

## Foreign language teachers and their role as mediators of language-and-culture: A study in Mexico\*

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### ABSTRACT

*This article reports on an investigation of Mexican foreign language teachers' perceptions of their role as mediators of language and culture in foreign language education that is part of a comparative study (Sercu, et al., 2005) with secondary teachers in seven countries (Belgium, Bulgaria, Greece, Poland, Mexico, Spain, and Sweden).*

*The article describes how teachers perceive of culture-and-language teaching, how they perceive of their students' perceptions and attitudes towards the foreign countries and cultures associated with the language they are learning, and how they perceive of their teaching practice related to **intercultural competence and intercultural communication**. It is anticipated that outcomes of this study will serve as a guide in designing programs for teacher in-service programs regarding intercultural competence teaching in foreign language education.*

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Keywords: *foreign language teachers, perceptions, intercultural competence, communication, education*

\* Este artículo se publicó originalmente en *Estudios de Lingüística Aplicada*, 37 (2003), pp. 99-118.

## RESUMEN

*El artículo reporta los resultados de una investigación sobre las percepciones que los maestros mexicanos de lenguas extranjeras tienen sobre su papel como mediadores de lengua y de cultura en la enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras. La investigación forma parte de un estudio comparativo (Sercu, et al., 2005) con maestros de secundaria en siete países (Bélgica, Bulgaria, Grecia, Polonia, México, España y Suecia).*

*El artículo describe cómo los maestros perciben la enseñanza de la cultura y la lengua, las percepciones y actitudes de sus estudiantes hacia los países y las culturas asociados con la lengua que están aprendiendo, y su práctica docente en relación con la competencia y la comunicación interculturales. Se anticipa que el resultado de este estudio servirá como guía en el desarrollo de programas de actualización para maestros en relación con la enseñanza de la competencia intercultural en el aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras.*

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*Palabras clave: profesores de lenguas extranjeras, percepciones, competencia intercultural, comunicación, educación*

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## AN INTRODUCTION TO THE INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH PROJECT\*

There is no doubt that we are living in times of great change. As we educators prepare our students for the 21st century, we are aware of many changes occurring globally. Population mobility continues throughout the world at an all-time high in human history, bringing extensive cross-cultural contact among diverse language and cultural groups. Predictions focus on an increasingly interconnected world, with global travel and instant international communications available to more and more people. Businesses and professions seek employees fluent in more than one language to participate in the international marketplace as well as to serve growing ethnolinguistic minorities living within each community. Employers increasingly want their employees to be interculturally competent. They want them to be skillful negotiators in increasingly intercultural work situations.

Change is not exclusive or selective in terms of sectors of society which it affects. Industry, health, politics and business are affected, but also education. Across different parts in Europe, just as elsewhere in the world, the presence of ethnic and linguistic minority children in schools is becoming an everyday phenomenon. Educators often include intercultural objectives in curricula, and teachers find themselves faced with the challenge of promoting the acquisition of intercultural competence through their teaching. This is true for teachers of a diversity of subjects. It is definitely true for teachers of foreign languages. Foreign language education is by definition intercultural. Bringing a foreign language to the classroom means connecting learners to a world that is culturally different from their own. Therefore, foreign language educators are now encouraged to exploit this potential and promote the acquisition of intercultural competence in their learners. The objective of language learning is no longer defined in terms of the acquisition of communicative competence in a foreign language. Teachers today are required by circumstances to teach intercultural communicative competence.

It follows that new professional demands are made on teachers. If foreign language teaching can no longer be regarded as a mainly linguistic task, and needs

\* We would like to thank Marilyn Chasan and Harold Ormsby for their stimulating discussions and contributions to the article. One of the authors (P. R.) would like to express her appreciation for academic and economic support received from the Centro de Enseñanza de Lenguas Extranjeras, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, during her sabbatical year while the study and its analysis took place, as well as a stipend received from the DGAPA, UNAM.

to be directed towards the full attainment of communicative competence including its intercultural dimension, then teachers have to acquire the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes to be able to accomplish this wider task in an appropriate way.

The assumption seems to be that teachers are already moving in this direction and are willing to support the new objectives. Most teachers are attempting to move well in the direction of multicultural and intercultural teaching.

The observation that this belief remains largely intuitive with little rigorous evidence to support it, constituted the rationale for the research project reported on here.

