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Rethinking foreign language teacher training: The role of intercultural competence in higher education

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Abstract

This study examines the integration of intercultural competence (IC) in Foreign Language Teaching (FLT) programmes within higher education institutions in Spain. It explores how the internationalisation of higher education influences initial teacher education, particularly in fostering intercultural awareness. The analysis reveals that while IC is mentioned in many programmes, its integration is inconsistent and often peripheral. The study identifies four major trends in IC integration, with a prevalent transversal approach embedding IC within competences but not as a distinct focus. The findings highlight the need for more deliberate and systematic incorporation of IC into FLT curricula and pedagogy to better prepare students for global citizenship. The study underscores the importance of aligning educational strategies with frameworks like the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (RFCDC) to ensure comprehensive intercultural education. Recommendations include enhancing teacher training and curriculum design to prioritise intercultural competence as a core component of foreign language education in higher education. Additionally, the study suggests that geographical context plays a significant role in shaping intercultural approaches, with regions of greater cultural and linguistic diversity showing more robust integration of IC. Future research should explore classroom dynamics and the role of digital technologies in supporting IC development.

Introduction

The internationalisation of higher education has significantly reshaped its mission, expanding beyond traditional realms such as autonomy, research, funding, and quality control (Koukouraki, 2020; Sursock & Smidt, 2010). This transformation has affected academic curricula and the development of global competencies, essential for cultivating critical global citizenship, while also emphasizing the supranationalisation of governance in education (Koukouraki, 2020; OECD, 2019). This refers to the increasing influence of international organisations, such as the OECD, UNESCO, and the European Union, on national education policies, curricula, and standards, often shaping educational priorities beyond the control of individual states.

According to de Wit and Altbach (2021), internationalisation is now a pivotal strategy for preparing students to confront global challenges, with an increasing focus on embedding values of global citizenship into curricula. However, the effective incorporation of global competencies into institutional curricula, particularly those related to language, culture, and pedagogies for their development, remains a challenge (Islam & Stamp, 2020).

As Koukouraki (2020) points out, fostering critical global citizenship has become essential in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) classrooms, where the emphasis is not only on academic proficiency but also on preparing students for active participation in a global society. Buckner (2019) further notes that the process of internationalisation is not uniform and varies significantly across national contexts, necessitating a more contextualised approach to intercultural competence and global competencies. This variability highlights the importance of integrating specific intercultural practices that nurture mutual understanding and respect among cultures — a central feature of international higher education. This variability highlights the importance of integrating specific intercultural practices that nurture mutual understanding and respect among cultures—a central feature of international higher education. As Deardorff and Jones (2022) argue, intercultural competence is not only a key learning outcome but also a foundational paradigm in internationalisation efforts across universities worldwide. Similarly, Hassan (2025) emphasizes that higher education institutions have become dynamic cultural hubs, where intercultural engagement is essential for academic integration and student success.

Internationalisation thus not only transforms curricular content but also requires a deep reflection on the pedagogical practices that contribute to global education. The intersection of internationalisation and interculturality is becoming increasingly vital as both aim to equip students with the competencies and ethical awareness needed to thrive in a diverse, interconnected world (Islam & Stamp, 2020; OECD, 2019). Higher education institutions must adopt innovative, transnational pedagogical approaches that foster intercultural understanding and global collaboration, ensuring students acquire the knowledge and skills to become responsible global citizens (Sursock & Smidt, 2010). Therefore, by innovative, we refer to pedagogical approaches that transcend traditional national frameworks, incorporating transnational perspectives, interdisciplinary methods, and intercultural engagement to better prepare students for the complexities of global citizenship.

The present study aims to assess the incorporation of intercultural competence (IC), as defined by Byram (1997, 2020), into the competences and content of Foreign Language Teaching (FLT) programs at higher education institutions. The paper also seeks to examine how the broader process of university internationalisation has influenced initial teacher education, with a particular focus on the role of FLT subjects in promoting intercultural awareness. Yoshikawa (2016) underscores a critical challenge between institutional policies and classroom practices. While many institutions espouse internationalized learning goals, course content, and pedagogical strategies, these frequently fail to reflect a truly global perspective. This incongruity underscores the necessity for deliberate curriculum development that integrates global and intercultural dimensions into both the form and the substance of education. In this regard, educators must assume a pivotal role, particularly through the integration of local experiences with global issues and the cultivation of analytical, reflective, and culturally responsive mindsets among students. To address this objective, the following research questions have been formulated:

RQ 1. How do foreign language subjects in initial teacher education programmes explicitly address intercultural competence through their intended learning outcomes, curriculum design, and pedagogical approaches?

The increasing integration of transnational education, international mobility, and academic competition further illustrates this evolving landscape. Since the late 1990s, transnational education has emerged as a significant sector, offering cross-border programmes that respond to global demand, yet raising concerns about the commercialisation of higher education (Sursock & Smidt, 2010). In response, organisations such as the European

University Association have underscored the need to uphold quality, transparency, and institutional coherence in international strategies.

International student mobility, in particular, plays a pivotal role in shaping global higher education. It contributes to the development of intercultural awareness and enhances institutional visibility and competitiveness. The Bologna Process has promoted mobility through standardised degrees, recognition mechanisms, and the creation of joint programmes, positioning international cooperation as essential for the long-term sustainability of higher education systems (Reichert & Tauch, 2003). The Bologna Process has played a key role in shaping European higher education by promoting compatibility across systems, standardizing degree structures, and encouraging mobility and quality assurance, thereby supporting the internationalisation of curricula and pedagogical practices.

Nonetheless, Buckner (2019) reminds us that internationalisation is not a uniform process; its implementation must be adapted to local and national contexts. Institutions must adopt a reflective and context-sensitive approach, ensuring that strategies are aligned with student needs and broader societal goals. This flexibility is crucial for translating internationalisation into meaningful learning experiences that go beyond mobility metrics or market expansion.

The internationalisation of higher education is reshaping the mission and functions of universities, embedding global competencies at the heart of curricular and institutional development. As globalisation continues to redefine the contours of knowledge, identity, and professional practice, fostering intercultural competence becomes essential for the formation of globally aware, critically engaged, and socially responsible graduates.

