Intercultural communicative competence:
Exploring English language teachers’ beliefs and practices
Abstract

This paper reports an investigation into the beliefs and practices of experienced teachers in the USA, UK and France relating to the application of a model of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) to English language programmes. Broadly ‘intercultural’ approaches to language learning and teaching are strongly advocated in both the recent theoretical applied linguistics literature, and in curricular guidance in frameworks such as Council of Europe (2001). However little prior empirical research has addressed the extent to which such approaches are actually operationalised. The investigation was multimethodological, combining diaries, focus groups and questionnaires. Byram’s (1997) language pedagogical model of ICC was the specific focus. Findings indicated a general consensus across locations, with an apparent disparity between teachers’ attitudes to and beliefs about ICC and their current classroom priorities. Most reported beliefs that supported the relevance of interculturality to their work, and stressed that ‘good’ learners and teachers tended to exhibit high intercultural competence. However, they also suggested that ICC was given relatively little emphasis in syllabi which were negotiated with learners. Participants also identified and discussed a lack of support, in testing, in textbooks and in institutional syllabi, for effective and appropriate approaches to ‘culture learning’ and interculturality.

Keywords: Intercultural communicative competence; language teaching; language learning; culture; teacher cognition; teacher practices.
Introduction

Interculturality and language learning

Recently, the central importance of interculturality has been stressed by applied linguists with an interest in the interface between language learning, thought and social interaction. Interculturality is seen here as a dynamic process by which people draw on and use the resources and processes of cultures with which they are familiar but also those they may not typically be associated with in their interactions with others (Author and Sercombe, 2010). An intercultural approach is absolutely central to influential curricular frameworks for language pedagogy such as Council of Europe (2001). Here a competent language user is characterised as one who is both plurilingual (i.e. whose experience of language in its cultural context expands from the language of the home to that of the society at large and then to the languages of other peoples), and in the process of developing interculturality. The linguistic and cultural competences in respect of each language used by the learner are modified by knowledge of the other and contribute towards intercultural awareness, skills and know-how. An important motivation for the advocacy of interculturality are perceptions that intercultural contact and interchange are greater than ever, necessitating approaches to understanding and brokering difference through effective communication. From this position, language learning is the best place within the educational field for the learning of and about culture, reflecting powerful interrelationships between language and culture (Risager, 2006). The nature and salience of such associations centre on the linguistic relativity hypothesis (e.g. Sapir, 1949; Whorf, 1956), currently enjoying a resurgence of interest in applied linguistics (Kramsch, 2004). Given the ubiquity of English language teaching and learning, with varieties of the language serving as vehicles for communication between people worldwide, it is argued that it is especially important that intercultural awareness, skills and know-how are prioritised in the myriad contexts where the ‘global’ language (Crystal, 2003; Graddol, 2006) is learned and taught.

The actual take-up of an intercultural approach in its application to classroom language learning has been the subject of very little investigation, however. It was the relationship between intercultural pedagogical theory and curriculum, and what teachers actually think and do in respect of the teaching and learning of culture on language programmes, that motivated this study. The recent literature shows a rapidly growing body of work, mainly concerned with the elaboration of conceptual models of and theories about interculturality. There has been a comparative dearth of empirical research investigating the application of these theories to classroom practice and to learning (Byram & Feng, 2004). Emerging from this literature is a clear need for a research agenda with which to build up a systematic knowledge of language-and-culture teaching (e.g. Paige, Jorstad & Colby, 2003). The small body of literature addressing the teaching and learning of culture specifically on English language programmes worldwide shows a growing body of literature exploring ‘culture’ (a contested term, variously defined and approached), both as a context for and as an influence on English language teaching and learning (Author, Author & Seedhouse, 2009). This literature included critiques of ‘culturally-loaded’ classroom practices and broad curricular approaches to culture, interculturality and language (e.g. Chu, Swaffar & Charney, 2002; Holliday, 1999; Hu, 2002), as well as more general critiques of the socio-
economic and socio-political role of the English language teaching ‘industry’ (e.g. Kachru, 1991; Phillipson, 1992; Pennycook, 1994, 1998a, 1998b). In contrast, a comparatively small body of work in this field has explored the ‘learning of and about culture’. A large majority of this literature was purely theoretical or rhetorical in nature.

From the relatively small body of empirical, classroom-focused literature in the field of culture learning and English language teaching, it is possible to draw a number of tentative conclusions. In some cases there are indications that culture and cultural difference seem to be approached by teachers more as problems, or constraints, than as resources to contextualise and enhance motivation and learning (e.g. Duff & Uchida, 1997; Lazaraton, 2003). Teacher orientations that took full account of apparent sociocultural difference, and which sought to relativise the familiar and the different, seemed to be successful in terms of encouraging learner engagement (e.g. Flowerdew & Miller, 1995; Pennington, Brock & Yue, 1996; Rao, 2002). There are indications, in the studies of Holliday (1995) and Lazaraton (2003), that a critical, mediating approach to ‘cultures’ may be successful in motivating both learners and teachers. Such approaches attempt, to some extent, to destabilise views of cultures (or other collectivities) as discrete and mutually exclusive entities that largely determine the actions of individuals, and to frame ‘culture’ in such a way that any social encounter can be ‘cultural’. They also aim to challenge stereotyping and ‘othering’, i.e. self-affirmation that depends upon the denigration of members of perceived out-groups (e.g. Holliday, 1999, 2010; Said 1978), and to promote interculturality as (critical and ethnographic) method as much as content.

