



Challenges and Opportunities of Croatian EFL Teachers' Continuous Professional Development for Intercultural Dialogue

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Abstract

With the growing emphasis on the need for an intercultural approach to modern education [1, 2] and the pedagogy of intercultural competence [3], twenty-first century EFL teachers are no longer expected to merely transmit factual information about the target culture; they have assumed the role of a cultural facilitator or mediator through the learning process [4]. This comes as no surprise given that language is an inseparable part of culture. In the Republic of Croatia, [5] presumes a high level of teacher competences and their ability to effectively utilize a range of methods and teaching aids in order to successfully organize the educational process. However, while the need to implement the fundamental tenets of intercultural education across subject curricula and the emphasis on the role of teachers have become the focus of much scholarly effort [6, 7, 8, 9], teachers would benefit from additional encouragement in fostering both their own and their students' intercultural competences. Therefore, this paper aims to provide an insight into the challenges of intercultural education and opportunities of continuous professional development of EFL teachers that encourage a positive classroom atmosphere and facilitate risk-taking, self-reflexion, and development of respect for cultural differences as well as an open and constructive intercultural dialogue.

Keywords: *intercultural education, teachers' professional development, foreign language, pluralism.*

1. Introduction

While language proficiency lies at the heart of any language instruction, it has been recognized that "learners need not just knowledge and skill in the grammar of a language but also the ability to use the language in socially and culturally appropriate ways" [1, p. 7]. This means that, in the 21st century classroom, teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) are no longer expected to merely transmit factual information about the target culture, but rather assume the role of facilitators [4] that encourage students' activity and motivation while they explore, analyze, and evaluate received information through authentic materials and more eagerly engage in intercultural dialogue. EFL teachers are thereby required to navigate between cultures in a manner that accurately represents both the source and target culture, while simultaneously modeling intercultural values and interpersonal skills that foster a democratic and open dialogue. Affirmation of intercultural dialogue implies a culturally responsive teaching style, encouragement of student participation in intercultural experiences and exchanges, and promoting partnerships and cooperative learning methods [10]. While it may be argued that EFL teaching and learning is in and of itself intercultural, the kind of intercultural competence that is an expected outcome of exposure to intercultural education does not happen spontaneously without effort; it is a learning process that presupposes continuity. Furthermore, achieving a uniform degree of teacher competence for intercultural education has proven challenging. While for some teachers, intercultural education and competence are central to their educational concerns and planning [3], research suggests that teachers devote more time to language teaching than culture teaching [11]. For this reason, it is essential that EFL teachers, who are the liaison between the fundamental values of intercultural education and the students, be provided with the required competences during initial education as well as regularly supported through continuous professional development programs that are "critical to systematic educational reform and school improvement focused on enhancing learning outcomes for all children in public education" [12, p. 64].

2. Theoretical background

The development of intercultural education in the European context is associated with migrations following World War II and the development of integration policies and recommendations of the Council of Europe and the bodies of the European Union. Formal education was thereby given a key role in providing the appropriate environment for fostering intercultural communication and dialogue [13, 14]. With the growing emphasis on the need for an intercultural approach to education [1, 2] and



development of intercultural competence through education [3, 15], the linking of language and culture in the FL classroom has become the focus of much scholarly inquiry [16]. This comes as no surprise given that language and culture are inextricably linked. Culture is a complex concept that incorporates 'material' manifestations of culture that are easily seen and 'non-material' ones that are more difficult to observe [17]. In this paper, culture is understood as "culturally-influenced *beliefs* and *perceptions*, especially as expressed through *language*, but also through cultural behaviors that affect cross-cultural tolerance" [18, p. 9, emphasis added]. However, in order for EFL teachers to be able to conduct intercultural education, i.e., to encourage students to form intercultural attitudes and to educate them for intercultural communication and dialogue, it is necessary that they themselves are interculturally competent [19].