To fulfil this potential, higher education institutions must go beyond the pursuit of international prestige. They must develop inclusive, holistic strategies that integrate intercultural learning across teaching, research, and community engagement. Only through such deliberate efforts can universities become truly intercultural learning environments, equipping students to meet the complex challenges of a diverse and globalised world. This reflection invites a deeper examination of how internationalisation strategies can be designed and implemented to balance global ambitions with local responsibilities, ensuring equity, relevance, and long-term impact.

The foreign language as a vehicle for developing intercultural competence

As previously noted, in the field of foreign language teaching (FLT), it is widely acknowledged that culture plays a central role, given that language is the primary vehicle through which cultural practices, values, and beliefs are communicated (Byram, 2009; Kramsch, 2011). Consequently, learning a foreign language necessarily involves engaging with the cultural practices of its speakers, positioning FLT as a key means of preparing learners to navigate cultural “otherness” (Byram & Golubeva, 2020).

Byram’s model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), originally developed within FLT and grounded in communicative language teaching principles (Byram, 2009), results from the integration of two major components: communicative competence and intercultural competence. The purpose of ICC is to equip learners with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to communicate and interact effectively with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. Drawing on applied linguistics and sociolinguistics, Byram expands Hymes’s (1971) model of Communicative Competence - comprising linguistic, sociolinguistic, and discourse competences - by incorporating insights from social identity theories and cross-cultural communication. The second major component of ICC, Intercultural Competence (IC), is based on Byram’s earlier five factors (Figure 2), later reorganized into three core dimensions: knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Byram, 2009).

The key distinction between IC and ICC lies in their scope: IC refers to an individual's ability to interact with people from different cultural backgrounds using their own language, whereas ICC refers to the ability to communicate across cultures specifically through a foreign language (Barrett & Golubeva, 2022). Importantly, Byram (1997) argues that IC should be evaluated not only on the effectiveness of information exchange but also on the capacity to develop and sustain human relationships (p.33). Barrett and Golubeva (2022) further emphasize that Byram places critical cultural awareness (*savoir s'engager*) at the core of the model, explicitly linking it to political and citizenship education (p.62). For Byram (2009), this centrality reflects its function as "the element which ensures that language teaching has an educational function" (p.325).

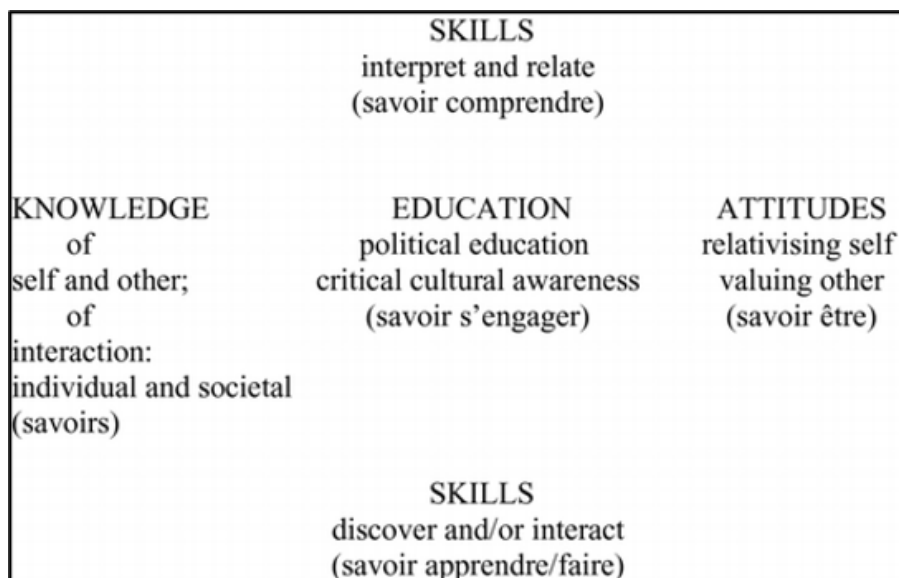


Figure 2. Factors in intercultural competence (Byram, 2012, p.7).

Figure 3 shows the interrelation of both components of ICC, the communicative and the intercultural within an educational context. In his model, the educational objectives of the linguistic, sociolinguistic and discourse components are not discussed in depth as they had already been laid out within the frame of Communicative Language Teaching. These components are structured around several core elements: knowledge, which involves understanding cultural differences and developing awareness of one's own cultural identity alongside that of others; skills, which pertain to the ability to interpret, explain, and engage with individuals from different cultural contexts; attitudes, which emphasize openness, curiosity, and a willingness to engage with other cultures.

This model underscores the importance of a reflective approach to IC, emphasizing the integration of both personal growth and professional preparedness in navigating intercultural contexts. According to Byram (1997), Intercultural Competence (IC) forms the cultural, attitudinal, and cognitive core of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). ICC expands IC by integrating the linguistic, sociolinguistic, and discourse competences required to communicate effectively across cultures. Thus, IC is a fundamental component of ICC, while ICC represents the ability to use intercultural competence through language in real communicative situations. Furthermore, Byram stresses the importance of critical cultural awareness, which entails questioning and reflecting upon cultural norms and assumptions. This model encourages the development of learners who are equipped to engage in meaningful communication within a globalized world, fostering both personal and professional growth.

Byram's ICC model has particular relevance in European contexts, where the author played a pivotal role in shaping the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001, 2018) and the Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (RFCDC) (Council of Europe, 2018). Since 1997, Michael Byram's model of ICC has evolved to address the expectations of our changing society. In that sense, García (2016) pointed out that the 2001 edition of the CEFR, did not even establish it as a competence but as an "intercultural conscience" closely related to the plurilingual competence. However, the 2018 revision of the

