

DEVELOPING FUTURE TEACHERS' INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCY: AN EXPERIENCE "IN CONTEXT"

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Abstract

Developing intercultural competence (IC) is increasingly considered essential for preparing future teachers for diverse educational and professional contexts. In Québec, teacher training programs (TTP) introduce student teachers (ST) to key concepts related to diversity and interculturality. IC can be understood as a *savoir-agir*, or the ability to act appropriately in context, encompassing attitudes and skills such as flexibility, empathy, communication, and conflict resolution. In classroom settings, these dispositions play a key role in shaping student-teacher relationships and overall teaching effectiveness. TTPs therefore aim to support ST in developing this capacity, notably through experiential learning opportunities such as international mobility. This study examines the impact of a short-term international teaching experience on the development of IC among ST. As part of a French-as-a-foreign-language course at Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières (UQTR), eight student teachers conducted French lesson in Hanoi, Vietnam, over a two-week period. Data were collected through a post-project questionnaire and a focus group. Results indicate improvements in pedagogical competencies, including lesson planning, adaptation to learners' needs, and communication skills. However, contrary to expectations, participants did not report significant gains in intercultural competence.

Keywords: *Intercultural competence, foreign language teaching, teacher training, teaching abroad, student teacher.*

1. Introduction

The world of education is becoming increasingly diverse and multicultural. It is therefore imperative that student teachers (ST) develop intercultural competencies (IC) in preparation for the workplace. With respect to diversity and interculturality, Québec's teacher training programs (TTP) acquaint ST with a variety of theoretical concepts (e.g., integration, prejudice, and discrimination). They also familiarize them with ethnic relations and immigration, professional competencies required of increasingly diverse educational environments as well as aspects of adaptation of the educational system to diversity (e.g., general frameworks, pedagogical practices, and school-family community relationships) (Groupe de travail interuniversitaire, 2015). However, an analysis of the ministry's teacher training framework (MEQ, 2001, 2021) reveals that "there are no common reference points which all professors and instructors could use to define the specific competencies that future teachers must master to assume the twofold responsibility of carrying out effective and equitable interventions in multiethnic environments" (CEETUM, 2013). Consequently, "if we really wish to provide equal learning opportunities for all children, regardless of their background, an even bigger investment in our current and next generation of teachers is necessary" (Romijn, Slot, & Leseman, 2021, p. 3). In their literature review, these researchers also identify a wide range of professional development initiatives aimed at enhancing teachers' intercultural competence, reporting generally positive—though variable—effects. What impact does a guided international teaching experience have on the IC of future second or foreign language teachers?

2. Framework

In Québec, Canada, the training of second and foreign language teachers is guided by the *Référentiel de compétences professionnelles de la profession enseignante*. This framework was updated in 2021 to better respond to the educational and social challenges facing Québec, particularly in relation to inclusion, culture, and language. This revised version includes 13 professional competencies that guide the design, organization, and implementation of teacher education programs in Québec.

2.1. Quebec reference framework for professional competencies for teachers

The training of second and foreign language teachers is guided by the *Référentiel de compétences professionnelles de la profession enseignante*. This framework was updated in 2021 to respond to the educational and social challenges currently faced by Québec, particularly in relation to inclusion, culture, and language. This revised version outlines 13 professional competencies that guide the design, organization, and implementation of teacher education programs in Québec.

Table 1. Summary table of the 13 core professional competencies for teachers.

TWO FUNDAMENTAL COMPETENCIES	
Competency 1	Act as a cultural facilitator when carrying out duties
Competency 2	Master the language of instruction
AREA 1: Six specialized competencies central to working with and for students	
Competency 3	Plan teaching and learning situations
Competency 4	Implement teaching and learning situations
Competency 5	Evaluate learning
Competency 6	Manage how the class operates
Competency 7	Take into account student diversity
Competency 8	Support students' love of learning
AREA 2: Two competencies underlying collaborative professionalism	
Competency 9	Be actively involved as a member of the school team
Competency 10	Co-operate with the family and education partners in the community
AREA 3: One competency inherent in teachers' professionalism	
Competency 11	Commit to own professional development and to the profession
TWO CROSS-CURRICULAR COMPETENCIES	
Competency 12	Mobilize digital technologies
Competency 13	Act in accordance with the ethical principles of the profession

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Analysis of the Quebec Ministry of Education's teacher training framework (MEQ, 2021) reveals that no specific professional competency explicitly addresses interculturality. However, IC can be understood tacitly as a cross-cutting competence embedded across several competencies of the *Référentiel des compétences en enseignement*. Moreover, "there are no common reference points which all professors and instructors could use to define the specific competencies that future teachers must master to assume the twofold responsibility of carrying out effective and equitable interventions in multiethnic environments" (CEETUM, 2013).

