

TRAINING EFL TEACHERS TO BECOME INTERCULTURALLY COMPETENT: REFLECTING UPON IDENTITIES THROUGH MULTICULTURAL LITERATURE

Dr. Juan Ramón Guijarro Ojeda

Department of Didactics of Language and Literature
Faculty of Education and Humanities
University of Granada (Spain)

Dr. Raúl Ruiz Cecilia

Department of Didactics of Language and Literature
Faculty of Educational Sciences
University of Granada (Spain)

ABSTRACT

In this paper we aim at understanding the concept of interculturality and its implications and applications for the EFL classroom. Later, we present the theoretical underpinnings of this educational relation between culture and foreign languages. Finally, we offer the reader the results of a multicultural reading experience carried out at the Melilla Faculty of Education and Humanities of the University of Granada, Spain.

1. Introduction

In recent times, interculture has become an increasingly important component in the English as a Foreign Language area. A great array of reasons for it is to be considered taking into account the obvious multicultural use of English and the view of language that integrates a wider social and cultural perspective.

Halliday and Hasan (1984) have changed our conception of language integrating it within the general context of culture and socio-pragmatics. The socio-semiotic perspective of language highlights the social meanings that language both represents and shapes, “the social structure is not just an ornamental background to linguistic interaction... It is an essential element in the evolution of semantic systems and semantic processes.” (Halliday, 1979: 114). Therefore, every language and its literature reflect the values, beliefs and mores of their general cultural scaffolding. Thus learning

a foreign language (and literature) implies learning the culture (interculture) the language expresses. Hymes' (1972) notion of communicative competence has been expanded in the recent years by Byram's (1991) and Kramsch's (1993) conception of intercultural communicative competence.

Intercultural communicative competence entails an understanding of the differences in interactional norms between different speech communities and an ability to "reconcile or mediate between different modes present" (Byram and Fleming 1998: 12). Cultural awareness is of paramount importance for the notion of intercultural communicative competence. This new concept implies understanding of both L2 and L1 cultural systems. In order to be successful in communication, foreign and own cultures are to be considered as an intrinsic part of language learning (and literature).

In FL education, we can affirm that there are likely few language teachers who have not adopted his or her own approach to classroom development. When it comes to intercultural issues, there is not a unique model to be reproduced in the everyday praxis. What we think it is more important is to foster the role of the teacher as an attitude-mediator which certainly implies the power to influence students. The teacher can thus be seen as one of the most important figures for pre-adult newcomers to a new society.

In this educational context, the research agenda must be re-opened for teachers to adjust their views on language teaching and use a more value-laden approach to teaching and learning. We take the position of a conscious training on values and attitudes to promote intercultural understanding using as basis multicultural literature written in English.

2. Objectives

With this paper we aim at achieving the following objectives:

- To settle the theoretical bases for the introduction of intercultural issues into the EFL classroom within the Spanish educational context.
- To demonstrate that intercultural education is of paramount importance for EFL teacher training.
- To foster the use of multicultural literature as a valuable resource to train EFL teachers in order to achieve intercultural competence.

3. Interculturality and the EFL classroom

The Common European Framework for the Teaching of Languages “[...] provides a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc. across Europe. It describes in a comprehensive way what language learners have to learn to do in order to use a language for communication and what knowledge and skills they have to develop so as to be able to act effectively” (Council of Europe, 2001: 1).

Figure 1 represents the ‘competences’ language learners must achieve during the process of language learning according to this document:

Fig. 1. Competences of learners, Council of Europe (2001)

GENERAL COMPETENCES	
DECLARATIVE KNOWLEDGE (Savoir)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Knowledge of the world - Sociocultural knowledge - Intercultural awareness
ABILITIES AND SKILLS (Savoir faire)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Social skills - Intercultural skills and know-how
EXISTENTIAL COMPETENCE (Savoir-être)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Attitudes, motivations, values, beliefs, cognitive styles, personality factors
ABILITY TO LEARN (Savoir apprendre)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Language and communication awareness - General phonetic awareness and skills - Study Skills

The introduction of cultural, gender, and queer (gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered) issues into the EFL classroom fall into three general competences as described previously by the Council of Europe (2001): Declarative knowledge (Savoir), Skills and abilities (Savoir faire), and Existential competence (Savoir-être).

Taking into account these facts, when a student learns a foreign language, he or she is not only learning an isolated system of linguistic symbols, but a cultural system which leads people to a metaphorical intercultural sphere. Subsequently, learners will

develop a series of intercultural skills and abilities which will allow them to open to the world, to new languages and new cultures:

In some cases, the learning of a foreign language aims above all at imparting declarative knowledge to the learner [...]. In other instances, language learning will be seen as a way for the learner to develop his or her personality [...] or to develop his or her knowledge of how to learn (greater *openness to what is new*, *awareness of otherness*, and *curiosity about the unknown*). (Council of Europe, 2001: 135).

If language and culture are inseparable, then when a person is acquiring a new language, he or she is acquiring a new culture at the same time. Notwithstanding, this new culture is neither the first culture nor the foreign culture, but a new hybrid cultural space called “third place” by Kramersch (1993). This new place involves the language learner in objective and subjective reflection of first culture and foreign culture where meanings are to be chosen depending on personal perspectives. Following this approach, individual interpretation of culture is more important than performing given stereotypes.

