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An Intercultural Approach for Language Teaching: Developing Critical Cultural Awareness*

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This article presents the pedagogical experience of a teacher implementing an intercultural approach in an undergraduate foreign language teaching program. The students who participated in this experience were interviewed in order to demonstrate that an intercultural approach is an effective alternative to developing students' critical cultural awareness, as well as to explore the critical relationship between language and culture. Analysis of the interviews revealed critical cultural awareness in students' teaching practices and personal views. It also showed students becoming conscious of the essential role of culture in language teaching.

Key words: intercultural education, critical cultural awareness, language teacher education, intercultural competence, foreign language teacher education, critical pedagogy, pedagogical innovation, culture, intercultural dialogue, social transformation

Este artículo presenta una experiencia pedagógica al implementar un enfoque intercultural en una licenciatura en lenguas extranjeras. Con el fin de argumentar que un enfoque intercultural es una alternativa eficaz para desarrollar una conciencia crítica cultural en estudiantes y para explorar las relaciones críticas entre lenguaje y cultura, algunos de los estudiantes que participaron de esta experiencia han sido entrevistados. El análisis de las entrevista reveló indicios de conciencia crítica intercultural en las practicas de enseñanza de los estudiantes y en sus visiones personales. Además, se evidenció que los estudiantes son conscientes del papel esencial que la cultura desempeña en la enseñanza de las lenguas.

Palabras clave: educación intercultural, conciencia crítica cultural, formación de docentes en lenguaes extranjeras, competencia intercultural, pedagogía crítica, innovaciones pedagógicas, cultura, diálogo intercultural, transformación social

Cet article présente l'expérience pédagogique de mise en place d'une approche interculturelle dans le programme de licence en langues étrangères. Afin d'argumenter qu'une approche interculturelle est une alternative efficace pour développer une conscience critique culturelle chez les étudiants et pour profiter des relations critiques entre langage et culture, certains étudiants participant à cette expérience ont été interviewés. L'analyse des entretiens a montré des indices d'une prise de conscience critique interculturelle dans leurs stages pratiques et dans leurs visions personnelles. On a pu constater en outre que les étudiants sont conscients du rôle essentiel de la culture dans l'enseignement des langues.

Mots-clé: éducation interculturelle, conscience critique culturelle, formation de professeurs de langues, pédagogie critique, innovations pédagogiques, culture, dialogue interculturel, transformation sociale

1. INTRODUCTION

Foreign language teaching has been an active participant in the formation of what seems to be a more globalized society. The teaching of certain predominant languages around the world, particularly English, has empowered some visions of life over others, thus giving preference to certain ways of citing and creating knowledge (Kumaravadivelu, 2003), commercializing a cultural model to follow (often an ethnocentric model), and allowing many to cross boundaries in a hierarchical capitalist society providing them with the required cultural capital to ascend (Bourdieu, 1979).

Although the field of foreign language education is more than a mere object of some higher interest, there is some truth in the above description in the sense that other socio-cultural factors and even political interests are interconnected with the teaching of a language. Therefore, these factors play a role in shaping and reshaping the field of language education. For example, the teaching of English as a foreign language (TEFL) has been acknowledged as contributing to the opening of new markets and to the internationalization of various institutions. This may be illustrated by the bilingualism project currently in progress in Medellín, a major city in Colombia. The government of Medellín, which leads the project, is fully committed to this process of internationalization and has openly declared that having a bilingual city, Spanish-English, would greatly facilitate the accomplishment of this objective. This aspiration is being materialized through a project called "Medellín, the most educated", chasing the dream of becoming a bilingual city. Relating this to the broader picture, we have the interests embodied by the Free Trade Agreement that is currently being negotiated between the US and several Latin American countries, including Colombia. Companies are now urged to implement measures that allow their employees to use the transaction language or lingua franca which is English. All of this highlights the need for teachers to be constantly aware of the wider influence that language teaching has on our society.

The implementation of an intercultural approach in a course from the undergraduate foreign language teaching program at this public university

sought to help future language teachers understand not only the multiple socio-cultural factors that are implied in the teaching of a foreign language, but also the importance of critical cultural awareness to be able to understand other cultures without losing perspective of the local reality. Thus, from this perspective the exploration of the local culture was as valid and necessary as that of the target culture.

The first part of this article presents a rationale that supports the essential role of culture in language education divided into two views: A Trivia Approach and an Integrated Approach. The second part shares the pedagogical experience which includes: the context of implementation and the underlying principles that shaped this approach alongside interview interpretations and supporting literature. I also describe the core teaching activities carried out in this course and establish a correlation with the underlying principles (see correlation table in appendix 1). Finally, I present a conclusion.

2. Rationale

This section presents a theoretical background that supports the adoption of a critical approach for language teaching which considers language and culture as interrelated. I begin with a definition of culture and move on to show the way in which two different perspectives on language teaching have treated the relationship between language and culture.

2.1 Defining Culture

Culture tends to be invisible to us in our daily life until we are exposed to contexts in which cultural factors such as beliefs, behavior and language are challenged, either by direct intercultural experiences (e.g., living in another country or cultural context) or by learning experiences that provide us with cultural awareness.

Definitions of culture are constantly changing and have historically been shaped by the social sciences and informed by research and ideas developed in the academic world. The early description of culture as a fixed and complete

state was an incorrect interpretation of reality, and later anthropologists and social scientists agreed that culture is not a complete construct, but rather a continuous, dynamic and unfinished human process.

In accordance with this unfinished process, the notion of culture has also moved from a behaviorist approach[1] (Parson, 1949; Linton, 1945), in which culture was conceptualized by early theorists solely by observing behavior in a given community, to one which conceptualizes culture in terms of ideas and beliefs. In recent times, this concept has been strongly based on socio-cultural theories, yet there is no common consensus. It may be suggested that the definition of culture depends on the specific interests, objectives and social theory of the researcher.

