

Familiarity and Contacts with Foreign Cultures: Research on Foreign Language Teachers and Intercultural Competence

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Abstract

This article is based on the results of a large empirical study that seeks to explore the cultural dimension of foreign language learning in terms of the intercultural communicative competence of teachers and learners. The quantitative comparative study contained an internet survey presented to secondary school teachers in Belgium, Bulgaria, Greece, Mexico, Poland, Spain and Sweden. The main purpose of the survey was to attempt to describe an average profile of foreign language teachers. I focus on one of the areas found in the survey, teacher familiarity and contacts with foreign cultures. The results of the entire study can be found in *Foreign Language Teachers and Intercultural Competence: An International Investigation* (Serçu, 2005).

Keywords:

Foreign languages
Teachers

Resumen

Este artículo está basado en los resultados de un amplio estudio empírico que busca explorar la dimensión cultural del aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras en términos de competencia comunicativa intercultural de maestros y alumnos. El estudio cuantitativo-comparativo consistió en una investigación por Internet presentada a maestros de escuelas secundarias de Bélgica, Bulgaria, Grecia, México, Polonia, España y Suecia. El propósito fundamental de la investigación fue intentar describir un comportamiento promedio en los maestros de lenguas extranjeras. Nos enfocamos en una de las áreas encontradas en la investigación: la familiaridad y los contactos que tenían los maestros con culturas extranjeras. Los resultados del estudio completo se pueden encontrar en *Foreign Language Teachers and Intercultural Competence: An International Investigation* (SerVu, 2005).

Palabras clave:

Lenguas extranjeras
Maestros

During the Summer of 2001, researchers from seven countries (Belgium, Bulgaria, Poland, Mexico, Greece, Spain and Sweden) conducted a quantitative, comparative study of foreign language teachers in their corresponding countries. The project, directed by Lies Serçu, Kuleuven University, Belgium, included Ewa Bandura, Paloma Castro, Leah Davcheva, Chryssa Laskaridou, Ulla Lundgren, María del Carmen Méndez García and Phyllis Ryan.

The purpose of the international study was to explore the cultural dimension of foreign language teaching in terms of intercultural communicative competence using a web-based questionnaire to produce a teacher profile for each country for comparison with other countries. The focus was on how teachers perceive their students' knowledge of and attitudes toward target language countries, their reports on their own teaching, and their own experiences with target language countries via travel and the use of different kinds of media. The results of the study highlight the professional identity of language teachers and aid in understanding how teachers' views on intercultural communicative competence in foreign language education impact their teaching.

Each of the researchers wrote a chapter for the publication, *Foreign Language Teachers and Intercultural Competence: An International Investigation*. (See Serçu, 2005) based on comparing statistical results from the seven countries. The following areas were included in the publication: objectives of foreign language teaching and culture teaching time, pupils' culture-and-language learning profile, culture teaching practices, culture in foreign language teaching materials, opinions regarding different facets of intercultural competence teaching, the foreign language intercultural competence teacher.

In this article, I will highlight some of the major findings related to the theme of the chapter I wrote, Chapter 3, entitled "Familiarity and Contexts with Foreign Cultures". My discussion will be guided by three domains, 3.1, Teacher familiarity with country, cultures and people; 3.2, Travel to foreign countries; and 3.3, Foreign cultures at home.

In Chapter 2 (in the section on "objectives for foreign language teaching and culture teaching time") the teachers mention one reason for not getting around to culture teaching more often. They say that they feel that they are not sufficiently familiar with the cultures associated with the language they teach to teach about them. Part of the questionnaire studied whether this lack of familiarity appears to be characteristic of all participating teachers.

The aim of Chapter 3 was to understand reasons why some teachers appear favorably disposed toward intercultural competence teaching and others not, and why some are more willing to devote more time to culture teaching and others not. One assumption presented was that teachers who are very familiar with the foreign culture primarily associated with the foreign language they teach will be less

hesitant to interculturalize their foreign language teaching.

