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Topic: The role of the internet in the development of the intercultural competence of Colombian and Azerbaijani 10th and 11th grade Students

Master Student: Janeth Carolina Valencia Restrepo

Supervisor: PhD, Sevil Gurbanova

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INTRODUCTION

The current state of research suggests that culture is a key component in language classrooms that has been historically relegated to the backseat by placing more importance to the linguistic components of language acquisition. For a long time, culture was seen as an add-on to language programs, in which separate lesson time or lessons were assigned to develop awareness of the target culture in the learners. However, this awareness was often confined to the teaching of surface cultural elements, which were frequently the product of subjective or stereotypical points of view shared by teachers and textbooks alike.

The emergence of the communicative language teaching approach propelled educators to realize that the acquisition of language goes beyond grammar structures and vocabulary items. The ability to communicate successfully in the target language is now seen as a more holistic endeavour, where linguistic and extralinguistic elements play an equal role. Culture has finally been recognized as an intrinsic part of language studies. The reciprocal link between language and culture has been made evident and language educators around the globe have started to acknowledge the need to become interculturally adept themselves, which will help them recognize the most adequate strategies they can employ in the classroom to foster intercultural skills in the students.

Educators have also come to realize that the rapid pace in which technology is developing, the growing globalization of markets, and the increasing immigration have brought to the table a whole new array of potential situations in which learners will have to be equipped with intercultural skills in order to communicate effectively in different cultural settings. The internet, specifically, has become the most accessible tool to open the gate to new ways of viewing the world and it is arguably

the medium in which most intercultural communication happens for people living in countries that are not so culturally diverse. Younger people specially have a proclivity towards online interactions, which can greatly influence their understanding of cultural patterns and may help them become more interculturally-minded.

The research question is as follows: To what extent do 10th and 11th grade students from International Baccalaureate Schools in Azerbaijan and Colombia use online resources in their daily lives to come across intercultural content and how may these resources promote the development of the intercultural competence in the students.

The object of the study is the intercultural competence in high school students.

The subject of the study is the analysis of the internet resources used by the students and teachers and their possible impact on the development of the intercultural competence

The theoretical and practical significance of research work is related to how this dissertation can serve as a point of reference for educators to analyse the cross-cultural variance of the use of online resources, the type of content the students interact with in English, and the internet resources used in the classrooms. As well as finding out how well the intercultural competence is developed in the students of international schools, and whether the results are maintained cross-culturally. This research can perhaps help educators see the advantages of using internet resources in the classroom and encouraging students to interact with as much English content as they can on their down-time. The study can show as well how the interests of the learners reflected on their internet usage could be exploited to foster intercultural skills.

The aims and tasks are as follows:

- to create awareness about the importance of fostering intercultural skills in the students.
- to assess the level of proficiency of the students in the intercultural competence by employing different assessment tools.
- to identify how much the students interact with English content online and which type of content they favour.
- to give some suggestions on how the internet can be utilized to develop the intercultural competence.
- to list the internet tools most used by this age group to interact with English content.
- to compare the use of internet and the subsequent intercultural competence proficiency in students from two different cultural backgrounds studying in international schools.

The methodology used was both qualitative and quantitative in the form of classroom observation, discussion, and questionnaires.

The scientific novelty of the study was to find out which online content in English is preferred by students of Colombia and Azerbaijan, and gauge the similarities and differences. To see if the level of competence in intercultural communication is the same for both or if perhaps the cultural setting or the interactions with online content may influence in any way the level of proficiency. This is done taking into account that both sets of students are in a similar setting of an international school. And to identify the intercultural competences developed by the students of international schools taking into account how much online English content they interact with on a daily basis.

The dissertation consists of an introduction, three chapters, conclusion, bibliography, and appendices.

In the introduction an overview of the study is given, where its object, subject, aims, methodology and significance are stated.

Chapter one is divided into three chapters and it consists of an overview of the relationship between language and culture, the emergence and the evolution of the intercultural competence and the role teachers and students play in classrooms where the intercultural competence is a key component.

Chapter two is divided into two chapters and it talks about the internet and its role in intercultural communication, as well as the different tools that can be used to assess the intercultural competence. It also explores the role of the internet and International Baccalaureate schools in the development of the intercultural competence.

Chapter three is split into four chapters where the methodology and the results of the study are presented. Information regarding the research site and participants, as well as the methodology used, the different data collection instruments employed, and the discussion of the results, is presented in this chapter.

The suggestions put forward by this study are found in the conclusion. The bibliography cites all the references used for the dissertation and the appendices consist of the questionnaires and questions asked during the discussion.

CHAPTER I

LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

1.1. A historical overview of language and culture

Language is an essential component of our everyday lives; it permeates different spheres of life and plays a key role in most of them. Our need for language (whatever its manifestation may be), is as intrinsic to us as the act of breathing itself. Chomsky [16] argued that human beings are born with an innate readiness, a set of constraints that predispose us to pick up language structures. At the same time, these language structures allow us to think and to communicate with others, to interact with and interpret the world around us, and to break down barriers in order to encounter different points of view and cultures [62].