2.1.1. Intercultural competence. Over the past decades, the concept of intercultural competence has generated a rich and evolving conceptual and theoretical landscape (Romijn, Slot, & Leseman, 2021). Intercultural competence (IC) extends beyond discrete skills and can therefore be understood as a *savoir-agir*, or "knowing how to act in context". Building from Le Boterf (2010) and (Tardif, 2006). IC involves the mobilization and combination of a range of internal and external resources in response to situational demands arising from or situated within diverse cultural milieus. In this sense, IC aligns with integrative models (e.g., Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006), which conceptualize intercultural competence as the dynamic ability to draw on attitudes, knowledge, and skills to act appropriately and effectively in culturally diverse contexts. IC plays a central role in interpersonal relationships and encompasses attitudes and skills such as flexibility, adaptability, empathy, effective communication, and conflict resolution. In educational contexts, dispositions such as openness, empathy, and the ability to manage diversity are particularly salient, as they shape student–teacher relationships, group dynamics, and overall teaching effectiveness. Accordingly, one of the key objectives of teacher training programs (TTP) is to support student teachers (ST) in developing this *savoir-agir*, enabling them to navigate and learn from

intercultural situations. More broadly, IC may be fostered through direct engagement with culturally diverse individuals or through experiences such as international mobility.

Widely used in K–12 research in the United States, as well as in studies on pre-service teacher education (e.g., Sleeter, 2001), Banks' (2004) framework of multicultural education conceptualizes the transformation of learners' beliefs, attitudes, and actions through five dimensions: content integration, knowledge construction, equity pedagogy, prejudice reduction, and an empowering school culture. While differing slightly in emphasis, the framework proposed by Pastori, Mangiatordi, Ereky-Stevens, and Slot similarly emphasizes knowledge, values, attitudes, skills, and actions, grounded in a human rights perspective that strongly values diversity (Pastori et al., 2018).

According to Pastori et al. (2018), intercultural competence encompasses five interrelated and reciprocal dimensions: knowledge, values, attitudes, skills, and action. More specifically,

- 1) *Knowledge* refers to knowledge of the self, of language and communication, and of the world in a broad sense (e.g., politics, law, human rights, cultures, and religion);
- 2) *Values and beliefs* cover a wide range of domains, including diversity, inclusion, human rights, and justice. While grounded in knowledge, they also include an affective dimension, as they involve judgment and evaluation);
- 3) *Attitudes* refer to a system of beliefs about ideas, objects, people, or situations that predispose individuals to respond in a particular way. In this perspective, positive intercultural attitudes are characterized by openness to cultural otherness, as well as respect for diverse beliefs, worldviews, and practices. They also include dispositions such as civic-mindedness, responsibility, self-efficacy, and tolerance for ambiguity.
- 4) *Intercultural skills*, which include listening and observation, cooperation and conflict resolution, communicative competence, and analytical and critical thinking (particularly the ability to reflect on one's own biases);
- 5) *Action* is understood as behaviors that contribute to collective well-being and sustainable development at both local and global levels (Pastori et al., 2018).

3. Methodology

Four months prior to departure, two lecturers and the university professor responsible for the program began meeting with the ST to prepare them both didactically and culturally for teaching French as a foreign language (FFL) at the University of Languages and International Studies (ULIS), in Hanoi, Vietnam. Lesson planning was carried out in alignment with ULIS' course objectives. All required content and material were provided in advance of the stay. During these preparatory meetings, UQTR participants developed ten FFL lesson plans; they also held two online tutoring sessions with their future ULIS learners. Two weeks before departure, participants connected with their Vietnamese students via Zoom on two occasions, both to become acquainted and to gauge their language proficiency more accurately.

A total of 8 future English-as-a-second-language student teachers participated in the project. They came from three different cohorts ($n_{\text{year1}} = 1$; $n_{\text{year3}} = 3$, and $n_{\text{year4}} = 4$) and all had French as their native language. ST were enrolled in *DLA1115-Initiation à l'enseignement du français, langue seconde* [Introduction to the teaching of French as a second language], an elective course offered in the *Department of modern languages and translation* at UQTR. All eight L2 ST conducted classes and activities in French as a foreign language (FFL) at ULIS over a period of two weeks in June 2025. They also observed classes given both by the Vietnamese university teachers and by their peers.

As part of the *DLA1115 – Initiation à l'enseignement du français langue seconde* course, these L2 student teachers (ST) taught 75 university students, delivering one hour of instruction per day for a total of 10 teaching hours. In addition, they were required to remain in class for three hours each day, either to observe Vietnamese instructors or their fellow UQTR peers. The Vietnamese students were beginners in French and had completed one semester of instruction prior to our arrival. At the end of the project, student teachers from Québec completed a post-project questionnaire and participated in a focus group to reflect on their experience and report perceived gains in knowledge and professional development.

