of knowledge within in a certain area, hence the excluded areas in the textbooks are perceived as more difficult to teach since they do not get the required knowledge to teach it (p.124). It becomes evident that if textbooks would adapt an intercultural approach, teachers would supposedly receive greater knowledge within that field. However, it should be taken into consideration that this might not be the case in a European context, since teachers may use extensive material to supplement or altogether replace the textbook. Hence, textbooks taking an IC approach might have a greater impact on teachers' culture teaching in the Asian context than in the European one.

In addition to what has been discussed it is worth asking whether teachers are not knowledgeable of the concept of IC or whether they merely do not have the proper skills that they need in order to teach it. Sercu (2006) discusses in her study, that there are certain skills that the language teacher needs to possess in order to be able to teach IC. Apart from investigating teacher beliefs, she looks at how well language teachers are able to teach the concept, by drawing conclusions from what the participating teachers' report on their own teaching practice. She distinguishes between the knowledge and skills, hence being aware of the concept and if they are able to use the awareness to implement it in the classroom. What is concluded in her study is that teachers, according to the results, are familiar with the concept but are not skilled to teach from an intercultural approach (p.63). However, this conclusion merely depends on teachers' comments on their own practice, which shows that they do not *use* the intercultural approach in their classroom. Its absence from the classroom does not consequently mean that teachers lack skills in that field. Hence it could be argued to be a questionable conclusion to draw.

To summarize there is a number of studies that show how there is a lack of knowledge regarding this concept, which would create a difficulty for teachers when actually trying to implement it in their EFL teaching. There are a variety of explanations for teachers' lack of IC

knowledge. One of the most highlighted in the research is the exclusion of it in teacher programmes which means that a vast number of teachers get no training in the field. Another explanation is that the concept itself is quite broad and unclear which could make it hard for teachers to grasp. Gu (2016) suggests that it would be easier to include IC in EFL teaching if one would clarify *how* one could implement the concept and in *what* teaching areas. There are a number of guides, given out by The Council of Europe that could be useful for EFL teachers in the aspect of clarifying the concept and in what way it could be included in the classroom. However it could be argued that something that is objectified as an aim of EFL teaching should not be something that teachers set out to understand on their own, but should rather be exposed to in their teacher education.

3.3 Teachers' unwillingness to teach IC

In previous sections, this paper has discussed the difficulty of choosing material that could develop students IC knowledge, and the lack of teachers' knowledge about the concept of IC which would inhibit the efficiency of its teaching. In this section, focus is on the teacher attitudes towards the teaching of the concept. Research shows that there are some negative attitudes towards IC and that teachers feel reluctant to teach and apply it in their classrooms. This section will look at results of this and go into detail by looking at what has caused this reluctance within teachers.

According to the participating EFL teachers in the study conducted by Young & Sachdev (2011), the implementing of an IC approach is problematic because of the issue of letting students reflect on and engage critically with the target culture. Young and Sachdev report that teachers perceive a critical approach to cultural aspects as dangerous since free discussions could give students with racist opinions the possibility to express beliefs that do not correlate with the values that the school in the UK, the US and France stand for. Many teachers that participated in the study argued that the language classroom should be a safe place where no students should feel exposed or that they are in a position where they feel that they should have to defend why they do, or do not do, certain things, for instance why they celebrate certain traditions or not. This would, according to the participants, be a risk of a critical approach to culture teaching (p.89).

The same issue is mentioned in a study carried out by Larzén-Östermark (2008) who looks at Finland-Swedish teachers of English and their beliefs and attitudes towards the teaching of IC. The participants in her study are 12 comprehensive teachers whose beliefs

were reported through interviews. A belief that she highlights is that there is a risk of approaching culture in a critical way, since critical discussions might give students with racist opinions the opportunity to discuss other cultures in a negative sense, which then teachers need to face and tackle (Larzén-Östermark, 2008, p. 537). Larzén-Östermark hence argues, in the results of her study, that this risk might create an unwillingness or fear of addressing culture from an IC approach. She compares this approach with the traditional one by saying that whilst the IC approach allows students to interact with the target culture and to reflect critically on their own culture, the traditional approach avoids this critical aspect of the cultural education (p.543). Hence, students merely need to acquire facts about cultural aspects which would inhibit the risk that would arise in the IC approach. In light of this, one might understand why teachers might feel tempted to continue with the traditional approach.

