

INTERCULTURAL DIVERSITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A CASE STUDY AT UNIVERSITY OF VALENCIA

Anna M. DEVÍS-ARBONA, Silvia-Maria CHIREAC

Abstract

The current article draws upon the idea that the study of a language must in all cases be intimately entwined in the study of the particular culture to which said language is affiliated. For this, we must take into account the fact that each language reflects a personal worldview, one which cannot occur in the absence of a good knowledge of our students, especially when it comes to learning a foreign language. The present study pretends to analyze the first-grade students' perceptions of Faculty of Teacher Training from the University of Valencia about intercultural diversity, understood in a broad sense, as a linguistic, religious, ethnic, gender diversity, etc. The reasons of the importance of this research lie on the one hand, in the existence in the Teaching Guides of different competences in relation with the interculturality, and on the other hand, in the study of future teachers' needs which will use the intercultural diversity in our pluralistic classrooms.

Key words

interculturality, higher education, competences, diversity, pluralistic classrooms

JEL Classification: I23, Z13, I21

1. Introduction

The present study pretends to analyze the first-grade students' perceptions of Faculty of Teacher Training from the University of Valencia about intercultural diversity, understood in a broad sense, as a linguistic, religious, ethnic, gender diversity, etc. The reasons of the importance of this research lie on the one hand, in the existence in the Teaching Guides of different competences in relation with the interculturality, and on the other hand, in the study of future teachers' needs which will use the intercultural diversity in our pluralistic classrooms.

We set the following objectives:

- To develop intercultural skills among higher education students.
- To evaluate our students' perceptions regarding intercultural diversity.
- To analyse the given subjects in order to avoid stereotypes or common places.
- To come up with specific curricula whose aim is to develop intercultural skills among higher education students.

2. Intercultural skills

The current article draws upon the idea that the study of a language must in all cases be intimately entwined in the study of the particular culture to which said language is affiliated. For this, we must

take into account the fact that each language reflects a personal worldview, one which cannot occur in the absence of a good knowledge of our students, especially when it comes to learning a foreign language⁴ (Oliveras, 2000; Rodrigo, 1999).

The acquisition of intercultural skills is one of the goals established by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), as it states that the learner should be an intercultural speaker. Pascual and Sala (1991, p.57) also state that:

languages are not mere instruments used to conceptualize reality, to communicate and express oneself, or to regulate our own conduct and that of others. What is more, languages are a symbol of social identity, being markers for group belonging. As such, they are subject to attitudes and are attributed certain values, not only by the users of said language, but also by those who are not familiar with it.

Teachers should be aware of the fact that students enrol our L2 or FL courses with specific knowledge of the language or the culture to which they belong. On many occasions, that knowledge will be different from that of the target language; thus, a fundamental requirement concerns their ability to insert the knowledge acquired in a new language in the social context that created it. Thus, (Devís and Chireac, 2015a) state that one of the main objectives of the linguistic policy pursued by the Council of Europe and the European Commission is promoting

⁴Henceforward referred to as FL.

multilingualism. This can be achieved through contact between languages and cultures, a key element that facilitates the construction and development of intercultural skills. In the age of globalization, intercultural communication is defined as the process that leads to cultural globalization (Sorrells, 2012), and to “a world in motion” (Inda and Rosaldo, 2001, p. 11); one in which people with diverse linguistic backgrounds must adapt to a new community, defined by “unity in diversity” (Solé, Alcalde, Lurbe and Parella, 2002). This highlights the importance of learning other languages in order to develop multilingual and multicultural skills and, at the same time, it leads to the formation of one’s identity.

The *Diccionario de términos clave de ELE* (Dictionary of keywords for English as a Foreign Language), defines interculturality as:

A type of relation that is generally and intentionally established between cultures, that promotes dialogue and communion among them, based on mutual respect for their values and lifestyle. The goal is not to merge the identities of the cultures involved into a single one, but to strengthen them and enrich them creatively, in solidarity (Centro Virtual Cervantes, 1997-2016)

This particular intercultural relation is generally not easy to maintain. The most common options (Devís, 2015) include three possibilities⁵:

- Marginalization: the student does not integrate into the target language and culture.
- Integration: the student inserts himself into the target language and culture.
- Mutual knowledge and enrichment: this is the desired option, yet it only occurs in exceptional circumstances.

Nevertheless, considering that diversity is the norm, we would have to agree upon the idea that intercultural skills imply a relation among equals: “in order to establish intercultural relations, the language and culture less favoured would have to initiate a process of intracultural self-affirmation” (Devís, 2015, p. 153). To that end, Tusón (1998) suggests replacing the concept of “tolerance” for that of “love for what is different”.