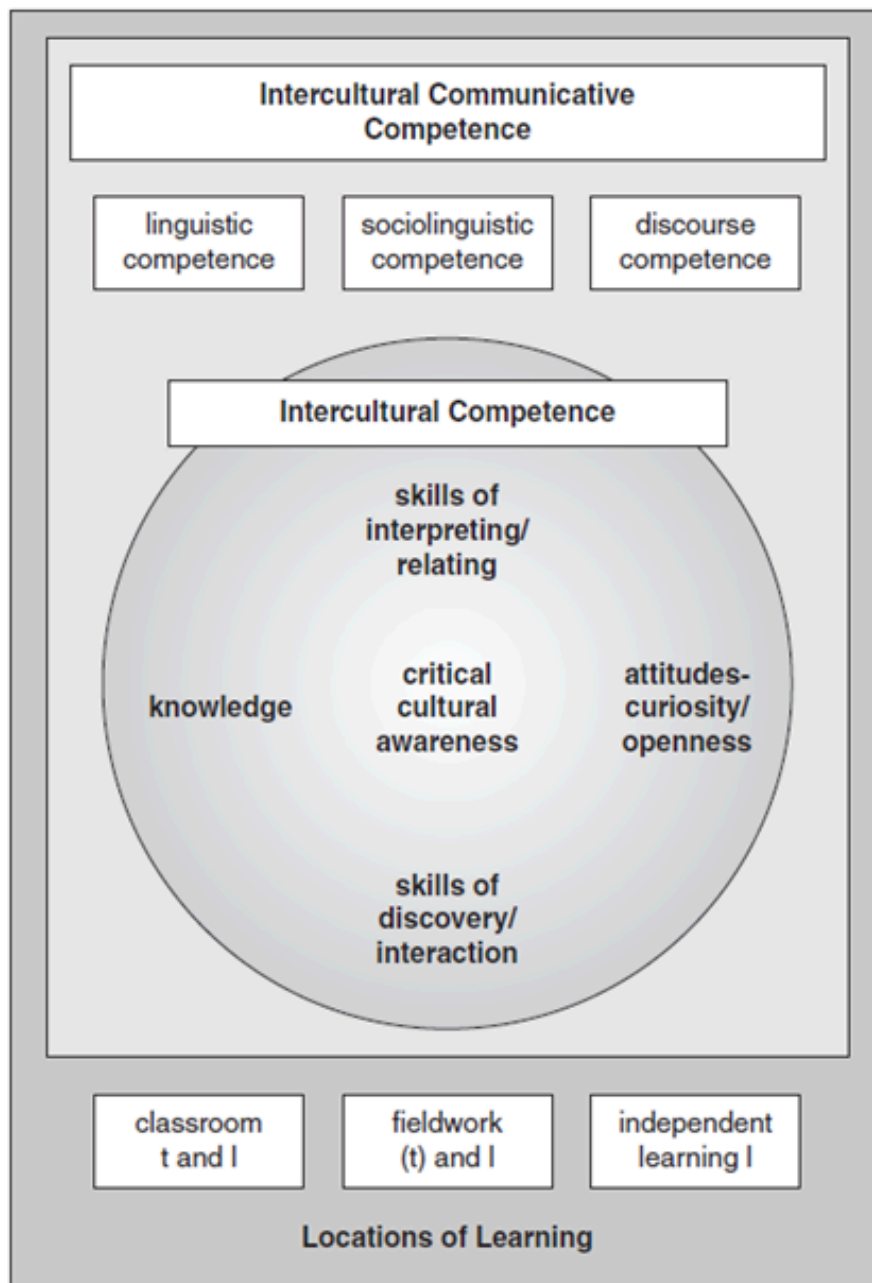


Figure 2. Factors in intercultural competence (Byram, 2012, p.7).

document addressed this void: “Neither pluriculturalism nor the notion of intercultural competence – referred to briefly in CEFR Section 5.1.1.3 and 5.1.2.2 – are greatly developed in the CEFR book” (Council of Europe, 2018, 29). Before that, Byram (2009) had explained the connection established the CEFR (2001) between the concepts of intercultural and mediation, which has become a key concept in intercultural language education. Byram argued that in the original CEFR the concept of “intercultural speaker/mediator” is described as the ability to “act as an intermediary between interlocutors who are unable to understand each other directly—normally (but not exclusively) speakers of different languages” (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 87).

The CEFR New Companion Volume (Council of Europe, 2018, 2020) modified the elements to be assessed to achieve an overall language proficiency as established in the 2001 edition, replacing the traditional model of the four skills (Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing) with a “closer to real-life language use, which is grounded in interaction in which meaning is co-constructed. Activities are presented under four modes of communication: reception, production, interaction and mediation” (Council of Europe, 2018, p.30). Mediation, according to the Companion Volume, “is related to communication and learning as well as social and cultural mediation”. Thus, the cultural component is strongly grounded in the definition of pluricultural competence and should be introduced in language teaching curriculums.

Having said that, this study acknowledges the criticism the model has received since its publications in 1997 (Dervin, 2010; Hoff, 2020; Matsuo, 2012; Riisager, 2017). The most recent of them, Hoff (2020), reviews all referred critiques, and addresses the challenges Byram's model faces. The main question is that according to the authors it equates 'culture' with 'country' and it does not address the complexity of the 21st century intercultural communication. However, the author agrees that "there is no doubt that the model remains influential to this day, and it is thus important for stakeholders to be aware of its limitations as a guideline for 21st century intercultural language teaching and learning" (Hoff, 2020, p. 68), while simultaneously acknowledging that further work is needed in order to translate such general principles of Byram's ICC model into more concrete descriptors "suited to serve as a comprehensive guideline for intercultural teaching and learning" (p.69). Besides that, Barret and Golubeva (2022) also address two more critiques. The first one referring to the oversimplification of the concept of culture, which in view of the authors it not so, as "Byram himself states that members of cultural groups are constantly negotiating their understanding of aspects of their culture" (p.66). The second criticism refers to the fact that it is a competency model where there are no specifications of the interrelation among all of them. In that sense, Barret and Golubeva (2022) argue that these relationships cannot be pre-established as they are dependent on the context and on the individuals, and that by not specifying them "Byram's model displays a suitable level of humility on its claims, leaving to future research to identify empirically the nature of these relationships in different settings, and to different individuals" (p. 67).

With the internationalisation of higher education, policies promoting plurilingualism have emerged, often emphasizing English as the lingua franca of global communication. However, the practical implementation of these plurilingual policies, particularly in Spain, has focused disproportionately on English, which contradicts the broader objectives of plurilingualism. As Lauwo et al. (2022) argue, plurilingualism challenges monolingual ideologies by promoting linguistic diversity and resisting the dominance of English in global communication. This narrow focus on English limits the scope of plurilingual policies and overlooks the value of fostering linguistic and cultural diversity in higher education.

