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Title:

A small-scale study on senior undergraduates' perceptions towards intercultural competence and multiculturalism.

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## **1. Introduction**

The rapid development of communication and transportation technologies has gradually transformed human society into a global community in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Nowadays, intercultural communication competence has become a necessary and crucial ability for citizens to interact appropriately and effectively in order to develop a harmonious and productive life and further build a multicultural civil society across nations and regions (Chen & Xiaodong, 2014). Canková et al. (2012) states that, today, intercultural understanding and intercultural competence are more important than ever because they make it possible for us to address the root causes of some of the most virulent problems of today's societies in the form of misunderstandings across cultural, socio-cultural, ethnic and other lines: discrimination, racism, hate speech, etc. (p. 5). These authors further state that there is a real urgency – in many aspects of our lives – for education, which can help citizens live together in our diverse societies (p. 5). For this reason we all need to develop intercultural competence. As Huber puts it, “the ability to understand each other across all types of cultural barriers is a fundamental prerequisite for making our diverse democratic societies work” (p. 5).

Byram et al. (2002) defines intercultural competence as the learners' “ability to ensure a shared understanding by people of different social identities, and their ability to interact with people as complex human beings with multiple identities and to avoid stereotyping which accompanies perceiving someone through a single identity” (p. 4). Intercultural Competence (IC hereafter) requires the development of attitudes, skills and acquisition of knowledge and it is therefore a lifelong process (Deardorff, 2009). The conceptualization of Intercultural Competence Communication (ICC) is culturally grounded. As Miike (2010) points out, it is necessary for scholars to recognize the significance of culture as theory in intercultural communication studies. Culture

inevitably affects the development of ICC and how people construct it in interactions. Because most of the existing ICC models and theories were developed by American and European scholars, we need to be aware that the dominant paradigm of the study of ICC is not free from the linguistic, cultural or academic biases of Eurocentrism (Miike, 2003, 2012). ICC is most easily observed in intercultural interactions. It is argued that investigating the development of ICC in the process of concrete intercultural practices enables us to locate where ICC resides and identify the specific components of ICC. To be a competent person, individuals must acquire face managing knowledge, cultivate mindfulness and face-saving skills (Chen & Xiaodong, 2014, preface).

Although the study of ICC dates back to more than half a century ago, the globalizing processes in contemporary society have made the concept of IC even more relevant in the scholarly arena. It demands scholars to face the intrinsic and the extrinsic challenges of studying the concept by taking multiple perspectives to it, and re-examining its development in diverse cultural and interactional contexts (Chen & Xiaodong, 2014, preface). With the blurring of national and cultural boundaries resulting from globalization, intercultural relations have been strengthened and turned more complicated. The globalizing world is characterized by interdependence and mutual penetration, where people from different cultures increasingly encounter each other (Chen & Xiaodong, 2014, p. 1). When people engage in an intercultural dialogue, they are inevitably facing the challenge from communication barriers such as cultural stereotype and prejudice, identity conflict, language deficiency, and the lack of interaction skills. As Chen and Xiaodong (2014) put it, “only through the acquisition of intercultural communication competence (ICC) can these problems be solved in the process of social interaction” (p. 1). These authors conclude that ICC “constitutes an

indispensable capacity for people to survive and establish productive relationships in the globally interconnected world” (p. 1).

Education leaders around the world are increasingly talking about the need to teach “global competences” as a way of addressing the challenges of globalization (School of International Studies, 2011). Educators have been struggling with how to prepare students for the culturally diverse and digitally-connected communities in which they work and socialize. They will need to appreciate different ideas, perspectives and values. It is a world in which people need to decide how to trust and collaborate across differences (School of International Studies, 2011). Schools can provide opportunities for young people to learn about global development, equip them with the means of accessing and analyzing different cultures, help students engage in international and intercultural relations, and foster the value of the diversity of people. As Chen and Xiaodong (2014) stress, “education now is not only about teaching something, it is also about making sure that children develop a reliable compass, the navigation skills and the character qualities that will help them find their own way through an uncertain, volatile and ambiguous world” (p. 1).

To contribute to the development of intercultural competence some authors recommend that IC is included in the curriculum activities along with actions that could contribute to the development of five global cultural competencies: cultural consciousness, cultural self-awareness, global mindset, and the abilities to lead and negotiate in multicultural teams (Ashwill, 2004; Cant, 2004). Other authors include models of development of intercultural competence skills, knowledge and attitudes (Deardorff, 2009). However, most of the times, higher education institutions just rely on their students’ development of intercultural competences by promoting multicultural activities around campuses and supporting students’ participation in short or long term study abroad experiences. These

efforts are isolated and basically focused in recruiting international and intercultural students. The literature explains that the aim of universities is to create a multicultural college environment, and expose local students to international environments, through study abroad experiences (Fabregas Janeiro et al., 2009; Hungerford, 2011; Salisbury, 2013).

To contribute to the study of IC, the main aim of this dissertation is to explore a small group of senior undergraduates' perceptions of their linguistic and cultural competences as well their attitudes towards English as a foreign language and foreign languages in general and, more specifically, towards the value of English for their professional development.

