

AN EXPLORATION OF INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN BILINGUAL CLASSROOMS: A COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS**UNA EXPLORACIÓN DE LA COMPETENCIA INTERCULTURAL EN AULAS BILINGÜES: UN ANÁLISIS INTEGRAL**María Marcela Zúñiga Ruiz¹

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Abstract: This review paper concisely examines the pivotal role of intercultural competence within bilingual classrooms, incorporating key references from sociocultural theory, culturally responsive teaching, intercultural bilingual education, and the Vygotskian Zone of Proximal Development. It explores critical classroom attributes and implications for educators.

Keywords: Interculturality, bilingualism, culturally responsive teaching, intercultural bilingual education, second language learning

Resumen: Este artículo de revisión examina de manera concisa el papel crucial de la competencia intercultural en aulas bilingües, incorporando referencias clave de la teoría sociocultural, la enseñanza culturalmente receptiva, la educación bilingüe intercultural y la Zona de Desarrollo Próximo de Vygotsky. Explora atributos críticos en el aula e implicaciones para los educadores.

Palabras claves: Interculturalidad, bilingüismo, enseñanza culturalmente receptiva, educación bilingüe intercultural, aprendizaje de segundo idioma.

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Introduction

The importance of diversity in the modern classroom is emphasized by Arroyo (2013), who notes that intercultural education has been adopted by both Europe and the United States in response to globalization. This approach champions justice, freedom, equality, and solidarity among students from diverse cultural backgrounds (Rizza, as cited in Holguín, Morales, & Torres, 2018). Developing intercultural competence, defined by the OECD as global competence, is essential to participate actively in our interconnected world (OECD, 2016). Bilingual classrooms are a prime example of embracing diversity, as they require intercultural competence and the ability to adapt to different cultures while respecting their uniqueness.

This article explores the application of intercultural competence in bilingualism, emphasizing its educational significance (Holguín et al., 2018). Intercultural competence is crucial in promoting dialogue, mutual enrichment, and a global perspective (Arsenal-Muñoz, 2019). It aligns with sociocultural theory, emphasizing the dynamic nature of cultural interactions, and enriches the learning process by integrating cultural exchange practices into bilingual classrooms (Martínez-Lirola, 2018). To create inclusive environments where students from diverse backgrounds feel a sense of belonging, it is essential to encourage students to appreciate both cultures equally. This can be achieved by using the term “bicultural,” as suggested by Sercu (2002).

Furthermore, teacher training shapes students’ attitudes and behaviors toward other cultures. As highlighted by Olaya and Gómez (2013) and cited in Acosta, de Haro, and Frutos (2018), culturally aware educators are better equipped to navigate diverse classrooms effectively and foster intercultural communication. Therefore, teacher training programs must focus on developing cultural awareness and sensitivity among educators.

Methodology

This study adopts a rigorous qualitative research approach, specifically employing thematic analysis, encompassing both Spanish and English. The analysis is centered around pivotal terms including “interculturality,” “culturally responsive teaching (CRT),” “intercultural competence (IC),” and “bilingual classroom.” These terms are the foundational elements for an exhaustive search across various prominent educational databases, including Digiburg, Horizon Research, ResearchGate, and Scielo. The temporal scope of the review primarily spans 2019 to 2022, with reasonable consideration also given to seminal documents from prior years. A meticulously selected corpus of 52 papers is subjected to comprehensive scrutiny.

This selection entails a systematic process involving data collection, in-depth analysis, succinct summarization, and an organized alphabetical organization. This research underscores the qualitative nature inherent in its methodology. It elucidates how the curated materials contributed to hypothesis generation and facilitated profound insights into the subject. The thematic analysis employed herein is aligned explicitly with Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA), particularly emphasizing the formulation of categories and their intricate interconnections. The principal types under examination incorporate “intercultural competence (IC),” “culturally responsive teaching (CRT),” “intercultural bilingual education (IBE),” and “Zone of Proximal Development (ZDP).”

Results

Historical Framework of Intercultural Competence (IC) in Bilingual Classrooms

The concept of intercultural competence considers diverse ideas supporting its significance. Authors have explored numerous angles highlighting the complexity and necessity of integrating intercultural competence into teaching and learning scenarios. A foundational perspective in understanding intercultural competence is acknowledging diversity’s central role. Diversity is inherent to humanity and society, and it is a critical aspect in shaping contemporary classrooms. Arroyo (2013) underlines diversity as a defining human characteristic, linking it to the transformation and education of citizens. Identities, as a lens for comprehending variety, reveal layers of complexity, illustrating individuals’ ways of perceiving their surroundings.