For Kramersch (1993: 205-206) there are four main premises of culture which are to be considered in education:

1. *Establishing an sphere of interculturality*: to relate first culture to foreign culture and to reflect on conceptions of first culture and foreign culture.
2. *Teaching culture as an interpersonal process*: to present not only cultural facts in a structural way, but to present understanding processes, values, beliefs, or attitudes.
3. *Teaching culture as difference*: culture is not only national traits, but race, gender, social class, etc.
4. *Crossing disciplinary boundaries*: in order to carry out this approach, teachers need to have wider knowledge on subjects related to culture such as ethnography, psychology, sociology, or sociolinguistics.

For teacher training, the process of acquiring culture and language in a successful way is very important. Kramersch and Sullivan (1996) state that learners

should use language to communicate properly with English native speakers and also use that language to reflect their own cultural backgrounds and values. The term ‘glocal’ (global + local) can summarize this educational situation. For example, Medgyes (1999) echoes this concept stating that bilingual/bicultural teachers are more valuable models for foreign language learners than monolingual or monocultural teachers. Considering this approach, teachers and learners can mediate between cultures and make clear their position fostering communication between them in “third places”.

When it comes to culture, gender and sexual orientation in the field of EFL, we could say that a person is ‘interculturally competent’ when he or she:

[...] respects individuals from other cultures; is open to new learning; is flexible; has a healthy sense of humour; tolerates ambiguity well; is sensitive to own prejudices; approaches others with a desire and an openness to learn; is genuinely interested in others; sees differences not in terms of inferiority but as learning opportunities; and makes continued and sincere attempts to empathetically understand the world from other’s point of view (Lynch, 1999: 77).

Edelhoff (1987: 76; in Byram y Fleming, 1998: 255-256) presents the following points to have into account by FL teacher trainees for intercultural teaching. These competences clarify the statements presented above making reference to specific knowledge, skills and attitudes towards the whole educational system:

Knowledge:

- Teachers must acquire knowledge about cultural history and context of the FL target community.
- Teachers must acquire knowledge of their own cultures and the way they are perceived by others.
- Teachers must have active knowledge and be ready to be applied and interpreted within the educational context and learning styles of their students.
- They must know the constraints of language and the use of it by foreign speakers, and the way to avoid wrong interpretations.

Skills:

- Teachers must have communication skills for negotiation in the classroom and in international communication in the own country and others.
- Teachers must be able to have textual skills, *i.e.*, to be able to interpret any kind of text (written, oral, audiovisual) or face to face interaction.
- Teachers must be able to develop skills to create learning contexts based on experiences and negotiation.

Attitudes:

- Teachers who are thought to educate students in interculturality must also be intercultural students.
- Teachers must be ready to consider the ways they are perceived by others and be curious about knowing more about themselves and about others.
- Experience and negotiation are the right ways to get understanding.
- Teachers must be ready to share meanings, experiences, and feelings with their students and with people of other cultures.
- Teachers must be able to participate actively searching on the ways modern languages can affect positively peace and international understanding.
- Teachers must adopt the role of social and intercultural interpreters.

Byram's (1997) proposes a model of intercultural competence consisting of five distinct but interdependent components:

- Knowledge: About social groups and cultures in one's own country and in the interlocutor's country. About processes of interaction at societal and individual levels.
- Attitudes: Curiosity and openness. Readiness to suspend disbelief and judgement with respect to other's behaviours. Willingness to suspend belief in one's own behaviours and to analyse them from the point of view of the other.
- Skills of discovery and interaction: Ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture. Ability to use knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of communication.
- Skills of interpreting and relating: Ability to interpret a document or event from another culture. Ability to explain it and relate it to documents and events from one's own culture.

- Critical cultural awareness: Ability to evaluate perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures.

4. Spanish EFL teachers' competences and the curriculum

Following the needs analysis carried out by the Spanish Educational Reform and the major guidelines (R.D. 1006/1991; BOE 26-6-91), Madrid and McLaren (1993:10) propose the following goals for an elementary and intermediate level related directly to values and the appreciation of foreign cultures:

1. To appreciate the communicative value of the foreign language and the student's own capacity to use it, showing a positive attitude, understanding and respect towards other foreign languages and other cultures.
2. To improve the students' general and basic education by introducing cross-curricular contents and activities through the FL syllabus.

Related to the axiological component of competences, Madrid and McLaren (2004) summarize the attitudinal parameters "Savoir être" in the following capacities to cope successfully with differences in multilingual and multicultural societies:

- To be sensitive to the new multicultural, plural and social reality developing strategies for social and educative inclusion.
- Capacity to be a teacher in a critical, auto-critical, and reflexive manner within a multicultural community with a great array of values.
- To be able to adopt attitudes which facilitate integration and normalization of differences with an ethic compromise and the right to differences.

Madrid and McLaren (2004: 24-25) present a series of general and specific objectives to be achieved by EFL teachers in order to fulfil the requirements posed by Spanish Educational laws. Below, we present some of the most noticeable ones which refer directly or indirectly to the axiological component in teacher training:

1. To be able to practise the profession efficiently within an Autonomous Community, in Spain and in present-day pluricultural and plurilingual Europe, by recognising and accepting the multicultural diversity of modern society and being prepared to work in multicultural educational contexts. This will mean in turn a) being able to relate the students' home culture to the foreign culture; b) encouraging cultural sensitivity and developing strategies which help the learner relate to other cultures; c) being prepared to act as intermediary between speakers from different cultures; and d) overcoming cultural stereotypes.