4. Results and discussion

From the outset, and as consistently reported during and after the field experience, all participants (both Vietnamese and Québécois) expressed strong appreciation for the time shared with their counterparts, both in and outside the classroom as well as for the cultural activities organized in formal and informal settings. However, with the exception of mandatory cultural and teaching-learning activities, interaction between the two groups remained largely confined to the university setting, and participants did not really engage in additional socialization.

In terms of professional development, participants reported gains in several key teaching competencies. These included improved daily lesson planning, greater adaptability to student needs and to last-minute changes introduced by supervising professors, and more effective communication in the French-as-a-foreign-language classroom. Notably, participants demonstrated an increased ability to adapt their speaking pace and simplify their language to suit the proficiency levels of Vietnamese learners. At the same time, the experience raised awareness of pedagogical differences across contexts. Although both groups claimed adherence to communicative language teaching (CLT) principles, classroom practices diverged in noticeable ways, particularly regarding student behavior. For instance, the use of mobile phones and quiet peer interactions during class was more tolerated in the Vietnamese context, and one student teacher reported being criticized for attempting to enforce stricter attention and task engagement.

Were two weeks (for a total of 10 hours of teaching and 20 of observation) sufficient to foster the development of intercultural competence (IC)? We tend to think not. Aside from the need for continuous adaptation of teaching content—which may have contributed to some awareness of cultural differences between the two educational systems—we believe that ST were still in an immersive curiosity or immersive excitement phase characterized by enthusiasm and discovery. They were primarily engaged in exploring the people, culture, food, climate, and contrasts between urban and rural life. It is important to note that Vietnam is geographically and culturally distant from Québec (Canada), which may have heightened this initial sense of novelty. While short-term interventions of approximately two weeks can contribute to the initial development of intercultural competence (IC), their impact remains limited in both scope and depth. Research on short-term programs (e.g., two to five weeks) indicates that learners may experience measurable gains in self-perceived intercultural awareness and attitudes, particularly when activities are intentionally structured and include meaningful intercultural interaction. Even very brief experiences (e.g., two-week programs) can trigger important developmental processes such as empathy, openness, and reflective awareness when participants are exposed to culturally disorienting situations and engage in guided reflection. However, these gains tend to be uneven, with evidence suggesting that short-term interventions are more effective in enhancing cognitive dimensions such as cultural knowledge than in fostering deeper attitudinal and behavioral change. Given that IC is a complex, multidimensional construct involving attitudes, knowledge, skills, and internal transformation (Deardorff, 2006), its development typically requires sustained engagement, repeated intercultural encounters, and iterative reflection over time. Consequently, despite the time spent abroad, this short-term experience may not have been sufficient to foster deeper reflection or support the development of intercultural *savoir-agir*. Even with the inclusion of cultural workshops, student teacher (ST) preparation appears to have remained largely didactic in nature. This suggests that greater emphasis should be placed on engaging participants in critical reflection processes that explicitly address underlying beliefs and facilitate the cognitive deconstruction of cultural representations and prejudices—whether negative or idealized—toward the target culture (Gazaille, Boucher, & Gosselin, 2014).

5. Conclusions

The objective of this study was to explore the impact of a guided teaching-abroad experience on the intercultural competence (IC) of future second or foreign language teachers. To this end, the study first highlighted the importance of IC for student teachers. While the development of several professional competencies was observed, IC development was not notably reported by participants. More specifically, student teachers demonstrated gains in short-term planning, rapid in-class adjustments, and day-to-day instructional decision-making.

Despite the limited number of participants, the study remains relevant due to its distinctive context—Hanoi, Vietnam—characterized by a markedly different educational system, teaching culture, and sociocultural environment from that of Québec. Even though the proximity between Québec and Vietnamese participants, the language barrier remained a significant obstacle, limiting the type of interaction and “natural” cohabitation that might be expected in a context of forced immersion at this age and in this setting. Consequently, a two-week stay should be understood as an initial, catalytic phase rather than a sufficient condition for the development of intercultural competence. In this sense, this study

contributes to a better understanding of how to design and implement intercultural competence (IC) development within teacher training programs, as well as through teaching abroad experiences.

These findings open avenues for future research. First, longitudinal studies are needed to examine the development of future teachers' IC over longer periods of time, as short-term teaching abroad experiences may only constitute an exploratory phase rather than a sufficient condition for deeper intercultural learning and development. Second, the impact of language proficiency and communication barriers on intercultural interaction warrants closer examination, particularly in contexts where limited linguistic exchange may constrain meaningful engagement with local communities. Finally, comparative studies across different mobility contexts, durations, and cultural settings would contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the conditions under which teaching abroad experiences effectively promote IC.

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