The particular focus of this investigation was on the application of Byram’s (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence (ICC). This model is unusual among the plethora of available models in being pedagogical, and specifically applicable in formal language learning contexts, rather than simply modelling the act of intercultural communication (Chen, 2009). The ICC model especially foregrounds evaluative, relativising intercultural criticality (‘Savoir s’engager’) among a cluster of factors for developing intercultural competence within communicative, learner-centred foreign language education. In this conceptualisation, an intercultural approach promotes the ‘intercultural speaker’ as a more valid and attainable learner aim and model than the previously prevailing ‘native speaker’. The intercultural speaker is defined as one who can effectively and appropriately mediate between world of origin and world of encountered difference. Such mediation involves the affective and cognitive capacity to establish and maintain relationships with individuals from a different culture while at the same time stabilising one’s self-identity (including social identity). At the heart of this conceptualisation lies the belief that intercultural competence involves successfully mediating between cultures, the first culture, or ‘C1’ that an individual was enculturated into, and a second, other culture, or ‘C2’, so that an individual aims to occupy a relativising ‘C3’. This aim bears a strong conceptual similarity to the ‘thirdness’ discussed by Kramsch (e.g. 1999), and the ‘Third Space’ interrogated by the contributors to Kelly, Elliot and Fant’s (2001) exploration of intercultural communication and language learning in European higher education, and others. In successfully effecting mediation between cultures, the likelihood of successful communication is enhanced, it is argued by advocates of this perspective.

Byram (1997) stresses an inextricable link between the ability to function effectively in a foreign language and the clusters of skills, knowledge and attitudes which can be acquired or changed, and which contribute towards intercultural competence. His ICC model attempts to build on earlier models of intercultural
competence and effectiveness in learner-centred, communicative language teaching (e.g. van Ek, 1986; van Ek & Trim, 1991, 1996), but to move beyond their dependence on ‘native speaker’ norms and rules. He is also critical of what he discerns as a lack of emphasis on the inculcation of sociocultural, as opposed to purely sociolinguistic, knowledge, which he sees as inherent in these models. These have also been characterised as giving insufficient guidance to educators on how an intercultural approach to language learning can be operationalised in teaching and learning, and assessed fairly and accurately with explicit criteria (e.g. Byram & Risager, 1999).

Despite at least tangential support for an intercultural approach in the limited amount of work which directly addressed issues of culture and language learner effectiveness (Author, et al., 2009), there has been very little direct empirical work on explorations of the uptake and perceived applicability of this approach. It was this specific research gap that this exploratory study addressed.

**Teachers’ beliefs and practices**

The views of teachers, key ‘brokers’ between theories of interculturality and their application to language learning, are likely to be particularly salient to any investigation of the perceived applicability of an intercultural approach, and their perspective on this has been underexplored (Atkinson, 1999; Paige et al., 2003). Research into language teaching has been generally neglectful of the beliefs and practices of experienced language educators at least relative to the amount of research attention given to pre-service or inexperienced teachers (Dornyei, 2001; but see also Borg, 2006a, Ch. 3; Byram & Risager 1999 and Sercu, 2005, for instances where the beliefs of experienced practitioners were fruitfully explored). For an area as complex as the nexus of language, culture, teaching and learning, the views of educators who have applied experience in the field are likely to be highly relevant. There is a growing body of research literature suggesting that teachers’ beliefs directly affect both their perceptions of teaching and learning in the classroom (Clark & Peterson, 1986; Clark & Yinger, 1987). Borg (2003, p. 81) observes:

> teachers are active, thinking decision-makers who make instructional choices by drawing on complex practically-oriented, personalized, and context-sensitive networks of knowledge, thoughts, and beliefs.

The issue of the ‘native speaker/non-native speaker’ raised by researchers is also relevant. Firstly because there are suggestions in the theoretical literature that ‘non-native’ language teachers may lack confidence to inform about a sociocultural milieu that is not ‘their own’ (Borg, 2006b; Kramsch, Cain & Murphy-Lejeune, 1996). This issue may be especially pertinent in English language teaching, where an increasingly large majority of teachers worldwide are not first language speakers of English. Secondly, as noted above, the efficacy of prevailing ‘native-speaker’ models for learners has increasingly been questioned over recent years. This criticism has been framed in terms of the conceptualisation of the ‘native speaker’ (e.g. Davies, 2004; Kramsch, 1993; Leung, Harris & Rampton, 1997; Medgyes, 1994), and in terms of the applicability of such models to language learning in general, and to a lingua franca like English in particular (e.g. Alred & Byram, 2002; Cook, 1999; Jenkins, 2006, 2007; Norton, 1997). Author et al. (2009) stress the importance that empirical investigation of
the beliefs and practices of experienced practitioners operating in a variety of sociocultural milieus would be in adding to our knowledge in both of these cases.

The study

Given the issues raised in the literature review summarised above, a study was designed to explore the following research questions:

1. What do experienced and practising ‘native’ and ‘non-native’ English teachers think of ICC as an aim for learners?

2. To what extent is intercultural communicative competence prioritised on current English as a Foreign Language (EFL) programmes?