## THE MEXICAN PROJECT

Mexico is one of the seven countries that participated in a comparative study of foreign language teachers' perceptions of culture and language teaching in Belgium, Bulgaria, Greece, Mexico, Poland, Spain, and Sweden (for a complete discussion of the study see Sercu, *et al.*, 2005). Lies Sercu organized and directed this international project to explore teacher thinking and perceptions about culture in foreign language learning, providing the opportunity to compare views of intercultural competence. The project began in 1999 with a team of researchers that included Lies Sercu (K. U. Leuven, Belgium), María del Carmen Méndez García (Universidad de Jaén, Spain), Paloma Castro Prieto (Universidad de Valladolid, Spain), Ulla Lundgren (University of Jönköping, Sweden), Ewa Bandura (Jagiellonian University, Poland), Chryssa Laskaridou (University of Thessaloniki, Greece) and Phyllis Ryan (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, México). The researchers studied teachers of foreign languages (English, French, and German and/or Spanish as a second language) in their respective settings with students 12 to 19 years old in secondary schools.

The aims of the project are: 1) to inquire into foreign language teachers' views regarding the teaching of intercultural competence in foreign language education, 2) to investigate to what extent current teaching practice can be characterized as directed towards the attainment of intercultural communicative competence rather than communicative ("linguistic") competence, and 3) to investigate whether it is possible to profile an 'average foreign language-and-culture teacher' irrespective of the country in which s/he teaches (Sercu, *et al.*, 2005).

Teachers' perceptions of their current language-and-culture teaching practice and the teaching of intercultural competence in foreign language education were profiled by means of a web-based questionnaire with closed questions (including a series of statements to be scored) and some open-ended questions. In the operationalization of "foreign language-and-culture teaching profile", the collection of data was guided by the following questions, focusing on three areas of study, namely how teachers look at themselves and their job, how they describe their students and how they describe their classroom teaching:

1. How do teachers perceive of the objectives of foreign language education?
2. How familiar do teachers consider themselves with the foreign cultures of which they teach the foreign language?
3. How do teachers perceive of their students' knowledge and attitudes regarding the foreign cultures associated with the foreign language they teach?
4. How do teachers describe their culture teaching practices?
5. How do teachers perceive of the cultural dimension of teaching materials?
6. How do teachers perceive of the effect of school trips and exchange projects on students' intercultural competence?
7. What attitude do teachers have vis-a-vis different aspects of intercultural competence teaching in foreign language education?
8. To what extent are teachers willing to interculturalize foreign language education and what factors appear to affect that willingness?

The total number of participants (424) ranged from 151 participants in Belgium to 30 in Bulgaria. 79% of the respondents are English teachers, 9% German teachers, 7% French teachers, and 2% Spanish as a second language teachers.

We would like to point out that the questionnaire was designed from a European perspective, but it was thought that except for some minor details it could be used for investigating the Mexican context.

### *Mexican teachers*

Forty-seven Mexican teachers participated in the research: 93.75% are English teachers and 6.25% Spanish as a second language teachers. They are employed at

the Colegio de Ciencia y Humanidades (CCH) and Escuela Nacional Preparatoria schools (ENP) in Mexico City. These schools are part of the educational structure and program of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. With the exception of one teacher who is from the United States, all the teachers are Mexican. Forty of the teachers identify themselves as native Spanish speakers while four are Spanish/English bilinguals and a native English speaker. Thirty-five teachers (or 76.09%) are women; eleven (23.91%) are men; their average age is 41; the average number of years they have taught is 13.64; and the average number of hours they teach a week is 15.6 hours.

The university degrees they obtained are the *Licenciatura* (basically a bachelor's degree with a thesis) as well as a wide range of master's degrees. The *licenciatura* degrees are in the fields of accounting, architecture, chemistry, dentistry, English language teaching, English language and modern literature, French language and literature, history, industrial engineering, international relations, psychology, and social psychology. The nine teachers who hold master's degrees have degrees in the fields of applied linguistics, business administration, comparative literature, experimental psychology, intercultural education, organic chemistry, pedagogy, and primary education.