2. To develop competences enabling an increased mobility within Europe. The European dimension of pre-service FL teacher education means a) developing specific skills which encourage transversal, plurilingual communication and intercultural processes; b) realising that each European language represents the culture of the community which speaks it; and c) encouraging empathy, tolerance and understanding of the cultures and peoples of Europe.

3. To be open to new cultural experiences in the country where the FL is spoken by spending time in the country, which will allow them to a) identify specific semiotic features of the culture; b) recognise sociocultural characteristics; c) compare social and cultural features of the foreign society with those of the home culture; d) distinguish social rules and appropriate behaviours; e) organise future exchange programmes for teachers and students, etc.

According to Vez Jeremías and González Piñeiro (2004: 374), in order to achieve control in intercultural competence, as a manifestation of axiological competence, EFL teachers are to:

- provide information about social aspects of the target culture,
- generate curiosity and interest in the target culture,
- provide an expectation that all children will become intercultural mediators,
- establish a classroom atmosphere that encourages the exploration of otherness,
- use the cultural content as a source of language activities,

- plan an intercultural programme that caters to children's cultural needs,
- observe and record the children's intercultural progress,
- keep cumulative, dated samples of children's activities to show their development.

Teachers are encouraged to deal with diversity in the classroom but we suspect that the reality is far different from the postulates of Educational Laws. This situation is mainly due to the lack of (in)formation to address these issues in the EFL classroom and not a conscious racist, sexist, or homophobic position.

Obviously, it is acknowledged that teachers lack specific training to address these requisites. Universities should train future teachers in education for tolerance and so forth. When it comes to otherness issues, academic staff need basic information about culture, gender, homosexuality, strategies to prevent violence, psychological bases for possible crises, and appropriate strategies to fight against intolerance.

5. What do we understand by multicultural literature?

At the beginning, the term multicultural literature referred to those books which were about different cultural backgrounds; however, this original meaning has amplified its contents and now it covers all those topics related to otherness and difference. Thus, it is defined as that literature which deals with traditionally marginalized groups such as women, the elder, homosexuals, linguistic and religious minorities, and the disabled.

Multicultural literature is a good medium to foster respect towards other cultures (in the broad sense), to highlight the common features of individuals, and to promote people's self-esteem who share the same ethnic minority. And this is one of the main objectives of education in Spain nowadays, that is, to educate children in tolerance towards differences to properly develop within global and multicultural societies. Both pedagogy and children's and young adults' literature studies state the benefits of the use of multicultural literature within the EFL classroom. Axiological and aesthetic education, critical thinking, knowledge of the world, reading, and communicative competence are among the main contributions of multicultural literature to the people's minds.

Specifically, the work with multicultural literature is acclaimed by authorities such as Ghosn (2002) for whom the use of narratives in the EFL classroom is a

fundamental way to carry out “a top-down approach”, i.e., a language methodology which goes from discourse to words. It is opposed to the “bottom-up approach” which goes from words to discourse; this is the most widely spread methodology in EFL in Primary Education in Spain. Through multicultural literature we can foster a “discourse-based approach” to language and literature which enables us to develop students’ communicative competence and literary education because they are exposed to whole linguistic units.

Pérez Valverde (2004) states that multicultural literature fulfils all the competences proposed by the *Common European Framework of Reference for the Teaching of Languages* (2001). Considering our work, it is relevant the intercultural awareness and the existential competence. The latter is developed through the use of stories which make students come closer to minority groups.

Many of the objectives of multicultural education can be developed through multicultural literature. Basically, these objectives can be summarized in the following principles: to foster cultural equality and respect, to reinforce the self-image, and to promote respect for diverse cultures. All these objectives are related to those stated by the *UN Convention of the Rights of the Child*:

1. Understanding and respect for each child’s cultural group identities;
2. Respect for and tolerance of cultural differences, including differences of gender, language, race, ethnicity, religion, region, and disabilities;
3. Understanding of and respect for universal human rights and fundamental freedoms;
4. Preparation of children for responsible life in free society;
5. Knowledge of cross-cultural communication strategies, perspective taking, and conflict management skills to ensure understanding, peace, tolerance, and friendship among all peoples and groups. (UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, 1992: 224).

Through multicultural literature, children who belong to marginal communities or ethnic minorities develop and value their own cultural identities. Furthermore, to know stories of marginalized people who have been able to solve their problems may be highly motivating and will reinforce their self-esteem. At the same time, students will recognize in multicultural characters real people who are able to feel, who have

emotions and have similar needs to their own, i.e., they are individual human beings and not stereotypes. Students will discover that happiness is possible even if nobody shares your beliefs and values.

6. An intercultural experience: reflecting upon multicultural literature

Method

Respondents. Respondents in this project are 5 EFL teacher trainees from the Faculty of Education and Humanities of Melilla (University of Granada, Spain). They are students of the subject “Children’s and Young Adults’ literature in English” for the third year of the degree BA in EFL for Primary Education. They are all women. This is representative of the feminization of the education sector for primary education in Spain. Their ages range from 20 to 21 years old. We just wanted this study to be based on case studies and the motivation to choose these participants was that they were volunteers to undertake it.