3. Goal and Methodology

3.1. Instruments and participants

As previously stated, the participants of this study consisted of 44 first-grade students of the

Faculty of Teacher Training from the University of Valencia, of which we obtained a sample of 42 that completed all of the necessary tasks. All the participants follow the course programme *Llengua catalana per a Mestres* Catalan Language for Teachers, for most of them Catalan is the L2 language⁶, which is a parallel subject of the Spanish one: *Lengua española para maestros* Spanish Language for Teachers⁷.

In the beginning of the course, students were told that, within the scope of the argumentative discourse that they were working on, the texts would tackle subjects related to interculturality (in the broader sense of the notion)–, from a linguistic, ethnic, religious and gender related perspective...–. To this end, their papers would have to address the issue from as varied a perspective as possible. Given the length of the investigation, we will focus on evaluating two of the practices: an initial one, aiming to establish previous knowledge (initial evaluation) and the last one (final evaluation), meant to establish the degree to which the studied skills have been acquired. Thus, the aforementioned practices are:

- P1: students are asked to bring at least one text that tackles interculturality from a relevant perspective.
- P2: Students are asked to prepare an argumentative speech on the subject of “intercultural education”.

In the following section of our article, we will perform an analysis of the subjects that have been discussed and the perspectives that have been adopted in the process.

3.2. Findings

3.2.1. First practice

We have obtained, in total, 68 speeches which have been divided into several groups, according to the main subject.

⁵The classification is based on the degree of cultural assimilation of the emigrant population.

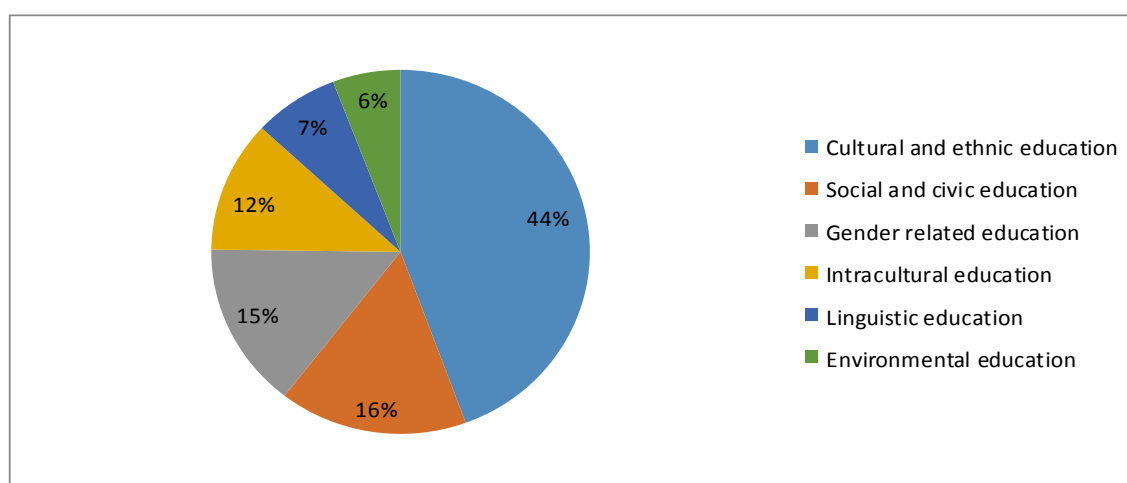
⁶ In the Valencian Community there are two official languages, Spanish and Catalan, which are the L1 and L2 of our students.

⁷ In further studies we pretend to extend the sample to students who are follow Spanish subject.

Table 1: number of texts on the subject of intercultural education in P1.

Gender related education	Cultural and ethnic education ⁸	Intracultural communication	Linguistic education	Environmental education	Social and civic education
10	30	8	5	4	11

Analysing the results, we find that our students are mostly interested in subjects such as the coexistence of different cultures, closely followed by those related to social and civic coexistence or conflicts generated by sexual diversity. The percentages are as follows:

Chart 1: Percentage of subjects related to intercultural education in P1.

We have observed, among our students, a prevalence of themes related to ethnic or racial interculturality, or to interculturality in general; themes involving an intercultural contrast which can cause xenophobic attitudes. Aiming to integrate in our study programs students pertaining to other cultures, and, in particular, aspects related to the process of acquiring and maintaining values that other cultures have to offer is an attitude that requires us to reconsider the higher education curriculum on a deeper level.

Secondly, our students are interested in subjects like euthanasia or abortion, which are constantly under debate within their social context. Not so far behind them in the list of main areas of interest among our university students are subjects concerning gender diversity; themes such as gay marriages, adoption in mixed and varied family models, or the sexism that continues to reign even in our days.

Moreover, other popular subjects are those concerning intracultural aspects, such as the debate on the presence of bulls in folk celebrations or the advantages and disadvantages of uncontrolled tourism on the coastline.