This intrinsic communicative nature of language has historically been set aside or even disregarded in some classrooms. At the early stages of formal language teaching, one of the most prominent approaches, i.e. Grammar Translation (GTM) [44], was seen as the mainstream teaching approach for many. However, the superficial understanding of the language achieved through this method only contributed to the development of incompetent language users. Critics of the GTM, argue that students hardly become good communicators, its lack of commitment to booster the students' communicative abilities has made it irrelevant in many classrooms around the world [9, p.16]. It can be said in better terms, that the translation aspect has become unnecessary, while the need to teach grammar has remained. However, in more recent approaches, the way to introduce grammar to the learners has evolved, becoming more intuitive and interactive, in hopes to avoid association with the now unpopular systematic methods [44, p.2].

It is precisely this communicative property of language that has become the focus of recent language teaching and learning approaches and methods. With the emergence of the communicative approach [14, 28, 59], the development of communicative ability has become the goal of language teaching and learning. Consequently, educators need to be able to provide learners with the tools necessary to develop strategies to communicate successfully in real life situations, by knowing when and how to use different linguistic resources [37, p.10]

This communicative reality of language is tied to the notion of language as a social undertaking and not as a system [35, p.2]. Successful communication in any language requires not only linguistic elements, but also sociolinguistic, and cultural knowledge [14, 59]. The introduction of the cultural element to the communicative approach was a great leap forward in the field of language teaching and learning. It moved beyond the acquisition of an adequate oral competence, towards an understanding of the equal importance of cultural knowledge in order to facilitate the interaction of people from different backgrounds [66, p.4], or as Liddicoat puts it “Communication is the use of a culturally shaped code in a culturally shaped context to create and interpret culturally shaped meanings” [35, p. 129]

The essential nature of this cultural element in the communication process, makes it a focus point in language studies. Language and culture are intrinsically connected, as Byram points out “language is inseparable from ‘culture’. Thus, as learners learn *about* language they learn *about* culture and as they learn to use a new language they learn to communicate with other individuals from a new culture.” [10, p.22]. The term culture itself is very difficult to define. According to Liddicoat culture “refers to the knowledge people have about how the world functions and how this knowledge is reflecting in the communication acts” [35, p.118]. Tomalin, B. & Stempleski, S. define culture as “an implicit set of values, beliefs, and attitudes

shared by its members” [58, p.121]. Byram states that culture is “knowledge, but it is knowledge which is shared and negotiated between people, belonging to all of them and not being idiosyncratic to any single one.” [10, p.82]. However, some other authors like Seely [53, p.15], Tang [57, p.86], and Janssen [29, Chp. 1] maintain that the definition of culture cannot be pointed so precisely, they view culture as a holistic concept that touches all spheres of life. It goes beyond knowledge about surface cultural elements, into the domain of being able to recognize and understand the cultural norms at play and adapt one’s behaviour in order to achieve successful interaction with another culture [43, p.1].

The link between language and culture is quite significant, communication acts need not to be viewed as mere messages constructed by accessible lexical and grammar items. Instead, it needs to be recognized that each lexical item and their grammatical positionings call on ever-present cultural knowledge, so the construction of meanings “resides both within and outside language” [35, p.119].

The understanding of culture has become one of the key competences to be developed in the language classroom. Nonetheless, its intricacy has made it one of the hardest features to incorporate in lessons. Teaching culture was traditionally handled as “the cultural component”, separated from the language itself, and taken as an add-on to some lessons, while concentrating on surface knowledge about the people and their everyday lives. Tomalin, B., & Stempleski, S. make the distinction of the different components that can be taught when talking about culture, they refer to the Big C as “achievement culture” and little C “behaviour culture”. The Big C which used to be the focus of language teaching for many years, deals with common cultural achievements in various fields, such as literature, technology, art, music, etc. In recent times, this focus has shifted towards a more anthropological view on

culture, i.e. the Little C, which comprises behaviours, customs, habits, ways of life (dress, food, leisure, etc.) [58, p.6-7].

Regarding the “links” between language and culture, Kramsch, refers to three: “*universal links*” involve the commonalities shared by people around the world, usually represented in universally known literary works; “*national links*” refer to nation-specific referents, and “*local links*” are related to the language used and action taken by everyday speakers in everyday situations [31, p.88]. Robinson defines the elements of culture as products, ideas and behaviours [45]. These perspectives place great importance in cultural considerations, such as celebrations, time, gestures, the truth, compliments, gifts, visiting, individualism, straightforwardness, turn-taking in conversation, comradeship, intonation, levels of speech [10, 20, 31].

These traditional elements were the focus point of many language classrooms around the world for many years. In order to teach culture, many educators used to allocate separate lesson time to explicitly teach learners about the above-mentioned cultural factors, usually with the aid of textbooks or authentic materials. But it should be taken into account that these elements are incorporated in textbooks following a predetermined view of the target language world, which is often not objective, they tend to be influenced by different factors, such as politics, so they are not universally-held views, which leads to different preconceptions the learners may have or acquire about the target culture. These preconceptions may sometimes clash with what they encounter in the classroom, so it is important that the teachers familiarize themselves with the learners’ preconceptions [40, p.17-18].

However, this view of culture and language as independent units has in the most part been left behind. Educators have realized the undeniable socio-cultural nature of linguistic elements; they have come to terms with the fact that culture cannot be

regarded as an outside factor to be taught independently from the language. As Neuner points out “There is no foreign language teaching without socio-cultural contents. Even if socio-cultural learning is not explicitly identified as a cognitive objective, the target-world is implicitly present in many components that constitute foreign language learning (e.g. in words, texts, pictures, situations, people and their roles and actions, exercises etc).” [39, p.35]. Liddicoat also states that “each lexical item and their grammatical arrangements invoke cultural knowledge which is always present and which is intrinsic to rather than additional to the meanings communicated.” [35, p.119].