To achieve meaningful intercultural learning, educators must first understand the relationship between language and culture and integrate intercultural competence into FLT curricula. This requires teacher trainers in higher education to be equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to guide future educators in embedding intercultural competence into their language teaching practices.

It is acknowledged that cultural diversity in European classrooms is a growing reality that necessitates robust educational responses. However, as Herzog notes, there are notable discrepancies between the competencies imparted in initial teacher training and the practical skills required to effectively teach in multicultural and multilingual contexts. Documentary analysis from Austria and Ireland demonstrates that, while there has been progress, there are also risks. If institutional developments are not given due consideration, future teachers may lack the necessary knowledge of migration and diversity, and the pedagogical tools to respond to this reality.

The challenges posed by cultural and linguistic diversity to education systems necessitate the implementation of policies and practices that are capable of responding to the increasing heterogeneity observed in classrooms. However, despite the recognised importance of CI in teacher training, many training experiences remain primarily conceptual, with only superficial integration into modules on diversity. Consequently, given the preceding discourse, it is imperative to understand how institutions of higher education are preparing teachers within the framework of their institutional curricula.

The objective of this study is to undertake a critical examination of whether contemporary curricula are equipped to equip future teachers with the professional competencies required to effectively teach comprehensively and with a holistic pedagogical approach in contexts characterised by migration and cultural diversity.

Methodology

This methodological framework was developed with the objective of identifying and analysing material that is theoretically linked to IC, specifically focusing on how the curricular planning in FLT courses represents and inter-

this competence. The decision to examine FLT programmes was intentional, stemming from their inherent connection to interculturality, as conceptualised by Byram (2020), which underscores the interdependence between language acquisition and intercultural competence.

The study adopted a deductive approach (Flores-Kanter & Medrano, 2019), systematically applying predefined categories or semantic fields relevant to the context under consideration, Spanish teacher education system. These categories were adapted from analytical frameworks previously applied in similar research contexts and with comparable objectives, as proposed by Herzog-Punzenberger et al. (2022) and Barret & Golubeva (2022) (see Table 1). The data was sourced from curricular documents of initial teacher training programmes in foreign languages for International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) 1 (UNESCO, 2013) offered at all public universities in Spain.

To carry out the analysis, MAXQDA Pro 20 software was employed to manage and process the data. A thorough examination of the 499 FLT teaching guides was performed, focusing specifically on key curricular elements such as competences and contents (Martínez, 2006; Cáceres, 2003). This analysis aimed to uncover how intercultural competence is incorporated into the curricula of FLT courses and identify the associated competencies that align with or complement intercultural skills.

The core of the analysis centred on didactic planning as articulated by the professors responsible for these subjects, given that such planning provides critical insight into how IC is embedded within FLT courses. The study scrutinised all subjects related to foreign language didactics within the Primary Education degree programmes. Specific attention was paid to references to interculturality or related terminology within the 2021–2022 academic year curricula. This qualitative approach allowed us to observe not only the integration of intercultural competence in teacher training but also its connections to other diversity-related factors.

Context of study

In the Spanish university context, degrees in Primary Education (PE) were developed in alignment with the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) to provide a generalist foundation alongside opportunities for specialisation. This structure was outlined in the White Paper on Teacher Training Degrees (ANECA, 2005), which proposed two four-year degrees comprising 240 ECTS credits: one for Early Childhood Education and another for Primary Education.

This study considers both generalist and specialist teachers within Primary Education. In Spain, generalist teachers typically deliver most core subjects, such as language, mathematics, and social and natural sciences, during the early years of primary school, offering a broad and integrated approach to learning. Specialist teachers, by contrast, have specific training in areas such as foreign languages, physical education, music, or speech and language therapy, and usually teach these subjects across different classes or year groups. To support specialisation, specific mentions were incorporated into the Primary Education degree, allowing students to focus their training on particular areas such as Music Education, Physical Education, Special Education, or Foreign Language.

The Foreign Language specialization is designed to equip future teachers with the linguistic, didactic and intercultural competencies essential for language instruction in Primary Education. As indicated in the aforementioned reference, students are required to undertake specific subjects related to the following: language acquisition, teaching methodology, children's literature in FL, evaluation of language learning and socio-cultural aspects.

It is important to note that this mention does not exist in the Early Childhood Education degrees. Consequently, in many cases, specialist teachers trained in PE also teach foreign languages in the Early Childhood stage. In response to the growing demand for bilingual and multilingual programmes, the universities and colleges of education in Spain have devised a novel programme for the instruction of foreign languages in the pre-primary stage.

Table 1. Codes and categories for the analysis of the IC.

IC CODES	CATEGORIES	IC CODES
The intercultural competence in programme	Modules that have intercultural competence used in the title along with the weightage in the overall programme (Herzog-Punzenberger et al., 2022)	N° of credits
		Keywords about intercultural competence in title of the programme
		Explicit mention of intercultural competence
	Skills related with intercultural competence (DICE report) (Barret & Golubeva, 2022)	Multiperspectivity
		Skills in discovering information about other cultural affiliations and perspectives (discovering information)
		Skills in interpreting other cultural practices, beliefs and values and relating them to one's own (Interpreting other cultural practices)
		Empathy the ability to understand and respond to other people's thoughts, beliefs, values and feelings
		Cognitive flexibility-the ability to change and adapt one's way of thinking according to the situation or context
		Skills in critically evaluating and making judgements about cultural beliefs, values and practices, discourses and products, including those associated with one's own cultural affiliations, and being able to explain one's views (critically evaluating and making judgements)
		Skills of adapting one's behaviour to new cultural environments
		Linguistic, sociolinguistic and discourse skills, including skills in managing breakdowns in communication
		Plurilingual skills to meet the communicative demands of an intercultural encounter, such as use of more than one language or language variety, or drawing on a known language to understand another ('intercomprehension')
	The ability to act as a 'mediator' in intercultural exchanges, including skills in translating, interpreting and explaining	
Intercultural competence appears together with other diversity topics (Herzog-Punzenberger et al., 2022)	Gender, disability, social class, race, ethnicity in a general description of a course.	