Despite a lack of consensus on the term, it is important to explain which definition I considered for this paper; Arvizu, Snyder and Spinoza (1980) use a definition of culture that I find comprehensive and aligned to an intercultural approach: "Culture is a dynamic, creative, and continuous process including behaviors, values and substance learned and shared by people that guides them in their struggle for survival and gives meaning to their lives." (Cited in Lessow-Hurley, 2000, p. 95). This notion is concurrent to contemporary social anthropology which claims that culture is an unfinished process in constant circulation.

2.2 Language and Culture

The integration of culture in language teaching is based on the assumption that one cannot be explored without the other; they are interrelated (Kramsch, 1998; Lesow-Hurley, 2000; Savignon & Sysoyev, 2002; Sellami, 2000). However, there have been many practices in language education that have not reflected this interrelationship, which I refer to here as a "Trivia Approach". I will subsequently move on to an "Integrated Approach" which advocates the central role of culture in language teaching.

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1 An example of this is Parson`s definition (1949) "Culture consists in those patterns relative to behavior and the products of human action which may be inherited, that is, passed on from generation to generation independently of the biological genes" (p. 8).

a. A Trivia Approach

Regarding a trivia approach towards the inclusion of culture in language teaching, Crawford-Lange and Lange (1984) assert that the study of culture as a process represents the "study of its essence", while the traditional teaching of culture through facts is a fragmented view of culture. Weil (1998) calls this type of perspective the *tourist approach* which sees culture as the transmission of cultural trivia. Sellami (2000) argues that "a simplistic view maintaining that in teaching language we by definition also teach its cultural baggage falls short of credibility" (p. 4). A coherent argument emerges when Sellami states that studying a language without considering the interrelationship with its culture is a naive venture. It is not unusual to hear comments related to the teaching of culture referred to as being implicitly covered, perhaps through the teaching of idiomatic expressions, typical food, seeing a movie or learning about cultural celebrations such as Valentine's Day. However, it is uncertain whether this type of perspective helps our students learn how these cultural manifestations are connected with the language and further investigation is needed to reveal the way in which students mirror the target culture in relation to ours.

Equally narrow is the vision that refers to culture as a fifth skill[2] parallel to the known four linguistic skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking. Separating culture from language in such a structural form ignores this intrinsic relationship. To this respect Claire Kramsch (1993) states:

> If […] language is seen as social practice, culture becomes the very core of language teaching. Cultural awareness must then be viewed as enabling language proficiency… Culture in language teaching is not an expendable fifth skill, tacked on, so to speak, to the teaching of speaking, listening, reading and writing. (p. 8)

b. An Integrated Approach

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, based on studies of American Indian languages, was one of the first attempts to evidence the relation between language and

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2 Considering *Culture* as a fifth skill is aligned to the traditional segmentation by linguistic skills: *(Receptive) Reading and Listening: (Productive) Speaking and Writing*

culture. It states that language influences the way that people think and behave. The implications of such a theory have been debated and its insights acknowledged. An opposition argument refers to the impossibility of translating something to a different language due to the lack of understanding of a different world view; the most accepted part of this hypothesis is the fact that semantic associations of common concepts differ among cultures, that is, "language, as a code, reflects cultural preoccupation and constrains the way people think" Kramsch (1998, p.14).

Foreign and second language teaching education has committed itself to a ceaseless search of better and more effective ways to facilitate learning, so that learners reach the goal of becoming qualified users of the language. We have also witnessed that this field has not constrained its exploration to only abstract and linguistic features; the goals that we are currently pursuing go beyond the abstract analysis of a language. It has broadened the horizons towards the many layers that languages possess. Interdisciplinary approaches have enriched this professional field, and disciplines such as Cognitive Psychology, Literature, Anthropology, Sociology, Cultural Studies, History, and Communication have been essential partners in redefining and recreating our views on language theory and pedagogy. Critical theorists have contributed with their research (Bourdieu, 1986; Delpit, 1988; Fairclough, 1989; Gee, 1991; Pennycook, 1998) by unveiling that classrooms are not simply spaces filled with chairs, a board, some students and a teacher, but a cultural mirror where social dynamics and power relationships are present; a space where meaning negotiation reflects the complexity of human relationships.

As a result of this interrelationship with other disciplines a claim has been laid on the role of culture in foreign language education. Over the last two decades, socio-cultural theories have addressed this issue with an increasing call for attention to the way that language teachers are dealing with the inherent relationships between language and culture. Kramsch (1993) points out that many approaches to language teaching have focused on linguistic features while the connections between discourse and culture have been insufficiently explored. Language learners are not simply faced with the mental challenges of achieving communicative competence or linguistic knowledge; Austin and Hall (2003) state that this involves socio-cultural processes that demonstrate

discrepancies with the student's home culture and language. Thus, conflict is difficult to avoid when two or more cultures meet.

Foreign Language Literacy is another alternative that calls for an integral approach which would allow the learner to become familiar with the values and narratives of the target language. According to Berman this approach would stress the relationship between language and culture as these are reflected in different cultural acts like: films, songs, political discourse, and everyday language (Berman, 1996, cited in Kern 2000).

In the search for a coherent curricular framework between language and culture in EFL teaching, the concept of *Intercultural Competence* has grown in importance, especially in European EFL contexts. Regarded perhaps as a parallel to the communicative competence of the late 1980s or as a new dimension to language teaching, intercultural competence is today *the new magic word* (Sercu, 1995). This term is defined as being able to behave appropriately in intercultural contexts. It also involves the capacity to establish intercultural relationships on both emotional and cognitive levels, as well as "the ability to stabilize one's self –identity while mediating between cultures" (Jensen, 1995, p. 41). A more recent and comprehensive conceptualization of intercultural competence is offered by Byram, Gribkova and Starkey (2002) in a document written for the European Union language council. This definition includes five *savoirs*:

> Intercultural attitudes (*savoir être*): curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's own
> Knowledge (*savoirs*): of social groups and their products and practices in one's own and in one's interlocutor's country…
> Skills of interpreting and relating (*savoir comprendre)*: ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents or events from one's own
> Skills of discovery and interaction (*savoir apprendre/faire*): ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge.
> Critical cultural awareness (*savoir s'engager*): ability to evaluate, critically and on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries. (p. 12)