## **2. Literature review**

As Kristin Hoyt (2012) observes, the multi-dimensionality of the notion of intercultural competence “thwarts efforts to unequivocally articulate its tenets” (p. 34). Hoyt (2012) further notes that “the imprecision surrounding the concept of IC further renders IC assessment attempts challenging. Puzzling questions persist: Can we categorically evaluate the presence of IC in an individual? Can growth in IC be gauged? Are there ways to cultivate and foster the development of IC?” (p. 34). Byram (1997) proposed a model which has served as a frame to the development and assessment of IC, being foundational for the studies of many later scholars (Hoyt, 2012). Byram's (1997) model provides a point of departure for exploring the construct of IC. It is argued that this construct is useful to take a closer examination of its articulated features of IC and how they might be measured over a particular time span (Hoyt, 2012, p. 34).



Hoyt (2012) reports that Byram's (1997) model for teaching, learning and assessment of IC inspired the student learning outcomes for a university French conversation course module entitled 'Francophone Interviews' (FI). The study participants were students enrolled in a French conversation course and represent a cross section of second through fourth/fifth year undergraduate students (Hoyt, 2012, p. 38). Hoyt's study reports that there were eleven study participants in fall 2010 and sixteen study participants in spring 2011 and that in the data analysis, each of the five domains was addressed comprehensively. Comparing the two semesters of study implementation (fall 2010 and spring 2011), the post-questionnaire grand mean with the mean scores on questionnaire items representing Byram's five goal areas showed that there was a significant difference in the areas of (II) Knowledge and (IV) Skills of Discovery and Interaction. In the other domains, (I) Attitudes, (III) Skills of Interpreting and Relating, and (V) Critical Awareness/Political Education, there was no notable change across both semesters (see Byram, 1997).

Another example can be found in Fabregas Janeiro et al's (2014) study on the Intercultural Competency Certificate (CCI in Spanish) designed for the Universidad Popular Autónoma del Estado de Puebla (UPAEP University). The study was a theory based comprehensive plan to develop undergraduate students' intercultural competence. Fabregas Janeiro explains how this Certificate was based on the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) developed by Milton Bennett (1993) and was going to be assessed by the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) developed by Bennett and Hammer (Hammer, 2009; Hammer, Bennett, & Wiseman, 2003). The main purpose of the Intercultural Competency Certificate was to develop students' intercultural competence at least to the acceptance level of the DMIS continuum. To achieve this goal, the students had to develop of necessary knowledge, skill and attitudes (Deardorff,

2009). This Certificate involved developing attitudes, knowledge and skills through certain activities such as learning a new language, taking international classes, reflecting about intercultural differences, interacting with people from other cultures, traveling abroad and receiving coaching by a professional who will guide them through tailor-made experiences according to the initial level of intercultural competence, measured by the IDI at the beginning of the Certification.

## **Methodology**

For the present study I created a survey (see Appendix) which included 42 questions and I asked the senior undergraduates of the Degree in English studies to complete it. The tool used was Google Forms; 40 of these questions were to be responded with a 1 to 5 Likert scale (1 meaning ‘strongly disagree’, 3 meaning ‘neither agree nor disagree’ (neutral), 5 meaning ‘strongly agree’); the remaining two questions were the number of languages they know and how they think they have become critical and auto-critical in the course of these four years. Therefore, the survey helped me collect data that resulted primarily in numerical data which was then analysed and interpreted (Dornyei, 2007, p. 24). The questions were inspired by the previous literature on IC, and a selection of different sources was consulted to design the survey: *Erasmus Mundus Intercultural Competence Needs Analysis*, a questionnaire by the Erasmus Mundus Association; *The MIRIPS Questionnaire*, which draws material from earlier ones, mainly the ISATIS and ICSEY projects; the study *Measuring Intercultural Sensitivity in Different Cultural Context* by Wolfgang Fritz/Antje Möllenberg/Guo-Ming Chen; and *Assessing Intercultural Competence, A Research Project of the Federation EIL*, a questionnaire by the Federation of The Experiment in International Living (FEIL).

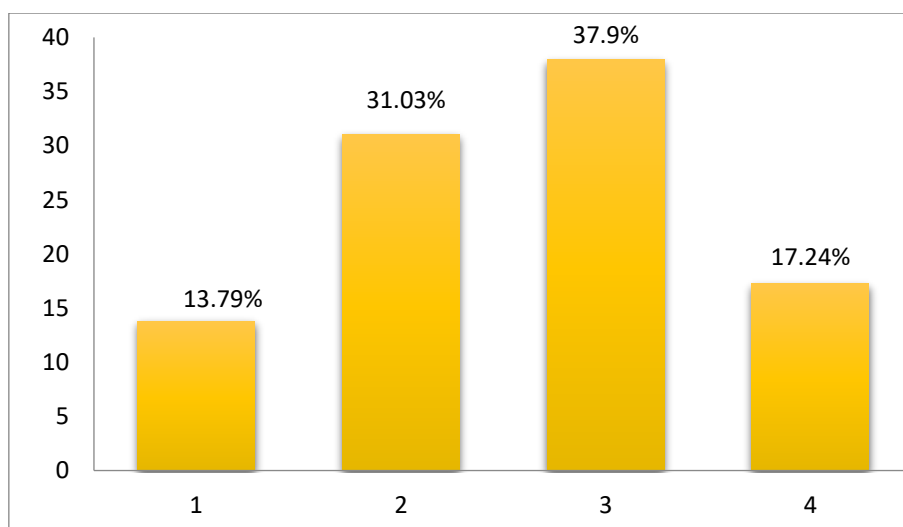
The distribution of the questions aligned with Byram's (1997) model of intercultural competence, using *Developing the Intercultural Dimension in Language Teaching. A Practical Introduction For Teachers* (Byram et al, 2002) as the main source. I sought to explore how well these students thought they knew about issues like foreign cultures, identities, discrimination/acceptation, openness towards new influences, rejection towards immigrants/other cultures/influences, inner fears (related to their own identity), individual skills, capability to adapt to a foreign culture, critical awareness and knowledge of English, since is the language they had had to master in these four years. The survey was therefore ethnographic because the purpose was to describe, analyze and interpret the culture of a group – senior students of the degree in English Studies – over time to understand the group's shared beliefs, behaviours and language (Scollon, Scollon & Jones, 2012).