It is evident that certain academic institutions have instituted entry or exit criteria pertaining to linguistic proficiency in a foreign language. These institutions have also made available supplementary resources, including reinforcement courses, internal level accreditation, and agreements with certifying institutions. This development corresponds to an emergent training necessity: namely, the preparation of pedagogues who are equipped to address the demands of a plurilingual education, an approach which integrates not only linguistic knowledge, but also communicative and intercultural competencies.

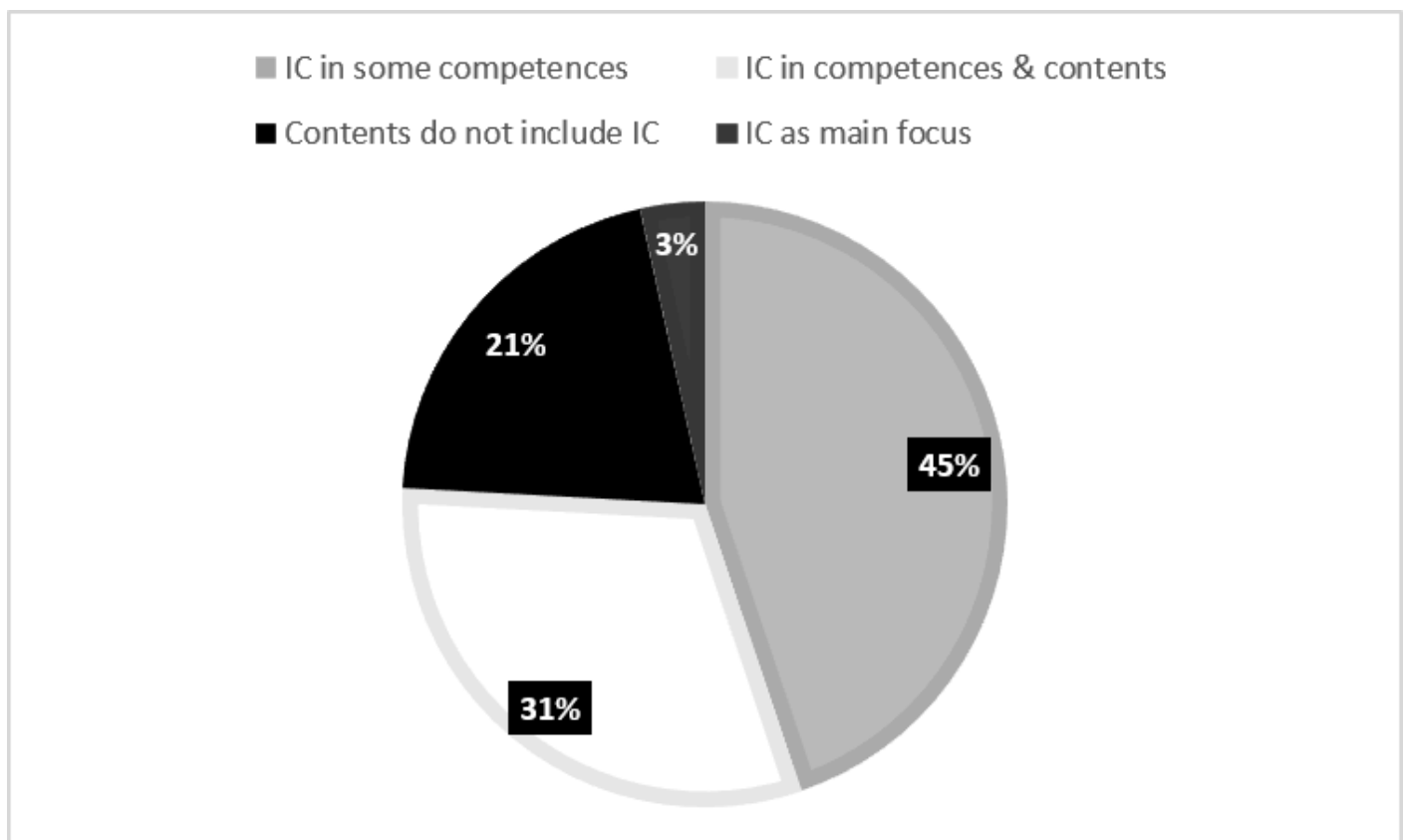
Data analysis

The data presented herein have been arranged in accordance with the methodological framework that was adopted in the preceding section. The principal finding is heterogeneity in the incorporation of IC among the competences of the teaching programme contents. Even within the same universities, there is heterogeneity among different faculties in terms of the trends in incorporation.

The major trend, in more than 65% of the subjects, is that the IC is present in some of the competences of the subject, although to a lesser extent with respect to the linguistic competence, especially, and to the discursive or sociolinguistic ones. This trend is the most representative. However, this does not imply that these subjects integrate interculturality among the contents in the teaching guides. The percentage of subjects simultaneously developing interculturality in their competences and content sections, drops to 45%, 20 percentage points less. To a lesser extent, approximately 30% of the teaching programme contents do not include this competence. Finally, the tendency of subjects including the IC as the main focus of study is very minor, it does not even reach 5% of all the subjects.

It is the object of this work to focus on those teaching programmes that place interculturality as a central axis and, then, to observe the competences related to the IC that are developed in them. The inclusion of the interculturality in the title of the subjects presents a scarce presence. Specifically, it can be observed in just two subjects: "Analysis and Production of Texts in English Language and Intercultural Education" and "Communicative and intercultural competence in a foreign language". Consequently, those subjects showing a direct allusion to the term 'culture' in the title were selected and only twenty-one subjects out of the 499 reference the term.

Graph 1. Distribution of Intercultural Competence (IC) across subjects.



Therefore, the major trend is that of subjects that do not make any reference to culture as the central focus in FLT. In the case of this group of subjects, their denomination is usually influenced by their orientation towards teaching the content, such as, for example, "English I", "English II", or to the pedagogy of the content, such as, "Foreign Language Didactics".