3. What are the reasons behind this degree of prioritisation?

4. What are teachers’ views of suitable models for learners (Intercultural Speaker and Native Speaker models)?

Methodology

Participants

The authors used personal contacts in each national location through which to approach experienced teachers of English in the UK, USA and France directly through email or telephone, or via their schools or professional organisations, and invited them to participate. A total of 36 people, 12 in each national location, were approached to participate in the first stage of the study, of whom 21 agreed (UK, Male = 5, Female = 3; USA, M = 3, F = 4; France, M= 3, F = 3). The first author had direct contact with the schools in the UK (he worked for the organisation that provided all of the British participants) and in the USA (where he had contributed to programmes for the participants’ employing organisation), which were the sites where the data was collected. The French participants came from a number of different schools in Paris or its immediate environs in the Île-de-France, but all were members of the same professional English language teachers’ organisation. It was through this that the French participants were contacted, and it also provided facilities for the focus group. All of the participants in the three countries worked in private language schools with fee-paying adult students (at least 18 years of age in the USA and France, and at least 16 in the UK). All of their schools predominantly taught general English at all levels from elementary to advanced, although examination classes (particularly for TOEFL and for the Cambridge suite of examinations) and business English classes were important, if secondary, activities. Teacher participants at the schools in the UK and in the USA taught multinational, multilingual classes of sojourners from various nationalities: in the USA these were predominantly east and south east Asian, Latin American or European, in the UK predominantly from east and south East Asia and Europe. The French teachers taught EFL predominantly to other French nationals, although some Asian or North African expatriate sojourners typically formed a small part of their classes.
In seeking volunteers for the study as a whole, our approach to sampling was ‘purposeful’ (Lingard & Kennedy, 2007) in that we sought the input of participants who have direct professional experience and so would be best able to produce data with which to confirm, challenge or expand theory as it related it to their actual experiences. We therefore stressed that we were interested in the views of practicing teachers with more than two years classroom experience and in all three locations. In addition, in the UK we specified that we wanted to hear the views of British teachers who were first language English speakers, in the USA those of American teachers who were first language English teachers, and in France teachers who were French nationals whose first language was French. To ensure that all participants were informed about the issues relevant to this study, volunteers were provided with access to Byram’s (1997) model of ICC (via a reference and a précis) prior to participation.

**Procedure**

The investigation consisted of two main stages. Firstly volunteer teacher participants in each location were pre-informed of the nature of ICC (as above), and were invited to complete diaries with which to record incidents in class which they felt reflected in some way on the applicability of the ICC model. Teacher focus groups (in each of the three locations) were then held to elicit teacher responses to the focus questions, which are detailed below. In a second stage, a questionnaire was employed among a similar sample population (experienced EFL teachers with the requisite first languages), but with a larger sample of participants in each of the three locations to determine wider patterns of general attitudes to and current practices related to ICC in their work which had been alluded to in the focus groups, or which arose from the literature review but were not directly addressed in the focus groups. Participants in the second part of the study were teachers working for the same types of organisations as the focus group participants (i.e. private language schools teaching primarily general English to adults) in each of the three national locations. These had also been contacted via their schools or professional organisation. They were also provided with a reference and a précis of the ICC model prior to participation.

*Stage One: Diaries and Focus Groups*

Participants in each location were asked to complete diaries for a two-week period ahead of participation in the focus groups. The diary asked them, in deliberately very general terms, to keep a record of in-class incidents which they felt had a bearing on the applicability of the ICC model. Participants were pre-advised that the diary would remain confidential to them but that they might, if they wished, chose to share any of its contents during the focus group. The diary, if completed, was then brought to the focus group and referred to by participants as an aide memoire. The rationale behind this approach was to help ground the contributions of focus group participants in recent, actual classroom practice and interactions. Of the total of 21 focus group participants, 17 reported that they had actually made entries in their diaries - all eight in the UK, six of seven in the USA, two of six in France. Of the other four, three reported that pressure of time had prevented them from making entries, and one reported simply forgetting. Although we did not see any diaries (to maintain participant confidentiality), from participant comments during the focus groups in each location we were able to determine that their entries were of widely varying lengths and complexity, but that most participants who had completed a diary had noted incidents on most days which
they felt had some relevance to the applicability of the ICC model. About half had reported multiple such incidents, i.e. at least two a day.

Participants were also pre-notified of the focus questions which were introduced in the focus groups, in this order, by the first facilitator in each of the three locations. These were:

1. Is the development of ICC an aim in your work? Why/Why not, do you think?
2. How appropriate is it as an aim, do you think?

Participants were also invited to ‘feel free to bring along any other comments relating or questions relating to ICC to share’ and were reminded to bring their diaries for their own reference. Post hoc content analysis revealed that participant discussion of the second focus question lead in each location to a number of subsidiary issues relating in particular to the study’s final research question, exploring teachers’ views of suitable models for learners (‘Intercultural Speaker’ and ‘Native Speaker’). Also emergent from this analysis were discussions and materials which might be used with learners to address questions of culture and interculturality. These points are detailed below, in ‘Findings’.

Focus group procedures followed those suggested in Kitzinger (1995) and Hall (2002). All sessions were audio recorded. Each session had two facilitators, one of whom was the first author, the other was a different personal contact of that author’s in each location. The first facilitator took an active part in discussion, and facilitated communication within the group, asking direct questions for clarification, follow up questions for more detail, and encouraging some individuals to participate when necessary. The second facilitator recorded the focus group, and observed and took notes of the discussion, but took no active part in it. The two facilitators then reviewed the contents of the audio files of all the focus groups, and subjected them to a detailed qualitative content analysis, i.e. a systematic and comprehensive summary of the dataset as a whole (Wilson, 2004). This grouped together, by means of a coding system, key themes in responses to the focus questions, as well as identifying general group agreement or disparity in the responses to the foci and in any other discussion. We finally identified, where possible, interesting quotes to illuminate overall group responses or particular, individual and perhaps idiosyncratic points of view. Once the three focus groups had been completed, and analysis of each had been undertaken, the two authors of this paper then further analysed the facilitators’ notes from all three focus groups. This involved a cross-sectional analysis which checked responses to the foci in each group, to discern overall patterns of responses – both similarities and differences - across the whole sample in the three locations.