Of these components in the development of an intercultural competence, I believe that the *critical cultural awareness* savoir is a vital concept in an intercultural approach to language teaching. One might say it is a transversal axis in language teaching due to its implications. In other words, becoming conscious of our own cultural representations as well as those we use to identify others helps us see who we are in relation to the other. This is linked to what Freire (1970, 1973) called "concientizaçao" (meaning "critical consciousness"). Hence, triggering this never-ending process of consciousness is fundamental in establishing an honest intercultural dialogue with different worldviews. According to Mendes and Moreira (2005), "Contact between languages and cultures provides a communicative framework in which the local, the national and the global, the individual and his/her social identity […] determine a consciousness of the need for critical cultural awareness" (p. 1)

Stressing the fact that this view does not neglect linguistic achievements, Byram et al. (2002) argue that an intercultural dimension still helps students attain a 'linguistic competence' while facilitating a shared understanding among diverse individuals and acknowledging the complexity of dealing with other identities as well as our own.

3.   PEDAGOGICAL EXPERIENCE

In this section I will describe the context in which this teaching experience took place, the interview procedure and the underlying principles that framed this proposal, intertwined with the students' voices. I also include a description of the core teaching activities implemented in the course.

3.1 Teaching Context

In the second semester of 2005, I designed and taught an undergraduate course, "Language, Culture and Diversity", in a teacher education program –Licenciatura en Lenguas Extranjeras (B.A. in Foreign Languages) at the Universidad de Antioquia. The course was an option open to students from the seventh semester and upper levels. Fourteen students signed up for the course and attended two classes, each of two hours, per week.

The main objective of the course was to explore and analyze the intrinsic relationship between language and culture and its central role in the field of language teaching. The exploration of this relationship was related to a third component, *diversity,* and was performed through a variety of activities, in particular a micro-pedagogical project which also included a lesson implementation. (The course activities will be described in more detail below).

What led me to develop this course?

In a nutshell this pedagogical experience represented an attempt to develop an intercultural approach that would respond to certain professional concerns and interests, such as:

- A desire for a more coherent pedagogical voice that would support the fundamental role of culture in language teaching.
- A need to raise critical cultural awareness about both the target culture and the students' own culture. Here, I aimed to have a fair emphasis on exploring the value and diversity of our own culture.
- A practical exploration of the notion of an intercultural approach with students of this language teacher education program.
- My personal and professional inquiry about issues of diversity and culture.
- The lack of exploration from a critical perspective on the relationship between language and culture by EFL teachers in our context.
- A hope for social transformation as a result of this experience.

It is important to note that this was the first time that this course was taught in the program. It was also in 2005 that I became involved in the research group "Diverser" which mainly focuses on pedagogy and cultural diversity[3]. My connection with this group further motivated me to continue with the idea of a course that would incorporate culture in language teaching from a critical intercultural perspective.

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3 This group was carrying out an intercultural education project with an Indigenous community in Antioquia at this time. Sharing with some of the people on this project helped with my reflections on this issue.

3.2 Interviews and Analysis

After having written a first draft of this paper and being moved by the multiple reflections that had surfaced from this teaching experience, I decided to find out whether this course had had more than a short term impact on my students. Therefore, I contacted and interviewed a few of the students who took the course in the second semester of 2005, when it was first offered. My interest was focused on exploring how the course as a whole (content, methodology, activities) had affected the students' professional practices and personal views. I conducted some semi-structured open-ended interviews (Rossman and Rallis, 2003) during the first semester of 2007. The participants were selected using purposeful sampling (Merriam, 1998) and six out of the fourteen students who took the course in 2005 were interviewed by the author. All the interviews were tape-recorded, verbatim transcribed and analyzed using a constant comparative method (Merriam, 1998). The categories that emerged from the interviews were particularly related to the underlying principles of the course. Thus, I decided to use these principles as guiding categories for the analysis. In order to establish the reliability of my findings, the interpretations were frequently contrasted to the interview transcripts and were read by an outside researcher who provided feedback.

Underlying Principles Informing my Intercultural Approach
AN INTERCULTURAL APPROACH
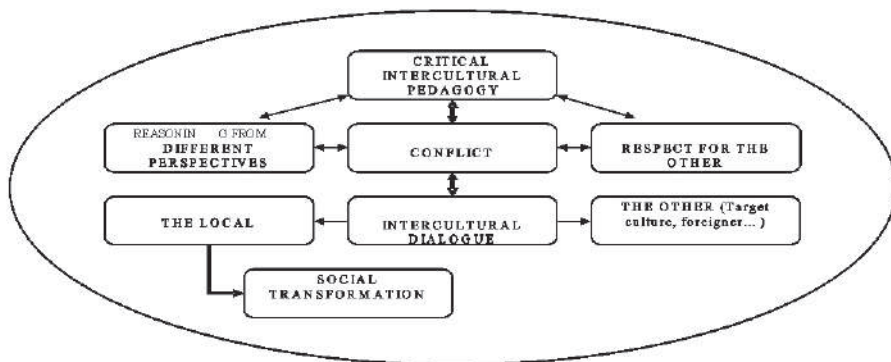
This graphic represents the flow, dynamics and interrelationship between the underlying principles.

Underlying Principles

- *Language and culture belong together.*
- *Intercultural education / Critical pedagogy*
- *Reasoning from different points of view*
- Value and respect for other views/Conflict is a space for dialogue
- Constant intercultural dialogue between the local and the "other"
- Social transformation

These underlying principles shaped my approach in the "Language, Culture and Diversity" course. In this section I will describe how these principles informed my approach whilst connecting them to the interviews and supporting literature. Hence, responses to whether the course had an impact on my students' teaching practices and personal views are presented in the excerpts and linked to the principles. The interviews revealed *critical cultural awareness* in students' teaching practices and personal views. In the same way, they also displayed that these students are conscious of the vital role of culture in language teaching.

a. Language and culture belong together

This principle refers to the critical analysis of some forms in which language and culture shape each other, the critical questioning of a fragmentation of language and culture, and the practical ways in which language and culture are related to each other. In other words, sharing teaching and learning practices that could help my students understand that language and culture belong together and that this relationship mirrors very diverse worlds was important in demonstrating that their role as teachers should go beyond language teaching.