The term "intercultural competence" may be defined as the ability to interact in one's own language with the people from another country and culture [1], whereby the term comprises knowledge, skills and attitudes, complemented by the values one holds because of one's belonging to a number of social groups [4]. Byram went a step further and proposed another term relevant for FL instruction, "intercultural communicative competence" (ICC), which he views as the ability to interact with people from another country and culture in a foreign language. Surely, the development of attitudes towards people from other cultures is not the sole responsibility of the school; it is inevitably influenced by various factors such as family discourse, representation of minority groups in the media, and personal contact with cultural diversity. In formal education, the responsibility for developing intercultural competence in learners is shared by all teachers; however, to differing degrees [3]. Therefore, before EFL teachers can be expected to deliver on the great expectations of intercultural education, they need to be empowered and equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to ensure inclusion and equity in education. This requires looking beyond the conscious elements of the target culture (food, literature, history, geography) and exploring unconscious ones (beliefs, values) through authentic resources (digital, interactive content) and representations of cultures as well as concrete vocabulary that promotes human rights and equality. The development of intercultural competence through education encourages teachers to work with the knowledge and experience each student brings into the classroom [20], yet it is equally important how teachers contribute to cultural encounters within the classroom because they, too, draw on personal and professional experiences, explicit knowledge, beliefs, and ideas [21].

The implementation of intercultural education in the everyday teaching practice across subject curricula has become the focus of much scholarly effort in the Republic of Croatia. We know from research that "teacher beliefs directly influence the interpretation and importance which they attribute to their teaching experience" [22, p. 135]. Some Croatian authors have given a significant contribution to defining the fundamental dimensions of intercultural competence [23, 8, 7, 24, 25, 26, 6]. However, there is a lack of research on in-service EFL teachers' interpretation and implementation of ICC as well as attitudes and beliefs about intercultural education, especially considering that research into the intercultural content provided in programs of study for the education of English language teachers reveals that the majority of programs do not contain content related to the components for developing intercultural competence [27]. Therefore, given that the acquisition of communicative competence precedes the acquisition of ICC, it is justified to wonder how much emphasis is placed on intercultural content during classroom teaching. While it is important to continuously explore what aspects of intercultural teaching EFL teachers are already addressing in their teaching practice, it is equally important to uncover what it is that they are not because "teachers cannot teach and cannot increase awareness of something they do not know themselves" [28, p. 70]. Programs of teachers' professional development with intercultural orientation have the potential to uncover EFL teachers' strengths and weaknesses and provide them with opportunities to apply techniques that promote self-reflection and greater self-awareness both in their students and themselves.

3. National curricula and EFL teachers' continuous professional development

In the Republic of Croatia, [5] has adopted the EU guidelines on lifelong education and presumes a high level of teacher competences for a successful organization of the intercultural learning and teaching process. The acquisition of multilingual and intercultural competence is thereby perceived as a means of encouraging respect for diversity and tolerance. EFL teachers' role in fostering ICC is specifically addressed in [29], where ICC represents one of the three key pillars of instruction. As one of the values and principles of the subject curriculum, the document highlights that "mastery of the English language outside of school and application of what has been learned in real life situations is



encouraged, which opens up opportunities for authentic communication in English in learning and teaching" [29]. The educational process thereby takes place "in a stimulating and safe environment in which each student has the opportunity to succeed, and it is especially important to promote cooperation, encourage creativity and respect for cultural diversity." It is obvious that the demands on EFL teachers are multifaceted and complex. In addition to taking into account the individual development of their students and the successful management of learning processes in the classroom, they are also faced with challenges that emerge from teaching *in* multicultural classrooms or at least from teaching *for* multicultural belonging. This endeavor inevitably requires professional support.