The survey was piloted by one of the senior students of the Degree in order to see if the questions were easily understandable, if there was any difficulty and to check the average time that it would take to complete it. Her feedback was positive overall and only minor adjustments were made (I reformulated a couple of questions and introduced a few more to explore their convictions more accurately). Then, I administered the survey to the rest of the students via email and gave them a week to complete it. Google Form analyzes all the data automatically in the form of statistics and I used Excel to compile the answers and interpret the students' different perceptions in the light of the theoretical frameworks selected for the present study. A total of twenty-nine senior students answered the questionnaire and fourteen provided me with their emails, by this means showing their willingness to take part in possible follow-ups. Out of these fourteen students, I was able to meet nine of them in person and deepen into some of the most interesting issues that arouse from the survey answers. I divided the results of the

survey in two different thematic blocks. The first set of questions dealt with awareness, knowledge and skills in the context of intercultural competence, and the second set dealt with issues related to culture and questions related to opportunities for intercultural competence learning in the degree in English Studies.

## Results

The first question of the questionnaire showed that out of all the students, the majority ( $n=25$ ) were Spanish native speakers, one was Russian, two were Romanian and only one was a simultaneous bilingual of Catalan and Spanish. English was the second language for all of them (Table 1). Other languages the students reported were French, German and Italian. Only 3.4% of the students reported knowledge of other foreign language (Finnish).



**Table 1.** Number of languages spoken by the students

According to the survey responses, the students were conscious of the cultural knowledge they used when interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds. The majority of the students (86.2%) reported awareness of the cultural knowledge they drew upon. In particular, the third question asked the students whether they checked the accuracy of their cultural knowledge as they interacted with people from different cultures. Almost 80% agreed that they had acquired cultural learning of English speaking countries in the courses they had taken in the degree in English Studies; 6.9% were neutral; and the remaining 13.7% considered that they did not pay attention to the accuracy of the cultural knowledge they use when talking to people from other countries. However, the students' self-perceived cultural knowledge apparently referred only to cultural aspects attached to the language, as the question "I know the legal and economic systems of other cultures" scored (an average result mean of 2.41 out of 5). Only 10.3% of the students considered that they have knowledge (*savoirs*) of social processes in other countries. Approximately half of them admitted that they do not know about them and the rest (34.5%) were not quite sure of the amount of knowledge they have about these foreign cultural processes; suggesting that they may have some knowledge of the social systems of other cultures but not much. Having this knowledge would be important in order to achieve critical awareness of themselves and their values, as well as those of other people (Byram et al., 2002, p. 9). This is related to the importance of 'intercultural attitudes' (i.e. the need to be curious and open as well as to be ready to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's own, Byram (1997) and therefore avoid misunderstandings/different points of view that can arise when talking with people from other countries about politics or economy – or saying erroneous information about the history of the country and offend the natives, for example. Skills of decentering and attitudes of comparing are essential in this respect.

Questions 10, 11 and 17 were related to intercultural encounters and how the senior undergrads thought they reacted when facing them (taking benefit and learning from them). The average means of the group were 4.28 out of 5; 4.24 out of 5 and 3.62 out of 5 (5=strongly agree). Almost 80% agreed that they can adjust to a culture which is unfamiliar to them and only one of them admitted that it was difficult to him/her. The overall majority (almost 95% of students) stated that they were able to change their accent, tone, etc. in cross-cultural interactions. This suggests that, overall, these students have communicative competence in the sense that they can vary their use of language according to the setting and the participants of an intercultural conversation (Richards, 2006, p. 3), they use different communication strategies in order to maintain a good conversational flow in English and that they are able to create meaningful and purposeful communication through the use of English (Richards, 2006). Turning to actual knowledge of the language, the overall majority (97%) affirmed they knew the rules (e.g. vocabulary and grammar rules). They stated they had acquired a good knowledge of the grammar of English and in that they have developed a rich knowledge of the English vocabulary. Only one person considered that he has not developed accuracy/fluency in using English vocabulary and grammar. Responses to questions 13, 14, 15 and 16 of the survey sought to elicit the students' self-perceived skills in English (e.g. writing, listening, speaking and reading). The majority considered themselves advanced learners of English. Out of the four language skills, the students perceived that writing was the most difficult skill, maybe due to the difficulty in adjusting to different types of texts and producing an accurate one. Interestingly, they considered that the skill they were most proficient was their understanding of English, despite they are always worried about the difficulty of listening exams. In addition, 86% of students considered

that fluency in English was important to them (Q25), as one of the premises to achieve communicative competence is being fluent (Richards, 2006).