Hall (2013) further elucidates identity’s dynamic nature, presenting three key ideas. Identity is not a static construct; it constantly evolves and often mirrors societal intricacies. Hall defines identity as a bridge between the personal

and the public, connecting individuals with their cultural identities and aligning subjective feelings with objective societal roles. This understanding underscores the continuous construction and reconstruction of identities relative to others.

The OECD (2016) recognizes the importance of intercultural competence, referring to it as global competence. This encompasses knowledge, understanding, skills, attitudes, and values used to collaborate on globally relevant issues, promoting justice, peace, inclusivity, and sustainability. These identity and global competence concepts offer critical insights into enhancing classroom activities. They provide a framework for appreciating language's evolving nature, shaped by dynamic societies and influences. Acknowledging cultural contexts and interactions fosters a deeper understanding of language diversity and cultures, which is crucial for cultivating intercultural competence in today's globalized society.

To address foreign children's educational challenges, Europe and the United States have adopted intercultural education and promoted respect and understanding among diverse cultures despite differences in language and culture (Rizza, as cited in Holguín, Morales, & Torres, 2018, p. 60). This educational approach recognizes the equality of all cultures, striving for social justice, freedom, equality, and solidarity. It vehemently opposes cultural hegemony or prejudice that compromises human dignity and rights.

In bilingual classrooms, intercultural competence often prioritizes linguistic aspects over cultural ones. Nevertheless, it is crucial to include cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions (Vilà, 2002, as cited in Rico-Martin, 2005). Teachers' training in bilingual settings, influenced by international experiences, improves intercultural approaches (González, 2022). Personal training in professional competencies and social transformation is integral to language learning (Santos-Sopena, 2020).

Stressing intercultural competence training for bilingual teachers equips students with the global understanding necessary in an increasingly interconnected world (Olaya & Gómez, 2013, cited in Acosta, de Haro, & Frutos, 2018). Culturally aware communication is paramount to prevent misunderstandings (López-Botet, 2021). Successful intercultural education relies on teacher training and global ethics implementation, transcending classrooms to create inclusive environments. The curriculum's intercultural competence becomes pivotal in nurturing critical, influential citizens capable of addressing contemporary challenges.

Paricio (2014) underscores pedagogical strategies focusing on linguistic and intercultural aspects, preparing students to interact respectfully with diverse cultures. Rojas (2017) advocates transversal pedagogical approaches, including all educational community members, emphasizing elements like intercultural and peace content, group dynamics, tolerance, respect, active listening, and socio-moral and socio-affective strategies.

Understanding intercultural and communicative competence is vital. Tzu-Yiu (2020) distinguishes between intercultural competence, enabling effective interaction among diverse cultures, and communicative competence, encompassing linguistic proficiency and contextual language use. Both competencies are essential for cultural exchange, requiring tolerance and discourse analysis (Amara, 2020). However, some curricula focus on managing diversity rather than fostering intercultural practices (Wello et al., 2017).

Martínez-Lirola (2018) emphasizes implementing cultural exchange practices in bilingual classrooms, considering students' backgrounds. Intercultural competence incorporates dimensions such as knowledge, attitudes, and skills (Sercu, 2002), with models proposed by Byram (1997) and Deardorff (2006). Perez (2017) suggests embracing both cultures equally, highlighting the term "bicultural" for intercultural practices, where the incorporation of two cultures need not be identical.

Intercultural Bilingual Education (IBE) and Intercultural Competence

Intercultural education lacks a universally satisfactory definition, but recent perspectives view it as a method rooted in democratic values, aiming to promote pluralism, inclusivity, and respect for cultural differences. It embraces

cultural diversity to enrich citizens through idea exchange, knowledge application, and cultural practices, fostering active, critical, and democratic societies based on equity and respect (Louzao et al., 2020; Vera, 2022).