Stage two: Questionnaire

A larger group took part in the final stage of the investigation, a questionnaire study. As with the focus groups, all participants were provided with an introduction to Byram’s (1997) model of ICC by means of a précis and with a reference. All participants were also experienced and currently practising teachers of English as a Foreign Language working with adult learners (N = 105):

1. London, UK (N = 51, 30 female, 21 male, all ‘NS’, with a mean experience of 14.5 years), whose students were sojourners, and classes were multinational
2. Bay Area of California, USA (N = 21, Female 13, Male 8, all ‘NS’, with a mean experience 12.7 years), whose students were sojourners, and again, classes were multinational
3. Paris, France (N = 33, Female 17, Male 14, all ‘NNS’, with a mean experience 13.9 years), whose students were almost exclusively French nationals doing evening classes or similar
All participants completed a hard copy of the survey, either given out at staff meetings in schools (in the UK and USA) or at meetings of the professional organisation they belonged to (in France). Surveys were completed ‘there and then’ by the great majority of participants in all locations, although a small number of participants in France took them away and completed them at home before returning them to the first author via a contact within the professional organisation. The completed surveys of six participants who reported less than two years classroom experience were excluded from analysis in order to maintain a consistent sampling across the two stages.

The survey consisted of questions which emerged as salient either from the literature review summarised above, or from the focus group discussions, or from both. A review of data gathered to date was conducted after the diary and focus group stage of the study, and this sharpened the focus for the survey onto 10 questions in particular. In designing the questions we were mindful of good practice in questionnaire design as discussed in Dörnyei (2001) and Dörnyei (2007). The questions investigated a larger sample of teachers’ opinions of key aspects of the applicability of the ICC model in the three locations under investigation. These were whether participants understood what the model was (question one), and whether they felt it was important to include ICC in an EFL course (question two), and the degree to which they shared the central ethos of the model in its stress on the importance of the promotion of communicative, learner-centred foreign language learning (question seven), and learner-centredness (as exemplified by course content negotiation, question six), the importance of increasing international understanding (question three), and the extent to which learners were perceived as interested in learning about other cultures (question four). Question five dealt with a crucial issue relevant to the model’s perceived applicability, and to teachers attitudes towards the feasibility of one of its central goals – whether it was possible for learners to change their attitudes towards people from different cultures on an EFL course. Questions eight and nine gauged their views on the suitability of the intercultural speaker and of the native speaker, respectively, as models for learners. Question ten related the beliefs in questions one to nine, to actual current practice, and asked teachers to rank curricular areas (such as grammar, vocabulary and ICC) in terms of their priority on the courses they were currently teaching.

Findings: Focus groups
Comments from specific individuals are indicated below with a designation of the particular focus group, gender and a number, for example UKF1, which is British female participant number 1. Each focus group interview was scheduled to last two hours, but all overran. The focus group in France lasted two hours 15 minutes, in the USA, two hours 30 minutes, and in the UK three hours and 20 minutes.

Is ICC an aim?
Responses to this question revealed a discrepancy, across locations, between teachers’ expressed beliefs in the general desirability of ICC as an aim, and their belief about what was feasible in applying it in the contexts where they worked. The views expressed by British, American and French teacher participants were unanimous and categorical. Teachers reported that the ICC model was not an explicit part of the curriculum in the schools they worked in, or in any of the schools operated by their
employing organisation, despite the fact that its aims conformed to the vast majority of participants’ beliefs about the nature of good language teaching and learning. Teachers were also unanimous in their view that the development of ICC was not an explicit aim on any of the major public examinations taken by the learners they worked with. Examples of these specifically cited in all three locations were all of the Cambridge University suite of EFL examinations, such as IELTS, and also TOEFL. Because ICC was not part of any of the curricula the teachers operated, it was not a part of needs analysis for new learners. Thus, during course content negotiation (which was reported to be undertaken by all teachers, in all locations), learners were asked how important the development of grammar, vocabulary, and language skills (speaking, listening, reading and writing) were, and their level of attainment in each area was also tested on entry. ICC was missing from this process of attainment testing and course content negotiation.

Interestingly, teachers in both the USA and in the UK reported that their employers’ organisations had in their ‘mission statements’ what were felt to be very general aims which conformed to those advocated in the ICC model. Thus the British employer of the majority of teachers in London had as its corporate mission an aim to promote international friendship and understanding. Such an aim, very similar to that of the American organisations, may conform (‘rather vaguely’, it was admitted by the British teachers in particular, and ‘maybe tangentially’ in the view of USF4) to the aims of the savoirs involving knowledge of self and other which underlie intercultural competence in the ICC model. Teachers in both the UK and USA were adamant that the mission statement aim was not realised in explicit curricular guidance, however. French teachers made no comment about mission statements, but FrM1 did comment, to general group agreement, that the ‘atmosphere of ICC’, its emphasis on the importance of successful intergroup interaction, ‘caught the idea of what we try to do with learners’ while not being a specific or explicit element in any syllabus. It is noteworthy that comments made by teachers about ‘good’ teachers and learners, reported below, gave indications that ICC was actually ‘happening’ in class, and had a positive impact on learning and interaction, but that the teachers reported that the development of ICC was not an explicit curricular aim in any of the three locations, despite, as also reported in the next section, a general, if conditional, acceptance that it was a desirable aim.