To the question “I know the cultural values and religious beliefs of other cultures” 64% of the students agreed that they know the most important cultural values of the English speaking countries studied throughout the Degree (later mentioned). However, the fact that almost 35% of the responses were neutral suggests that some students may not be aware of competence learning across the curriculum. Very similar responses were given to the question “I know the essential norms and taboos of English speakers (e.g., greetings, dress code, behaviours, etc.)”: almost 80% agreed and considered that they have to improve their knowledge of social identities.

Questions 8 and 9 of the survey asked the students whether they enjoyed interacting with people from other cultures and whether they found it easy to socialize with locals in a culture which is unfamiliar to them, respectively. The majority stated that they enjoy intercultural experiences, confirming their openness towards multiculturalism. Almost 80% of the students further considered that they socialized with locals when they travelled abroad. One might assume that the remaining 17.2% has not yet had the opportunity to travel abroad and/or that finds challenging socializing with natives in their own country. Only one student acknowledged difficulties in doing so but clarified that the fact of not having a common language made communication impossible. As for issues of multiculturalism, almost 85% of the students were able to contrast important aspects of English language and cultures with their own. 85% agreed that they were able to do so. Once again, the skills of comparison, interpreting and relating emerged as crucial in this process, which suggests that the students were competent intercultural communicators.

The second part of the survey dealt with questions related to culture and to how the students considered that the degree in English Studies served them as a source of intercultural competence learning. In general terms, the students reported that they spent considerable time abroad throughout the course of the Degree; only two students reported that they did not have the opportunity to travel abroad. Sixteen students stated that they had spent several weeks/months abroad, mainly as part of family holidays. Moreover, eleven students considered that they had spent over a year or more than one year abroad, either as Erasmus students or for holidays.

There is an interesting correlation between the answers to questions about the importance of language for the communication of information (Q19) and the importance of language for maintaining social relations (Q20). All the interviewees agreed that knowing about language plays a crucial role. Nevertheless, a variety of opinions were expressed in the question “I have to take steps to protect my cultural traditions from outside influences” (Q21). Although 40% of the students considered that this did not apply to them because they perceived themselves as open to different influences in order to increase their knowledge about multiculturalism, 38% hesitated about the way in which they are affected by foreign influences and 24% of students disagreed. Having the opportunity to clarify this issue in follow-up interviews, the overall conclusion is that students thought that while other cultures enrich us, the more cultures they get to know the more knowledge of those cultures influenced their knowledge of their own culture and changed their view of the world, their personality, etc. As a case in point, they mentioned American culture as an example of globalization and how they were gradually adopting more and more American habits.

Answers to the question “Learning other languages makes me forget my own cultural traditions” (Q22) showed that the majority of the undergraduates (86.2%) disagreed and



only 10.3% were neutral. These percentages suggest that studying different cultures makes them being more aware of them that of their own culture. Only one student agreed, but this was so because this student in particular had lived abroad over two years and therefore the loss of contact with his culture made him forget the traditions of his own country. These results are in agreement with those of the question “I am concerned about losing my cultural identity” (Q23). While 62% of the students considered that this did not apply to them, 13.8% admitted that it is true for them. The remaining percentage responded ‘neutral’. In follow ups, the students who agreed with these statements stated that trying to adapt to the other language, culture and behaviour can influence their own culture. Two students who agreed with these statements, who are immigrants, commented the following:

“I live in a different country, use three languages a day and all of this makes me a product of the blend of these cultures. I am a bit of everything and a bit of nothing” (student #3)

“I came to Spain when I was a child. Sometimes, this makes me feel that I have lost the identity/culture of my own country and that I see myself more identified with Spanish identity/culture” (student #6)

Results were somehow inconclusive regarding the question “people who come to your [country/region] should change their behavior to be more like us” (Q31). Even though over 62% of the students disagreed, 20.7% neither agreed nor disagreed and 17.2% agreed that immigrants/travelers should adapt their behavior to the country they visit. This reflects the natural controversy that these topics produce in people; some individuals do not actually care about these issues but others feel that if you have to adapt when you go to another country, they should also adapt to yours. Moreover, the answers of those who agreed can also be interpreted in terms of politeness, you should

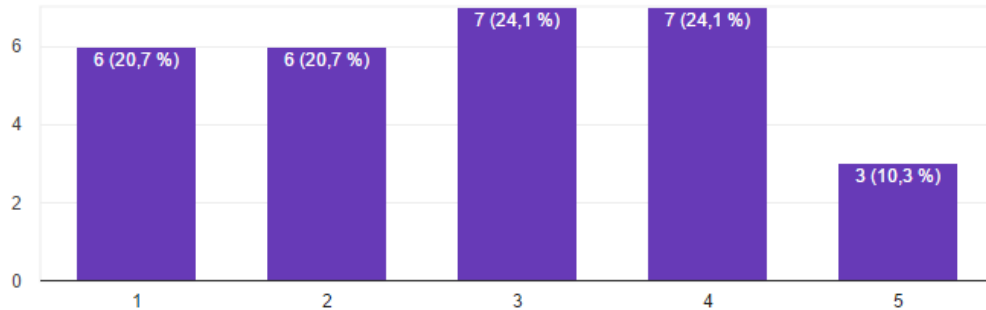
always be respectful when you travel. Very different opinions were given by the students in response to the statements “Immigrant parents must encourage their children to retain the culture and traditions of their homeland” and “A society that has a variety of ethnic or cultural groups has more problems with national unity than societies with one or two basic cultural groups”. Regarding the former statement, only over 17% disagreed, 48.3% agreed and 34.5% remained neutral in this issue, overall showing rather mixed attitudes.