Lastly, there are other subjects that, although just as frequent as the previous ones, are in fact less relevant. It is the case of texts or speeches related to linguistic and environmental education. As to the latter, we are well aware of the raising preoccupation surrounding all that affects the conservation and upkeep of our eco-system. With regard to the linguistic education, we state that it is a delicate subject for the students of the Valencian Community, if we keep in mind that even in this territory Catalan and Spanish are living together, Catalan is a minority and language compared to Spanish.

⁸We should note that, in considering cultural and ethnic education, we are referring to subjects and themes that are generally labeled under intercultural issues, i.e. which develop arguments related to xenophobia and similar topics.

3.2.2. Practice 2

In P2, students produced 42 texts or discourses which, as a result of the work performed in the intercultural area, generate the following results:

Table 2: Number of intercultural education texts in P2.

Gender related education	Cultural and ethnic education	Social and civic education
7	15	20

On one hand, we should note that, while in P1 subjects fell into six categories (given their diverse nature), in the second practice –the final one–, subjects are much more condensed –thematically–, which has enabled us to reduce the categories to just three, due to the absence of themes more specifically linked to interculturality (such as linguistic education or environmental education, emphasized in the first practice).

On the other hand, given the proposed subject –“Interculturality and education”– it is to be noted that all of the aforementioned discourses draw upon one of the main themes offered within the concept of interculturality, but it is at all times linked to an educational perspective –in general–, or a school related one –in particular–.

As to the subjects chosen within the scope of the three main categories, there is a prevalence of subjects referring to “Social and civic education”, mainly equality of rights, the right to demand quality education, or other equally important subjects, such as the relevance of folk celebrations for the development of intercultural skills or music as an instrument that facilitates inter and intracultural acquisition.

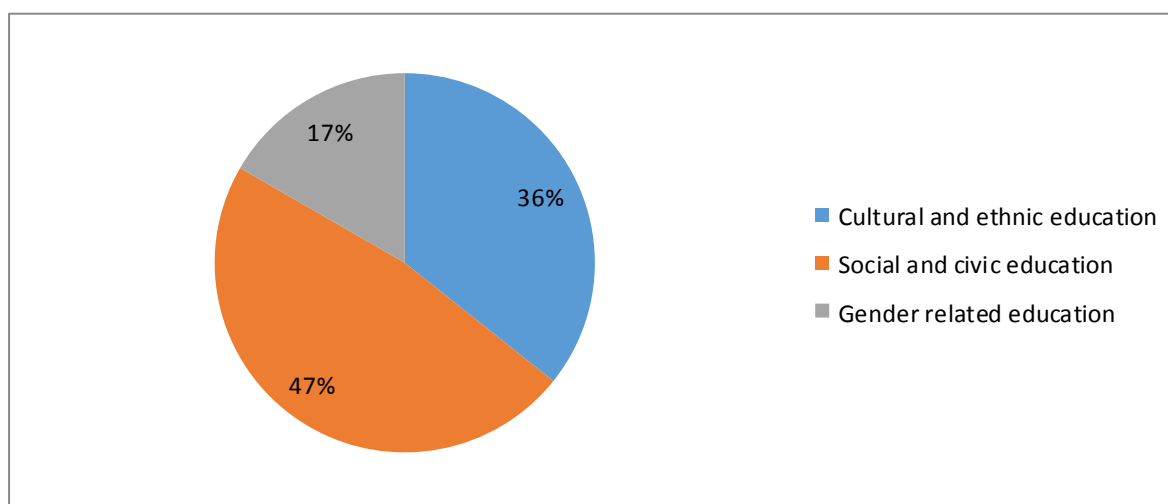
Some of the other subjects can be explained as a product of the particular circumstances of the moment in which the texts were created. Among them were subjects of high interest in society at that time, relevant for that specific timeframe; for example, the need to reduce the homework load for students in compulsory education, or a plea for full-time schooling, which would eliminate classes scheduled in

the afternoon. Nevertheless, the major, constantly reiterated theme for the area in question (interculturality) was bullying, which comes to emphasize –and rightly so, might we add– the significance of the matter and the concern it raises among all actors of society, particularly educators. To be aware of the fact that there are students who constantly suffer the psychological and physical abuse of others (classmates, mainly) is a rather unnerving experience.

“Cultural and ethnic education” also has an elevated percentage; we must state that the most addressed issue –pursued almost exclusively– is the integration of emigrants in schools. Some of the specific aspects mentioned were marginalization due to race or the defence of ethnic minorities; such cases were built on examples of the gypsy ethnic minority, which is engrained in the Spanish population.