The schools where they teach (CCHs and ENPs) provide preparatory, prevocational and technical training as part of the National Autonomous University of Mexico. Among the foreign languages they teach are Classical Greek (11.04%), Classical Latin (11.69%), English (27%), French (25%), German (11.69%), Italian (10.39%) and Spanish as a second language (2.6%). In addition they also teach English and French reading comprehension courses. It should be mentioned that some teachers teach more than one language, but that in the questionnaire they were asked to proceed with the language of which they teach the most hours.

Their students are between 12 and 19 years of age and will be continuing their education at the university level.

## RESULTS

The discussion that follows looks at the specific questions put to the teachers and provides the results of the study (for the complete questionnaire see Sercu, *et al*, 2005).

*A. How teachers look at themselves: their goals, their familiarity and contact with cultures, their degree of willingness to teach intercultural competence*

*Teachers' general teaching goals*

Teachers were given the question “What do you try to do as a teacher?” and asked to respond to one of two paired statements. It was found that teachers tended to be more subject-oriented than pupil-oriented in their approach to teaching. The teachers whose responses are more subject-oriented chose statements such as the following: “I try to impart to pupils the skills, knowledge, and attitudes they will need to further their proficiency in the foreign language they are learning” or “I want to fulfill the curriculum requirements”, “I want to pass on expert knowledge regarding my subject to my pupils” or “I try to awaken enthusiasm in my students for my subject”. By contrast, the teachers whose responses were more pupil-oriented chose statements that include: “I try to impart the skills, knowledge, attitudes, etcetera, pupils will need in life”, “I want to support pupils when they have personal problems” or “I want to be on good terms with my students”.

*How do you perceive of the objectives of foreign language teaching?*

The teachers were next asked about how they perceive of objectives of foreign language teaching. They were presented with a list of objectives and asked to indicate using a scale from 1 (most important) to 8 (not important) their importance. The statements about teaching objectives included both language objectives, culture learning objectives and general learning objectives. Below are the objectives in sequence with the ranking of aims. The ranking is based on the mean score obtained for all teachers. Also the statements are ranked in decreasing order of importance.

1. Promote the acquisition of a level of proficiency in the foreign language that will allow the learners to use the foreign language for practical purposes. (3.38)
2. Assist my students to acquire skills that will be useful in other subject areas and in life (such as memorize, summarize, put into words, formulate accurately, give a presentation, etcetera). (4.11)
3. Enthuse my students for learning foreign languages. (4.16)

4. Promote the acquisition of an open mind and a positive disposition towards unfamiliar cultures. (4.31)
5. Promote my students' familiarity with the culture, the civilization of the countries where the language which they are learning is spoken. (4.76)
6. Promote the acquisition of learning skills that will be useful for learning other foreign languages. (4.93)
7. Assist my pupils to acquire a level of proficiency in the foreign language that will allow them to read literary works in the foreign language. (5.04)
8. Assist my students in developing understanding of their own identity and culture. (5.27)

The most important objective was a language-learning objective and the least important objective, a culture learning objective. When considered in relation to intercultural education which by definition includes the learners' own culture, it would seem that teachers do not give this objective significant importance.

*What do you understand by "culture teaching" in a foreign language teaching context?*

They were given a list of nine possible culture-teaching objectives and asked to rank them on a scale of 1 to nine, with 1 being the most important and 9 the least important. The following list of objectives are ranked according to mean scores for all teachers:

1. Promote the ability to handle intercultural contact situations. (4.55)
2. Promote the ability to empathize with people living in other cultures. (4.69)
3. Provide information about the history, geography and political conditions of the foreign culture(s). (5.33)
4. Provide information about daily life and routines. (5.58)
5. Provide experiences with a rich variety of cultural expressions (literature, music, theatre, film). (6.0)
6. Promote increased understanding of students' own culture. (6.42)
7. Provide information about shared values and beliefs. (6.73)
8. Develop attitudes of openness and tolerance towards other peoples and cultures. (7.16)
9. Promote reflection on cultural differences. (7.78)

Both of the highest rated objectives involve promoting the ability to empathize with people living in other cultures. It is interesting to note that developing attitudes of openness and tolerance towards other peoples and cultures (one of the main attitudinal objectives of Byram's list of intercultural competence, 1997) holds the least importance for them.