This suggests that the long-held belief that learners only need to have sufficient proficiency regarding these cultural factors needs to be reevaluated. It is essential to move towards a more comprehensive view of culture, while knowledge about specific cultural elements of a culture is important, educators should aim to create empathy and understanding towards different points of view and different worlds [10, p.88-89].

1.2. Features of the intercultural competence

The realization of the strong link between language, communication, and culture has given rise to the current high-standing of the intercultural competence, which aims to transform students’ worldviews by “encouraging them to constantly move between their linguistic and cultural world and that of the users of the target language” [49, p.324].

The main focus of the intercultural competence must be the ability to understand different social situations, the elements involved in the communication and the different strategies that may be used to achieve communication [65, p.219]

Byram describes intercultural competence as the “ability to communicate and interact across cultural boundaries” [11, p.7]. He proposes a model for intercultural communication, which comprises 5 dimensions required to achieve successful intercultural communication:

i) *savoirs*: individual and social knowledge brought to the interaction, ii) *savoir être*: attitude of curiosity and openness towards other cultures, iii) *savoir comprendre*: skills of interpreting and relating to existing knowledge, iv) *savoir apprendre/faire*: skills of discovering and/or interacting from prior or non-existent knowledge, v) *savoir s’engager*: education about politics and critical cultural awareness. [11, p.34].

Deardorff defines intercultural competence as “effective and appropriate behaviour and communication in intercultural situations” [17, p.33]. The intercultural model proposed by Deardorff [17, 18 p.84], shares some commonalities with Byram’s model, such as the importance of

i) attitudes: openness, curiosity, and discovery to leave the comfort zone, ii) knowledge: cultural self-awareness and deep cultural knowledge, iii) skills: addressing the acquisition and processing of knowledge, i.e. observation, listening, evaluating, analysing, interpreting, and relating.

The acquisition of these 3 factors, leads first to an internal outcome which translates into the development of adaptability, flexibility, empathy. As well as an external outcome, which refers to how all the previous factors (including the internal outcomes) are present in the behaviour and communication of the individual [17, p.88].

Arasaratnam and Doerfel put forward the notion that in order to be interculturally competent, individuals need to possess five qualities: “empathy, intercultural experience/training, motivation, global attitude, and ability to listen well in conversation” [1, p.157].

Neuner positions empathy, role distance, tolerance of ambiguity, awareness and representation of own identity as the main factors of the intercultural competence [39, p.49], while Gudykunst, highlights the importance of using mindfulness to reduce uncertainty and anxiety so the learners can become effective communicators [23].

Bennett explains how in order to be successful intercultural communicators there needs to be a change of perspective in how we view ourselves, the world, and our position in it. He puts forward a model of intercultural sensitivity, which goes from an “ethnocentric perspective” defined by the stages of denial, defence and minimization when expressing one’s own culture, towards and “ethnorelative perspective”, centred in acceptance, adaptation, and integration [3, p.3]. Other authors have also underlined the importance of the role intercultural sensitivity plays [2, 15, 69].

The intercultural competence represents a move from communicative competence towards a more comprehensible view of the intrinsicality of language and culture [41]. The communicative competence did not fully recognize the link between language and culture, and it didn’t recognize that the mere knowledge of the target culture is not enough to encourage mutual cultural understanding, it did not perceive the importance of being aware of one’s own culture before being able to reach any understanding [24]

The communicative competence also had a predisposition of “native English” i.e. its main goal was for the students to achieve native-like fluency. In contrast, the Intercultural competence places non-native speakers in a position of privilege, they are seen as adaptable, versatile and resourceful communicators. Non-native teachers are highly regarded as well, since they should be the embodiment of all the skills required to be efficient intercultural speakers. They should be able to successfully guide the learners towards the same path [6, p. 260].

Another consideration that needs to be taken into account is the question of which English culture needs to be taught. Culture itself is not monolithic, it is everchanging and learners need to be aware of this. The educator has the responsibility of facilitating encounters with a wide variety of successful behaviours for different interactions in a specific a culture [43]. There is a long-held belief that there are some English variants that are more “authentic” than others, such as American, British, Australian, etc. However, it is important to instil in the students the notion that English is the *lingua franca* of the 21st century. It is the language most often used to build bridges between cultures, and thus the nativity of its speakers is inconsequential [42, p. 675].

The intercultural competence’s aim is not to draw the learners towards a rigid and set view of “culture”, instead the goal is to help the learners understand that there is great diversity of cultural referents in all languages. In the case of English in particular, no one can claim ownership of the language, so it is impossible to pinpoint an English language culture. Consequently, rather than directing the acquisition of this competence towards subjective and often narrow views of culture, the purpose should be to create learners that are culturally sensitive and aware of the role they play as citizens of the world [36].

1.3. The role of the teachers and the students in the intercultural classroom

The above indicates that first and foremost, the teachers themselves should be interculturally competent [63]. They should be open-minded, critical-thinkers, and culturally-sensitive individuals, so that they are able to successfully foster the same attitudes and skills in their students. Educators should also have in-depth knowledge about their students “as linguistic and cultural beings”, their backgrounds, expectations, needs, learning styles and so on, in order to successfully guide them in their journey to navigate different cultural landscapes, by creating connections towards the target culture [48, p.05.8].