As for Q29, whereas 41.4% of students disagreed, 24.1% were neutral and 34.4% disagreed. In follow-up interviews the students who agreed expressed that in a country where there are many different ethnic/national backgrounds, conflict is likely to arise at some points if people have different opinions and ways of seeing the world. For others, in a country where there is a diverse population people tend to create smaller cultures/communities and this makes national unity more difficult because they only see themselves as part of those smaller groups.

On the other hand, the students that disagreed commented that the problem was not about diversity but about being narrow-minded. They referred to the United States as an example of a diverse country where many cultures operate relatively peacefully. They further stated that sometimes conflict arise due to external forces or political forces and not because of the existing differences across cultures (Tables 2 and 3).

29. A society that has a variety of ethnic or cultural groups has more problems with national unity than societies with one or two basic cultural groups.

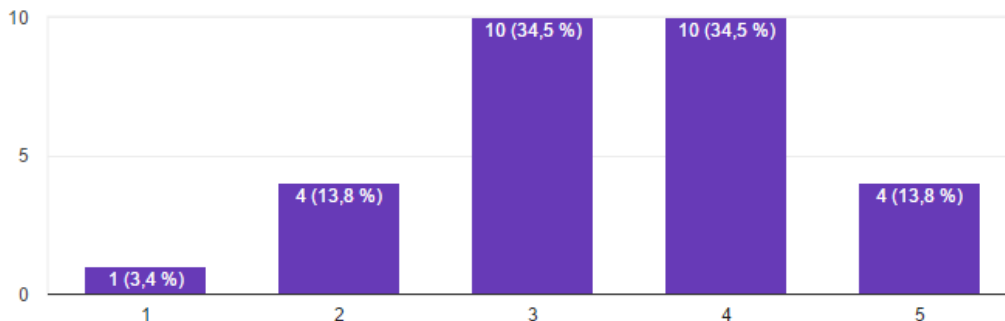
29 respuestas



**Table 2.** Responses regarding how a society with several cultural groups may have problems with national unity.

30. Immigrant parents must encourage their children to retain the culture and traditions of their homeland.

29 respuestas



**Table 3.** Responses to the role of immigrant parents regarding their culture and traditions.

Finally, the students were asked about whether the degree had really helped them to acquire a C1 level of English and a better understanding about real life intercultural experiences. They were also asked whether they felt they were prepared to join the labor market. Interestingly, more than 82% considered that having studied the Degree in

English Studies has enabled them to handle social skills better than before. 85.7% agreed that they would be able to work in an international scene. 82.1% agreed that the degree helped them to become critical and auto-critical. That is, that they achieved critical thinking skills. Results were consistent with those of the question “having studied the degree in English Studies, I can adapt to new situations” (Q35); more than 81% agreed, two students were neutral and only three disagreed. In follow-ups, some commented that the activities carried out in some subjects related to the anticipation of problems that may arise during intercultural encounters helped them reflect about their behaviour when interacting with people from different cultures (e.g. facial expressions, body language) and anticipate possible solutions to misunderstandings. However, one of the students who disagreed noted that in the Degree the whole group acquired academic knowledge but little attention had been paid to how to adapt to new situations. The student considered that in his/her Erasmus experience realized that he/she was not able to adapt to a new society easily. This correlates with their views over their capacity to meet commitments. Only three students disagreed in this respect, probably because they thought they were already able to handle them before the degree, while over 61% agreed, they considered themselves more responsible than they were before.

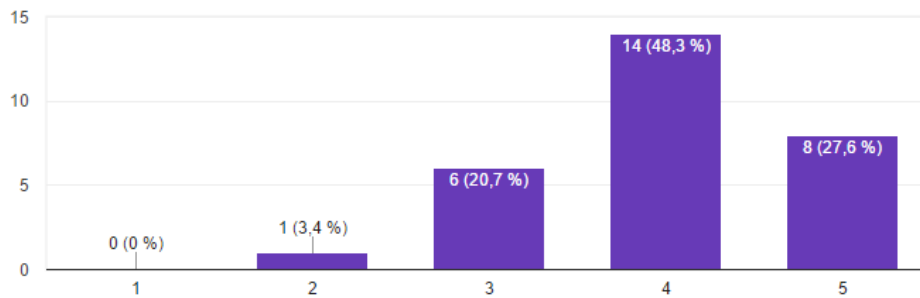
Further, the majority of the students (85.7%) agreed that some subjects helped them to better analyze social and cultural reality through their representations. Almost 86% of students agreed that they improved their skills communicating in English thanks to the degree. Only two students disagreed, one argued that he/she had improved his/her communication skills thanks to a semester doing an Erasmus. In addition, more than 75% of the students considered that the degree helped them appreciate multiculturalism and diversity much better. In the follow-up interviews the students further added that subjects such as North-American and English literature, Other literatures in English