However, in this group of subjects, heterogeneity can be observed in their denomination, which could be due to the fact that the affiliation of the teaching staff is both to Humanities and to Social Sciences and Education. FLT subjects in Spain are either taught within the Modern Languages or the Education departments, depending on the internal teaching organization of each institution. Although English is the primary foreign language taught in most programmes, among those with a central focus on culture or interculturality, approximately two-thirds are delivered in English and one-third in French, with other languages playing only a marginal role.

In this set of subjects with interculturality as the focus, the skills present a critical orientation towards the teaching of foreign languages, including issues such as gender perspective and coeducation, as well as respect for functional diversity. They also include skills aimed at knowing how to act as a mediator between languages and maternal and foreign cultures. These subjects are designed to instruct future teachers on how to plan curriculum design and development within multicultural contexts, as well as to analyse the social environment and the contexts from which foreign languages are taught. In these contexts, variables such as geography, history, institutions, and policies are taken into account.

The frame for the teaching of FL in cultural studies is based on key concepts such as culture, civilization, identity, alterity, ethnocentrism, cultural relativism, multiculturalism, interculturality, plurilingualism, multilingualism intercultural competence. The competences developed in these subjects are linked to contents such as: ethnical and linguistic pluriculturalism in English-speaking countries; English-speaking countries geography and media; multiculturalism; tolerance and gender; culture and cultural studies; and gender cultural contents in English.

This study also focused on analysing the introduction of the IC with other diversity topics like gender, disability, social class, race, ethnicity. With regards to this, 33% of the subjects that integrate competences and contents related to interculturality, also introduce diversity topics. In this sense, a variety of topics are discussed: equality (especially between women and men), equity, coeducation, respect for human rights, or topics related to multiperspectivity skills. Topics related to empathy skills are also discussed, such as coexistence or culture of peace.

The scarce presence of the IC among all the FLT subjects showcases the fact that FLT planning in initial teacher training does not consider the competences referred in the Developing Inclusive and Creative Economies report (DICE) (Barret & Golubeva, 2022). The first code most frequently integrated in the subjects refers to "Plurilingual skills to meet the communicative demands of an intercultural encounter, such as use of more than one language or language variety, or drawing on a known language to understand another ('intercomprehension')" (Barret & Golubeva, 2022, p.72). This is reflected on competences such as "an approach with efficiency situations of learning language in multicultural and plurilingual contexts" in 28% of the subjects, or "develop the ability to communicate in order to teach in one's own language and in other European languages".

The second code most integrated in subjects is "Skills in critically evaluating and making judgements about cultural beliefs, values, practices, discourses and products, including those associated with one's own cultural affiliations, and being able to explain one's views". An example of such competences is "to promote the reading and the critical comment of texts of the diverse scientific domains and cultural contents in the school curriculum". After that, multiperspectivity skills code is the third most included, and one of the most repeated skills in this sense is to "design and regulate learning spaces in contexts of diversity attend to gender equality, equity and respect for human rights that conform the values of citizenship education". This implies taking other perspectives into account, becoming aware of diversity global contexts and those factors that may affect them.

In this sense, close relationships can be observed among the skills involved in critically evaluating and making judgements about cultural beliefs, values, practices, discourses and products- including those associated with one's own cultural affiliations, and being able to explain one's views and intercomprehension. Other relationship-

-s are also revealed such as skills of adapting one's behaviour to new cultural environments and empathy or skills in discovering and interpreting information.

Upon observing the co-occurrence of the codes (Fig.4), the intersection among those can be appreciated, as well as the frequencies in which those occurrences take place within one teaching guide. Based on that, it can be inferred that in those subjects including intercomprehension or plurilingual competences are related to a larger extent to skills in critically evaluating and making judgements', although this inclusion in the competences does not often correspond to their inclusion in the contents introduced in the subject.