Intercultural Bilingual Education (IBE)

IBE is a movement recognizing and valuing cultural diversity, especially significant for indigenous communities seeking to bridge cultural gaps and overcome oppression. It represents a political victory for indigenous people but requires widespread implementation, beginning with intercultural teacher training. Teachers ideally should be fluent in multiple languages besides Spanish and knowledgeable about ancestral practices. Differences in intercultural approaches exist among countries, with a substantial gap in utilizing intercultural tasks (Valdez-Castro, 2021; Correa, 2021; Villegas, 2020).

IBE also has ties to decolonial theory, highlighting the importance of collective memory as a tool for building decolonial interpretations of social issues and pedagogical approaches. Figures like Dolores Cacuango, known as Mamá Dulu, exemplify this political-pedagogical praxis rooted in hope, justice, dignity, freedom, and humanization, resisting ethnic, racial, gender, and class oppression. IBE's contemporary approach advocates inclusive discussions and activities about cultural practices, strengthening indigenous identity while challenging majority-minority dynamics. It aims to provide equal opportunities for developing intercultural skills and communication, with language playing a pivotal role (Walsh, 2020; Valdiviezo, 2020; Dalton et al., 2019).

To sum up, IBE offers a promising solution to address socio-political and pedagogical challenges. Valuing cultural diversity, it seeks to dismantle oppressive structures, bridge cultural divides, and provide equitable access to intercultural skill development, ultimately promoting a more inclusive and equitable education system (Valdiviezo, 2020; Dalton et al., 2019).

Critical Aspects of Second Language Learning in the Bilingual Classroom

Emotions fundamentally influence learning, as humans perceive and process information through emotional filters (Francisco Mora, 2000, as cited in Segovia, 2018). Understanding the emotional dimension is essential in language learning. Students tend to apply the cognitive patterns and networks formed in their first language (L1) when acquiring a second language (L2). Proficiency in the L1 can impact L2 skills, particularly in terms of coherence and cohesion. The L1's influence extends to semantics and morphology in the L2 (Biswas, 2021).

Affective variables significantly motivate second language acquisition, as recognized by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Existential competence, deeply intertwined with language learning highlights the importance of emotions. Students' negative or positive attitudes can significantly affect language learning outcomes (Getie, 2020). Consequently, effective language teaching and learning should consider students' emotional contexts, as affective factors play a substantial role in language learning success (Getie, 2020). Language learning also involves adopting behaviors related to the target language's culture. Interference from the first language can impact students' linguistic performance in the target language, with less proficient students facing more significant challenges. Low lexical development in the first language can negatively affect second language learning and teaching processes (Getie, 2020).

Sociocultural Theory and Social Interaction (ZPD) in Bilingualism

As Lin (2019) claims, Vygotsky's theories have pivotally contributed to language learning throughout the last decades, focusing on the importance of understanding oneself, others, and the world. The connection between these aspects is made possible through social interaction, which indicates that language learning cannot be achieved in isolation. Regarding this idea of language as an aspect of human life, Marc Pagel, in his lecture *The Evolution of Language: From Speech to Culture* (2019), explores ideas concerning the evolutionary history of humans and the origins of language. Pagel suggests that language evolved primarily to facilitate social interaction and human coordination. In this sense, language is an essential tool without which humans would not reach agreements easily or even be able to create and transform reality.

To consider language as a cognitive phenomenon, Steven Pinker (2008) emphasizes the mental aspect of language and how it is shaped by brain activity. He argues that humans are born with an innate ability to learn language, supported by the brain's remarkable plasticity in early childhood. During this critical period, the brain is highly receptive to linguistic input, and children can rapidly acquire the complex rules and structures of their native language. However, this plasticity declines as humans reach adulthood, making it more challenging to learn a new language. Pinker suggests that language is a means of communication and a cognitive tool that enables humans to think and reason in sophisticated ways. He highlights the role of language in shaping human thought and culture, arguing that language structures and patterns influence how we perceive and interpret the world around us.

Most teachers know that sociocultural theory stands out within contemporary pedagogical approaches. This perspective, applied to bilingual settings, means that learning is a process in which sociocultural instruments are essential (Biswas, 2021). These sociocultural instruments are related to the interaction between subjects (human beings). The concept of Zone of Proximal Development points to the analysis of the learner's potential to raise themselves to higher levels of development through internalization; this is the meaning of developmental language learning. This is also the content of the concept of the ZPD. Consequently, as Biswas (2021) states, ZPD is a defining feature in any study of language learning.