**How appropriate is ICC as an aim?**

Group responses in all three locations were broadly similar, and so are reported together here. Views on this question affirmed that ICC was a desirable aim for learners of the types they worked with, with some provisos. The reasons given for this view are detailed later in this section. The provisos related to potential problems with the model itself, and with learners’ perceived aims relating to their language learning.

Doubts about the applicability of Byram’s (1997) ICC model in all three locations centred on savoir s’engager. Savoir s’engager corresponds to political education and (relatedly) critical cultural awareness, and is defined as ‘an ability to evaluate, critically and on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices and products in one’s own and other cultures and countries’ (Byram 1997, p. 101). This was seen by many participants as problematic, particularly in so far as critical cultural awareness would involve an engagement with potentially controversial topics. Thus the British and the American teacher groups both stressed the need for a ‘safe, generally calm and unthreatening atmosphere’ (UKF3) in class - most agreed that such an atmosphere was difficult to create if topics such as religion and politics were issues for discussion. Teachers in both France and the UK raised the issue that two aspects of the ICC model may be incompatible, specifically savoir s’engager and savoir comprendre,
the latter involving the skills of successful interpretation and relating across cultures. As FrM1 put it, to general group agreement:

“A sensitive person, even if engaged and curious, knows better than to raise this kind of thing. You cannot, er, I think have both controversy and sensitivity in the classroom… some things are just too difficult.”.

UKM2 provoked supportive laughter from his group when he summarised his view on this: “The last thing you want in the classroom is real communication about this difficult stuff.” Teachers in all three locations reported a number of incidents which they felt showed some learners being culturally insensitive during in-class discussions. These were usually situations where an individual learner was made to ‘answer for’ the actions of or supposed norms within his or her society. Specific topics raised by participants included the use of rare animals in Chinese traditional medicines; the social roles of women in Islamic societies; and bullfighting in Spain. “There are many potential nightmares here, these things are really best avoided, headed off at the pass if you see them coming…, definitely not to be put in a lesson plan for discussion, and if students raise them you have to be ready to step in and steer people away.” (USM2).

The second proviso about ICC related to perceived learner aims and expectations. A large majority of teachers in all three locations were of the view that EFL learners in general did not have ICC as an aim. This view was particularly strongly held by the French teacher participants, the sample of whom who completed a survey also accorded relatively higher priority to ICC in their teaching compared to UK and USA teachers (see Table 1, below). Interestingly, many teachers reported that learners’ views were not explicitly sought on this issue. Some teachers in all locations also felt that even if learners did not perceive ICC as important, then it was perhaps the duty of teachers to point out to them why it might be so. One British teacher put it in these terms:

UKM3: It is so important, especially as they will be talking to so many people, from so many places, in English that they are culturally aware, er, able to relate their way of thinking, of er doing things to other cultures [general agreement from group]. Maybe, not only should we be asking them, maybe we should be (laughing) telling them, like we tell them to learn vocab[ulary], to er study grammar.

Teachers in general acknowledged, however, that learners’ views were not explicitly sought on this issue.

These provisos apart, there was general consensus across the three locations that the model should be taught. It was seen as a “robust and comprehensive” (UKM1) model, “needed in” (FrF2) and “applicable to” (UKF2 and USM1) the work they did. All three groups also related the need for ICC to the nature of good language learners, stressing an apparent interconnectedness between intercultural communicative competence and the ability to be a competent and successful real-time user of a foreign language.

Interestingly, all three groups saw a connection between ICC and the attributes of a successful language learner and language teacher. These connections were not explicitly raised by the facilitators and were not central to this enquiry, and so are not developed here beyond noting that the expressed view of one teacher (UKM2) about ‘good’ language learners captured the consensus view among his group, and among the French and American ones: “A person with a lot of ICC looks a lot like an ideal
communicative language learner”. Interestingly, teachers across the three locations were unanimous in agreeing that good EFL teachers also tended to have high levels of ICC. Reasons given were very broad, but can be summarised as follows. No single recipe can be used to make a good language teacher. However, most are likely to have the ability to feel empathy towards diverse types of learners, and to have knowledge of both own group and other groups’ practices. They are likely to exhibit “a relativising instinct” (USM1), and to have interaction skills, and to have and to show a curiosity to encounter to understand and to engage with difference. All of these attributes would be held by an individual high in ICC.

A French teacher made what his group felt was a particularly interesting point in discussing this issue:

FrF1: “I think it would be more fair if teachers’ intercultural competence was measured and used as a measure, for employment, for selection for jobs… This would be better than just giving a job to a native speaker, because, just because, they are a native speaker”.

The majority of the French focus group assented strongly to this point of view. A number of anecdotes were shared which the group felt illustrated the unfairness of favouring a ‘native speaker’ over an individual who was not a ‘native speaker’. They shared a view that ‘native speakers’ were advantaged in employment as English language teachers in the Paris and the Île-de-France, the contexts where these ‘non-native speakers’ worked.

The views of teachers suggesting a link between teaching ability and ICC are not in themselves a justification for the inclusion of ICC on language learning programmes. They offer, however, new and interesting insights, and may have something to contribute towards teacher assessment, recruitment and training. These points are discussed in the conclusion.

Models for Learners and Materials to Develop ICC

Two other broad issues were of considerable interest to many teacher participants. These were models for learners in general, and the impact of English as a Lingua Franca on such modelling, and materials to develop ICC. Both of these were highly relevant to our fourth research question relating to teachers’ views of suitable models for learners and so are reported in detail here.