Context. Melilla is a Spanish city placed in the North of Africa (Morocco). Within the general context of Spain, Melilla has a special relevance when it comes to intercultural issues. Four cultures coexist in this small city of just 60.000 inhabitants: Christians, Muslims, Jews, and Hindus. In this context we assume that the debates around different perspectives on sexual orientation, for example, are richer than in other more neutral environments.

The experience. To undertake the experience, we have used the book *From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun* (1995) by Jacqueline Woodson. This is a good example of Young Adult Multicultural literature (YA novels) to be exploited in the EFL classroom from a didactic point of view. This novel is about an intelligent young Afro-American guy who lives in New York called Melanin Sun who has to face his own and people’s prejudices when his mother tells him that she is a lesbian and that she has fallen in love with a white woman. The diary provides us with the skilful and axiological growing-up process of Melanin and the vicissitudes of life. He has to adapt to the gossiping of the neighbourhood, to generational and personal conflicts, and to a good deal of tolerance towards different models of familiar and personal relations based on sexual orientation

differences. Racism is also addressed here in the figure of Melanin's mother who is in love with the white woman. The process of the study is levelled in three main stages:

1. Before reading: Before reading the text, we have provided respondents with this battery of questions to be taken into account and to be thought of while reading the text:

- 1.1. Notions about family: What are the implications of the term 'family'?
- 1.2. How do you feel about being different from everyone else?
- 1.3. When is it important to know that someone is gay or lesbian? When is it not important at all?
- 1.4. In your city, what do people say about gays or lesbians?
- 1.5. What is the importance of sexual orientation for self-identity and social life?
- 1.6. Pedagogically speaking, what have you learned from this experience?

2. While reading: Reading the text and solving doubts about vocabulary and grammar. The reading phase has taken two weeks time. Students are not obliged to read a certain amount of pages per day. On the contrary, we have preferred that they enjoy the process because we believe that pleasure may be at the very heart of reading.

3. After reading: The after reading level is devoted to discuss the questions provided to the respondents during the 'before reading' step. We asked the respondents to answer these questions taking into account their attitudes and thoughts before reading the novel and the, after reading it. With the respondents' narratives, we try to elucidate the level of education and intercultural understanding achieved by means of the careful and thoughtful reading of *From the notebooks of Melanin Sun*. Respondents are allowed to provide examples from the text to illustrate their comments when they consider it necessary. Below we present some of the most salient contributions respondents have come out with:

Results.

1.1. What are the implications of the term 'family'?

Respondent 1. For me a family is the union between a man and a woman and the children they have. This is the way I have been educated by my family but Melanin Sun has made me think of new family patterns.

Respondent 2. I could not say exactly what a family is because after reading this novel I have a lot of doubts about this term. I am very impressed with this fragment: *“I’ve always wanted a family,” Kristin was saying. “I lost mine.” “How?” I asked, still staring at the water. Kristin was talking softly. (...) “They found out I’m queer,” Kristin said, tossing her hair. She looked like a girl then – stubborn and hurt. “They stopped speaking to me. Wrote me off.” “Oh.” Had I written Mamma off? She must have been afraid. Afraid that she’s lose me. And all the while I had been afraid, too. Of what everybody would think. And of losing her. “What about Christmas? I said after a long time had passed. Kristin frowned, then shielded her eyes with her hand and looked out over the water. “What about it?” “Who do you do it with?” “Family.” “But I thought you...” “Not the family I was born into,” she said. “The family I make for myself. Close friends.” She took her hand away from her eyes. (pp. 135-136).* Now I know that it may be very hard for homosexuals to be written off by their families. If anybody in my family told me that he or she is homosexual, I would give him or her lots of love. At the end this is the only thing which matters. A family is a question of love.

Respondent 3. Traditionally, a family is a thing different from what we think it is today as we appreciate in *From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun*. We always think of a family as the union of two people who love each other, but, for example, a family is also a woman and her baby. This fragment of the novel is very illustrative: *“I write some poetry sometimes,” she said softly. “Stuff about life and my family.” When I looked at her, she was smiling. Looking at me and smiling. “What’s your family like?” Maybe she had a dyke mother, too. Maybe this was the perfect ending. “Mother, father, sister, sister, brother, brother, brother,” Angie was saying. I felt myself closing up, switching off – like a light with a dimmer switch. She would run screaming if she knew. Screaming, screaming, back to her big, big family. Back to her normal life.” (pp. 101-102).*

Respondent 4. A family is the union of two people who love each other. It doesn't matter whether they are heterosexual or homosexual.

Respondent 5. Well, a family is a man, a woman and their children, this was my idea. But lately, there appear new models of family in the media and reading this novel

has opened my mind and now I know that there are one-parent families, homosexual families. At the end, the important thing is to be happy.

1.2. How would you feel about being different from everyone else because of race or sexual orientation?

Respondent 1. I do not like being different from my friends, for example. I feel pity for Melanin because he is different because of his mother who is a black lesbian and goes out with a white woman. If I were Melanin, I would die. I cannot imagine such a situation happening to me. The following part of the novel has struck me because it refers to the complex phenomenon of racism which is a vicious circle: *“Every television show seemed to feature some black person in fail or committing a crime. Every news show talked about violence in black communities. It got so Mama and I only watched cartoons and corny sitcoms”* *“I didn’t think about white people. They were a different species, living a different life in some other place. At school, where most of the teachers were white, we were indifferent to their color. We didn’t think about our teachers’ private lives, where they went at night or who they went with, or if they even had lives outside of the classroom. We didn’t imagine their pale bodies showering each morning, thin-toothed combs raking through their bone-straight hair. We didn’t contemplate what they ate or how they ate it. White, before Kristin, didn’t matter at all”* (pp. 81-82).