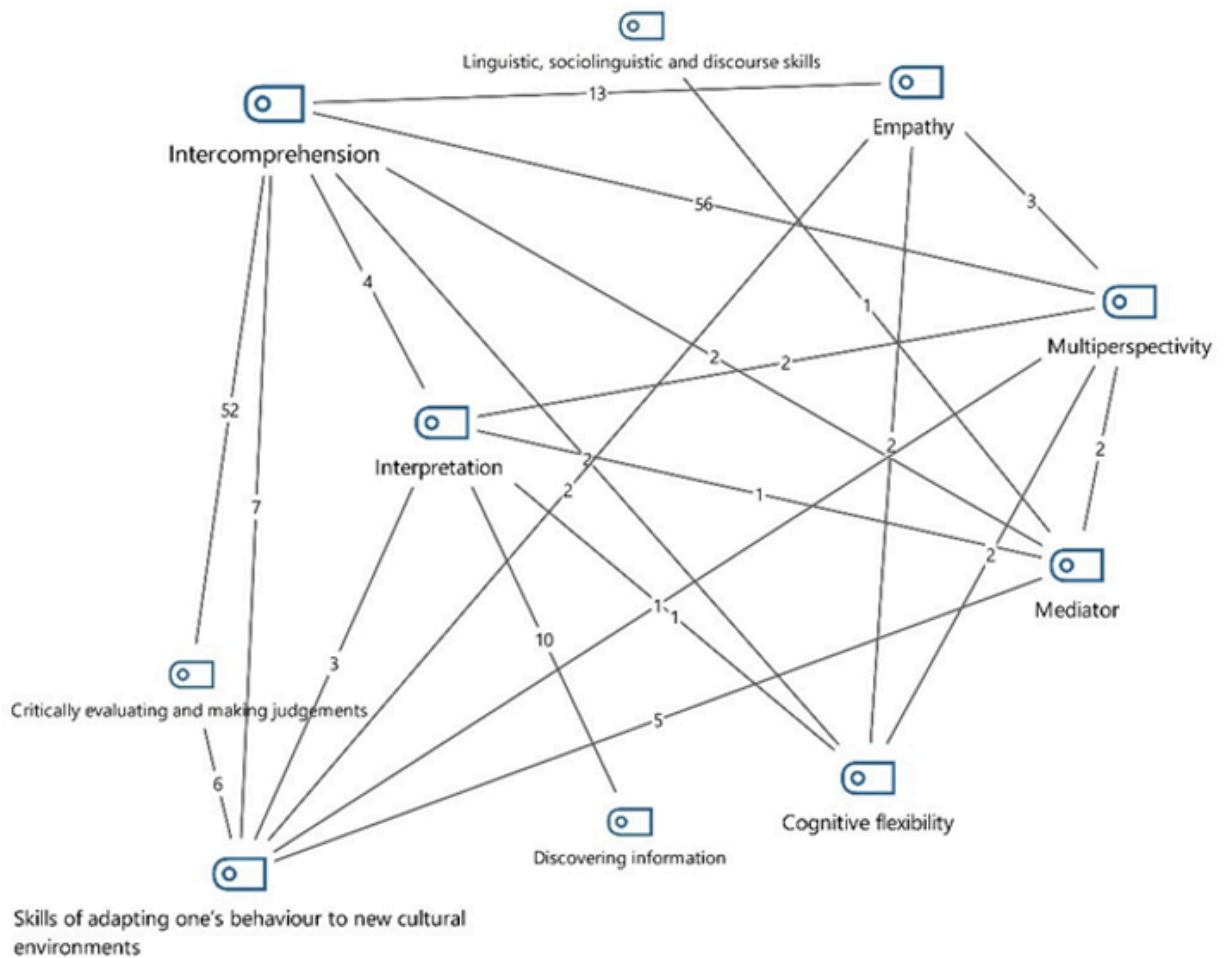


Figure 4. Skills related with intercultural competence co-occurrence map.

Finally, it has been considered necessary to observe the CEFR, as in educational contexts it plays a major role in providing guidelines for the development of intercultural competence. With regards to it, it should be noted that about one hundred of all the subjects under study incorporate the CEFR. Here, it can be appreciated that 40% of those teaching guides with competences related to interculturality also make reference to the CEFR.

Discussion

The first research question explores how foreign language subjects within initial teacher education programmes explicitly address intercultural competence—through intended learning outcomes, curriculum design, and pedagogical approaches—as reflected in the content sections of their teaching guides, with a particular focus on the pursuit of interculturality. Following Shulman's (1986) Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) model for curricular analysis for specific didactics subjects -in this particular case, the knowledge of the FL and its culture a-

-nd the pedagogical training to teach it- it has been observed that in those subjects including IC skills in their competence section of the teaching programmes, frequently do not refer to it neither in the pedagogical knowledge section nor in content specific knowledge one. This leads us to think that it might be worked transversely. Consequently, it would be interesting to investigate this matter through an analysis of the teaching narratives or the classroom dynamics. Another motivation for that might be found in the fact that the content specific knowledge is sometimes introduced through textbooks, mainly focusing on the linguistic component of the communicative competence, such as grammar-oriented manuals. It is also found, that in the pedagogical knowledge factor great relevance is given to the use of technology as a means for developing the communicative competence in many of the teaching guides. Given the fact that digital resources can be seen as window to other languages and cultures, a close study on how they are introduced in the classroom could show a transversal introduction of the IC.

Regarding the CEFR (2001, 2018) there seems to be a misconception of its competences in the content section of the syllabi. It is found that frequently, when referring to the document, the CEFR competences are confusingly introduced as the receptive and productive skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing). But the 2001 document only specifies two types of competences. In section 5.1 it describes the "General competences" which "are those not specific to language, but which are called upon for actions of all kinds, including language activities" (p.9) and in section 5.2 it describes the "Communicative language competences". The general competences in the document parallels those savoirs that Byram (1997, 2012) used to describe the intercultural competence. The fact that the development of the four skills is the focus in the discussion of the CEFR in the teaching programmes, points in the direction that often the relevance is given to the linguistic among all the components of the ICC.

The second research question defined for this study focused on evaluating whether university students, particularly those enrolled in programmes with a strong social or educational focus, are being effectively trained in intercultural competences. The analysis of these data clearly shows four tendencies in the incorporation of the IC component of the ICC, as specified in the categorization proposed by Herzog-Punzenberger et al. (2022). The major tendency includes subjects where some of the skills of the IC are referred to in the competence section of the subjects. Therefore, it is inferred that it is introduced in a transversal fashion, not as an entity on its own among the pedagogical contents. As discussed before (Hoff, 2020; Barret and Golubeva, 2022), the ICC model was particularly designed for educational contexts as a pedagogical tool, and it can be observed that is not generally incorporated explicitly or with its own entity in the FLT programmes despite European and curricular guidelines. Interestingly, it is important to point out that in several subjects the cultural awareness component is linked to the sociolinguistic and discursive components of the communicative competence, but not in reference to Byram's (1997) and Byram and Golubeva (2020) Intercultural Competence. Therefore, the IC competence is subordinated to the communicative one.

The second tendency includes those subjects that do not include any type of reference to the IC competence as categorized by Herzog-Punzenberger et al., (2022). The last two tendencies involve those subjects that are structured around the IC and ICC competences as their central focus and subjects where the IC is not referred in the competence section, but it is so in the content section. Regarding the first one, given the strong interrelation previously discussed between language and culture, the fact that FLT subjects explicitly developing the ICC among future Primary teachers leads the researchers to think of two possibilities. The first one is that FLT university teachers may rely on the general training of their programmes to provide future teachers with pedagogical tools to develop the IC among their pupils, or that their pedagogical approach to FLT is focused exclusively on developing the communicative competence.

Only those subjects that place IC at the core of their content explicitly address issues of diversity, such as race, gender, or disability. Moreover, these subjects are predominantly offered in regions of Spain with more than one official language, such as Catalonia, Valencia, or Galicia, or in territories where multiculturalism and coexistence are especially prominent compared to the rest of the country, such as Ceuta and Melilla. This suggests that the geographical and sociocultural context in which these subjects are taught plays a determining role in shaping the intercultural approach to FLT.

This study has established the relevance of mediation as a tool for intercultural education (Byram, 2009; Corbett, 2021). In that sense, it is important to point out the fact that the discussion of mediation is rarely introduced in the content section of the teaching guides. This may be due to the fact that often these subjects are structured around the CEFR, where mediation as a skill was not introduced until the 2018 update of the document. Only those subjects that develop the IC as the central focus, refer to mediation skills. Regarding this group of subjects, two other issues worth mentioning arise. On the one hand, those same subjects are the only ones discussing diversity issues such as race, gender or disability. And, on the other, these subjects are mainly offered either in regions in Spain where there is more than one official language, such as Catalonia, Valencia or Galicia, or in regions where coexistence or multiculturalism have a major presence as compared to the rest of Spain, such as Ceuta or Melilla. Thus, it can be inferred that the contextual geographical framework where the subjects are taught predetermines the intercultural approach to FLT.