When considering the Zone of Proximal Development, it is essential to note that optimal problem-solving and performance may only sometimes be achieved through teacher-led instruction. The acquisition of knowledge can also be facilitated by peer learning, in which students act as a source of information and support for one another.

From Infante and Poehner (2019), it can be understood that co-constructed learning is meaningful. What is done with the help of a classmate or instructor can be done tomorrow without assistance. This social interaction teaching approach also focuses on scaffolding strategies for cooperative learning (Huston, 2020).

Students from different cultural backgrounds inevitably bring their home cultures into their English classrooms (Iswandari & Ardi, 2022), which can be used to develop a multicultural classroom that integrates knowledge diversity, and such an approach will be a great help when designing an inclusive environment that fosters a sense of belonging and promotes cultural awareness. Therefore, embracing diversity and promoting cultural exchange can significantly benefit students' academic and social growth.

Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT)

According to Snigdh (2022), the term "intercultural" commonly refers to communication in a cross-cultural setting where speakers come from different cultures and may have varying characteristics such as language, religion, nationality, region, gender, and social and economic status. In such situations, they can influence each other and learn new skills and cultures by interacting with each other, both inside and outside the classroom, especially in the context of teaching and learning a second language.

Collaboration, communication, critical thinking, and creativity are crucial to achieving educational goals at all levels of education, including elementary and higher education. Yurtsever and Dilara (2021) propose that cultural awareness is a vital component of a student's social and academic growth, and students must recognize that respecting and understanding other cultures is necessary to succeed in the educational environment. Thus, the key to meaningful learning is acknowledging and appreciating diverse cultures.

It is essential to consider the context of teaching a class. Nieto (2019) suggests that teachers should consider the external factors and competencies each one is developing to achieve an excellent learning process and take advantage of harmonious diversity. CRT meets the education needs of all types of cultures, and despite the differences, it finds solutions to meet all these cultural diversities (Rodríguez-Izquierdo & González, 2021).

In an allied fashion, Valdez-Castro (2021) claims that CRT approaches school integration of cultural experiences and aims for better academic performance by considering students' needs. It involves the teacher's consideration

of students' cultural and linguistic capital, racial heritage, and family background to boost the learning process. This means that education is contextualized. It considers students' experiences to make learning more exciting and attractive.

CRT builds a cultural tie between students and teachers and empowers them to function in multiple cultural settings, contents, and systems, effectively providing equity in education without forcing diverse students to operate in mainstream culture or deny their own culture (Oberg de la Garza et al., 2020).

Factors to consider in a CRT classroom (Çelik, 2019):

- The physical environment should be warm and inviting. The visual elements of the classroom reflect a wide range of cultures.
- Classroom management: Rules about the class around background, race, and learning styles should be established from the beginning of the course. "DO" and "DON'TS" should be stated and recognized by the students. Teachers should model appreciation for diversity to get students to achieve this.
- Classroom interactions: It is crucial to ensure students can share diverse viewpoints while treating everyone respectfully, even if their ideas fall outside the usual standards.
- Instructional approach: Tasks involving various learning styles should be included. Students should be encouraged to work together. Students may be asked about what activities they prefer.
- Cultural adjustment: New students from diverse backgrounds may benefit from students who want to help them. The teacher may ask these students what they need. Explain to them what they are expected to do.
- Connecting school and home: It is essential to ensure that students connect academic content with their experiences. Students may be asked about their family traditions or events that happened to them.

Teacher roles and expectations:

Çelik has parallel perspectives to Giles (2019), who states that:

- It must be recognized that we are all cultural beings.
- Diversity should consider students' cultural, racial, ethnic, and class differences.
- It should be considered that certain school practices privilege certain groups of students but marginalize others.

Devine (2020) claims that:

- Traditional approaches, such as a teacher-centered classroom, no longer fit a 21st-century setting. Additionally, like Çelik and Giles, teachers should invite students to understand and accept each other.

Materials

Authentic materials: Since authentic materials are culturally contextualized, they are pivotal in bilingual intercultural classrooms. "Authentic materials in EFL classrooms may be useful for teachers and students to develop not only grammatical skills but also to reinforce students' ability to understand and contextualize the language" (Bernal, 2020, p. 31). This author deepens the topic (authentic materials) by acknowledging the importance of language and culture in the EFL classroom. It can be summarized that the culture of the language being taught is necessary, as is the culture of the L1. This can be easily achieved through intercultural awareness, which is achieved by understanding that people belong to many different social communities. Materials must include tasks that aim to understand the target culture and the students. Considering the previous ideas, Putra, Rochsantiningsih, and Supriyadi (2020) claim that English is an intercultural language, meaning that materials should also consider other

countries' histories and stories.