Teachers in all three locations discussed the usefulness and applicability of the ‘Intercultural Speaker’ as a model for learners. The Intercultural Speaker model was felt by most teachers to be most useful in positioning learners between their own culturally-derived perceptions and those of another cultural group. It thus served as an attitudinal model, and as a model for the skills of discovery of difference. Teachers, in France directly, and in the UK and USA indirectly, stated that they had already been conforming to the model even before they knew directly of its existence as a model for dealing with culture and intercultural difference. That is, they felt that “good teachers were already instinctively doing the cultural objectivisation thing”, in the words of USF2. There were questions raised about the specific lexical and phonological usages of an intercultural speaker’ – most teachers in all three locations expressed views that indicated a lack of clarity about this, and a clearer view of what a ‘native speaker’s’ usages would be. One British teacher’s comment captured a general view on this: “I think we all like the intercultural speaker as a person, if you like, but we have no idea who or what he or she would sound like, or if they would say ‘sidewalk’ or ‘pavement, or whatever” (UKM5)
Another issue which emerged rather than being part of the intended topics was the matter of materials. The ‘cultural’ content of published ‘General English’ EFL materials tends to focus on geography, education systems, food and drink, festivals and other, perhaps superficial, aspects of cultural manifestation (e.g. Borg, 2006b; Pulverness, 1998). The ICC model stresses the need for deeper exploration, and for a critical and principled relativisation between world of familiarity and world of difference. Additionally, the model stresses the need for an acknowledgement of the multicultural nature of most societies, but allows conceptually for a focus on the sociolinguistic and sociocultural practices of a dominant group, at least for heuristic purposes.

Responses in all three locations again showed a high measure of uniformity, and are therefore summarised here together. Teachers in all three locations reported that content, especially in the EFL course books teachers were using, still tended to deal only with superficial aspects of cultural differences, and thus needed to be either supplemented or replaced. Realia, such as excerpts from television programmes and newspaper articles from L1E countries, formed the bulk of the cultural input that teachers used. French teachers reported that, thanks to cable and satellite television, and the internet, it was becoming easier to access such realia. Consequently, its use was becoming an ever-greater feature of their classes, particularly with higher level learners, and most particularly for the development of skills such as listening and speaking, and for increasing learner engagement with features of L1E sociolinguistic usages and sociocultural factors. The use of such L1E realia enhanced, it was felt, the “face validity” (FrM1) of their lessons: essentially, recent realia were seen by most teachers as inherently good teaching materials.

Teachers gave numerous examples, in all three locations, of the use of up-to-date realia to reflect contemporary sociocultural and sociolinguistic reality in L1E environments. When asked to specify what materials they had used most recently with learners which might serve to foster the content element of ICC, the following examples were given. In the UK: newspaper articles about shopping habits in the UK, ‘Metrosexuality’ in London (the growing interest in fashion and personal grooming among young men), global warming; and television programmes about the anthropology of shopping, the royal family, and excerpts from a soap opera. In the USA, the following materials were specified: newspaper articles about a music festival being held in San Francisco, excerpts from a guide to foreign visitors about the social effects of the smoking ban in San Franciscan public places, reports of the anniversary of the death of the 19th Century author Mark Twain, and a guide to what to do for Thanksgiving Day. Television programmes teachers had used included excerpts from the comedy programme ‘Friends’, the CBS Evening News, and a medical soap opera. Excerpts from recent Hollywood films had also frequently been used. In France, teachers reported the recent use of English language newspaper articles about English restaurants that had received stars from the *Michelin Guide*, an article describing an alleged conspiracy to murder the late Princess Diana, an article about Prince William’s love life, and an article about how the English weather was changing as a result of global warming. Television programmes they had used in class included excerpts from an Agatha Christie murder mystery, headlines from the BBC *News 24* television channel, and extracts from a recent Hollywood film.

A number of things are striking about these lists of materials, and about what teachers said they did with the materials. The first of these is the lack of any overtly sociopolitically or socioculturally controversial content, with the possible exception of
the news programmes. Related to this point, a lack of engagement with cultural differences within L1E societies is also noticeable. The second striking feature is how under-exploited the materials were by teachers for any real intercultural exploration: for example, teachers reported that they did not ask learners about social phenomena such as smoking bans or attitudes to global warming in their own countries, and little overt attempt was made to relativise the sociocultural phenomena in the materials and equivalent phenomena in learners’ own societies. This relating of ‘world of similarity’ to ‘world of difference’ is central to the ICC model. Indeed, teachers in both the USA and UK who used news broadcasts reported that they avoided news items which were too controversial, particularly items which might offend learners from particular cultural or religious backgrounds. The third noticeable feature of teachers’ choices of materials, especially in the case of the French group, is perhaps how stereotypical the subject matter is - bad food, royalty, the weather, and country house murder mysteries all seem to conform to very stereotypical projections of the nature of L1E societies (and of the UK in particular), and all seem to draw examples from the dominant, mono-ethnic groups of these societies, giving no indication of any exploration of the multicultural nature of modern societies. The fourth point to note is that group talk in each location stressed how “new”, “current” and “up-to-date” (all expressions used at least once in each location) the materials they were using were, rather than stressing how suitable they were for intercultural interaction and exploration – little emphasis was overtly expressed on the importance on ICC as method of learning rather than as content. The fact that the materials were ‘real’, that they were from an L1E country and that they were recent, seemed sufficient justification for using them.

It seems fair to conclude that this representative sample of materials, which teachers claimed were used to inculcate ICC, was itself rather narrow in its conception of the sociocultural and sociodemographic realities of L1E countries. It also seems reasonable to conclude that many teachers were, despite protestations, still seeing culture as content rather than method, and as rather stereotypical content at that.