Respondent 2. Being different is important because in that way you can be a special person. The problem is when people discriminate you because of your differences. If I were a lesbian, my family and friends would put me apart from them. EC, Melanin’s mother is a great woman. She is black and she doesn’t care falling in love with a white woman. This is great and it may not be easy doing so in a black community. We all should learn from her: *I like the contrast of us, the differences between us – and I like the way we’ve found our way to each other across color lines. Kristin’s amazing to me. I like her – everything about her, and her whiteness is a part of her.”* *Mama said. “Does that make sense?”* (p. 115). *Mama put her hand on her hip. “What makes you think I can’t love both of you?” “’Cause she’s white and I’m black. ‘Cause she’s a lady and I’m not! Don’t be stupid. You know why.”* *Mama sighed. “Just see her as human, Mel. Just walk into one day without being so mad at me.”* (pp. 116-117).

Respondent 3. We are all different, but we all should have the same rights. In my city I am different from other people and I am a recognized person. But when it comes to sexual orientation, I recognize that it may be very difficult. I like the following fragment when Melanin Sun is saying something racist and his mother says “When did you start seeing the world in black and white? This is such a beautiful metaphor to fight against racism. I will use it with my students when I become a teacher: *“You think just because Kristin’s white, she’s the world. Well she’s not. She’s just some stupid white lady out to mess with your mind.” I turned away from her and faced the wall. “Don’t give me that white guilt, Mel. We’re both smarter than that. Since when did you start seeing the world in black and white, anyway?*” (p. 79).

Respondent 4. The main problem of being different is that a person considers himself or herself different from others. At the end, external people do not really care about your differences; the discrimination is born inside every person. We can see how Melanin Sun discriminates white people: *“This was our place – people of color together in harmony, away from all of their hatred and racism. I didn’t dislike white people, I just didn’t think of them. For years and years, they had fought hard to stay separate from us, and when we finally said, “Keep your stupid land, we’ll find a place of our own,” they had to come over to it and check it out. I didn’t care that Mama and Kristin hung out at the gym and had gone to the same law school. But Kristin wasn’t a part of us and it bothered me that Mama had invited her into our world. How didn’t matter. I wanted to know why.”* (pp. 32-33).

Respondent 5. Being different may be a horrible thing, but sometimes you have to follow social patterns so that your parents be happy with you. Although Melanin Sun is black, he has a racist position when he talks about Kristin, his mother’s girlfriend: *“This woman wasn’t fine or a sister. She was white. White white. Like Breck Shampoo-girl white but with glasses. And those straight white-people teeth you know must have cost her parents a million dollars in dental bills. She had that shimmery white-people hair that has a whole lot of shades of brown and blond running through it and a dimple in one cheek.”* (p. 31).

1.3. When is it important to know that someone is gay or lesbian? When is it not important at all?

Respondent 1. It is important when they are your family members. For Melanin it is a big tragedy mainly due to the gossiping of people as we appreciate in: *“Let me go, Mama! Just let me go!” But at the same time I was falling right onto her chest and blubbering like a baby because I knew everybody was going to know. Everyone. Then I was begging her, crying and begging, “Please Mama. Please Mama be anything. But please don’t be a dyke.”* (p. 65).

Respondent 2. For me it is not relevant at all. I relate to people in the same way no matter whether they are homosexual, bisexual, heterosexual, transsexual, or transvestite. A different situation is when you learn that your mother is a lesbian as Melanin does: *“You’re a dyke! A dyke! A dyke! You and that stupid white lady. Nobody want you. No-body. That’s why my father disappeared and even the ugly guys didn’t come back. No-body”. My words were hot and loud right in her face like tiny knives being thrown one right after the other, right into her eyes and instead of blood, there were tears.”* (p. 65). Anyways, I’ve learnt that knowing about sexual identity is relevant or not depending on the degree of familiarity of the person with you.

Respondent 3. When you go out, for example, and you fancy a guy, it is important to know if he is gay or not. It is not important if a guy is your colleague at work or your classmate.

Respondent 4. In the first instance, I would have doubts to share a flat with a mate who is gay or lesbian and he or she is promiscuous. Now, after reflecting on this multicultural reading, I know that these ideas are very stereotypical and I should avoid them because being queer does not equal promiscuity.

Respondent 5. For me it is very important to know the sexual orientation of everybody because I can behave in a way or another depending on that. For example, if I knew that my teacher is lesbian, I would never ask her about her boyfriend. This is very relevant. In the novel I’ve been very impressed by this passage: *“Mama continued. “Is it talked about? Are there gay teachers at school?” “Why would I even care about them? Why do you? I mean, no one’s there trying to teach me to be ... a queer.” Mama looked at me. “I care because they’re people, Melanin Sun. Because I’ve raised you to care.”* (p. 59). Melanin’s mum asks him about gay teachers at school, and he answers that that question is not relevant to him because teachers are not there to teach him to be a queer. I don’t agree with Melanin. He has a very homophobic position. But I must admit that it may not be very easy to know at the age of 13 that your mother is a lesbian.