The role of the teacher is then to be the mediator between the learners and the target culture [68]. They should be able to create learning opportunities that allow the students to recognize the connections between what’s taught in the classroom and the real world by exercising critical thinking skills. Byram states the importance of critical cultural awareness (CCA), which is the “ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria perspectives, practices and products in one’s own and other cultures and countries” [41, p.74].

From their part, students should be aware of their own cultural paradigms, understand that culture is not “static” [47, p.360], and display critical thinking when faced with bias and stereotypes [22, p.45]. Learners should be able to recognize the role of their social identity in different interactions, how people view each other based on the perceived identity (stereotypes), and how their own identity may have impacted their world view [12, p.21].

It is also of great importance that the learners are fully aware of their own cultural identity, so that they can seek membership in different cultural communities. Learners need to be able to create a bridge between their own cultural identity and

that of the target language [42, 48]. The “interim world” concept presented by Neuner greatly exemplifies the notion that “awareness and acceptance of one’s own world and the perception and acceptance of the foreign world” [40, p. 49] is the key for the development of tolerance, openness, critical-thinking, and acceptance towards others, which all are the key towards a peaceful sharing of the planet.

Once the learners have become aware of their own cultural paradigms, they need to be able to adapt to the new culture without losing their own identity. Schuman exemplifies this with the “acculturation” concept, which defines “the social and psychological integration of the learner with the target language group” He proposes three integration strategies: assimilation, preservation, and adaptation [52, p.379].

The above has exhibited how the awareness of one’s own culture has become a priority in the intercultural classroom. Educators need to constantly present the learners with opportunities to come to terms and recognize the reality of their own individual world, how their knowledge and background are constantly explicitly and implicitly present in their daily lives. They need to understand that their reality will inevitably affect the way they interpret the target culture [34, p.50].

One of the ends of the intercultural competence is to develop intercultural communicators that are able to recognize the complexity and multiplicity of identities. Learners that are able to perceive people first and foremost as individuals with their own qualities, rather than as mere representatives of a specific cultural identity [12, p.5].

CHAPTER II

THE INTERNET AND ITS ROLE IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

2.1. Assessing the intercultural competence

First of all, it should be highlighted that the acquisition of the intercultural competence is not a process that has a specific and measurable end goal. As seen above, there are many models put forward suggesting the skills needed to have successful interactions in intercultural environments, but no “perfect” or “ideal” model has been established. The intercultural competence acquisition process is never-ending, it is a constant endeavour in which both educators and learners need to accept that people, not unlike cultures are not static, they are in a constant process of change, evolution and revaluation [13].

Here is where the notion of assessing the level of the intercultural competence gets tricky. It can be said that there is a fuzzy threshold where intercultural abilities and personality traits converge. It would be unrealistic to intend that all learners achieve a “satisfactory” level of intercultural readiness.

Firstly, there is no unanimity in what a “satisfactory” level even is. Secondly, as stated before, human beings are not static, even deeply held beliefs, attitudes and skills could change under certain circumstances. This is why a constant and permanent intercultural proficiency is quite unrealistic as well [17, p.13]. There needs to be continuous exposure to intercultural interactions in order to, at least, maintain a constant flow of intercultural input to help learners discern the most adequate ways to conduct themselves in various situations. Finally, there is an immutable truth that people are unique and their personalities may not aid them in their pursuit of becoming more interculturally-minded world citizens, i.e. there needs

to be a certain degree of self-esteem, extroversion, low levels of anxiety, willingness to take risks, etc. to be successful in unpredictable situations [7].

Nonetheless, this does not mean that the educators cannot help these learners overcome their barriers. Taking all of this into consideration, it is essential for educators to understand that the best way to carry out an assessment of intercultural competence, may be an overtime follow-up and monitoring process, rather than a one-time assessment [27, p.66-67].

It is also paramount that the teachers themselves assess their own intercultural communication competence, so they can accurately choose the best approaches to develop the same in the students [67, p.324]. A proficient level in intercultural communication is essential for the teacher [22].

A more holistic assessment can be done to help the students recognize their own cultural identity and to help them adapt to the new culture and navigate complex intercultural interactions [52]. Moreover, the teachers should aim to provide various opportunities for direct engagement with other cultures, and at the same time, they should encourage the students to interact with other cultures online [27, p.68].

The first step towards the successful incorporation of intercultural nuances in the classroom should be an initial assessment of the current level of intercultural competence of the students. The results of an initial diagnosis assessment can be utilized to come up with a long-term plan to include the development of intercultural skills in language classrooms. There are different scales and questionnaires aiming to recognize the cultural skills, knowledge, and attitudes of language users.

Vila Baños developed the Communicative Intercultural Competence Test, comprising of a set of questions focusing on assessing responses of students to different situations in the classroom. Their cultural identity is potentially challenged

by proposing scenarios where different cultural beliefs, behaviours, and values come into play. A total of 18 items are evaluated in the test, and it assesses cognitive aspects, such as verbal and non-verbal communication, self-expression, personal space concept, turn-taking during a conversation, the perception of different cultural notions, hierarchical relationships, individualism vs. collectivism values, etc. The test also evaluates behavioural aspects, like verbal and non-verbal skills, flexibility and adaptation. [69, p.113-122]

Another very useful tool to assess the intercultural competence is the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale developed by Chen, G. M. & Starosta, W. where a five-point Likert scale is used to assess the cultural sensitivity level resulting from 24 items measuring factors such as the interaction engagement, respect of cultural differences, interaction confidence, enjoyment, and attentiveness. Chen and Starosta states that intercultural communication competence requires the cognitive, affective and behavioural ability of the learners, where the cognitive aspect represents cultural awareness, the affective refers to intercultural sensitivity, and the behavioural aspect refers to intercultural adroitness, which is the ability to attain communication goals [15, p.3].

