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Language Teacher Training and Intercultural Education in the 21st Century School

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Abstract

Intercultural (IC) education has been defined by reputed scholars and there seems to be agreement under what we mean by this term. One of its first appearances can be found as soon as 1947, written by Lexter Dix (Consultant on Professional Education, Bureau for Intercultural education) who declared: "During the summer just past, the first southern workshop of university status in intercultural education was held at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill … This was an important pioneering venture, for it was organized in the face of an assumption, prevalent in many quarters, that any efforts to eradicate group conflict in the South are foredoomed to failure because of the prevailing regional attitudes toward race difference and the less rigid but still important religious prejudices. Among other important results, however, this workshop revealed that the study of intercultural education by workers in schools and communities is just as appropriate, timely and acceptable in the South today as in any other section of the country" [1]. His statement seems completely up-to-date for 21st century society, where institutions, politicians and educational agents all agree on the importance of IC education for the peaceful living together of future generations, and how the language teacher is one of the most important pieces of this picture [2].
Schools and language teachers are the first in the chain (and sometimes the last in the importance attached by politicians and investment) to implement IC education practices, methodology, evaluation of results and improvement. Little attention has been paid from most governments to inform (and advise) them on how new arrivals from immigrant children (regarding, among others, the language barrier, diversity of religions, variety of food) must be interculturally managed. In a nutshell, higher education must deal with the difficult task of training language teachers to teach 21st century citizens with cultural intelligence [3].
This paper will compare how language teachers at different schools from two countries (the United Kingdom and Spain) cope with IC education. Our analysis will be based on direct observation from researchers, as well as on objective data collected from school authorities and official reports.
Our results will lead us to conclude that IC education and language teachers have still a long way ahead. Fruitful cooperation among countries and institutions is needed for citizens' education. Good IC practices must be exchanged among schools and practitioners.

1. Introduction

Intercultural (IC) education is nowadays a common term that can easily be found at the official literature of international organisms and institutions (OECD, Council of Europe and national laws on education around the world, not to mention community or local educational policies). Much has been written on the origin of the term and its meaning; therefore, nowadays there seems to be some agreement on what we mean by 'intercultural education'. In the foundational idea of this concept, we always find that there is an intrinsic and unquestionable relationship between language and culture. As Agar (1991) said: 'Language and culture are wired in together' [4], so IC education should be (and effectively is) in the hands of language teachers (mainly second language teachers).
But, in spite of the relatively high degree of theoretical agreement on the concept, the idea and the main philosophy of IC education, the real issue is how to implement effective practices [5] that can help education accomplish one of its main goals: to bring up citizens who respect each other, who are able to acknowledge the difference and, once there, who can experiment real 'otherness'. In addition, education has experimented an unprecedented change. As Townsend (2011: 373) puts it: "The past 20 years has seen more changes in education than since education systems first became formalised in the mid to late nineteenth century." [6] This has led the educational agents (teachers mainly, but not only) to a compulsory (and sometimes not very well informed) adaptation to new contexts and necessities. Therefore, it seems logical to conclude that the question mark is not on the what; it is on the how.

Thus, to establish common points by comparison, to learn from good practices and to co-operate can be an efficient and fruitful procedure to improve international intercultural education and efficient intercultural practices.

2. A comparative analysis: methodological considerations

The comparison of systems is, generally speaking, the most advantageous way to obtain relevant and useful data. The way IC education is conveyed within different schools is, from our point of view, an interesting source of information from which learning and innovation can occur. Our experience as professional observers in two education systems (the UK and Spain) has brought about some interesting insights that will be discussed in the Conclusions of this paper.

Our first methodological step was to design an observation template (validated by a panel of international experts on IC education) that could provide relevant information on IC practices carried out by school boards, education policies, teachers and even students themselves. Data gathered were qualitative to give observers the opportunity to grade their judgement by adding some notes on the background reasons wherever they found it necessary and / or relevant.

The items under observation were varied and we organised them according to the following areas:

- Block 1: school observation. Information on the school context: the school mission and their current practice (e.g. if the language of instruction was inclusive of all students' cultures).
- Block 2: school environment observation. Analysis of the physical and social school environment (e.g. if diverse cultural and ethnic groups were represented in the school physical environment).
- Block 3: classroom observation. Classroom observation: physical, social environment and resources (e.g. if children and teachers can pronounce each other's names properly).

Once the template was validated, the selection process of the schools included these purposive features:

a. The school should provide a reasonable variety of levels for both countries: early years, primary and secondary education.
b. Pupils should have different cultural and/or ethnic backgrounds (as many as possible).
c. Either classroom observation or interviews with the specialists and head teacher should be officially allowed.

With these characteristics, 6 schools were chosen in the UK and another 6 were selected in Spain. The observers were two experts on IC education who had carried out different types of observation before.