The endeavor of English teaching is covered by economic, linguistic, literacy, and *cultural* layers that are represented and transmitted through the language as well as through the teaching approaches that English teachers have appropriated and utilized for this purpose (Kumaravadivelu, 2003, 2005; Penycook, 1998; Canagarajah, 2005).

In language teacher education programs it is clearly acknowledged that teachers are to be trained in approaches that provide linguistic expertise, not just in the

structural dimension of the language, but also in the appropriate usage of the language in diverse socio-cultural contexts. These ideas were pioneered, to some extent, in the language teaching field by the introduction of the communicative approach which originated as a theory of language as communication with the principal aim of developing a 'communicative competence' (Hymes, 1972; Canale and Swain, 1980; Bachman, 1991). Reflecting on how knowledge and ways of seeing the world are expanded, validated and transmitted through concepts like *the method*, Richards and Rodgers (2001) mention that the fast diffusion and adoption of the Communicative Approach was produced by "the status of orthodoxy in British language teaching circles, receiving the sanction and the support of leading applied linguists, language specialists, and publishers, as well as institutions such as the British Council" (p.172). Later on, in a section entitled *The Post-method era*, Richards and Rodgers (2001) discuss how the Communicative Language Teaching Approach (CLT), among others, was sometimes taken as 'cultural imperialism' since the context in which it was developed, Britain and the US, considered that some practices in the target culture needed to be replaced with the 'correct ones', a common situation in EFL contexts. All this deprived the establishment of a critical dialogue with the other culture.

Despite these facts, approaches like the CLT have allowed the discussion on the role of culture in language teaching to progress. The overlapping of global interests with local realities has stressed the importance of reflecting deeply on the local; an intercultural dialogue between the local and the global increases our awareness of our native culture and our formulation of other realities. Unfortunately, the traditional reproduction of methods and practices has not commonly promoted such a dialogue. Concerning a critical analysis of the educational practices that we adopt and how relevant they are and have been for our contexts Kumaravadivelu (2005) refers to this as the *Post-Transmission perspective* calling also on being aware of de-contextualized models of transmission in teacher education. At a micro-level, we could suggest a link between what Kumaravadivelu is advocating and what Byram (2002) describes as *critical cultural awareness*. Byram affirms that teachers are responsible for developing this competence in students as much as they are for developing knowledge about culture. Critical cultural awareness asks teachers to be aware of positioning the students' culture in a lower scale than

the target culture. The native language and culture of the students need to be valued while a positive attitude and atmosphere is fostered towards the target culture (Peterson and Coltrane, 2003). This is clearly expressed by Raquel[5], one of the students interviewed.

> "Language and culture go together, so you have to promote discussion about culture, not only the target culture but also our own culture, students' cultural identities and all that. It's not that their target culture is the best or is better, it's just that it's different and you need to know it and to know your own"
> (Pre-service student-teacher Interview, Feb 19, 2007)

By highlighting the importance of reflecting on both the local and target cultures, Raquel is displaying critical cultural awareness. This type of perspective has been developed in my course through an intercultural dialogue between the students' culture and the target one. Likewise Clark (1990) states that "Competent teachers understand that positive self-concept and positive identification with one's culture is the basis for academic success"(p.7).

Making the content meaningful, authentic, and connected to students' lives is one of the many challenges that language teachers have to face, more so, in EFL contexts. The ability to express language together with the cultural contexts of that language is a must if we want our students to see, feel, and experience those connections. In this excerpt taken from Miriam's interview she acknowledges how language teachers sometimes tend to omit those contexts:

> *"The connection between language and culture is an amazing one that we should include in our classes. I think most of the time we don't, we language teachers don't include that context in our courses. Culture, the foreign one and the local one and that is another aspect that should be included a lot". (Pre-service student teacher interview, March 20, 2007)*

A study by Nelson (1998) reports that of all M.A TESOL[6] programs in the US only 42% "offer courses related to cross-cultural communication". This finding was worrying for Nelson who suggested that TESOL graduates who have not taken

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5   To protect the participants' identities fictitious names are used

6   Teaching English as a Second Language

such courses would be more likely to adopt ethnocentric views on intercultural teaching events. All this as a consequence of the lack of exposure to courses that were designed to "increase self-awareness and their awareness of other cultures" (cited in Dogancy-Aktuna, 2005, p.102). Being involved in teacher education, I realize that language education programs face a great challenge in providing future teachers with the capacity to be *cultural mediators* and with opportunities to explore their own cultural identities through a critical and reflective lens. In this regard, Byram (2002) states that "Intercultural speakers/mediators need a critical awareness of themselves and their values, as well as those of other people" (p.9). Hence, curricular changes which seek to prepare teachers as intercultural mediators should be considered as an important part of language teacher education courses.

b. Intercultural Education and Critical Pedagogy

"Approaching pedagogy as a critical and political practice suggests that educators refuse all attempts to reduce classroom teaching exclusively to matters of technique and method" (Giroux, 2004,p. 41).

The idea of developing an intercultural approach for this course has been shaped by my personal and professional interaction with issues related to cultural diversity and education through encounters that have been both planned and spontaneous. These experiences have led me to believe that more elaborate and critical pedagogical proposals are needed to confront the realities that teachers face, in times when human interaction mediated by culture is more visible and complex than before, as expressed by Mendes and Moreira (2005):

> Economic Internationalization as well as cultural globalization, increased mobility and ease of access to information constitute cultural and communicative challenges in today's world. The inevitability of encounter with otherness and the multiplicity of interactions this provokes, in which diverse discursive communities are constituted, place culture and communication at the centre of a fundamental process of redefinition of individual and social identities. (p.1)

Intercultural education emerges from the need for an educational response to diversity, the marginalization of minority groups and the need for equity in education. For some, intercultural education is "almost equivalent to multicultural

education", as expressed by Sonia Nieto in the prologue of Aguado's (2003) book on Intercultural Pedagogy. Etymologically, we could express that 'multi' refers to 'many' (e.g, Colombia is a multicultural country), whereas 'inter' implies an 'interaction' between two or more. The term 'multicultural' has, since its origins, been part of the US context, whereas the term *Intercultural* has been widely used in Europe. The term most commonly used in Latin America is Intercultural Bilingual Education (IBE)[7]. A good example of this is a participatory action research project developed in Chile with Mapuche communities in which IBE was central to the project. The authors commented on the differences between the terms multicultural and intercultural, particularly for that context. They express how this notion of intercultural education embodies the interactions between their culture, as the traditional, and the government/global society, as the dominant. (Pastrana & Gómez R. 2004). Intercultural education attempts to challenge the notion of a dominant culture that imposes its rules and conditions over what the Mapuches called the 'traditional culture'. This project is an example of how one could critically filter those educational alternatives that are more appropriate for a local reality, especially if they have been developed elsewhere.