Language and History of the United States and Great Britain have opened their eyes mainly towards historical events, different interpretations of reality, and colonialism; they considered they had become more open-minded, and that they have a better understanding of concepts such as ethnocentrism and English as a Lingua Franca (or ELF) – the latest by means of subjects such as Geographical varieties of the English Language and Academic English and Intercultural Linguistics. Only two students showed disagreement in with these statements and, coincidentally, they were those that thought that the Degree was not the basis of their mastery in communicative skills. Having the opportunity of talking with one of them, he/she explained that in his/her experience as a non-white person, he/she has always being aware of diversity, and that multicultural/diversity have always existed. It is because of this personal experience that he/she was already aware of both concepts before starting the degree.

The last two questions of the survey sought to explore how well they thought the degree helped them to acquire knowledge, culture and civilization of English and to be able to analyze audiovisual and literary texts. The answer was very positive, more than 85% of the students considered this true and 20.7% were neutral. Only one student disagreed, who was the same who thought that the Degree did not help him/her to become aware of multicultural and diversity.

41. How well do you think the degree has served you to acquire knowledge, culture and civilization of English?

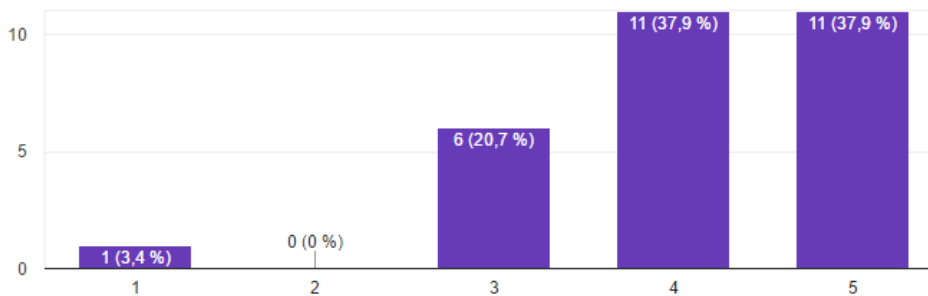
29 respuestas



**Table 4.** The influence of the degree for acquiring *saviors* of English cultures.

42. How well do you think the degree has served you to be able to analyze audiovisual and literary texts?

29 respuestas



**Table 5.** The influence of the degree in developing analytical skills with audiovisual and literary texts.

## Discussion

Overall, the students proved to be open-minded – as the follow-ups also confirmed – and none of them seemed to have deeply-rooted values that led them to conflict with foreigners. Chen and Xiadong claim that “when people engage in an intercultural dialogue, they have to face communication barriers such as cultural stereotype and

prejudice, identity conflict etc.” (2014, p. 3). However, none student proved to be racist and students mentioned some subjects of the degree (e.g. North-American Literature, Other Literatures in English Language) that helped them to become aware of the seriousness of stereotypes and to not rely on them. As Brookfield (1995) argues, “stereotypes are unexamined interpretations people believe to be valid without verification” (p. 3). Brookfield (1995) further states that students should think about their feelings and this will help them scrutinize critically and analyze assumptions. This relates to other questions in the survey that also demonstrated that the students were themselves aware of different values, beliefs or taboos other cultures embrace, though they showed a scarce knowledge of the legal and economic systems of other cultures.

The students’ responses proved to support Byram et al.’s (2002, p. 7) observation that seeing different behaviours can shock and disturb our deeply embedded identities and values, however open-minded, tolerant and flexible we would like to be. Chen and Xiadong (2014) explain that “only through the acquisition of ICC can these problems be solved in the process of global interaction” (p. 3). Furthermore, intercultural speakers/mediators need to become aware of their own values and how these influence their views of other people's values (Byram et al, 2002, p. 9). The students surveyed in the present study showed critical awareness of themselves and their values, as well as those of other people. Byram (1997) identifies two key elements in this process, namely, ‘intercultural attitudes’ (*savoir etre*) and ‘critical cultural awareness’ (*savoir s’engager*). Intercultural attitudes refer to the need to be curious and open as well as to be ready to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one’s own. Critical cultural awareness is defined as “the ability to evaluate, critically and on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices and products in one’s own and other cultures and countries” (Byram, 1997, p. 11). The findings regarding the statements of the

second part of the survey illustrated that the students showed openness to participate in national/international social activities.

Regarding how the students saw native speakers, the follow-up interviews clarified that they paid attention to natives especially in terms of pronunciation, accent, but not as far as culture is concerned. They had different views in the way other cultures are perceived and showed awareness of the importance of learning from different cultures. These findings are consistent with Byram et al. (2002), who stress the importance of realizing that different social groups have different values, beliefs and behaviours, i.e. their own culture. Therefore, an individual native speaker cannot be an authority on the cultures of a country and cannot give authoritative views on what is 'right' or 'wrong' as might be possible with language (2002, p. 12). Furthermore, intercultural competence is only partially a question of knowledge, and it is the other dimensions (*savoir être, savoir apprendre/faire, savoir comprendre* and *savoir s'engager*) which must be given importance in the teaching and learning process (p. 12). Nevertheless, as these dimensions refer to how people interact with other cultures, they are not automatically acquired by the native speaker. Byram et al. (2002) argue that a native speaker who has “never ventured out of their country or even out of their restricted local society, does not have these other *savoirs* which are crucial to intercultural competence” (p. 12).