*How familiar are you with the cultures of the countries associated with the foreign language you teach most?*

Teachers of English listed six countries as being associated with the language they teach; namely the United States (44), Great Britain (31), Canada (13), Australia (11), Jamaica (2), and Ireland (1). Most of the teachers mentioned more than one country. They were next asked to rate their own familiarity with cultures of the people associated with the foreign language they teach. They were given a list of cultural topics and asked to rate them according to four possible options: namely, "not familiar at all", "not sufficiently familiar", "sufficiently familiar" and "very familiar". The list below represents the decreasing order of familiarity with the topics.

1. Daily life and routines, living conditions, food and drink, etcetera (3.34)
2. Traditions, folklore, tourist attractions (3.04)
3. Values and beliefs (3.02)
4. Youth culture (3.0)
5. History, geography, political system (3.0)
6. Literature (2.95)
7. Cultural expressions (music, drama, art) (2.93)
8. Education, professional life (2.91)
9. Different ethnic and social groups (2.78)
10. International relations (political, economic and cultural with students' country and other countries) (2.76)

Several patterns emerge from the percent of teacher response for each of the answering categories provided. First, more than half of the teachers indicate that they are "sufficiently familiar" or "very familiar" with all of the cultural topics in the list. A large percentage (42.22%) of the teachers indicate that they are not sufficiently familiar with "international relations (political, economic and cul-

tural with students' country and other countries)". None of the teachers indicate that they are not familiar at all with the topics listed.

*How frequently do you travel to the foreign country primarily associated with the foreign language of which you have the most hours?*

To gain farther insights into the extent of teachers' familiarity with the country/culture primarily associated with the foreign language they teach, they were asked about their frequency of travel to the foreign country. They could answer either "never", "once in a while", and "often". "Never" is reflected in scores between 0.01 and 1.00, "once in a while" in scores between 1.01 and 2.00 and "often" between 2.01 and 3.00:

1. Tourist trips (1.91)
2. Visits to relatives or friends (1.78)
3. Participation in a teacher training program or a language course (1.49)
4. Work visits, within the framework of an exchange project (1.20)
5. School trips (one or three days) (1.11)

It is noteworthy that a large percentage of the teachers (88.89%) say that they are "never" involved in school trips. 82.22% teachers indicate that they "never" participate in work visits within the framework of an exchange project and 60% say that they never participate in teacher training programs or language courses. Tourist trips and visits to relatives and friends appear to be the types of contact teachers have most often, though the mean scores reveal that these contacts do not happen frequently, but only once in a while.

*How often do you get into contact with the foreign culture/people/country primarily associated with the foreign language of which you have most hours while at home?*

Teachers were also asked to indicate how frequently they get in contact with the foreign culture while at home. The teachers were asked to respond to either

“never”, “once in a while” or “often.” Our data reveal that a very large percentage of the teachers (95.45%) “often” have culture contact through the media while 51.11% say they never have contact with foreign language assistants who are usually natives from the foreign country in their school. Also, 55.56% say that they never have contacts with foreign teachers or pupils who visit their school. The means for their responses are as follows:

1. Media contacts (TV, newspapers) (2.95)
2. Contacts with people originating from the foreign country who live in my country (2.27)
3. Visits to the cultural institute representing the foreign country in my country (1.91)
4. Contacts with foreign language assistants (usually natives from the foreign country) in my school (1.67)
5. Contacts with foreign teachers or pupils who visit my school (1.53)

### *Teachers' degree of willingness to teaching intercultural competence in foreign language education*

The questionnaire also contained a series of statements which specifically inquired into the respondents' willingness to integrate an intercultural dimension into their foreign language teaching and into the factors conditioning that willingness. These statements were scored on a 5-point scale. The findings yielded a 'willingness index' that served as a dependent variable to correlate with teacher characteristics.

Teachers' willingness was found to covariate with a number of convictions regarding the way in which intercultural competence teaching should take place. Teachers' degree of willingness to interculturalize foreign language educational was found to be significantly (at the .01 level) and positively correlated to:

1. Conviction that a foreign language teacher should represent a realistic image of the foreign culture, not a merely positive one ( $r = .621 (**)$ )
2. Conviction that foreign language teaching should also enhance students' understanding of their own cultural identity ( $r = .591 (**)$ )
3. Conviction that the teaching of intercultural competence should be undertaken cross-curricularly ( $r = .474(**)$ )

4. Conviction that culture teaching is as important as language teaching in foreign language education ( $r = .352(**)$ )
5. Conviction that more knowledge and a larger familiarity with the foreign culture will lead to a more tolerant attitude ( $r = .355 (**)$ )