Ruiz (2004) argues that an intercultural pedagogy is grounded on the acknowledgement of cultural differences and "on intercultural communication" as a means to establish a dialogue, while multiculturalism has not valued that communication between cultures in a comprehensive form. The intercultural dialogue that Ruiz refers to was part of the underlying principles that influenced my pedagogical experience. Framed within the conceptualization of intercultural pedagogy, this dialogue emphasizes the establishment of an exchange between different cultures. Aguado (2003) claims that an intercultural pedagogy entails:

> The reflection about education, understood as a cultural construct, and based on the value of cultural diversity. It promotes educational practices for all and every member of the society [...] Equal opportunities (opportunity to choose and

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7   IBE has also been used in the political arena to promote educational policies concerning indigenous and afro communities as a result of their struggle for culturally responsive education. In Colombia it is more commonly known as Ethno-education.

access social, economic and educational resources), overcoming of racism and the acquisition of an intercultural competence for every person from any cultural group. (p.63)

Critical pedagogy is a principle embedded in intercultural education (Aguado, 2000; Nieto, 2000)[8]. It should be placed at the center of intercultural education as it proposes a critical reading of the world, primary to the aims of this approach. Critical pedagogy was fundamental in developing critical cultural awareness in my students. In Paulo Freire's (1970) work *conscientization* or *conscientizacao* (in Portuguese) it is also essential to critically understand our relationships with the other, to be aware of the reasons behind behaviors and beliefs. Critical cultural awareness helps us identify the particular cultural reasoning behind different worldviews while we realize how our own cultural standards interfere and affect our perceptions.

Critical Pedagogy requires teachers and students to work together in questioning knowledge, justice and equity in different contexts (Wink, 2000). Critical pedagogy has been a relevant principle in this course since I wanted the students to reflect critically, challenge and act on the multiple perceptions that result from the language-culture interrelationship. Miriam, one of the students interviewed, comments:

> "I thought that I was going to be a language teacher and no more, teach English or French but not teach my students to think critically, to respect others, to like… to, how do you say… like to teach in a holistic way. I always thought that I was going to be a language teacher and no more" (Pre-service student teacher interview, March 26, 2007)

This student is not only referring to herself as someone who has discovered other connections in relation to language teaching, but she is also reflecting on what she, as a teacher, should do to teach her students to think critically. Freire and Macedo (1987) also talk about the way that language shapes our

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8   Sonia Nieto, one of the leading theorists in multicultural education in the U.S, considers critical pedagogy as one of the seven vital principles in multicultural education. Thus, critical pedagogy is always present in this approach.

representations of the world, which demonstrates the importance of developing pedagogical spaces so that our students see those connections.

Many of the readings covered in class allowed my students to learn about critical theory applied to educational contexts, some related to practical teaching experiences (authors included Freire, Giroux, Mclaren and Hooks). This approach required students to confront those ideas with our own views and realities. A crucial target of Freire's critical pedagogy is to teach our students not only to read the words, but the world:

> Reading the world precedes reading the word, and reading the word implies continually reading the world […] In a way, however, we can go further and say that reading the word is not preceded merely by reading the world, but by a certain form of writing and rewriting it, that is, of transforming it by means of conscious, practical work. (Freire and Macedo, 1987, p. 35)

Freire and Macedo clearly portray language and culture when they call for connecting *our words* with *our worlds*.

I believe that an intercultural approach for language teacher education responds to many of the realities and needs that I have previously explored. However, it ought to be clarified that I do not wish to suggest that such an approach should replace a set of existing teaching practices in the field of language education, but rather to establish a critical dialogue with them when possible. Furthermore, I believe that this perspective could allow teachers to develop a more critical view on their teaching practices and on their socio-cultural interactions with students, local and target cultures.

c. Reasoning from different points of view

Most language teachers are aware of the effect that language and culture have on us. Somehow our thoughts shift to perceptions that were not considered before; hence, a language invites you to see things in new and different ways. Unfortunately, for some that other way is viewed as a 'better way', as sometimes occurs when certain cultures are idealized while others are demonized. Language teachers have the responsibility to help students consider different

world views so that a dialogue can be established between different realities and knowledge.

Framed within an intercultural approach, this principle considers different perspectives of the learning process; it avoids ethnocentric views and is embedded in what many authors call culturally relevant pedagogy (Gay, 2000; Howard, 2001; Austin and Hall, 2000). This type of pedagogy considers not only the social but the academic needs of students with different cultural backgrounds and also "places high priority in valuing what every learner brings into the classroom as a source of knowledge and a capacity for learning" (Austin and Hall, 2000, p.286).

The process of encouraging my students to consider the other's reality was fundamental in achieving the objectives of the course since it was through considering other perspectives that tensions arose and the need for an intercultural dialogue emerged. Regarding different perspectives, Camilo, one of the pre-service student teachers interviewed, explained that as well as considering his own perspectives when teaching, he feels that he is now more aware of the different views of the students in his class.