3.1, Teacher familiarity with country, culture and people

One of the first questions teachers were asked was about the foreign culture/s they associate with the language they teach. Below is a list of countries associated with foreign languages being taught:

<i>LANGUAGE:</i>	<i>FOREIGN CULTURE</i>
French	France
German	Germany
Spanish	Spain
English	United States (Sweden, Mexico) United Kingdom (all others)

Teachers were also asked to indicate their degree of familiarity with topics usually addressed in textbooks, such as:

- History, geography, political system
- Different ethnic and social groups
- Daily life and routines, living conditions, food and drink
- Youth culture
- Education, professional life
- Traditions, folklore, tourist attractions
- Literature
- Music, drama, the arts
- Values and beliefs
- International relations (political, economic and cultural)

Table 3.1 represents how familiar teachers felt they were with the topics. The topics were ranked from "least familiar" to "most familiar" on the basis of mean scores for each topic. Scores between 0.01 and 1.00 indicate that they consider themselves "not familiar at all", while scores between 1.01 and 2.00 indicate that they believe they are "not sufficiently familiar", and scores between 2.01 and 3.00 meant "sufficiently familiar", and between 3.01 and 4.00, "very familiar".



Fotografía: José Ventura

Table 3.1 Teacher familiarity with the country, culture and people primarily associated with the foreign language they teach

	GRE	MEX	BUL	SPA	SWE	POL	BEL	Mean
Index	2.98	2.97	2.97	2.94	2.91	2.90	1.97	2.95
International relations	2.70	2.76	2.53	2.43	2.91	2.90	2.49	2.65
Different ethnics and social groups	2.70	2.78	2.63	2.80	2.81	2.59	2.73	2.72
Other Cultural expressions	2.79	2.93	2.76	2.63	2.70	2.55	2.72	2.73
Youth culture	2.76	3.00	2.73	3.09	2.53	2.62	2.67	2.77
Values and beliefs	2.76	3.02	2.79	2.71	2.64	2.80	2.86	2.80
Education, professional life	2.89	2.91	3.00	2.77	2.84	3.06	2.53	2.92
Traditions, folklore, tourist attractions	3.18	3.05	3.07	3.03	3.15	3.11	3.23	3.12
History, geography, political system	3.21	3.00	3.20	3.00	3.24	3.12	3.30	3.15
Literature	3.32	2.95	3.50	3.37	3.21	3.06	3.15	3.22
Daily life and routines	3.42	3.34	3.43	3.57	3.39	3.55	3.59	3.47

Scores ranging between 0.00 and 4.00. 0.01-1.00 not familiar at all; 1.01-2.00 sufficiently familiar; 2.01-3.00 sufficiently familiar; 3.01-4.00 very familiar.

As the table suggests, teachers in the seven countries responded very similarly. Most said that they were familiar with daily life and routines, living conditions, food and drink and least familiar with international relations. The findings suggest that they feel sufficiently well equipped for culture teaching as passing on knowledge about the target culture. Their knowledge is strongest in the cultural domains addressed in textbooks. It might be asked if the content of their textbooks is a determining factor or other sources of information such as travel and the media greatly contribute to their knowledge.

3.2 Teacher travel to foreign countries

Table 3.2 represents all the contacts together in the foreign countries.

Table 3.2 Teacher's travels to the foreign countries associated with the foreign language they teach

	BEL	SPA	SWE	POL	GRE	MEX	BUL	Mean
Index	1.76	1.74	1.67	1.62	1.61	1.50	1.36	1.61
Wok visit, e. g. within the framework of an exchange project	1.28	1.34	1.34	1.27	1.34	1.20	1.30	1.30
school trips (one or two days)	1.95	1.31	1.26	1.50	1.21	1.11	1.13	1.35
Participation in a teacher training programme or a language course	1.50	2.09	1.77	1.53	1.82	1.49	1.80	1.71
Visits to relatives or friends	1.66	1.57	1.69	1.83	1.54	1.78	1.17	1.61
Tourist stays (lasting longer than two days) in the foreign country	2.40	2.40	2.27	1.94	2.16	1.91	1.40	2.07

Teachers were asked how frequently they travel to the foreign country associated with the foreign language they teach. In particular, they were also asked about the contacts they had in this/these countries.

As observed in this table, in none of the countries in this study do teachers appear to travel frequently to the foreign country. In comparing professional and private contacts, teachers more frequently travel to the foreign country as tourists or to visit relatives and friends, than for professional reasons.

3.3 Frequency of Contact with Foreign Cultures while at home

Teachers were asked to indicate also how frequently they are in contact with the foreign culture while at home, selecting one of the three frequencies, "never", "once in a while", or "often". The kinds of contact given in the question included: media contacts, visits to cultural institutes, contacts with people originating from the foreign country living in their country, contacts with foreign language assistance in their school and contacts with foreign teachers or pupils who visit their school.