1.4. In your city, what do people say about gays or lesbians?

Respondent 1. People say that they are nasty people, promiscuous. They have the same position as Melanin in this fragment: *“When I leaned back, Mama glanced over at me. “Your friends ever talk about... gay people?” “What? Faggots?” I’m not a faggot, I wanted to say. “I don’t like that word, Mel.” I swallowed. I wanted to explain my faggot theory to her. I wanted to let her know she didn’t have to worry about me, that just ‘cause I liked collecting stamps and stuff I wasn’t going to be one of the real faggots. After all, there was Angie, wasn’t there? (p. 56).* I must recognize that before reading the book I had more or less the same attitudes, but now I have to consider changing them. I feel a bit nasty for not thinking of that before. Homosexual people suffer a lot.

Respondent 2. Well, here people are very conservative, but I think they just gossip, but it is not relevant at all. I recognize that a few time ago I used to gossip about people who are different, but I must admit that we all should think like Melanin at the end of the novel when he doesn’t care much about those nosey people in the neighbourhood: *People passing by must have wondered about us – how strange we looked together – a black guy and white woman sitting silently, staring out at the water. But I didn’t care anymore what people were thinking. Some part of me was starting to move inside of myself, shutting out all those nosey eyes and nasty things people can think to say. (p. 138).* *When Kristin lay back against Mama’s shoulder, I had to look away, tears burning at the edges of my eyes. I wouldn’t be easy. All the hate and gossip and fights and maybes... I look at Mama. She was squinting up at me and smiling. (p. 140).*

Respondent 3. They do not look at them with respect. It is the same when Melanin says: *“Queerness?” “Queerness.” “How come you can say... queer-ness and I can’t say fag---“ Mama glanced at me, then stared straight ahead again. “Because when you say the f- word, it sounds like you’re spitting. It sounds like you have so much hate.” (p. 58).*

Respondent 4. Some people say that they suffer from an illness. Many people think that this is a contagious illness. Something similar happens to Melanin in: *“If she was a dyke, then what did that make me? I’m not a faggot. I’m not a faggot! I’m not a faggot! I’m not a faggot! I’mnotafaggotnotafaggot!” I wanted to scream this into the tight space of our car. I wanted to run out onto the middle of the B.Q.E. and get hit by*

the biggest thing coming". (p. 63). I admit that at the beginning when I was not familiarized with these issues, I thought that one could inherit homosexuality from your parents or so. However, I learned that there is a great lack of information which produces a lot of fear around these terms and situations.

Respondent 5. People consider them to be weak, mad, and lack respect. Nobody would like to have a son or a daughter who is gay or lesbian. It has struck me when Melanin Sun says this about Ms. Brown, the girls' gym teacher who is said to be a lesbian: "*People say Ms. Brown, the girls' gym teacher, is a dyke. She wears running clothes all the time and her hair is pretty short. She kind of looks like a guy, if you ask me, which makes me think Mama is different. She doesn't look anything like Ms. Brown. Mama's pretty. She was making a mistake about Kristin. They were just friends, that's all. And maybe 'cause she hadn't had a good friend in a long time, she got it all confused.*" (p. 69). Till reading the book, I thought that in New York people would be much more open minded. Now, I have discovered that stereotypes around homosexuality (gays or lesbian) are also present in big cities. Well, this is fiction, but I get the impression that it is quite close to reality.

1.5. What is the importance of ethnicity and sexual orientation for self-identity and social life?

Respondent 1. Both ethnicity and sexual orientation are very important facets of individual and social life. For example, it is very relevant when Melanin first like Audre Lorde and when he realizes that he is a lesbian, he dislike her writings. This is an homophobic attitude, but it happens and we have to consider it to try to solve it: "*All kind of books, about everything. I wondered if any gay books were on that shelf and thought of Zami, by this woman named Audre Lorde. I remembered telling Mama I liked it because the woman grew up in the city and had gone to the same high school as me. Now it was dawning on me that Lorde was a dyke. Duh. Mama must have known all along. And I had said I liked it. Studied, there was a big memorial service for her Mama and I went. There must have been ten women were dykes. May all of those women were dykes. I closed my eyes again. What if? I kept thinking. What if?*" (p. 76).

Respondent 2. We are individual human beings, but we do not live isolated from the rest of the world. We live in society and thus, culture/ethnicity are relevant issues for social life. This is what happens to Melanin's mother. She is obliged to tell her son

that she is a lesbian because they two form a family: *“I need to tell you I’m in love, Mel,” she said softly. “I’m in love with Kristin.”* (p. 59).

Respondent 3. Like it or not, racism and homophobia exist. This may be due to an innate force of Nature. We are rational animals and we have to protect against others. But education must educate us not to be racist or homophobe. At the very end of the novel Melanin is re-educated and he becomes tolerant with his mother and Kristin. At the beginning he thought that if his mother was a lesbian, he could also be a gay, but he understands that that is not true at all: *I didn’t know what would happen tomorrow or the next day or the next. I didn’t know what would happen with Ralphy or Kristin or Angie... I didn’t know if it would ever stop mattering what people thought. But I was sure of Mama, sure of my notebooks. And for the quickest moment, walking backwards against the sun, I was sure of me. Maybe that’s all that matters.* (pp. 140-141).