As Byram et al. (2002) state, social identities are related to cultures and to see only one identity in a person is a simplification. As these authors explain, an intercultural speaker is aware of this simplification, he/she knows something about the beliefs, values and behaviours which are 'Chinese', for instance, but he/she also bears in mind that there are other unseen identities in the person with whom they are interacting, even if they do not know what the associated beliefs, values and behaviours are. Therefore, if we assume that the students surveyed are intercultural speaker they would have the need to know



some knowledge, about what it means to be Chinese or a teacher or indeed a Chinese teacher, for example. However, an intercultural speaker also needs awareness that there is more to be known and understood from the other person's perspective, that there are skills, attitudes and values involved too, which are crucial to understanding intercultural human relationships (Byram et al., 2002, p. 6). In the follow-ups, several students highlighted the problems of prejudice and dominant discourses. They showed awareness of the importance of not relying on simplifications. The students referred to different subjects (mainly the ones related to literature) that contributed to make them aware of these practices and the need to rely on truthful interpretations of society. They thought that those subjects helped them become aware of these issues; however, they stressed the importance of seeing them in real environments, acknowledging therefore the importance of the need to include intercultural communication training in second learning courses.

As already mentioned, an intercultural speaker needs attitudes of decentering and skills of comparing because, at some point, misunderstandings can arise and it is important to be able to solve them quickly. Byram (1997) defines skills of interpreting and relating (*savoir comprendre*) as the "ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents or events from one's own". In contrasting ideas, events, documents from two or more cultures and seeing how each might look from the other point of view, intercultural speakers can realize how people might misunderstand what is said or written or done by someone with a different social identity (2002). LaFramboise et al. (1993) further explain that this process would be quicker if students maintained social relations with people from different cultures – as it is the case of the majority of the students that completed the survey. From their responses to the questionnaire, the students appear to be able to negotiate the

institutional structures of both cultures and have acquired the skills of finding out new knowledge and integrating it with what they already have. In other words, they seem to be perceptive of people from other cultures, their beliefs, values and behaviours. Furthermore, answers were very positive to the question “I don’t want to attend either national or foreign social activities, over 86% disagreed, which reflects his openness towards new influences, and their willingness to increase their *savoirs* of other cultures, as already mentioned above. This correlated with the question “we should do more to learn about the customs and heritage of different ethnic and cultural groups in this country and other countries”, to which over 83% students agreed. However, we need to be cautious when interpreting these findings, because these practices are often unconscious (Byram et al., 2002).

As stated in the introduction of this dissertation, the components of intercultural competence are knowledge, skills and attitudes, complemented by the values one holds because of one’s belonging to a number of social groups. These values are part of one’s social identities (Byram et al., 2002, p. 7). Overall, the results of the survey showed that students found it important to have acquired intercultural competence as a result of having studied the Degree in English Studies (Q39 and Q40) and the majority of them also as part of Erasmus plans or holidays in foreign countries (Q18).

Byram et al. (2002) and Deardorff (2009) stress the importance of bearing in mind that the acquisition of intercultural competence is never complete and perfect. That said, the students surveyed proved to be successful intercultural speakers; they seemed to be aware of the need to adjust, to accept and to understand other people. Byram et al. (2002) explain why we cannot acquire a complete intercultural competence: we cannot acquire or anticipate all the knowledge we might need in interacting with people of

other cultures. This may explain why some students acknowledged that the importance of skills to successfully communicate intercultural encounters.

All in all, the students showed a predisposition to interact with foreign speakers but some of them recognized that they had different experiences – more or less successful – when visiting other countries. The students' responses indicated that that when meeting new experiences, they came across unexpected beliefs, values and behaviours. For some, it was challenging to act without losing their nerves or to cope with misunderstandings.

## **Conclusion**

The literature on IC stresses the importance of the cross-curricular dimension when learning a foreign language. It argues that intercultural education can extend to the exchange of experience/information on content subjects across the curriculum and therefore should not be linked to language alone (Byram et al., 2002). Teachers can provide students with factual information about the countries where the target language is spoken. These authors further note that this information is often found on the Internet, in reference books, etc. and it is thus not a question of having visited the countries where that language is spoken, because this is not the kind of information we usually encounter when we travel.

Further, the literature on Communicative Language Teaching observes that the major innovation of communicative language teaching was the fact that learners need to develop not only knowledge and skill in the grammar of a language but also the ability to use the language in socially and culturally appropriate ways (Richards, 2006). For this reason, the 'communicative approach' introduces changes in methods of teaching,

instructional materials, the description of what is to be learnt and assessment of learning (Byram et al. 2002). The Council of Europe's Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, n.d.) embodies these innovations and also puts emphasis on the importance of 'intercultural awareness', 'intercultural skills', and 'existential competence' (2002; see also Canková et al., 2007; Sandell & Tupy, 2015). The Common European Framework introduces the 'Intercultural Dimension' into the aims of language teaching. The main objective is to help language learners to interact on equal terms with speakers who do not share their mother tongue, and that they become aware of their own identities and those of their interlocutors. It is expected that language learners who thus become 'intercultural speakers' will be successful not only in communicating information but also in developing a human relationship with people of other languages and cultures (Byram et al. 2002, p. 4).