> *"I started thinking about life in a different way, especially regarding different people, different lives and ways of thinking, different realities [...] and then I tried to take that into my classroom, analyzing that we not only have students with different learning styles but with different life condition. If we have 30 students, we have 30 different minds, even though they have some things in common, it totally helped me to like…it kind of opened my mind."*
> *(Pre-service student teacher interview, March 9, 2007)*

Camilo's words indicate how critical cultural awareness helped him view the cultural dynamics of his classroom differently. By enunciating and considering the different realities in his class, he realized that it was not simply a group of students waiting to be instructed but a wide array of rich and diverse learning possibilities. His consciousness not only helped Camilo view his students in a different way but also gave him the openness needed to establish and promote intercultural dialogue.

d. Conflict is a space for dialogue: Respect for the other

By means of fostering dialogue between cultures[9], an intercultural approach acknowledges the conflict that may emerge out of that dialogue as a result of our cultural differences and consequently assumes a critical perspective in establishing that communication. The notion of conflict from this perspective is not problematic; on the contrary, it is an obligatory road to walk. In considering different perspectives inside a classroom and in attempting to understand why the other thinks differently, the word 'conflict' needs to be mentioned. Respect for difference and dialogue among diverse social groups are principles embedded in intercultural education (Byram, 2002; Trapnell, 2003). It is actually through facing the contradictions that arise in an established dialogue between different worlds that one may start to consider respect for the other, respect that comes from critical reflection in addition to the pedagogical exercise of understanding the other. Therefore, contemplating other worldviews plants the seed for an intercultural dialogue which offers our students the opportunity of seeing things through a multicolor rather than a monochromatic lens. In relation to this Laura asserts:

> *"The course, I really liked it because it really had an impact on my personal life. I am more reflective, more open minded, I'm not judging everything by its cover, I need to hear all the viewpoints in order to make a decision or to make a judgement" (Pre-service student-teacher Interview, Jan. 21, 2007)*

Along the same lines but embodying the teacher's role, Camilo shares his experience of trying to help his students understand the value of respecting differences.

> *"So, until now, the most positive response I`ve gotten from those lessons is that they [his students] are aware of the differences and they respect those differences, [...] at least students are showing more respect in the classroom and they care about the language when they are referring to people" (Pre-service student-teacher Interview, March 9, 2007)*

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9 Culture here not only refers to foreign cultures or countries but also includes the different cultures within Colombia, such as the indigenous and afro-Colombian communities.

The concept of respect for what is different has a deep moral and humanistic connotation in any educational setting. This is part of what Freire (1970) called humanizing education.

e. Intercultural dialogue between the local and the other

True intercultural dialogue is created through the establishment of both an interest in knowing the other and a willingness to respect and critically understand other world views. Mckay (2002) states that:

> English as an international language needs to be taught in a culturally sensitive manner by respecting the local culture of learning. An understanding of the local culture of learning should not be based on stereotypes, or a received view of culture, in which assertions are made about the traditional roles of teachers and students and approaches to learning, often in reference to western culture. (Cited in Dogancay-Aktuna 2005, p.106)

This dialogue framed within an intercultural perspective emphasizes the need to establish an exchange of different cultural views. In this particular scenario those realities were, to a certain extent, the local and the target culture. One of the objectives I wanted to achieve in this course was to cultivate and facilitate critical reflection on our own culture in relation to the target one, by means of an intercultural dialogue. The approach adopted in the course stressed the importance of constant inquiring, critical reflection and contextualization of any content. This process, in addition to the core activities, permitted us (my students and I) to consider the local as a main character in this dialogue. Raquel refers to this principle in relation to her teaching experiences:

> *"I've been using a textbook that presents many topics that are, they are, like…, easy to compare, like for example daily routine, the city, and the situation of families in France. I think if I hadn't taken the course, I wouldn't be able to think or to reflect in this way or other ways of using those contents to establish an intercultural dialogue to have my students reflecting not only about the situation in France but also comparing those issues or those topics with Colombia or Medellín. That's what I do every topic, every topic I try to look for a way of promoting that intercultural dialogue". (Pre-service student-teacher Interview, Feb. 9, 2007)*

Aguado (2003) sees cultural differences as dynamic and continuously variable. This dialogue is not limited to a specific sector of society since it seeks to

promote intercultural communication among different cultures through the acknowledgement of the other and the validity of its culture. It is aligned with critical pedagogy as it proposes critical reflection that originates in cultural dialogue, which should lead us to taking action towards social transformation.

f. Social transformation

The pedagogical approach presented here is critical since it considers a praxis that should lead us to social transformation. The collaborative way in which my students performed their work during the preparation and implementation of the micro pedagogical project demonstrates this social transformation. A critical intercultural approach joins teachers and students in the construction and reconstruction of knowledge and cultural identity. Furthermore, it recognizes the learning process as a path to social transformation. Referring to transformative learning Wink and Wink (2004) state:

The idea is to link the learning to the lives of the students, to inquire into their worlds, and to take the learning back into the community. Action always follows the learning. Action is the link back to the community, and action can come in many varieties. (p.38)

Like Wink, I also see social transformation as emerging out of actions that are often triggered by learning processes. In the pedagogical model presented here (figure.1), we can see the principle of social transformation as originating in 'The Local', that is, our local context is the space that should be primarily affected by the learning processes of our students. However, such transformative actions can only occur if our curricular contents are connected to our students' socio-cultural realities. Teresa, one of the students interviewed, expresses the importance of contextualized curricular contents:

> *"I think practices need to be with a topic, with an issue that must be related to our students' lives, and I think culture is a very amazing thing to discover, they are very different, they were raised with different customs, with different patterns, with different social demands. So, I'd like to know what they think, what they believe in, in that way, I'd like to explore that part of my students through culture but at the same time teaching a language."*
> *(Pre-service student-teacher Interview, March 23, 2007)*

I consider this intercultural approach as a transformative teaching practice and, as I previously mentioned, the main purpose in conducting the students' interviews was to know how their teaching practice and their own views had been affected by the "Language, Culture and Diversity" course. This inquiry is highly important given that it reflects my professional concern of knowing whether the course had really had an impact on these students' lives. I now present a few excerpts that try to respond to such concern.