Respondent 4. Ethnicity is not relevant for me, we all have the same rights. For me, sexual orientation is more relevant because if you are a gay and have your boyfriend, you cannot hold hands in the street. In that case, people would criticise you for showing affection with your partner in public. It is really gorgeous this passage when Ralph’s mother says that at the end what matter is ‘to be happy’ and that she wants to find also a woman if that means to look so great: *We didn’t say anything for a moment. Then Ralph laughed. “You know what my moms said?” “What?” “She said she saw EC (Melanin’s mother) day before yesterday and she looked happier than anything. Mama said she should go out and find herself a woman if that’s what it’s all about.”* (p. 120).

Respondent 5. Being homosexual is an individual option, so, from a social point of view this may not cause great problems. Socially speaking, ethnicity is more relevant because it concerns a great array of people. For example, if you are a black (as Melanin Sun) within a white community you may feel uncomfortable because you feel strange. I do not agree with this position because we are all the same.

1.6. Pedagogically speaking, what have you learned from this experience?

Respondent 1. I have learned that we, as educators, have to pay attention to all sort of differences such as culture, gender, or sexual orientation. Through education we can change things. It is important to introduce critical thinking and dialogical experiences in our EFL classroom in order to make our students more tolerant towards

otherness issues. This experience has helped me to change my attitudes mainly to homosexual people. Sometimes when we do not think much of them, we can be unfair with them.

Respondent 2. I had hardly heard about multicultural literature. I thought that it was books about other people in Africa or somewhere. Now, I am strongly determined to use it with my pupils when I become a teacher. This is really great. I'm really willing to learn more from other books and other techniques to be implemented within the EFL context. I want to talk more with my teacher about this.

Respondent 3. The most important about this is that being 'multicultural' is not the same as being 'intercultural'. The second implies learning and acceptance of differences in a conscious manner. I'm very proud of having participated voluntarily in this experience. I dare to say that I'm a bit more tolerant now than I was before.

Respondent 4. EFL teachers we are always focusing on grammar and structural patterns and we forget about the 'learning to be' part of our profession. First of all, we must develop 'existential competence' and later, 'linguistic competence' since learning a foreign language has to do inseparably with learning a foreign culture and integrating it within our cognitive and affective schemata.

Respondent 5. Introducing these topics within the EFL classroom is not an easy task. We may find a lot of problems with the school and the families. Imagine, for example, that you are teaching in a religious school which is very conservative. They may limit a lot your educative practices. Anyways, this is such a great thing that everybody should be aware of it. Of course, we all need more education on intercultural issues. I have enjoyed a lot reading this book; it's been like a personal growing experience because you question many received notions about culture or sexual identity. I've learned to be more subversive.

Discussion of results. From the study we deduce that there is a change in the perception of the "other" in our students. Differences in culture/ethnic origin or in sexual orientation make the "other" a person who expresses his or her own culture and not just an outsider to our own cultural and axiological system. Through these activities, we break the idea that intercultural activities in school limit themselves to celebration of international meals.

A series of positive values can be deduced from the respondents' arguments: openness, empathy, self-criticism, trust, and credibility. Subsequently, negative

intercultural values are neglected: asymmetry, discrimination, marginalization, stereotypes, stress, cultural shock, subordination or communicative failure.

From the answers we deduce that there is a great change of attitudes towards the concept of family. There is a personal growing which goes from a monological notion of it to a dialogical integration of the different family patterns which are nowadays in society. They implicitly have a concept of family which relates to much deeper level of culture which is in fact difficult to change. They refer to attitudes, values, and beliefs. They create a dialogical thinking which can give meaning to a constructivist approach to understanding differences.

Nobody likes to be different from the rest of the group they belong to; if they were, they would feel very anxious about that. They recognize this situation and take a position against the situations which foster discrimination at culture or sexual orientation level. They express a way of being, a kind of egalitarian relationship between human beings and peoples. This is the opposite of ethnocentrism.

They state that sexual orientation has a strong social dimension and subsequently, has to be normalized in order to eradicate discrimination. Being so, there are homophobic attitudes towards homosexuality in their city and they position strongly against it.

When it comes to the relevance of culture and sexual orientation issues in social life, they say that sexual orientation has more significance socially speaking. This is normal considering the fact that Melilla is a multicultural city where the integration between different cultural and ethnic groups is something very familiar to them.

The fact we consider highly important from this study is that after the experience of multicultural reading, the five respondents are for addressing these issues of culture and sexual orientation within their everyday practices when they become EFL teachers. In some way or another, they implicitly will follow the four steps of psycho-anthropological model to finish with racism, sexism, or homophobia: 1) Reducing the level of ethnocentrism: to avoid stereotypical expressions; 2) entrance in the cultural code of the Other: how are the Others?, how to become an Other?; 3) consciousness about self-relativism; and 4) understanding and positive negotiation of differences: to accept differences without questioning self-identity (Martín Morillas, 2000). Following this model, education must be organized according to the three components of attitudes: knowledge, behaviour, and affection.