However, in this study, there are also teachers who are willing to teach IC but mention a range of factors that hinder the possibility of putting more effort into it. Some factors they mention are the lack of time and that there is not much emphasis put in the curriculum on this issue (Larzén-Östermark, 2008, p.541). Instead, the focus is rather on teaching lexical skills, such as grammar (p.541). This has also been reported by Cheng (2007), whose study's participants report that the main objective with the EFL teaching is to rather focus on the teaching of the language, and not the culture that comes with it (p. 126). She reports in her study, that in Taiwan, IC is not included as an aim in the syllabus which means that teachers need to teach this concept in addition to what they already have to include in their language course. However, when looking at the participating teachers in Cheng's (2007) study, their thoughts on why culture should be included also show that that culture is not perceived as being an important aspect when it comes to the learning of a new language (p. 125). Hence, it could be worth asking whether culture and IC is as neglected as becomes evident in Cheng's (2007) study because of it not being an explicit objective in the syllabus, or if it is because of the perception of the importance of culture, in the Taiwanese teaching context.

An additional reason why teachers feel unwilling to include IC in their teaching is that they feel that it is a competence that is developed through authentic interaction. This is reported by Sercu (2006), who in her concluding remarks on teacher beliefs presents two types of teachers regarding IC beliefs (p.66). There is the teacher who has a positive attitude towards including IC in his/her teaching, and the one who has a negative attitude towards it. The latter teacher profile is explained as perceiving IC teaching as having a negative impact on students' perceptions of different cultures and thinks that it will create a stereotypical

mind-set instead of preventing stereotypes from arising (p.66). In addition, as mentioned earlier, this teacher also has the belief that IC is not possible to develop in the EFL classroom, or in any classroom at all (p.66).

As mentioned earlier, it has however been reported that there are also teachers with positive attitudes towards IC teaching in EFL teaching (Sercu, 2006). It has been showed in studies that the majority of the participating teachers perceive IC as an important skill for students to develop, and that the EFL classroom is a good context in which it could be developed (Sercu, 2006; Young & Sachdev, 2011; Göbel & Helmke, 2010; Larzén-Östermark, 2008). Regarding the teachers that are of the different opinion, it becomes evident that it is mainly other factors, than their beliefs of IC teaching that influence teachers' unwillingness towards this issue.

One possible factor that could have an impact on their unwillingness is the students' motivation towards IC and culture teaching in general. It has been reported by teachers in research (Young & Sachdev, 2011; Sercu, 2006) that students do not perceive IC as important to include due to the fact that students do not find this issue as relevant in their language learning process. For instance, Young & Sachdev report that the participating teachers feel unsure about including IC in their teaching because their students do not see it as an important competence to develop (pp.89-90). However, Sercu (2006) reports in her study that the teachers, who come from different European countries, had similar perceptions of IC, even though the students from the different countries had different attitudes towards the teaching of IC (p.67). Evidently, one can argue that teachers' IC perceptions are not much influenced by their students' attitudes (pp.67-68). Hence, it could be concluded that students' attitudes might not be the primary reason for teachers' unwillingness, since even though students' motivation differed from one country to another, the teacher beliefs were still the same, regardless of the country they were from.

Furthermore, as has already been addressed to some extent in this section, it has also been noticed that there are teachers too who do not see the importance of including IC in education. Aveling (2002) who has carried out a study where he evaluates student teachers' attitudes towards evaluating their own concepts about the other and racism, reports that the participants in Aveling's class felt that addressing this issue was not important and found other aspects of education worth prioritizing (p.121). In light of this notion, it might not only be students that do not perceive aspects of IC important, but also teachers.

To summarize, there are a number of factors that could be argued to have an impact on teachers' willingness. The main factors that have been addressed is firstly that teachers do not feel that they have enough time to focus on IC, since syllabi in different countries tend to focus on linguistic skills rather than cultural skills. Furthermore, teacher attitudes could be argued to be a main factor. What has been noticed in the literature is that teachers tend to feel anxious about letting students discuss and engage critically with aspects of different cultures, because they might have to deal with potentially existing racist opinions. However, teachers' negative attitudes have also been shown to be a product of their beliefs regarding the importance of the topic. It has been shown that there are teachers that either feel that IC should be learned in authentic situations or simply feel that it is not an essential skill for language learning.

What should be taken into consideration is that some of the studies are set in a context where language learning and teaching is thought of as different because of a different educational culture. Hence, the responses found in this context cannot solely make the foundation of knowledge for teacher attitudes in a different context.