In this quote, Camilo is referring to a class in which he integrated a listening activity related to the topic of 'Ableism':

> *"These issues are not common in this school but at least in my classes, [Camilo is currently working in a private High School] I`ve managed to get these kids respecting those differences and working with them. I say; ok, we are disabled in so many ways ...and we don't even realize ... some of us are partially blind ... why? Because we need glasses. That's an 'ableist' condition." (Pre-service student-teacher Interview, March 9, 2007)*

Here Bibiana is explaining that the course helped her consider a different perspective for her teaching practicum.

> *"I tried to look for different things. I wanted to do something like more social than just language, so I thought about the course [Language, Culture and Diversity] and I tried to look at the students' personalities, their attitudes in front of the class. So I decided to use diversity, that's why I formulated a question about maximizing individual differences in my practicum through different approaches, but that was the main idea." (Pre-service student-teacher Interview, March 9, 2007)*

Social transformation always begins with our own personal views of the world, which move on to affect our roles in society. In relation to her personal and teaching perspectives after the course, Teresa affirms:

> *"I felt that the course touched me a lot, especially in me as a person, as a woman, especially as a woman, right, 'cause we dealt with topics related to gender, so I questioned my role as a woman who is a teacher, my role as a woman who is a daughter, a friend, a girlfriend, and in that way I questioned my pedagogical practice, because sometimes we have many problems with the generational gap with our students, so we judge them a lot, so I began to stop thoughts like 'ahh,*

estos pelados de ahora' that kind of expression or thought." (Pre-service student-teacher Interview, March 23, 2007)

Laura offers an example of how she has seen her teaching practice affected by the contents of the course:

"Showing them (students) what we have here; for example, our indigenous population, that we have hot and cold places, specific characteristics about the regions, but about people too. We have different ethnic groups in the city and in the country, most of the students live in the countryside of Copacabana and Bello [towns near Medellín], some of them don't know Medellín; I like to talk about Medellín. (...) Once we were talking about houses, what houses are like in the indigenous communities, what houses are like in the city, in Copacabana! They were amazed they didn't know any chozas." (Pre-service student-teacher interview, Jan 21, 2007)

Whilst listening to these students' words, I realized that some of their ideas had not even remotely concerned me when I was a pre-service student teacher at this same university. I celebrate this because it somehow shows that realities and perceptions have changed, meaning that developments in pedagogy need to occur in harmony with these changes. The critical cultural awareness expressed in these voices represents the seed of potential cultural and social transformation in their particular teaching contexts. I hope that these pre-service teachers keep trying to read and respond to their students' worlds.

g. Course Core Activities

The course was developed through a series of core activities, some taking place throughout the semester and others at specific stages. Here I include a brief description of those activities.

Reading Assignment and Reading discussions: Students were given a reading assignment every week which was discussed in class the following week. The readings were either articles or chapters from books, related mostly to issues of cultural diversity, linguistic diversity, critical theory in education, critical pedagogy, and multicultural/intercultural education. A reading was assigned for each of the workshop contents.

Reflection journal: The students were asked to write down their reflections based on the reading assignments and discussions that we had in class and on their personal and professional experiences. Emphasis was placed on including their views on the local context and school as they related to these readings. These journals were collected twice during the semester and gave me an excellent opportunity to get to know my students' views on a deeper level, especially those that were sometimes not actively expressed in class.

Cultural Diversity in Education Workshops: These were prepared and implemented in the classroom by small groups of students. I met with each group to provide advice and bibliographical suggestions. There were six workshops included in the course program: 'linguicism', racism, sexism, classism, 'ableism', and multicultural/intercultural education. Workshop topics were based mainly on the diversity workshops on social justice education performed at the University of Massachusetts, and were contextualized to our local reality.

The workshops were planned with three main objectives in mind; firstly to discuss these issues from a critical perspective whilst exploring how diversity issues could be dealt with within a local classroom; secondly, to connecting and be aware of the local reality of these issues comparing it to other realities; and finally, to have each group work collaboratively and reflect on how to engage the rest of the class pedagogically with the central issue of each workshop. The workshops offered an enriching space in the classroom, and the different views presented in each of them led me to believe that through this type of activity it is possible to help our students walk away from the mono-perspective educational pattern which we have traditionally experienced.

Guest Speakers: As a pedagogical strategy to bring different voices into the classroom, I invited a few speakers that represented either the "other" in our local context or a different alternative to our educational system (e.g. an indigenous university student, an Asian-American immigrant/ESL teacher working in Colombia, a university researcher working on intercultural educational issues). These guests shared their experiences in relation to the topics being covered and also established an intercultural dialogue with the students.

Micro Pedagogical Project: The main objective of the micro-project was to design and implement a lesson plan in which both language and culture were clearly integrated with the contents to be covered from a critical intercultural approach. It was also necessary for the lesson plan to consider the socio-cultural context in which it was to be applied. These projects were informed by all of the contents covered throughout the course, but the course unit on intercultural education probably provided students with the clearest ideas on how to shape it.

The first step was the selection of a foreign language teaching site (public school, university, private language institution). The students worked in small groups and I met with each of them during the process. After contacting a cooperating teacher, the groups were asked to observe a minimum of four classes with a previously agreed focal point. Besides this, the class also designed and carried out an open-ended semi-structured interview[10] with the cooperating teacher (the interview was collectively designed in class). As a result of this data gathering, the students were able to know, to a limited extend, the socio-cultural context of each site. Both the observations and interviews allowed the students to reflect on the cooperating teachers' beliefs, the role of culture in local language teaching practices and the diversity in these language classrooms. They also realized how culture was being integrated with language, if at all, within those classrooms.

After collecting and analyzing all the data, each group of students was asked to design a lesson plan as an action of pedagogical improvement framed within an intercultural perspective of language teaching. The next step was to share the lesson plan with the cooperating teacher, ask for feedback and implement it in collaboration with the teacher. I wanted the students to include the cooperating teacher throughout the project; rather than attempting to show cooperating teachers how to do something, the purpose was to share a pedagogical alternative which would highlight the crucial role of culture in language teaching. A further objective was to not allow the cooperating

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10 A couple of groups decided to interview students as well as the cooperating teacher.

teacher's students to see this intervention as a foreign innovation for their class. It was intended as an exchange of educational experience between in-service teachers and pre-service student-teachers.