The Intercultural Readiness Check (IRC), presents four sub-competences which are usually included in the items of many intercultural competence assessment methods, i.e. Intercultural sensitivity (cultural awareness, and attention to signals), intercultural communication (active listening, adapting communicative style), building commitment (building relationships, reconciling stakeholder needs), managing uncertainty (openness to cultural diversity, exploring new approaches) [8, p.36]

The Association of American Colleges and Universities developed the Intercultural Knowledge and Competence Value Rubric based on Bennet's model. This rubric

proposes four intercultural dimensions to be assessed: knowledge, skills, and attitudes. The knowledge dimension refers to cultural self-awareness and knowledge of cultural worldview frameworks, the skills dimension refers to empathy as well as verbal and non-verbal communication, and the attitudes dimension refers to curiosity and openness [70, p.2]

It is important to keep in mind that while there is a reasonable range of intercultural competence assessment tools, all of them share many commonalities. They view this competence as multi-dimensional because it requires people to know about other cultures, attempt to understand them and gain different skills [26, p.148]. It is up to the educators to decide the best way to move forward with the assessment of this competence, while keeping in mind factors like the needs of the students, personalities, school requirements, availability of resources, etc.

2.2. The role of the internet and International Baccalaureate Schools in the development of the intercultural competence

The shift from the communicative competence towards an intercultural framework is an attestation of the current social context of the world. The internationalization of markets and cultural globalization have expanded the need and likelihood of intercultural encounters.

Continuous contact with other cultures is required to become a competent intercultural speaker. The resources employed to interact with native and non-native speakers, and authentic materials used to be considerably limited, usually it was only possible through tv, newspapers, music, literature, and occasional real-life encounters with foreigners [4, 60]. Nowadays, the landscape has drastically changed. The increasing all-purpose migration, the internationalization of markets, the globalisation of cultures, and the technological advances have significantly increased

contact across cultures, which requires not only language learners, but people in general, to develop communication skills and abilities appropriate for a multicultural society [46, p.1; 68, p.216; 25, p.32]. English specifically has become the lingua franca to facilitate communication across cultures [61]. It is the language most commonly used to create bridges between different cultures.

In the current world, intercultural experiences are unavoidable. In schools, at work, and in everyday life there is a latent potential to be faced with intercultural scenarios. This is why now, more than ever, educators need to make sure to equip the learners with the tools necessary to conduct themselves appropriately and have successful interactions. They need to find a way to develop in the learners an awareness and a positive attitude towards intercultural competences, and help them develop their skills in this area.

Languages are constantly coming into contact as a result of the increasing mobility of people and the power of technology. Technology and the Internet have become the biggest allies in the fight towards creating interculturally-competent learners. In his connectivism theory, Siemens proposes the study of the generation of knowledge through the use of the Internet. He argues that having diversity of thoughts and points of view is the only way that learning can be achieved. He highlights the importance of being able to be selective when coming across the plethora of information found online. People need to be able to discern which information is authentic and relevant to them. He places the internet as the ultimate tool to acquire unimaginable amounts of knowledge about innumerable amounts of topics [73, chp. 19].

As mentioned above, before all these technological advances, cultural immersion when learning a new language used to be restricted to a few lucky people with access to direct immersion by traveling, letter exchanges or e-mail exchanges [50, 51].

Nowadays, every person has the world within the reach of their hands and can engage in as often as desired. Internet has become the most essential resource in the language teaching and learning process.

However, as Block states “Global communication networks present a paradox. They encourage alienation by reducing face-to-face contact, yet this same technology, from an opposing point of view, provides a nexus of connectivity, social interaction and community building, albeit in novel formations” [5, p.85]. Internet technologies have overcome most of the barriers for intercultural interactions inside and outside of the classroom. Internet resources offer an astonishingly new dynamic for human interaction [56, p.133], which is an enormous gain in the intercultural classroom. Now, educators and students alike have innumerable choices and opportunities to explore their own cultural paradigms and to engage in intercultural interactions as often as they desire.

Current learners have benefitted greatly from the ease in which intercultural communication can be achieved. They have a wide array of tools and internet resources at their disposal to profit from when learning a new language. Social networks seem to be specially designed to attract and maintain the attention of young people [55, p.128]. Facebook for example, can contribute to the increase in motivation and decrease of self-consciousness during intercultural language exchanges carried out on the platform [30, p.44-45]. Online interactions with peers from different cultures constitute a powerful tool to increase the level of the intercultural competence in language learners.

Teachers also need to be on par with the technology resources available to them for the classroom and used day to day by their students. They need to be aware that the internet is a key resource full of potential to aid the development of the intercultural

competence in the students [66]. It is the best tool to reduce distance between the schools and sociocultural realities, by using different internet resources, learners are able to get a closer look to different cultures, come to terms with the characteristics of their own cultural identity, how it affects their ways to view the world, and they are able to recognize as well the differences between cultures and to decide what the best approaches are to have successful intercultural interactions. There is no more “unknown” or uncertainty when wanting to get closer to a cultural community.