It is also worth recalling that there has been a change in the way we see the concept of 'culture' (Byram et al, 2002). It has shifted from an initial emphasis on literature, the arts and philosophy to culture as a shared way of life (2002, p. 5). What has not changed is our aim to imitate the native speaker. People tend to consider native speakers as experts and models, and even tend to regard native teacher speakers as better than non-native teachers. Byram et al. (2002) explain that the concept of the native speaker is "used primarily with respect to linguistic competence. It is argued that the native speaker 'knows' the language of a country intuitively and is an authority on the language in a way which a non-native speaker can never hope to attain" (p. 12). Yet, as these authors explain, people who live in a particular country do not know intuitively or otherwise the whole of 'the culture' of that country because there are in fact many cultures within a country.

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## APPENDIX

### Survey questions

Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements, using a 1 to 5 point scale. You are free to use all numbers between 1 and 5 to indicate varying degrees of disagreement or agreement: 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3= Undecided, 4 Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree.

#### **Part 1**

1. How many languages do you know apart from your mother tongue? (Specify also your mother tongue).

2. I am conscious of the cultural knowledge use when interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds.

1  2  3  4  5

3. I check the accuracy of my cultural knowledge as I interact with people from different cultures.

1  2  3  4  5

4. I know the legal and economic systems of other cultures.

1  2  3  4  5

5. I know the rules (e.g. vocabulary, grammar...) of English \*.

1  2  3  4  5

6. I know the cultural values and religious beliefs of other cultures.

1  2  3  4  5

7. I know the essential norms and taboos of English speakers (e.g., greetings, dress, behaviours, etc.).

1  2  3  4  5

8. I enjoy interacting with people from different cultures.

1  2  3  4  5

9. I can socialize with locals in a culture that is unfamiliar to me.

1  2  3  4  5

10. I can deal with the stresses of adjusting to a culture that is new to me.

1  2  3  4  5

11. I change my verbal behavior (e.g., accent, tone) when a cross-cultural interaction requires it.

1  2  3  4  5

12. I can contrast important aspects of the host language and culture with my own.

1  2  3  4  5

13. I understand English.

1  2  3  4  5

14. I speak English.

1  2  3  4  5

15. I read in English.

1  2  3  4  5

16. I write in English.

1  2  3  4  5

17. I practice new grammatical structures in different situations to build my confidence level in using them.

1  2  3  4  5

## **Part 2**

18. In the past 5 years, how much time in total were you travelling/being away from your country?

19. Language is important for the communication of information.

1  2  3  4  5

20. Language is important to maintain social relationships.

1  2  3  4  5

21. I have to take steps to protect my cultural traditions from outside influences.

1  2  3  4  5

22. Learning other languages makes me forget my own cultural traditions.

1  2  3  4  5

23. I am concerned about losing my cultural identity.

1  2  3  4  5

24. I feel that foreign speakers should maintain their own cultural traditions and not adapt to those of natives.

1  2  3  4  5

25. It is not important to me to be fluent in English.

1  2  3  4  5

26. I don't want to attend either national or foreign social activities.

1  2  3  4  5

27. I think that others have behaved in an unfair or negative way towards my nationality.

1  2  3  4  5

28. We should do more to learn about the customs and heritage of different ethnic and cultural groups in this country and other countries.

1  2  3  4  5

29. A society that has a variety of ethnic or cultural groups has more problems with national unity than societies with one or two basic cultural groups.

1  2  3  4  5

30. Immigrant parents must encourage their children to retain the culture and traditions of their homeland.

1  2  3  4  5

31. People who come to your [country/region] should change their behaviour to be more like us.

1  2  3  4  5

32. Having studied the degree in English Studies, I can handle social skills.

1  2  3  4  5

33. Having studied the degree in English Studies, I can work in an international scene.

1  2  3  4  5

34. Having studied the degree in English Studies, I have become critical and autocritical. (i.e. have you acquired critical thinking?).

1  2  3  4  5

35. Having studied the degree in English Studies, I can adapt to new situations.

1  2  3  4  5

36. Having studied the degree in English Studies, I have capacity to meet commitments.

1  2  3  4  5

37. Having studied the degree in English Studies, I can analyze social and cultural reality through their representations.

1  2  3  4  5

38. Having studied the degree in English Studies, I can communicate in English now.

1  2  3  4  5

39. Having studied the degree in English Studies, I can appreciate multiculturalism and diversity in a much better way.

1  2  3  4  5

40. Having studied the degree in English Studies, I can appreciate multiculturalism and diversity now. Why?

41. How well do you think the degree has served you to acquire knowledge, culture and civilization of English?

1  2  3  4  5

42. How well do you think the degree has served you to be able to analyze audiovisual and literary texts?

1  2  3  4  5