Other convictions which teachers may have regarding the teaching of intercultural competence in foreign language education are found to not co-vary with teachers' degree of willingness. They include:

1. Conviction that it is only when there are ethnic minority community children in one's class that one should teach intercultural competence
2. Conviction that intercultural education has no effect on students' attitudes
3. Conviction that intercultural skills cannot be acquired at school
4. Conviction that a sufficiently high level of language proficiency is needed before one can start teaching culture

This lack of co-variation suggests that teachers who are willing to interculturalize foreign language education may not be certain about these issues. They appear not to know whether the teaching of intercultural competence should indeed not be reserved for classes with ethnic minority community children; whether intercultural competence teaching indeed has an effect on students; whether intercultural competence can indeed be acquired at school; and whether a high level of proficiency is indeed needed before one can start teaching culture and intercultural competence.

### *B. Teachers' perceptions of pupils*

#### *Teachers' perceptions of their pupils' culture-and-language learning profile*

One of our aims was to look at the relationship between teachers' willingness to interculturalize foreign language education and their perceptions of students. Teachers were asked to give a general impression of their pupils and their culture-and-language learning by indicating their agreement with four statements involving student motivation. They were asked to rate their degree of agreement with the statements by rating them on a scale of 1 ("do not agree at all") to 10 ("agree completely"). The mean of each of the teacher responses follows:

- 1) My pupils think learning the foreign language I teach is very difficult. (7.04)
- 2) My pupils are very motivated to learn the foreign language I teach. (6.23)
- 3) My pupils have a very positive attitude towards the people associated with the foreign language I teach. (5.63)
- 4) My pupils are very knowledgeable about the culture of the foreign language I teach. (5.04)

The largest percent (73.34%) of the teachers agree that their students think learning the foreign language is very difficult. They also believe that their students are very motivated to learn the language they are teaching (63.34%). Slightly more than half believe that their students have a positive attitude toward the people associated with the foreign language they are teaching (52.27%). On the other hand, they tend not to agree that their students are very knowledgeable about the culture of the foreign language they are teaching (56.81%).

*Teachers' perceptions of pupils' perceptions and ideas regarding the countries and people(s) usually associated with the foreign language they teach*

Teachers were asked questions about their students' perceptions of cultures, countries and peoples. All teachers of English, when asked about the country they think their students usually associate with the foreign language they teach, say that it is the United States (note that the respondents could answer all of the open questions in their mother tongue or in English). One teacher mentions the United Kingdom. When asked how they would describe their pupils' perceptions of and ideas regarding the country/ies and people/s usually associated with the foreign language they teach, various patterns emerge. For example, teachers say that pupils' attitudes are polarized toward people associated with English. They say that their students tend to like the American way of life, even if they don't know much about it and often try to copy the customs of the country. They stereotype the United States as "the most powerful country in the world", "owners of the world", "imperialists", "dominating"; "liberal", "capitalistic", "economically powerful", "expansionists", and the people as being "racist", "superficial", and "immoral". Some characterized the people as "having no culture", being "lazy", "powerful", "racists", "pre-sumptuous", "silly", "without values", and "too commercial".

Teachers agree that their pupils perceive of the United States in terms of its rock stars, popular music, singers, television, well known sports players, science, technology and computers; as well as the country's political strength and economic condition. One teacher contrasts the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom, saying the first two were "first world countries with good incomes, clean, and good at what they are doing", and the United Kingdom as a first world country with "good incomes, expensive culture, old cultural traditions" and people who are "cold, nice and organized." Another compares the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom, saying that students are more familiar with the United States, but that their students' perceptions are derived from what they see on television and in the movies. She says:

In Mexico we are invaded by the Hollywood movies and as a result the experience of the U. S. seems close. Capitalism, expansionism, racism, fast food, gringos, yanks, modernity, large cities, the dollar, commercial malls are words that our students invariably associate with the United States. The case of Canada, let's say, is a country that seems to us more friendly even though they are less familiar with it. It is considered as more benevolent, inspiring much more sympathy than the United States, believe that this is part of our historical circumstances with respect to the United States. It seems to me that it comes from historical consciousness and for this reason there is much suspicion in relation to the United States, even though paradoxically our governments try to imitate North American models. Returning to the case of Canada, my students' perception of it as a country with great racial and cultural tolerance, very cosmopolitan, modern, and with an excellent standard of living. With respect to England, my students are much less familiar with this country. They see it further away culturally especially when they speak. It is considered to be a country of good manners, where they speak perfect English, but they have the idea that the English are cold people that do not react strongly to anything, that is to say, that they never lose their composure, and are not very passionate nor expressive. (Translated by author)