One outstanding example of interculturally-minded schools are the International Baccalaureate Schools (IB) [71]. Their aim is to form life-long learners, with high critical-thinking skills, who are capable of solving complex problems, and who are aware of their own cultural reality, their place in the world and the need to be able to co-exist with different people.

Inquiry-based teaching is the pillar of these schools, this approach is also essential in the development of intercultural awareness. IBT gives back the power and responsibility for gaining knowledge back to the learner. It allows them to explore different resources and to discover new things about the materials presented to them by analysing and being critical of what they’re presented with. It encourages students to become independent learners and fosters higher order thinking, which in turn allows them to unearth the various facets of culture by themselves, to go beyond what is being presented to them [19, p.80]. Students study topics relevant to them so motivation is also a big factor in the development of their intercultural skills.

International schools have also recognized the usefulness of the internet and technology in the learning process. Students are usually equipped with their own computers or tablets which they are able to use in the classroom for different learning activities. This opens the possibility of giving more agency to the students over their

journey towards knowledge acquisition. It is especially significant for the intercultural competence development, since the full potential of technology to encourage intercultural interactions in the classroom can be reached.

Nevertheless, these types of schools are the exception and not the norm. This does not mean, though, that regular schools cannot utilize the internet to help learners become better intercultural communicators. Nowadays, devices with internet access are readily available in schools and in households around the world. Most learners have access to computers or mobile phones that can be used as a tool to develop their language skills.

Technology has increased the possibilities for helping the learners get closer to the target culture. Intercultural exchanges can be arranged between students from different countries so that they can discuss topics that interest them, while at the same time gaining cultural insight into the others' reality. This can be done through forums [34], wikis, discussion panels, seminars, etc. The "cultura" project for example was carried out to develop American and French students' awareness about the beliefs, attitudes, concepts, and behaviour by creating a web-based exchange of opinions and ideas about parallel materials from their respective cultures [21, p.57]. The feasibility of such project has immensely increased in recent times due to the easy access to the world-wide web that students and schools generally possess. The incorporation of online resources in the classroom has become not only preferable but completely necessary. There is no better tool to build bridges between cultures and to inspire students to truly become proficient intercultural communicators.

In the current panorama, the ability to seamlessly interact with people from different backgrounds and cultures is regarded as one of the most important skills, if not the most important skill, for learners. This means that educators need to constantly

search for new ways to aid in the acquisition of its acquisition [34, p.57]. At the same time, students are presented with the flexibility to learn both in a formal school setting, as well as at any other moment. The widespread use of technological devices, such as smart phones, laptops, and the world-wide web in general, allow for a versatility in the way culture is taught and learnt. Teachers also need to be acquainted with the latest technological developments, so that they can effectively make use of them in the classroom. They should also be tech-savvy to be able to connect with the students and help them discover other cultures [54, p.159]. They should make use of online resources to make intercultural awareness and acquisition more relevant and attainable for the students [38]. Technology facilitates authentic communication at anytime, anywhere, so it is the holy grail of intercultural competence acquisition. Social media applications, blogs and multimedia encompass only some of the possible online resources that can be exploited to encourage intercultural communication [33]

For instance, telecommunication is a highly useful tool which has gained track in recent years due to its easy accessibility. Setting up telecollaboration projects between schools located in different countries is a great way to create authentic intercultural exchanges [32, p.8].

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS OF THE STUDY

The rising move towards market globalization and all-purpose migration has increased the need to ensure that learners are interculturally competent, so they can be considered as citizens of the world. In order to find out how the possible influence of technology in the acquisition of the intercultural competence in high school students, a cross-cultural case study was conducted in two international schools, one located in Baku, Azerbaijan and another located in Bogotá, Colombia. The first aim of this study is to explore the different online resources Azerbaijani and Colombian students use in their daily lives and how often they interact with English content online. The second aim of the study is to assess how culturally sensitive the students are by applying an adaptation of the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale developed by Chen and Starosta [15], as well as a set of hypothetical situations where intercultural sensitivity is required, which was adapted from Ruth Vilá Baños' intercultural competence test [69]. Both quantitative and qualitative methods in the form of questionnaires, discussions and observations were conducted.

3.1. Research Site and Participants

A cross-cultural study was carried out in two main locations: Dunya School in Baku, Azerbaijan and Cambridge International School in Bogotá, Colombia. In both cases the sites chosen were International Baccalaureate Schools (IB). As explained above, IB schools operate under the same framework across the world and their aim is to “develop students who will build a better world through intercultural understanding and respect, alongside a healthy appetite for learning and excellence” [71]. The participants chosen consisted on 4 groups of 10th graders: Class 10A-1 and 10A-2 from Azerbaijan, and class 10C-1 and 10C-2 from Colombia. As well as 2 groups of

11th graders: Class 11A from Azerbaijan, and class 11C from Colombia. The groups have been renamed for the purpose of this study.

The groups were selected after a brief discussion with an English language teacher from each school, who advised which classes would be more appropriate to conduct the study due to their high proficiency in the English language and their time availability. The students range in age from 15 to 18 years old and belong to the Diploma Program of IB Schools.