Each group handed in a written account of the design of the lesson plan and a personal reflection on the project. This process was assessed by their group peers, the cooperating teacher and the course teacher. The last step was the socialization of the project experience which was presented by each group through a poster session in the last week of classes. In this activity everyone had the opportunity to share their projects and to reflect on the achievements and challenges encountered in this process.

Assessment: Formative assessment was applied in this course and discussed with the students from the beginning of the course. Feedback was provided on all the activities in the form of advisory sessions for workshops and the project, journal responses and notes, and project and workshop feedback from peers and the course teacher.

The underlying principles, detailed previously, would be correlated with the core activities of this course to provide an overview of the achievements that were observed by this teacher in each of these activities. (See Appendix 1/Correlation Table 1)

4. Conclusion

The ways in which the EFL field has addressed the intrinsic relationship between language and culture have not been completely adequate, considering the complex dimensions represented in the establishment of a dialogue between cultures. Instead, this dialogue has either focused on an assimilation paradigm, or culture has been taken for granted, dissected from the language itself or presented with a trivia information approach, leaving our students with no awareness of the socio-cultural realities that every language mirrors.

This article presents a critical intercultural experience as a pedagogical alternative that can help future language teachers become aware of how our

own representations shape the ways in which we see other cultures. Hence, understanding language learning and teaching as being mediated by different cultural representations can help teachers face new challenges of learning/ teaching in a globalized world (New London Group, 1995). These challenges include cultural misunderstandings, conflicts that should be spaces for dialogue, and an urgent call to reclaim the local as both valid and valuable. The students' declarations reaffirm the importance of this approach in acknowledging their own reality, whilst placing emphasis on the local context and exploring their own cultural roots and current realities gave everyone a broader perspective of who we are. Moreover, this approach challenged those language teaching practices that disregard the local as a crucial component in establishing an understanding of a foreign culture. No model or practice of language teaching will transcend our students' minds and lives unless it is confronted and combined with our local context. In this sense, the implementation of an intercultural dialogue between the local and the target culture was key in developing critical cultural awareness in my students.

A critical intercultural approach presents language teacher education with a path that opens a dialogical space for mutual understanding among different languages, cultures and ways of reasoning. Consequently, by developing critical cultural awareness in future teachers, we also create the potential to trigger social transformation within our school settings. Dogancay-Aktuna (2005) asserts that "Cultural awareness and understanding are thus essential for language teachers to have in applying pedagogic innovations across contexts" (p.101).

Even though this paper shares an experience contextualized in language teacher education, I would like to suggest that its implications go beyond foreign language education and may be relevant to teacher education as a whole. Furthermore, I believe that all teacher education programs should consider the critical interrelationship between language and culture; Peter Mclaren (1998) expresses this himself and acknowledges that other social theorists such as Bakhtin and Freire understood the social and political implications that language has in shaping meanings and in determining our relationship with the other and the world.

This experience is not presented here as a model to follow but rather as a pedagogical exploration and hopefully as an invitation to both EFL teacher educators and teachers to contemplate the significance of an intercultural approach to our field. Nonetheless, we need to recognize that teaching and learning practices that see culture as a significant component in foreign language contexts, like ours, are still limited and require additional practical and theoretical explorations. A significant initial exploration might examine the way that pre-service language teachers perceive the role of culture in language teaching and how these beliefs are reflected in the field.

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Appendix 1

COURSE ACTIVITIES	Correlation with underlying principles:
	Underlying Principles • *Language and culture belong together.* • *Intercultural education / Critical Pedagogy* • *Reasoning from different points of view* • *Value and respect for other views/Conflict is a space for dialogue* • *Intercultural constant dialogue between the local and the other* • *Social transformation*
Reading Assignments	- Learning about local and the target's diverse contexts related to education. - Acknowledgement and questioning of other views and awareness o the local reality by contrast. - Facilitated reasoning from a different worldview.
Reading Discussions	- Learning critical conceptualization of Language, culture and diversity issues. - Reasoning from different perspectives when listening to the other (peers and teacher) - Conflict of views, discussion, questions (use of terminology) - Exercising a classroom intercultural dialogue (tolerance and alterity). - Learned to disagreement with ideas not with people. - Critical pedagogy: analysis of invisible cultural meanings Language & Culture - Challenge of status quo - Value and respect of other constructions and the way others try to bring social change.
Reflection Journals	- Reading the world :Critical thinking (challenging for some in first –journal) - critical cultural awareness (sometimes with a sense of impossibility/ hopelessness) - Use of terminology to argue critically in favor or against some of the authors in the readings. - Challenging how the other's reality should not be imposed here - Connection to personal narratives and consciousness of cultural identity through reflective writing.
Diversity Workshops	- Awareness of discourse and its effect on cultural acts. - Challenge of traditional cultural constructs with emphasis on the local. - Reasoning from different points of view - Overwhelmed when becoming conscious of realities they might face as educators. - Engagement in discussion respecting the other's opinion - Social transformation ideas and challenge of status quo. - Suggestions on the educational application of workshop issues. (Uncertainty at times –Awareness of this challenge)

COURSE ACTIVITIES	Correlation with underlying principles:
Guest Speakers	- Dialogue between the local and the other (students played both as the local and the other) - Considered by some students as a more authentic Intercultural dialogue experience - Curiosity for other world views - Interest in social transformation experiences - Respect for a different reasoning - Critical interpretation of other realities.
Micro-Pedagogical Project	- Critical understanding and respect for other realities - Collaborative work and constructive dialogue - Thinking of language and culture in an integral form - Awareness of the local sociocultural reality - Critical reflection on own lesson design - Challenges in designing a lesson plan that evidences the interrelation of language and culture - A successful pedagogical experience from an intercultural approach - Willingness to trigger curricular changes -Social transformation experience
Project Socialization : Poster Session	- Awareness of sociocultural reality on language learning. - Critical interpretation of the local educational conditions - Respect and value of the other`s curricular construction.