Fotografía: José Ventura

Table 3.3 Frequency of teacher's contacts with the foreign cultures at home

	BUL	SPA	MEX	POL	GR	SW	BE	Mean
Index	2.35	2.14	2.07	2.05	1.90	1.85	1.78	2.02
Contacts with foreign teachers or pupils who visit my school	1.80	1.86	1.53	1.71	1.24	1.63	1.46	1.60
Contacts with foreign language assistants (usually natives from the foreign country) in my school	2.07	2.17	1.67	1.53	1.34	1.34	1.15	1.61
Visits to the cultural institute representing the foreign country in my country	2.77	1.29	1.91	2.13	1.95	1.46	1.62	1.87
Contacts with people originating from the foreign country who live in my country	2.27	2.43	2.27	2.12	2.24	2.11	1.86	2.18
Media contacts (via newspapers, television, radio)	2.87	2.94	2.95	2.78	2.71	2.73	2.84	2.83

0.00-1.00 = never; 1.01-2.00 = once in a while; 2.01-3.00 = often

It appears that Bulgarian, Spanish, Mexican and Polish teachers have frequent contact with the foreign culture at home while Greek, Swedish and Belgium teachers indicate that they only are in contact with the foreign cultures "once in a while".

Teachers appear to be in contact with the foreign culture more frequently at home than through travel to the foreign country when comparing mean scores. Teachers who score low on journeys score high on contacts at home and vice versa. For example, Bulgarian teachers appear not to travel much, but have frequent contacts at home. The reverse is true for Belgium.

The most popular kind of contact at home with the foreign culture by far is media contact, such as Internet or television. Media contacts are equally frequent in all seven countries. Considering their frequent media contact, it remains to be known why they do not feel well informed about the foreign country's international relations or different ethnic groups in the country. It may indicate the type of media programming they watch.

3.4 Summary of main findings

Table 3.4 Summary of chapter's main findings

Country	Familiarity with culture (+, ++, +++)	Direct contact tourist stays (+, ++, +++)	Contacts at home: media contacts (+, ++, +++)
Belgium	+++	+++	+++
Bulgaria	+++	++	+++
Greece	+++	+++	+++
Mexico	+++	++	+++
Poland	+++	++	+++
Spain	+++	+++	+++
Sweden	+++	+++	+++

Symbols in the column 'familiarity with culture'; + not familiarity at all; ++ not sufficiently familiar; +++ sufficiently familiar; ++++ very familiar; Symbols in column 'direct contact tourist stays' and contacts at home; media contacts; + never; ++ once in a while; +++ often.

As can be seen in the table above, the summary of the main domains (namely sections 3.1, 3.2. and 3.3) of Chapter 3, teachers from the seven countries indicate that they are sufficiently familiar with the culture of the foreign language they teach. In other words, they could say something about different aspects of the foreign culture during their lessons if they had to, without considering themselves able to deal extensively with different aspects of the culture. The topics that teachers felt most familiar with are those dealt with in foreign language textbooks, such as daily life and routines, history and geography and folklore. They perceive themselves very familiar with literature as well.

Conclusion

These results about teacher familiarity and contacts with foreign cultures need to be viewed in the context of teacher participants in secondary schooling in the countries represented in the research group. Each is very distinct and has programs which reflect their needs. Also, the results are one of the nine areas in the larger study mentioned at the beginning of this discussion. To fully understand and follow the intercultural competence of teachers and learners, one should study in detail these areas in the book.

Many questions arise from a comparative study such as this one, such questions as:

- How do teachers perceive the objective of foreign language education?
- How do they describe their culture teaching practices?
- How do teachers perceive the cultural dimension of teaching materials?
- How open to foreigners are pupils in the eyes of their teachers?
- What attitude do teachers have vis-à-vis different aspects of intercultural competence teaching in foreign language education?

To what extent are teachers willing to interculturalize foreign language education and what factors appear to affect their willingness?

Moreover, questions can be raised at a more general level addressed to teachers and students in the global community I will conclude with three of those raised by Risager (2005) and Guilherme (2002) to stimulate further thought, discussion and future research:

What are teachers' attitudes to the aspects of intercultural competence that focus on critical awareness and the development of students as citizens (Guilherme, 2002)?

What is intercultural competence today, taking into consideration present political and cultural developments on the global scene?

What is the role of language learning for students' (and teachers') general identity development in a complex world?

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