**Findings: Surveys**

A broader sample of teachers, 105 in total, were asked to report their general beliefs about learner-centred, communicative language teaching, and the applicability of ICC in items 1 – 7 of the questionnaire (see Table 1, below, for items and responses). All items were on four-point Likert scales (disagree strongly, disagree, agree, strongly agree), with a higher score indicating as higher level of agreement. ANOVA analyses were conducted on mean responses to each item, with the location of teachers (UK, USA or France) as a between subjects factor. The mean responses in each location to each of questions one to nine were therefore compared to ascertain if there were any significant differences in responses between the three locations. To avoid inflation of Type I Error, only differences at p < .01 were considered significant.

Please insert Table One near here

Analyses revealed no significant effect by location in responses to any of the first seven questions, investigating teachers’ beliefs relating to the applicability of the ICC model, indicating that there was no significant differences between the responses given in the UK, USA or France. Means in all three locations were well above the
middle of the scale for question one, suggesting that a large majority of teachers in all three locations felt that they understood what is meant by ICC. Further analysis confirmed that 88.2% of participating teachers agreed or strongly agreed that teachers understood what was meant by ICC. In all other cases, items investigating beliefs about ICC in EFL showed an apparently strong belief that ICC as part of a communicative, learner-centred curriculum should be included on EFL courses, and that a large majority of teachers operated learner-centred, communicative approaches. For example, the overall mean response to the proposition that it is important to include ICC in an EFL course was well above the mid-point of the scale in all locations, and 93.2% of responses agreed, or agreed strongly, with the proposition. Most teachers also reported a belief that one of their chief roles was to increase international understanding, with 70.9% (73 participants) agreeing or strongly agreeing. Teachers were asked if they felt that EFL learners of the type they work with were interested in other cultures, and 88.2% of respondents (89 teachers) agreed or strongly agreed.

A repeated measures ANOVA was conducted to compare responses both within each location and between each location to items eight and nine, about the appropriateness of, respectively, an ‘intercultural speaker’ and a ‘native speaker’ as models for learners (Q.8 ‘I think the native speaker is a good model for learners’, Q.9 ‘I think the intercultural speaker is a good model for learners’). Analyses revealed no significant effect by location (F (1, 98) = 1.659, n.s.), indicating that there was no significant difference between the mean responses from teachers in each location. There was, however, a significant repeated measures effect (F (1, 98) = 12.838, p < .001), indicating that overall responses to the two questions were significantly different: examination of the means suggested that teachers across the 3 locations felt that the ‘intercultural speaker’ (mean = 3.1) was a significantly better model for learners than the ‘native speaker’ (mean = 2.6).

The final item (ten) on the survey asked participants to ‘rank, in order of importance, different curricular areas on the courses you are currently teaching’. The curricular areas were drawn from the pre-course needs analysis surveys conducted by the teachers with new learners in the three locations, and so included ‘grammar’ and ‘vocabulary’ and the skills of ‘reading’, ‘writing’, ‘speaking’ and ‘listening’. Additional items were ‘spelling’ which is clearly implied in ‘vocabulary’, but was included as a separate component here because it was separately listed in course content negotiation documents completed by learners in the UK and USA (perhaps reflecting the predominance of Asian learners whose L1 employed a non-Roman writing system). ICC was also included as it was the focus for this investigation, although as noted above in our discussion of the focus group findings, it was not included in any pre-course negotiation of content in any of three locations. Teachers were asked to rank the eight curricular areas of EFL courses in order of their priority on the courses they were actually teaching at the time of completing the survey (as below). Rankings ranged from eight (highest priority) to one (lowest priority). See table two.

Analysis revealed that the development of speaking skills was by far the highest priority in all three locations, with an overall mean response of 7.2 (/8). Also important
across the three locations were listening skills (m = 5.8), vocabulary (m = 5.6) and, to a lesser extent, grammar (m = 5.1). Teachers in France (m = 4.0) ranked grammar significantly lower in priority relative to those in the UK (m = 5.8) and the USA (m = 5.3), F (2, 100) = 30.832, p. < .01. No significant differences between locations were obtained regarding speaking, vocabulary and listening skills.

The four other curricular areas were reported to be receiving lower priorities. Specifically, in the 3 locations combined, reading skills (m = 3.6) and writing skills (m = 3.4) were given relatively low ranks, but were more highly prioritised than either ICC (m = 2.5) or spelling (m = 2.2). It is noteworthy that teachers in France (m = 3.3) gave a significantly higher priority to ICC than those in the UK (m = 2.6) and the USA (m = 2.4), F (2, 100) = 13.258, p. < .01.

In sum, the questionnaire findings served to reinforce the findings from the focus groups. Teachers reported understanding ICC and accepting, in general terms, its potential importance and potential for learner development. Learner interest in ‘cultures’ in general was seen as high, but translating this to specific classroom ICC learning was not, on this evidence, happening. French teachers were giving it a higher priority than British or American teachers. Within a ‘communicative’ framework teachers were prioritising areas such as speaking and grammar across the sample. Learner-centredness seemed very important in terms of programme content for the adult learners these teachers worked with. A conclusion might be that because learners expressed no need for ICC, that this was one important factor in its lack of uptake and application.