As the name itself suggests, continuous professional development is "a process, not a one-time event or sequence of events" [9, p. 133]. In Croatia, the Education and Teacher Training Agency is the public institution tasked, among other things, with providing teachers with professional and advisory assistance as well as monitoring, improving, and developing education. Bearing in mind the importance of the Agency's role in the complex and demanding task of designing and managing professional development programs, one can observe the insufficient offer of continuous professional development programs with intercultural orientation intended for EFL teachers. Despite a number of factors that directly or indirectly affect the organization and implementation of professional development, it would be crucial to overcome the existing constraints and meet the challenges of both quantity and quality of designed professional development programs for EFL teachers related to intercultural topics arising from today's school and educational needs. [30] found that Croatian EFL teachers lack the awareness of the key importance of fostering ICC; teachers consider less important the learners' ability to handle and resolve intercultural conflicts and identify cultural stereotypes and prejudices. A reason might lie in the fact that in-service teachers report that their initial teacher education does not sufficiently prepare them for culture teaching [31]. In the absence of professional development programs that accompany curricular demands and without a clear understanding of EFL teachers' ICC needs and continuous monitoring of their intercultural performance, we cannot confidently state whether Croatian EFL teachers are preparing their students to become effective intercultural communicators. Such research is much needed because if students are expected to acquire ICC, it is essential that teachers be equipped with these same competences as well. Given the aforementioned, there seems to be a disconnect between the research findings and the appropriate institutional response to them. It is, therefore, of utmost importance that teachers have the opportunity to participate in ICC programs. Such programs could target the identified needs and provide in-service EFL teachers with necessary professional support that would allow them greater autonomy and confidence in making independent decisions related to the implementation of the key tenets of intercultural education.

4. From challenges to opportunities

Integration of interculturality in the EFL curriculum calls for the creation of the necessary conditions to achieve an open and transformative dialogue in which both the teacher and students participate in each other's growth as well as an encouragement of education for pluralism and pluralism in education, which, among other things, promotes intercultural values and principles and the realization of intercultural dialogue. An emphasis should thereby be placed on a critical examination of beliefs and teaching/learning approaches, the transformative character of intercultural education as it challenges teachers' and students' explicit and implicit ideologies, as well as on providing them with the required tools for critical thinking and self-reflection. Through guided support, EFL teachers could increase their sensitivity for intercultural content and become more receptive to a critical evaluation of textbooks and teaching aids given that these are not always selected based on their objective pedagogical value or adherence to national curricula but, among other things, the teachers' intuition and belief in their value [32]. EFL textbooks carry explicit and implicit cultural values referred to as the "hidden curriculum" [33]; therefore, ICC programs might help facilitate the detection of ethnocentric images, stereotypical language or prejudiced portrayal of certain ethnic groups or even their complete omission from teaching content. EFL teachers could be empowered to explore their students' ICC through creative writing tasks, country presentations, critical analysis of media coverage, translanguaging projects, as well as provided with assistance in correcting their students' implicit cultural biases through individual and group feedback. By detecting possible obstacles to the acquisition of ICC, EFL teachers might be able to better visualize the course and dynamics of future activities that would facilitate the intercultural learning process. Teachers should also be given concrete examples how to include in their teaching practice vocabulary that helps learners to talk



about human rights, equality, gender, bias, prejudices and stereotypes [34]. It is thereby important that programs of continuous professional development, including programs of initial teacher education, do not lose sight of the fact that the purpose of EFL instruction is not to prepare the students for successful communication solely in Western English-speaking countries, but also in non-Western contexts. English, as a *lingua franca*, is also used as the language of communication between non-native speakers of English, whereby interlocutors are inevitably included in the interpretation of a third culture, which calls for reconsidering of whose culture is addressed in EFL instruction.

5. Conclusion

In the 21st century classroom, students' attitudes and beliefs should be challenged and carefully guided in the direction of the acquisition of ICC. Therefore, the exploration of EFL teachers' ICC needs to look beyond their subjective self-assessments and instead more closely examine their ICC in practice. Given the lack of research on EFL teachers' ICC, we must acknowledge the possibility of a gap between what EFL teachers hope they are doing and what they are actually doing in their teaching practice, not necessarily because they lack ICC but because they require refinement. Precisely for this reason, teachers' responsibility lies in their deliberate, conscious educational action that encourages the development of intercultural competent students - members of a multicultural society, who successfully participate in intercultural dialogue. In this dynamic process of achieving educational goals and expected learning outcomes, the active role of both the students and teachers is assumed. Namely, it is not enough to only learn a language; it is necessary for students to know its application in their familiar environment and the broader society and life. Continuous professional development should assist them in detecting and deconstructing their own potential biases and misconceptions which impact their learning and teaching process and are at odds with the fundamental tenets of intercultural education.

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