A total of 43 students participated in the study from Baku's Dunya school as follows: Class 10A-1 which consisted of 13 fifteen-year-old students, 9 males and 4 females, 11 students were from Azerbaijan, 1 female student was from Egypt and 1 male was from Dagestan. Class 10A-2 consisted of 20 sixteen-year-old students, 10 females and 10 males, most were from Azerbaijan, except for 1 female student who was from Ukraine, and 1 male student from Dagestan. Finally, Class 11A-1 was comprised by 8 seventeen-year-olds and 2 eighteen-year-olds, a total of 10 students, 7 males and 3 females, all were from Azerbaijan, with the exception of 1 male from Russia and 1 male from Iran. A total of 27 students claimed Azerbaijani as their mother tongue, 9 Russian, 3 English, 1 Farsi, 1 Arabic, 1 Turkish and 1 Dagestani.

In the case of Colombia school, a total of 57 students participated in the study as follows: Class 10C-1 comprised by 23 fifteen-year-old students, 10 females and 13 males, 1 male from USA, 3 males and 3 females from Venezuela, and the rest were from Colombia. Class 10C-2 composed by 19 students, 10 fifteen-year-olds and 9 sixteen-year-olds, 14 females and 5 males, 1 male from Venezuela, 1 female from Venezuela, 1 female from USA and the rest were from Colombia. Class 11C-1, 9 seventeen-year-olds and 6 eighteen-year-olds, 10 females and 5 males, 1 female from

Venezuela, 1 male from Argentina, and the rest from Colombia. All 57 students claimed Spanish as their mother tongue.

All in all, the sample consisted of a total of 100 students, who were following the IB Diploma Program which works under the same framework around the world. All the subjects are taught in English and the students involved in the study were part of the English literature class. One senior English literature teacher from Azerbaijan and another from Colombia were the facilitators for conducting the study and were the headteachers for the groups studied.

The online questionnaires were administered to all the participants as they had corresponding levels of English proficiency.

3.2. Methodology of the study

The aim of the research is on one hand, to make a cross-cultural comparison between 10th and 11th grade students from international schools in two different countries, to find out their preferences while interacting with online content, especially when interacting with English content across different online platforms. It is expected that an overview of the type of activities, websites and applications most frequently used by young students from Azerbaijan and Colombia will result from the questionnaire. On the other hand, two questionnaires to assess the intercultural competence of the learners will be carried out as well. At the end of the study, the intention is to get a clear picture on how developed is the intercultural competence for IB students in both countries, how well they may cope when presented with different potentially problematic situations related to cultural differences, and to perhaps attempt to make a conjecture on how important the role of the internet may be in the development of their intercultural competence.

In order to do this, the schools were contacted to request the permission necessary to carry out the study. Two literature teachers were assigned to aid in the selection of the groups. A brief online discussion was conducted with both teachers over Zoom, in which the purpose and methodology of the study was explained, a rundown of the potential participant groups was requested, and an introduction of the framework used in IB schools was given by the educators. After establishing that both schools met the requirements of the study, i.e. students with high English proficiency level, internationally minded framework, same age bracket, the groups were selected and an observation of class 10A-1 was carried out in the school in Baku, in an effort to understand further the execution of the IB curriculum during an English literature lesson.

Once the groups were selected the questionnaires were handed out to the teachers, who in turn applied them during one of their lessons, whilst explaining the purpose of the study to the students and how the questionnaires should be filled out.

3.3. Data collection instruments

As mentioned above, qualitative and quantitative data collection instruments were used to assess the intercultural proficiency of the students as well as their online interactions. The qualitative methods employed consisted of a classroom observation and an online discussion done through Zoom.

Observation

The classroom observation was conducted in the Azerbaijani school, group 10A-1, during an English literature lesson. The purpose of the classroom observation was to gain exposure to the methodology used in an IB English literature classroom, to assess the English proficiency level of the students, to have a discussion about the

role of interculturalism in the classroom and how it is perceived by the students. Note-taking was the method selected for the collection of the relevant data.

Discussion

The online discussion with the two teachers was arranged over Zoom by the author of the study in order to explain the purpose of the research, detail the questions included in the questionnaires, clarify any queries that may have arisen, to gain insight on the methodology used in International Baccalaureate schools, the role that interculturalism and the use of internet resources play. The teachers also provided their recommendations regarding the groups that should participate in the study so that the sample participants would be as homogeneous as possible considering the different backgrounds. Note-taking was the data collection method employed for this purpose as well.

Questionnaires

Questionnaires were chosen as the preferred method to collect quantitative data through open and closed questions useful to measure different variables.

Three different questionnaires were applied as well, some sociodemographic information related to gender, age, country of origin, country of residence, and mother tongue was collected at the beginning of the questionnaires. The first was designed ad hoc to find about the online interactions and knowledge about the English language culture. A set of 16 questions were designed intending to gauge the students' interactions with online content, especially English content, as well as to determine their awareness of English culture. 9 items correspond to multiple choice questions, 4 check box items and 3 long answer items. Overall, the Online Interactions and English Culture Questionnaire's aim was to get a general picture of

the type of content the students interact with online, how often they are using the internet for non-school related purposes, what type of online interactions are the most common for them, how much of the online content they interact with is in English, what are the most common websites/applications they use, how much of their knowledge about English language culture comes from the internet, among others.

Intercultural Competence Questionnaires

The second questionnaire used in the study was based on the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS) developed by Chen and Starosta [15], which is comprised by 24 items evaluating five factors: interaction engagement, respect of cultural differences, interaction confidence, interaction enjoyment and interaction attentiveness (p.8). The results were measured in a 5-point Likert scale (from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree), with 5 items reverse-scored. An adaption of this scale was done resulting in 16 items.