4 Conclusion

This literature review has highlighted difficulties with implementing an intercultural competence approach to EFL teaching. The focus of the paper has been on evaluating research that looks at teachers' beliefs regarding IC and their practice. This was done in order to get the teachers' point of view, and to find out where aid for teachers is needed in the field. Three main categories of difficulties have been highlighted in this paper. However, in each of the sections some sub-difficulties have been mentioned, that are directly linked to the main difficulties.

Firstly, this paper has looked at the difficulty of choosing material that would foster students' IC. It was concluded in this section that teachers have trouble finding and evaluating material regarding the concept of IC. It was noticed that teachers rather evaluate material from a traditional culture teaching perspective than focusing on how it could be used for IC teaching. In addition, it has been shown that teachers tend to include authentic material to teach IC, but do not evaluate whether it could be efficient or not. Lastly, it has become evident that research has different views regarding what could be argued to be appropriate IC material. Some research, that looks at teachers' choice of material, rather focus on the fact that teachers do not include "IC topics" whilst other studies instead focus on how teachers use teaching materials appropriately for an IC purpose. Hence, one could conclude that research does not agree on what should be focused on when it comes to appropriate IC material, whether it depends on the topic or how the material is used.

Secondly, the paper has discussed the lack of teachers' knowledge and understanding of IC. A factor for why teachers have trouble evaluating material could be that teacher do not have a clear perception of what IC is, and therefore have trouble teaching it. From the research it could be concluded that teachers do not understand the concept. Factors that could explain why there is a lack of IC knowledge have been reported by teachers who have participated in the research. It has been shown in section 3.2 that, according to them, they have not been exposed to this concept in their teacher education, which makes them feel unprepared to teach it. Another reason that has been noted for teachers' incomprehension of the issue is that IC is a broad concept that covers many aspects of language learning, which could be argued to make it difficult for teachers to grasp.

Lastly, teacher unwillingness has been discussed. From the evaluation of the research, it could be concluded that the willingness and the attitudes towards teaching IC depends on where the study has been conducted. It has been shown that teachers who have participated in

the European context perceive IC to a greater extent as important to include and have a more positive attitude towards it. However, in the Asian context, studies show that some teachers tend to see this concept as not important for increasing one's language competence.

Furthermore, one could say from the results, that the lack of willingness mainly depends on other reasons than not seeing IC as an important issue to teach. A factor that has been mentioned in this paper is that IC is not set as an objective in the syllabus. Another factor that has been mentioned is that some teachers show a fear of letting students discussing different cultures because potential racist opinions might come up to the surface, which teachers then would have to deal with.

In light of the results regarding these three difficulties it is worth asking what the results mean to EFL teaching, and what should be done in order to be able to include an IC approach efficiently. One could say that the results point to a lack of teacher skills in the field, which could be argued to be reduced by including IC training in countries' teacher education programmes. This would familiarize teachers with the concept early in their professional career and would make them feel more prepared and knowledgeable when evaluating material and having to manage critical discussions in the classroom. To summarize, it could probably create more positive attitudes towards the issue.

However, for those educational contexts where IC is not set as an objective in the syllabus and where it is not considered as an important issue to cover in a language course, it is difficult to say how these results would have any effect on the design of teacher education. If IC would be relevant to include in pre-teachers' education there is a need for a change of attitude towards the purpose and to what skills are important to possess when communicating in English.

Before ending this section, directions for future research should be addressed. What has become noticeable when reading research in the field is that there is a lack of research that focuses specifically on upper secondary school teachers. Studies conducted in Asia mainly focus on university teachers' beliefs and, a large number of studies do not specify on what level the participating teachers actually teach. However, the level of the students' proficiency could be argued to have an impact on teachers' attitudes towards including an IC approach. This could be due to the fact that being able to discuss and think critically about one's own culture in another language might require some level of language proficiency. Even if one could adapt IC activities to different levels of proficiency, it could be argued that critical discussions and reflections would be easier for students of a more advanced level of English,

than for those on a beginner's level. Hence, the teaching level of teachers could have an impact on their beliefs and on how familiar they would be with the topic, and since no studies from the upper secondary context have been found, this needs to be explored further.

An additional issue that needs to be addressed in the field is studies from a European context, which today is quite lacking in comparison to the amount of research in the Asian context. European studies on teacher beliefs and practice could be argued to be highly relevant since IC, in many European countries, is an established aim in the syllabus. Therefore, the efficiency of IC teaching in Europe is worth investigating in order to get information of existing gaps and to find solutions that would develop an effective IC teaching.

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