Analyzing the respondents' answers, we deduce that it is explicit the three stages in the intercultural approach to education: decentring, penetrating the Other's system, and negotiation. By decentring we understand the process when one takes a more distant view of oneself and tries to perceive his or her own cultural parameters (national, ethnic, religious, sexual...) As Colles (1994: 8) states, "the stages through which an individual has been socialised in his/her community are lost in the mists of time, to such an extent that they may well be unaware that what seems "obvious" is a construct of the world which is culture-determined." Penetrating the Other's system is defined in the following terms by Cohen-Emerique (1992): "It is an attitude of opening up, a personal effort of enquiry about the main themes which are shaped around basic systems of reference and fundamental signs that are interpreted and blended in a unique way by each individual." Finally, negotiating is to find compromise and understanding to avoid confrontation through communication, not imposing one's criteria.

7. Conclusions

The experience described in the paper intends to help teachers in the domain of intercultural communication and facilitate its instructional application in the FL classroom through the use of multicultural literature. We must highlight the idea that developing intercultural learning is not just a matter of acquiring cultural knowledge, but it rather implies changing attitudes and skills on behalf of language teachers. Concepts, procedures, and attitudes contained in intercultural communication must be systematically observed, practised, and discussed as we do in our project.

Intercultural theoretical and practical underpinnings demonstrate that dealing with intercultural issues (in this case, culture and sexual orientation) within the EFL classroom is of paramount importance for teacher training. When we use multicultural literature as a resource to introduce intercultural topics in the classroom, it proves a valuable source of ideas, identities, and dialogical thinking. Throughout the discussion on gender, cultural, and sexual orientation issues, we conclude that EFL teacher trainees involve within a process of critical thinking and dialogic creation of meaning. Teacher trainees question whether the received cultural patterns can be improved in order to achieve greater tolerance, or, on the contrary, it is worth continuing our lives in a performative way.

We can prove throughout our experience presented above that teacher trainees become more tolerant towards differences aroused by non-conventional cultural and sexual orientation patterns. The intercultural activities carried out here serve the purpose of improving the teachers' intercultural skills and providing them with guidance on promoting intercultural awareness in the classroom. Teacher training should incorporate intercultural education as an integral part in order to have a beneficial effect on social education and moral development.

References

- Byram, M. 1991. Teaching Culture and Language: Towards an Integrated Model. In Buttjes, D. & Byram, M. (Eds.). *Mediating Languages and Cultures*. Clevedon, Avon, England: Multilingual Matters.
- Byram, M. 1997. *Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Byram, M. & Fleming, M. 1998. *Language Learning in Intercultural Perspective: Approaches Through Drama and Ethnography*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Colles, L. 1994. *Littérature compare et reconnaissance interculturelle*. Bruxelles : De Boeck, Duculox.
- Cohen-Emerique, M. 1993. "La formation des enseignants: pour une approche interculturelle" In *La pluralité culturelle dans les systèmes éducatifs européens en 1993 – Proceedings from the Nancy symposium*. January 1992.
- Council of Europe, 2001. *Common European Framework of Reference for the Teaching of Languages*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.
- Sexuality*. New York: Oxford University Press: 3-18.
- Edelhoff, C. 1987. "Lehrerfortbildung und interkulturelles Lehren und Lernen im Fremdsprachenunterricht". In G. Baumgratz and R. Stephan (Eds.). *Fremdsprachenlernen als Beitrag zur internationalen Verständigung. Inhaltliche und organisatorische Perspektiven der Lehrerfortbildung in Europa*. Munich: Iudicium.
- Ghosn, I. 2002. "Four good reasons to use literature in the Primary school ELT". *English Language Teaching Journal*, 56: 172-179.
- Halliday, M. 1979. *Language as Social Semiotic*. Victoria: Edward Arnold.

- Halliday, M. & Hasan, R. 1984. *Language, Context, and Text: Aspects of Language in a Social-semiotic Perspective*. Victoria: Deakin University Press.
- Hymes, D. 1972. On communicative competence. In Pride, J. & Holmes, J. (Eds.): *Sociolinguistics*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, pp.: 269-293.
- Kramersch, C. 1993. *Context and Culture in Language Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kramersch, C. & Sullivan, P. 1996. Appropriate pedagogy. *ELT Journal*, 50 (3): 199-212.
- Lynch, E. W. 1999. "Developing cross-cultural competence." In Lynch, E.W. & Hanson, M. J. *Developing Cross-cultural Competence. A Guide for Working with Children and their Families*. 2nd Ed. Baltimore, MD/London: Paul H. Brookes.
- Madrid, D. & MacLaren, N. 1993. *Proyecto Curricular "Making Friends"*. Valladolid: La Calesa.
- Madrid, D. & MacLaren, N. 2004. *TEFL in Primary Education*. Granada: Granada University Press.
- Martín Morillas, J. M. 2000. "La enseñanza de la lengua: un instrumento de unión entre culturas". Available at [<http://www.ub.es/filhis/culturelle/morillas.html>].
- Medgyes, P. 1999. *The non-native teacher* (2nd Ed.). Ismaning: Hueber.
- Pérez Valverde, C. 2004. "Discourse competence in the EFL classroom: Use of texts and narratives." In Madrid, D. & MacLaren, N. 2004. *TEFL in Primary Education*. Granada: Granada University Press.
- United Nations. 1992. *UN Convention of the Rights of the Child*. New York: UN.
- Vez Jeremías, J. M. & González Piñeiro, M. 2004. "Intercultural competence and the European dimension." In Madrid, D. & McLaren, N. *TEFL in Primary Education*. Granada: Granada University Press, pp. 342-382.
- Woodson, J. 1995. *From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun*. New York: Scholastic Inc.