The first step in the observation process was to hold an interview with school head teachers who provided relevant and useful information on school mission, educational policies and, even, the social and economic background of the neighbourhood where the school was placed. Then, observers were invited to join one or some of the classes to spend there a variable amount of time (between 2.5 and 5 hours) or to hold another interview with the specialists, who provided the rest of the data. The classes observed were also varied according to the subjects delivered: Maths, Language (both, first and second), Science, Religion, and Music, among others. Observers took their notes and reflections immediately after observations.

The next two sections will be devoted to the analysis of the main features of both systems regarding their IC practices, and more precisely we will examine the way the language teachers (both, first and second language teachers) behaved regarding the tackling and management of diversity and otherness; that is, we will carefully examine how the teaching of IC education was carried out by language professionals within both systems.

3. Intercultural practices in the UK and Spain: main data

Due to space restrictions, we will analyse here some of the main features of two of the schools observed in the city of Manchester (UK) with the data from two schools observed in Córdoba (ES).

School	No. Pupils	Gender	Age	Immigr.	No. 1L	Ratio
St. James CoE (Rusholme)	240	B= 49.6% G= 50.4%	3-11	55.6%	35+1	6.8%
Stanley Grove Academy (Lonsight)	593	B= 51.1% G= 48.9%	3-11	78.3%	26+1	22.8%
Hernán Ruiz (Valdeolleros)	505	B= 53.06% G= 46.94%	3-12	4.5%	7+1	96.03% (=ES) 0.56% (≠ ES)
CEIP Al-Andalus (Parque Cruz Conde)	690	B= 52% G= 48%	3-12	5.4%	4 + 1	94.63% (= ES) 1.34% (≠ ES)

Table 1: Main school data

The first school analysed was *St James Church of England Primary School.* The neighbourhood of the school was Birch-in-Rusholme that showed a historical immigration background and a middle socioeconomic status (SES). All school signs were written in different languages (to facilitate the exchange of information and to promote the learning of different languages, according to the teachers' opinion) and the general policy of the school was to promote the learning of different cultures (explicitly including in this religions and languages). We observed a 150-minute 5-year-old class, to which 19 children attended and where 11 different first languages were spoken. The classroom was decorated with signs written in different languages, which were considered central and important for the teacher, who promoted the use of foreign languages. Pupils showed a high level of language awareness and they could use words in Polish, Chinese, German, Urdu, Bangladeshi and Arabic, among others. The teacher herself had a language education background (she had a Bachelor in Spanish and speaks three more languages: English as her first language, Polish and Chinese).

The second school observed was *Stanley Grove Primary Academy* (also in Manchester). The school was placed within an immigrant neighbourhood (Longsight), where newly arrived people in Manchester generally live. So, generally speaking, the place is full of foreign people, which and who make it really multicultural. School children are mainly Muslims, which affects school food (all is halal) and celebrations (they tend to avoid religious names to refer to feasts and school breaks; e.g. they avoid using the word 'Christmas' and say 'winter break' instead). The most popular languages were: Urdu, Pakistani, Bengali, Romani, Spanish (the only second language taught in the school), Chinese, Somali and Italian. All schools signs were written in English (to promote the learning of English as, according to the head teacher, English literacy in the school was an issue as most parents did not speak English and children needed to improve it.) School signs included either a drawing or a picture (sometimes both) to help children with a poor English level understand the messages and relate these with English writing.

The third school we visited in Spain was *CEIP Hernán Ruiz* (in Córdoba). The immigrant background of the 23 foreign pupils on roll was: South American (1 child from Paraguay and 2 children from Honduras), Ukraine (2), Portugal (2), Romania (4), Morocco (2), Italy (1), Brazil (5), Pakistan (2), and China (2). The neighbourhood where the school was placed is Valdeolleros, quite popular in the city, middle-class and accepting immigration from a number of years. Most of them belong to the workforce of the area; nowadays, those who were not able to find a job had to return to their home countries (due to the economic crisis affecting Spain). We found 9 foreign nationalities and 7 foreign languages spoken in the school (Ukrainian, Portuguese, Romani, French, Italian, Urdu and Chinese). All school signs were in Spanish and many were also in English (as the school is bilingual Spanish-English); no support in foreign languages (other than English) or images was found. We did not observe any language class in this school; instead, two important interviews were held. The first of this was with the head teacher, who facilitated relevant data and clues regarding the procedure the school board followed to welcome immigrant children: the team of specialists assess the newly arrived pupil (their language level, mainly) and, according to their results, they decide if the child can either go with the mainstream classroom or if, on the contrary, they need special support from the specialist, coming from a programme organised and centralised by the Andalusian Community called ATAL (*Aulas Temporales de Adaptación Lingüística* - which in English can be translated as 'Temporary Classrooms for Linguistic Adaptation'.) This programme was started in the academic year 1997-1998 and the Andalusian regional government yearly evaluates the number of immigrant children to attach a

number of ATAL teachers to each region (e.g. 7 in total for the province of Córdoba), who visit these students weekly to support and help them improve their Spanish skills. The schedule for these visits is yearly arranged between the ATAL specialist and the school head teacher to allow:

1. Appropriate time for all children to attend the ATAL sessions (they need to be temporarily and weekly taken out from the mainstream classroom, which needs official authorisation and organisation by the school.)
2. Appropriate time and schedule gap for the specialist (whose schedule is distributed among several schools in the area).