In reference to Shulman's PCK approach (1986), it can be argued that less teaching and learning time should be devoted to the development the language contents, particularly the linguistic competence, and more to the pedagogical knowledge of intercultural education, as initial teacher training programmes are not language schools. Even though the FL can be learnt directly or indirectly, the main focus in FLT initial training should be didactic and pedagogical.

All the FLT subjects were analysed, and it was observed that compulsory training for generalist teachers do not emphasise the cultural component of language. It is done more so among the subjects available for the specialization in FL. Compulsory education in FLT for the generalist primary teacher is limited in most of the programmes to 6 ECTS credits out of a total of 240 ECTS needed to complete a degree. This fact might justify the lack of intercultural awareness development in their programmes.

The analysis of the data reveals the predominance of English as the foreign language taught in Primary Teacher Education programmes in Spain, despite European policy frameworks that advocate for the diversification of linguistic repertoires in schools. This trend reflects a broader pattern of Anglonormativity, i.e. the implicit privileging of English as the dominant language in global education, which has been critically discussed by Lauwo, Accurso, and Rajagopal (2022) as a barrier to genuine plurilingualism. Interestingly, while non-English foreign language teaching subjects are fewer, they consistently incorporate cultural elements either as competences or content. This suggests that the integration of diverse foreign languages should be approached through a culturally grounded lens, rather than focusing almost exclusively on the language of globalisation. Promoting plurilingualism through culturally embedded pedagogies could help counteract Anglonormative tendencies and support more inclusive, multilingual education in teacher training.

Conclusion

The general aim of this study was to determine whether the IC is introduced in FLT initial training programmes in Spain. This study aimed to assess the integration of IC into FLT programs at higher education institutions and examine how the broader process of university internationalisation has influenced initial teacher education, particularly in relation to fostering intercultural awareness. The findings indicate that while intercultural competence is mentioned in many programs, its actual integration remains inconsistent and often peripheral, despite strong recommendations for its inclusion in educational guidelines like the CEFR (2001, 2020) and RFCDC (2018). These frameworks emphasize the importance of intercultural competence as part of the broader goal of preparing global citizens, yet it is not sufficiently highlighted in teaching curricula or explicitly addressed in pedagogical strategies.

The study identified four major trends in how intercultural competence is integrated into FLT programs. The most prevalent trend involves a transversal integration of IC, where intercultural components are embedded within the competence section but not as a distinct focus. This finding is consistent with Gregersen-Hermans (2017), who highlights the diverse conceptualisation of global readiness and intercultural competence in higher education, often leading to vague or incomplete implementations. This is further compounded by the fact that intercultural elements are often subordinated to communicative competence, with cultural awareness linked to

sociolinguistic and discursive components rather than the broader concept of intercultural competence (Byram, 1997, 2020). In many cases, FLT programs overlook the nuanced relationship between language and culture, which is critical for developing intercultural communicative competence (Gregersen-Hermans, 2017).

A second trend revealed that many programs lack any explicit reference to intercultural competence, raising concerns about the failure to adequately address the needs of students in an increasingly globalized educational landscape. The transversal integration of IC into the curriculum suggests a potential gap in the pedagogical focus on intercultural education within FLT, as suggested by Buckner (2019), who argues that internationalisation efforts often focus on outputs rather than on achieving deeper learning outcomes. This lack of explicit focus on IC reflects a broader issue in higher education where intercultural competence is not adequately developed across all disciplinary contexts, despite its importance for global citizenship (de Wit & Altbach, 2021).

In contrast, certain subjects with a specific focus on intercultural competence successfully incorporate it into their pedagogical approaches, aligning with the Internationalisation of the Curriculum (IoC) model (Leask, 2015). These programs are more likely to explicitly address the need for intercultural learning and to frame it within the global professional and societal contexts. However, the study also revealed that such subjects are often concentrated in regions with greater cultural and linguistic diversity, such as Catalonia and Galicia, suggesting that the geographical context plays a significant role in shaping the intercultural approaches to foreign language education.

One key limitation of this study is its reliance on curricular documents as the primary data source. While these documents provide useful insights into the formal curriculum, they do not capture the teaching dynamics or pedagogical practices that shape the development of intercultural competence in the classroom. Future research should consider classroom observations, teacher interviews, and student feedback to further explore how intercultural competence is enacted in teaching practices (Gregersen-Hermans, 2017). Additionally, the role of digital technologies in supporting intercultural competence development, especially through virtual exchanges or online platforms, warrants further investigation.

The implications of these findings are substantial for the internationalisation of higher education. As globalisation continues to shape the educational landscape, it is essential that universities recognize the need to integrate intercultural competence more explicitly and comprehensively across all programs. This can be achieved through more strategic approaches to curriculum internationalisation, aligning with de Wit & Altbach's (2021) recommendations to ensure that students develop the skills, knowledge, and attitudes required to engage with an increasingly interconnected world. The emphasis on English as the dominant language in Spain's FLT programs further highlights the need for plurilingual education (Lauwo et al., 2022), which promotes linguistic diversity and challenges the Anglonormativity pervasive in many educational systems.

In line with Byram's (1997, 2009) and Gregersen-Hermans (2017) frameworks, it is clear that intercultural competence cannot be developed passively. Universities must intentionally design learning outcomes and pedagogical strategies that target intercultural competence at all levels of education. This would ensure that all students, whether they participate in mobility programs or not, have the opportunity to develop the skills necessary to function as responsible global citizens, as emphasized by Islam and Stamp (2020).

In conclusion, while intercultural competence is recognized as a crucial component of global citizenship education, its integration within FLT curricula in Spain remains inconsistent. The study highlights the need for a more deliberate and systematic approach to incorporating intercultural competence into both the curriculum and pedagogy of foreign language education in higher education to better prepare students for the demands of the globalized world.

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