*How frequently do you think your pupils are in contact with the foreign country primarily associated with the language you teach most hours?*

Teachers were asked to respond to how frequently they think their pupils are in contact with the foreign country primarily associated with the language they teach

by indicating “often”, “once in a while” and “never”. The following table represents their responses in sequence of mean scores:

1. Watch one of the country’s television channels (2.53)
2. Use the internet to learn more about the foreign country (2.31)
3. Read one of the country’s newspapers (1.96)
4. Read literature written by authors living in the foreign country ( 1.78)
5. Travel in the foreign country (1.42)

Teachers believe television to be their students’ most important source of information regarding the foreign countries, cultures and peoples associated with the foreign languages they are learning. Both national television and cable television are available in Mexico. There are both dubbing and subtitles for foreign movies. The internet ranks second and the countries’ newspapers third. It is noticeable that a large percent of the teachers recognize that some of their students “never” have the opportunity to travel in the foreign country (62.22%).

We would also like to point out that students’ degree of familiarity with the foreign culture, the direction and strength of students’ attitude toward the foreign people and the frequency of students’ contacts with the foreign culture were found to not covary with teachers’ degree of willingness. This suggests that teachers may take account of their students’ level of foreign language proficiency when conceiving their teaching, but may fail to also take account of their students’ level of intercultural competence when deciding on how to approach foreign language-and-culture teaching.

### *C. Teachers’ perceptions of culture teaching practice*

Do you have the feeling that you would like to devote more time to “culture teaching” during your foreign language teaching classes, but that somehow you never get around to it?

An indication of how teachers implement culture-and-language teaching at present concerns the distribution of their teaching time over ‘language teaching’ and ‘culture teaching’. Teachers were given six options and asked to check the situation that best matched their situation: 100% language teaching – 0% culture teaching; 80% language teaching – 20% culture teaching; 60% language teaching – 40% cul-

ture teaching; 40% language teaching – 60% culture teaching; 20% language teaching – 80% culture teaching; 100% integration of language-and-culture teaching. The results showed that most teachers (73.33%) devote more time to language teaching than to culture teaching, but that about one-fifth of the teachers (17.78%) say they integrate language teaching and culture teaching 100% of their teaching time.

When asked if they were willing to devote more time to ‘culture teaching’ during their foreign language teaching classes, but somehow never get round to it, 62% answer affirmatively. The most frequently mentioned reason for not getting round to it more is ‘lack of time’, though other reasons, pertaining to lack of professional training in the area or to various factors in the learning situation, are also mentioned, as exemplified in the following: “The time to complete the program is reduced and certain aspects of language should be taught in a certain period of time. I don’t have enough cultural material and sometimes it is difficult to get it or the school does not have resources to use it.”

*What kinds of culture teaching activities do you practice during classroom teaching time?*

Teachers were given a list of culture teaching activities and asked to indicate how often they practice certain activities by marking “often”, “once in a while” and “never”. The activities are ranked below in descending order of the means of teacher response:

- \*1. I ask my pupils to compare an aspect of their own culture with that aspect in the foreign culture. (2.73)
- \*2. I tell my pupils what I heard (or read) about the foreign country or culture. (2.71)
- \*3. I tell my pupils why I find something fascinating or strange about the foreign culture(s). (2.69)
- \*4. I comment on the way in which the foreign culture is represented in the foreign language materials I am using in a particular class. (2.44)
- \*5. I talk with my pupils about stereotypes regarding particular cultures and countries or regarding inhabitants of particular countries. (2.42)
6. I ask my pupils to think about the image which the media promote of the foreign country. (2.34)
7. I ask my pupils to independently explore an aspect of the foreign culture. (2.20)