Lastly, we will analyse the section with the least number of entries (a total of 7), which continues, nonetheless, to be relevant among our students’ creations. This touches upon the issues of gender diversity, the educational measures that are being proposed to such effect and the rejection they frequently (and altogether too often) face in the school system. Homosexuality is by far the most commonly addressed subject, with underlying ramifications concerning the right of adoption for the gay community, or sexist attitudes which reject the right to choose one’s sexuality.

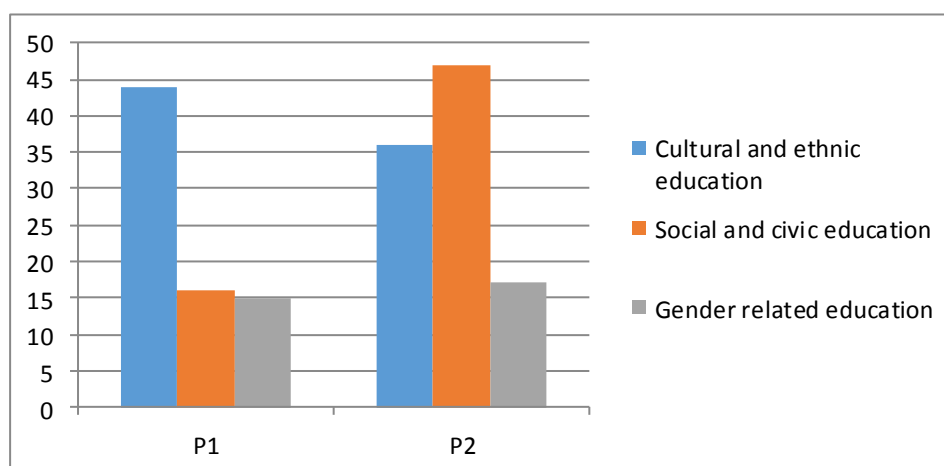
The previous data is, thus, summarized in the following percentage chart:

Chart 2: Percentage of themes related to intercultural education in P2.

3.2.3. Contrast and evolution of the treatment of intercultural skills

We have already pinpointed, in the previous paragraph, some of the key aspects related to the perceived evolution and development of intercultural

skills in the students who formed the participants sample for the current study. In the following lines, we will simply highlight the contrasting data for two of the evaluated tasks, which can be transposed into the following chart:

Chart 3: Contrasting P1 and P2 themes

In line with the statements made so far, we note that there are two main categories which greatly arose our students' interest: "Social and civic education" and "Cultural and ethnic education".

We should note that the reason behind the higher frequency of the "Social and civic education" category in the P2 chosen subjects lies in the fact that for the initial evaluation (P1), they were dissipated under some of the other categories mentioned, such as "Linguistic education" or "Environmental education". As for the "Cultural and ethnic education" category, it

has suffered an apparent fall between the two evaluative moments, P1 and P2. What actually happens is that there is a higher percentage of texts on the subject in P2, taking into account the fact that the total number of texts in P1 is 68, as opposed to those in P2, which amount to 42. This, in fact, comes as a proof of the high interest manifested by the students.

Although the numbers shown here are absolute, we ought to signal an increase in the interest shown for aspects concerning gender diversity and its

subsequent effects in education, such as the argument for gay or straight couples' right to adopt.

Conclusions

The conclusions of the current study allow us to formulate encouraging hypothesis as to the beliefs, expectations and awareness of our university students regarding the importance of developing intercultural skills during their graduate studies. Such skills are needed in the current European society, where diversity has become increasingly common.

Consequently, the current study could be summed up in the following key ideas:

- Students require better and more extensive training in the area of intercultural education in school, and, to that extent, we have observed a qualitative evolution from P1 to P2, following the assignment.
- Among the subjects that were discussed in the final evaluation (P2), the most common were those regarding social and civic education, and

especially subjects regarding the conflicts that occur in the presence of intercultural contrast, in situations where there are students pertaining to different ethnic groups or to different nationalities.

- Both evaluations –Practice 1 and Practice 2– outline the concern for gender diversity; although, in some areas, it may appear that it has been dealt with, it is really not the case for our society; school becomes, in this context, a reflection of these issues.
- In the light of the current results and in accordance to the European societies (which are becoming increasingly globalized) we must highlight the growing need for the corresponding education and administrative boards to develop a series of programmes for graduate and postgraduate studies, focused on including and developing intercultural skills –not only in core subjects, but also for cross-curricular ones.

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Contact

Anna M. Devís-Arbona, Dr.
Faculty of Teacher Training,
University of Valencia
Av. dels Tarongers, 4, 46022 Valencia
e-mail: Anna.Devis@uv.es

Silvia-Maria Chireac, Dr.
Faculty of Teacher Training,
University of Valencia
Av. dels Tarongers, 4, 46022 Valencia
e-mail: Silvia.Chireac@uv.es