Our second interview in this school was held with the ATAL specialist. She explained how she conducted her teaching: the materials she used (*Cuadernos de Lectoescritura para Ciudadanos y Ciudadanas del Mundo* is the name of the book, published and edited by the Junta de Andalucía); the level of Spanish of the 20 foreign pupils in this school; how she planned the sessions weekly; and some of the difficulties she had to overcome with the children regarding their cultural adaptation (mainly dealing with religion, food, hygiene, language support in the community/home environment.)
The last school was *CEIP Al Andalus* (in Córdoba). It is a bilingual school (Spanish-German) placed in the neighbourhood Parque Cruz Conde, which is close to an area where many immigrants coexist. The immigrant background of pupils was: China, Romania, Morocco, South America and Pakistan. We found four foreign languages spoken in the school (Chinese, Romani, Urdu and Arabic). All school signs were written in Spanish, German and English but no other foreign language was supported. Students were quite motivated because student-centred participatory approaches were carried out by the teachers. The coordination between language and content teachers was crucial as it ensured that students were provided with the necessary language to success. They had one language assistant that helps not only students but also teachers to improve their German skills.

4. Discussion

The discussion of these data will throw relevant insights according to the way different schools from two educational systems cope with language diversity and IC education.
Our first conclusions will relate school behaviour to the general immigration figures from both countries, as this establishes the general context and social background. A table containing the most updated data can be found at the Eurostat website http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/File:Immigration_by_main_citizenship_group,_2010_(1).png. The UK, followed by Spain, Italy and Germany are the European countries that receive the highest number of immigrants. The number and proportion of foreign pupils received by each school system reflects the general tendency of these two countries: decreasing Spain and increasing in the UK. In addition, the UK shows a long historical tradition regarding immigration, due to the popularity of English as a second language, among other factors. Consequently, the national educational policies of each country adapt to each scenario.
The undeniable value of IC education is officially recognised by many international organisms, among which we can mention the OECD, the European Commission and the national Ministries of Education in most European countries. A prominent example can be found at the British Council website, whose last report on the importance of the IC education in the workplace is really meaningful: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kFnl464oNb8&feature=c4-overview-vl&list=PLaALxC_iM0-YgiJx2wVclsWJ7tjgXPOs2. We consider it results extremely important (as they firmly state why IC education is a must for international workforce), as well as the way the British Council has decided to disseminate the report: as a pdf (where you can read the complete research) and as a YouTube infographic video, where the main results of this report are shown in an accessible and entertaining way.
The comparison of these two systems regarding the way language teachers cope with IC education in their language classes and the general school policies throws some light on how both systems understand IC education.
The first difference is found on the number of immigrant children in every system (considered as total numbers and as each school ratio).
These are our main conclusions from data shown in table n.1 above: the way teachers and school board need to deal with foreign languages and IC education is, to a great extent, determined by each school immigration figures (which, at the same time, are a reflect of the national immigration figures themselves.) In the UK, immigration is massive, which makes children's arrival in school massive, too. 35 languages spoken by a population of 240 children makes a real multicultural and multilingual context, where the ratio of speakers for the same language is 6.6 (English included). This is a scenario that must be supervised and managed in a different way when the context (the Spanish one) is not

identical; one where 8 languages are spoken among 505 individuals (here, the ratio must be calculated in a different way, as Spanish is spoken by 96.03% of the population whereas 0.56% of speakers speak another language.) Language can be a barrier for communication (thus for learning and living together within an educational setting) when only 6.8% speakers share the code, whereas it is more manageable and 'less problematic' when the code is shared by most people (Spanish, in this case, is spoken by 485 speakers out of a population of 505). So, the educational decision (centralised by the government) is to reinforce the mainstream language (as individual support in Spanish for the foreign pupils – ATAL). Some schools in the UK decide to support minority languages (e.g. *St. James CoE Primary School*) by writing school signs in different languages, by using them in the language classes, and by promoting the knowledge of cultures among all children.

Alred (2003: 27) [5] summarizes it this way: '…intercultural experience is not confined to overtly cross cultural or multicultural situations, but rather occurs whenever worldviews come into contact and engage, and is a potential whenever two people meet.' If we diminish the importance of intercultural encounters by not teaching and promoting the mutual exchange, we will be losing that potential (and, according to the British Council report, reducing our students' future job opportunities.

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