8. I ask my pupils to think about what it would be like to live in the foreign culture. (2.86)
9. I ask my pupils to describe an aspect of their own culture in the foreign language. (2.11)
10. I talk to my pupils about my own experiences in the foreign country. (2.09)
11. I use videos, CD-ROMS or the internet to illustrate an aspect of the foreign culture. (2.00)
12. I bring objects originating from the foreign culture to my classroom. (1.93)
13. I ask my pupils to participate in role-play situations in which people from different cultures meet. (1.93)
14. I ask my pupils about their experiences in the foreign country. (1.91)
15. I touch upon an aspect of the foreign culture regarding which I feel negatively disposed. (1.84)
16. I decorate my classroom with posters illustrating particular aspects of the foreign culture. (1.62)
17. I invite a person originating from the foreign country to my classroom. (1.33)

Large percentages of the teachers say that they “often” practice certain culture teaching activities. The \* indicates those statements that have more than 50% of the teachers indicating “often”. More than half of the teachers say that they “often” tell their students about what they have read or find fascinating and strange about the foreign country or culture. On the other hand, 71.11% of the teachers indicate that they never invite visitors from the foreign country of the language they teach to their classroom; 68-89% and 51.11% indicate that they never decorate their classrooms with posters illustrating cultural aspects.

In addition, teachers were given the opportunity to write in additional activities on the questionnaire. Some of the activities they mention include: 1) getting students to do interviews with tourists in which they ask about their countries, 2) asking students to see movies, 3) decorating the classroom with posters regarding other cultures and countries, 4) having round table discussions, 5) listening to rock music, 6) explaining aspects about the United States, Canada or England, 7) reading about cultural aspects, and 8) getting students to carry out surveys on certain topics.

*Cultural topics addressed in the foreign language classroom*

In addition to cultural activities, teachers were asked about the degree to which they touch upon different cultural aspects during their foreign language teaching. They were asked to choose between “I deal with it extensively”, “I only touch upon it once in a while”, or “I never touch upon it” with a series of cultural topics. The order in which the teachers ranked the topics is represented below:

1. Daily life and routines, living conditions, food and drink, etcetera (2.57)
2. Traditions, folklore, tourist attractions (2.51)
3. Youth culture (2.51)
4. Values and beliefs (2.41)
5. Education, professional life (2.29)
6. Other cultural expressions (music, drama, art) (2.27)
7. Different ethnic and social groups (2.11)
8. History, geography, political system (2.04)
9. International relations (political, economic and cultural) with students’ own country and other countries (2.04)
10. Literature (1.91)

It is interesting to note that the topics which the teachers touch upon most frequently are also the topics with which they are most familiar (section “How teachers look at themselves: their goals, their familiarity and contact with cultures, their degree of willingness to teach intercultural competence”). This is the case for the first four. It is curious that although teachers indicate familiarity with history, geography and political system, it is ranked as eighth. Literature is ranked last, a result that confirms an earlier finding, namely that literary objectives are not considered important goals of foreign language education.

*Criteria observed when selecting teaching materials*

The final aspect we explored was the criteria teachers use when selecting a foreign language textbook. They were asked to select from 11 textbook characteristics six criteria that appeal most to them.

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|---|--------|
| 1. The degree to which the textbook meets the curricular requirements   | 15.32% |
| 2. The degree to which the book can motivate my pupils  | 14.86% |
| 3. The degree to which the book is attuned to the level and the age of my pupils  | 14.41% |
| 4. The fact that additional materials come with the book (workbook, listening materials, texts, video, etcetera)            | 12.16% |
| 5. The amount of cultural information the book offers   | 10.36% |
| 6. The price  | 9.91%  |
| 7. The degree of matching between the amount of materials offered and the number of teaching periods assigned to my subject | 9.01%  |
| 8. The pace of the book, the speed with which the book progresses   | 7.21%  |
| 9. The lay-out  | 4.05%  |
| 10. The quality of the teacher's manual   | 1.8%   |
| 11. The textbook authors' nationality   | 0.9%   |

They were also asked if the cultural content of the textbook series meets with their expectations. A small percentage (15.79%) say “yes, very much so”, 68.42% say “yes, up to a certain extent, while 15.79% say “no, not really”. Their explanations varied from being favorable, such as “I find the texts interesting, informative and the students like them” to calling for more “aspects on values, beliefs, history and traditions.”

A large percentage (86.49%) of the teachers said that they can choose their own textbooks. Also, 94.29% say that they use additional materials together with the textbooks. They gave various reasons for why they did not use textbooks alone. Some teachers work with reading comprehension courses and use authentic texts that students select according to their personal and academic interests.