Conclusions

The combined quantitative and qualitative methodologies in this study produced a picture of the beliefs and reported practices of experienced teachers, and of the realities of their professional lives as they perceive them, which adds detail to the findings of earlier investigations of teacher’s beliefs and practices regarding ICC to their work (e.g. Paige et al., 2003; Sercu, 2005). Much confirmatory evidence emerged that the ‘teaching of and about culture’ seems to be neglected, or even actively avoided (cf Author et al., 2009; Duff & Uchida, 1997; Lazaraton, 2003). An apparent disparity emerged between most teacher participants’ beliefs and their practices, similar to that noted among Sercu’s (2005) international participants. Teacher participants in this study expressed a broad general view that an intercultural approach may be successful and appropriate, but seemed unable or unwilling to put it into practice. The stated reasons for this related to (a perceived but untested) lack of learner interest, a lack of curricular support, a lack of suitable textbook material, a lack of ICC testing, and concern about engaging with controversy. Strong support for the aims of the model did emerge in the identification of effective teachers and learners as exhibiting high ICC. These findings provide an agenda for future research of the type called for in both Byram & Feng (2004), Paige et al. (2003) and Young et al. (2009).

It is possible that a lack of teacher training contributes to the lack of ICC uptake. It is interesting to note that managers of Language Teaching Organisations, of the type which employed the teacher participants in this study, receive ‘intercultural’ training as part of the International Diploma in Language Teacher Management (UCLES, 2004). On the other hand, the diploma for teachers, Diploma in English Language Teaching to
Adults (UCLES, 2003), one of the main ‘advanced’ EFL teacher training qualifications in the UK makes no reference to it. Nelson (1998) also notes a relative dearth on of ICC on TESOL MA programmes in the USA. Most ‘Business English’ texts make reference to intercultural communication, but this is rarely the case with ‘general English’ texts. Thus in both training and in learning materials, the ‘intercultural’ seems confined to the domain of management and business, having no place, apparently, in learner or teaching education (confirming the view of Byram and Feng, 2004). Future research could very usefully investigate the applicability of ICC to language teacher training, and to text books aimed at ‘general’ language development.

It is also interesting to note the apparent uniformity of beliefs and practices across the three locations. There was no apparent lack of confidence among ‘NNS’ French teachers to inform about ‘the other’, and there was some sense of injustice at their relatively low status relative to ‘NS’ teachers. Otherwise the opinions expressed, and the challenges faced by teachers bore striking similarities across the three locations. Research is now beginning to investigate if this uniformity extends beyond the ‘western’ contexts investigated here. Early indications are that it may do, and for very similar reasons. Han (2010), for instance, found that teachers in China expressed a willingness to teach cultural awareness as a means of arousing the interests of students, and stated that they saw the development of students’ ICC as a legitimate aim. However, she also found teachers’ conceptualisation of culture to be limited to items of daily life and routines in the UK and USA, and she also found a very low level of classroom engagement with interculturality, a product, she suggests, of the ‘examination culture’ in China and a lack of detailed and explicit curricular guidance for teachers.

The findings from this study indicate that further research is needed into the beliefs of learners in different contexts. Much of the lack of uptake of ICC was provoked by perceived learner needs, but these had been in no instance tested. Recent developments in ICC and language testing may offer a way forward in resolving teachers’ concerns about a lack of ICC elements in learner evaluation (e.g. the ‘Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters’ detailed in Byram, 2008). It would also be interesting to investigate teachers who are not ‘prompted’ with information about the ICC model in advance of stating their views, as participants here were.

Overall, many apparent difficulties in implementing the ICC model emerged from this study. The views of the experienced practitioners that ‘good’ learners and teachers exhibit high ICC, indicates that as a pedagogical model and aim for language learners and teachers, it is of great potential merit. It also confirms that the centrality of interculturality in, for example, Council of Europe (2001), is in the eyes of a number of experienced classroom professionals working in the UK, USA and France, justifiable. In promoting engagement and interaction, and an enquiring, evaluative and relativistic orientation, the ICC model seems to capture the essence of what lies behind successful and rewarding encounters with difference. It provides a means of interrogating and challenging stereotypes and prejudice. It may also, on this evidence, provide a means of fostering effectiveness as learners, teachers and above all as users, of foreign languages. Future investigation of the nature of associations between language learner and language teacher effectiveness may be fruitful, and help to bring together conceptualisations of effectiveness and competence in the two worlds of intercultural communication pedagogy and language learning pedagogy. Future investigations of teachers’ beliefs and practices involving diary studies should aim to draw on actual diary content, rather than reports of the content: the lack of actual content analysis is a potential limitation of the study reported here. An examination of in-class interaction
was beyond the scope of this exploratory study. Investigation of this may also reveal more about the nature of effective and ineffective communicative practices, and of associations between interpersonal, interdiscourse and intercultural, effectiveness.

References


Table 1
ANOVA: Teachers’ Beliefs about ICC, 4 point scales.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>F (2, 101)*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>UK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. I understand what is meant by ‘Intercultural Communicative Competence’ (ICC)</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. It is important to include ICC in an EFL course</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Increasing international understanding is one of the chief roles of an EFL teacher</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Most learners I deal with are interested in learning about other cultures</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. It is possible to influence learners’ attitudes towards people from different cultures on an EFL course</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. It is important to negotiate course content with learners</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I use ‘the communicative approach’</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* For each question except number seven, respondent numbers were UK 51, USA 21 and France 33. For number seven, two responses were unreadable and so have not been included in analysis.
Table Two: Mean priority rankings of curricular areas (Maximum = 8)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Three locations (N = 105)</th>
<th>UK (51)</th>
<th>USA (21)</th>
<th>France (33)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Speaking</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>7.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammar</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICC</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spelling</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>