Lastly, materials such as textbooks need to include student-centered activities. As importantly identified by Heggernes (2021), underused but essential tasks are the ones that aim at “learners’ explorations of their own identities and cultural backgrounds” (p. 7). Materials that ask how a cultural (L2) activity is done in one’s (L1) culture are crucial for learners to understand and use the target culture in a more exciting and meaningful fashion.

Discussion and Conclusion

Intercultural education is a fundamental pillar within language centers, shaping the programs they plan and develop. In an increasingly diverse society characterized by migration and cultural exchange, classrooms are becoming more heterogeneous, bringing together students from various cultural backgrounds. The imperative to interact appropriately with individuals who may hold differing ideals, backgrounds, or beliefs becomes evident in these contexts. Ideally, this interaction should occur without negating, rendering invisible, or dismissing the rich tapestry of differences in the classroom. Interculturality fosters mutual knowledge and socio-cultural competencies, nurturing positive interpersonal relationships that enhance the learning experience.

However, at the core of intercultural communication, participants must possess self-awareness. This self-awareness involves understanding how one is perceived when communicating with others, a vital element in promoting respect and acceptance across cultural boundaries. The development of interculturality in the bilingual classroom finds resonance with constructivist approaches and methods. As discussed earlier, student-centered learning, with a strong emphasis on the target culture, plays a pivotal role in meaningful language acquisition. Languages, as noted by various authors, are indeed cultural tools. To effectively cultivate intercultural competence, instructional materials, and textbooks must encompass diverse cultures and global experiences, extending beyond the confines of solely American or British perspectives.

One example of learners exploring their identities and cultural backgrounds is exemplified by the “Life 5” textbook from National Geographic Learning. An analysis conducted during the Material Design course in the bilingualism program at Uicolombo found that this textbook genuinely brings the world into the classroom, aligning with the publisher’s claims. This assessment also underscores the importance of an intercultural approach to language instruction and the need for materials focusing on real-life contexts.

In bilingual classrooms, approaches and methodologies for fostering intercultural competence may not be universally agreed upon. However, intercultural competence extends beyond linguistic components to envelop cultural dimensions, demanding tangible actions. Classroom activities and tasks must not only center on understanding the structural aspects of the target language but also delve into the language’s essence and worldview.

Drawing upon the theoretical foundations of renowned scholars such as Jean Piaget’s sociocultural theory, culturally responsive teaching (CRT), intercultural bilingual education (IBE), and Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), the synthesis of these concepts crystallizes into the intricate landscape of the intercultural classroom.

Jean Piaget’s sociocultural theory posits learning as a collaborative, socially embedded process. When applied to the bilingual classroom, this theory underscores the significance of creating a socio-cultural context where language learners engage in meaningful interactions that facilitate language acquisition. On the other hand, CRT emphasizes the need for educational practices that resonate with students’ diverse cultural backgrounds. In the bilingual classroom, CRT serves as a guiding principle, ensuring that pedagogical approaches are culturally responsive and sensitive to students’ unique linguistic and cultural contexts.

Intercultural bilingual education (IBE) is an approach that explicitly acknowledges the importance of interculturality in bilingual classrooms. It seeks to bridge the cultural divide between dominant and minoritarian societies by valuing cultural diversity. IBE recognizes that language and culture are intricately linked and promotes linguistic

and cultural pluralism.

Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) offers valuable insights into language learning within the intercultural classroom. ZPD represents the difference between what a learner can do independently and what they can achieve with support. In bilingual education, ZPD highlights the role of teachers and peers in scaffolding language development, making it a critical concept for fostering intercultural competence.

In conclusion, the interplay between these theoretical frameworks and pedagogical strategies underscores the importance of creating an intercultural classroom that nurtures language learning while fostering respect, understanding, and empathy among students from diverse cultural backgrounds. Intercultural education, rooted in these theories, enriches language programs and equips students with the skills and necessary attitudes to navigate our increasingly interconnected and diverse world.

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