## DISCUSSION

We have followed in this discussion how teachers perceive of culture and language teaching, how they perceive of their students related to these aspects and how they perceive of their teaching practice related to intercultural communication. The results of each segment of the questionnaire have been reported on with our attention being on Mexico. We would like to acknowledge that as these results relate to the social context of Mexico, they hold special meaning for Mexico's educational

institutions and its teachers and students and speak to evolving concepts of competence in intercultural communication that are in the process of emerging, being defined and applied in Mexico. It is hoped that one of the outcomes of the questionnaire is to serve as an aid in designing programs for teacher in-service, especially in relation to descriptive profiles of teachers' attitudes toward intercultural foreign language teaching and teachers' role as mediators of language-and-culture. We would like to conclude by looking at the three areas of teachers' perceptions mentioned in the introduction, pointing out significant features and make some concluding comments about intercultural communicative competence.

### *How teachers see themselves*

First the majority of the teachers see themselves as more subject oriented than pupil oriented. Their greatest concern is to impart skills, knowledge and attitudes to further their students' language proficiency in particular and life in general.

They see general objectives for foreign language teaching in terms of the acquisition of proficiency in the language, ranking cultural objectives with much less importance. For example, aims that are central to intercultural communicative competence (such as 'promoting the acquisition of an open mind and a positive disposition towards unfamiliar cultures' or 'understanding one's own identity or culture') are ranked much lower than the acquisition of proficiency. On the other hand, when asked about the meaning of "culture teaching" teachers rank highest culture teaching objectives such as 'the ability to handle intercultural contact situations' and 'the ability to empathize with people living in other countries'. Here again the objective of 'developing attitudes of openness and tolerance toward other peoples and cultures' holds little importance for the teachers as a group.

Teachers view themselves when asked about the countries they associate with the foreign language they teach as being familiar with six countries, the foremost being the United States and Great Britain. Although more than the majority of the teachers view themselves familiar with a wide variety of cultural topics, they rate themselves most familiar with topics such as daily life and routines, living conditions, traditions, values and beliefs of such cultures. It is significant that almost all of the teachers often have culture contact through the media.

Teachers agree completely that intercultural competence should be taught in the foreign language classroom and endorse promoting the acquisition of intercultural skills. They agree that intercultural competence encourages tolerance towards other cultures.

Teachers' willingness correlates positively with convictions that include the teachers representing a realistic image of the foreign culture, that teaching should also enhance students' understanding of their own cultural identity, that teaching intercultural competence be undertaken cross-curricularly, that culture teaching is as important as language teaching in foreign language education, and that more knowledge and familiarity with the foreign culture will lead to a more tolerant attitude.

#### *How they describe their students*

In addition to teachers often having culture contact through the media, they also frequently mention their students watching one of the country's television channels and the use of the internet. In fact, a large percent of the teachers (91%) believe that their students (either once in a while or often) watch one of the country's television channels (these programs are in Spanish) and use the internet to learn more about the foreign country (93%). The questionnaire also revealed that teachers think that more than half of their students have not traveled or lived in the countries where the foreign language being studied is spoken. Teachers point out that English students associate greatly with it the United States.

#### *How they describe their classroom teaching*

In the area of teacher classroom practice, teachers view themselves as volunteering cultural information about what they have read, learned or heard about C2 (the culture of the foreign language) and often asking their students to make comparisons between their home culture (C1) and C2. It is important to note that a large percent say that they never invite visitors from the foreign cultures to their classroom or decorate their classrooms with posters illustrating cultural aspects. They indicate that they use mostly textbooks as well as materials from different text-

books rather than a single textbook. They tend to judge their textbook by the degree to which it meets curricular requirements while not having a consensus among the criteria to select textbooks.

Returning to the aims guiding the study it may seem early to draw conclusions about teaching practice especially being characterized as directed toward the attainment of intercultural communicative competence rather than communicative competence as intercultural communicative competence is new to Mexico and at the level of being discussed and introduced into the educational community and its structuring (Muñoz, 2001). Moreover, teachers' perceptions reveal concepts held about intercultural education and their perceptions that call for exploring in future research what intercultural communicative competence means to them before an understanding of their perceptions can be attained.

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