Table 3.1

Items classified by factor

Interaction engagement	Respect of cultural differences	Interaction confidence	Interaction enjoyment	Interaction attentiveness
Items 2, 13, 14	Items 7, 4, 6, 15	Items 1, 11, 8	Items 12, 16	Items 3, 5, 9, 10

The five factors measured by the scale are composed by items, such as:

Interaction engagement: Item 2= “I enjoy interacting with people from different cultures”, Item 13= “I often use non-verbal cues to show my understanding when

communicating with people from different cultures”. Respect of cultural differences: Item 7= “when I learn that people from different cultures have different values from mine, I feel it is ok”, Item 4= “I think my culture is better than other cultures”. Interaction confidence: Item 1= “I am confident when I interact with people from different cultures”, Item 11= “It is easy for me to make friends with people from other cultures”. Interaction enjoyment: Item 12= “I think it is easy to reach mutual understanding with people from different cultures”, Item 16= “I adapt my manner of communication when interacting with people from different cultures to avoid misunderstandings”. The purpose of the scale is to estimate the level of cultural self-concept, open-mindedness, non-judgemental attitudes, and social relaxation of the learners.

The third questionnaire used was adapted from Ruth Vilá Baños’ intercultural competence test [69], where different hypothetical situations describing potential intercultural misunderstandings were presented to the learners. The aim was to find out if the learners possess sufficient proficiency in the intercultural dimensions also detailed in the Intercultural Readiness Check (IRC) [72]. The test was adapted into 9 multiple choice items detailing different scenarios the learners may encounter at school or in their daily life, where a critical approach to potential problems is required. Each item had 4 possible answers presenting different responses to the situation. The responses were assigned the following values depending on their suitability in an interculturally-minded context, as follows: 5= very strong, 4= sufficient, 3= ambivalent, 2= insufficient, 1= very weak.

Some of the items are as follows: Item 18= “you are chatting with a native English speaker online and you realize that they are using words and expressions you don’t understand. What would you do?” Answers: “5-Ask them what the words and

expressions mean”, “3-Wouldn’t know what to do”, “2-Tell them to use normal English”, 1-Apologize and leave the chat”.

Item 23= “Your group of friends welcomed a new student from China. This student is very soft-spoken and likes to maintain their personal space, but your group of friends is often quite loud and they are used to getting into each other's personal spaces (hugging, patting each other on the back, standing very close when speaking to each other, etc.). The new student looks quite overwhelmed by this. What would you do?” Answers: “5-I would talk to my friends and tell them that we should try to tone down a little bit our usual behaviour in front of the new student”, “3-I wouldn't know what to do”, “2-I would talk to the new student and tell them they need to be like us if they want to be part of the group”, “1-I would just ignore the situation and carry on as usual”.

3.4. Results and discussion

On the previous chapter, the methods and tools used for obtaining the data were described. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were employed and the results of the same will be discussed in this chapter.

First of all, the results for the sample population will be segregated per country, and eventually a cross-cultural comparison will be executed in order to find out the possible variance of the resulting data.

One study participant from Azerbaijan was excluded from the study due to an error while filling out the form. The quantitative data was analysed using the IBM SPSS software, which facilitated the statistical analysis of the data obtained from 99 study participants. The software allowed the segregation per country and the display of the

statistics for each item found in the questionnaires for online resources and English culture, and intercultural assessment.

Results for the discussion

The three-way discussion was arranged via Zoom, the participants were the author of the study, one literature teacher from Azerbaijan, and one literature teacher from Colombia. A set of 10 questions was prepared to find out information, such as: “What is the students’ profile for International Baccalaureate schools?”, “Is the use of online resources common in the classroom?”, What are your views about interculturalism? “How do you think is the intercultural competence of your students?”, “What groups do you think will be adequate to carry out the study?”.

The resulting answers to the questions posed allowed for the understanding about how the international schools’ aim in general is to prepare the students to become critical thinkers, to be open-minded, to become aware of their own cultural identity, to be able to empathize with others, to be curious and critical about how the world works. In summary, to be citizens of the world. The base methodology in IB classrooms is the inquiry-based approach, which is widely regarded as a key approach to form well-balanced and independent students. According to the information presented by the teachers during the discussion, the students who participated in the study should be highly proficient intercultural communicators. Interculturalism is viewed as an axis of the international schools’ framework, since most commonly students from different countries and backgrounds are found in the classroom.

Regarding the use of online resources, the teachers expressed the need to constantly use forums, collaborative tools and multimedia in their lessons. They also expressed

the high proficiency of the students in the use of different technological tools and websites.

As per the aforementioned results from the interview, the expectation is that the results of the questionnaires will display the students' high level of competency in the assessed topics.

Results of the observation

A class observation was also conducted in Dunya School located in Azerbaijan. The author of the study physically attended one lesson imparted by the English literature teacher. The group observed was 10A-1 which corresponds to the IB Diploma Program (IBDP). There were 13 fifteen-year-old students, 9 males and 4 females, 11 students were from Azerbaijan, 1 female student was from Egypt and 1 male was from Dagestan. The native languages found in the class were Azerbaijani= 10 students, Turkish= 1 student, Russian= 1 student, Arabic= 1 student. The class was carried out in English and the students displayed a high level of mastery of the language.

At the beginning of the lesson, there was a discussion about interculturalism, in which most of the students displayed the importance of developing intercultural skills to have successful interactions in the modern world. They also expressed how the use of online resources was essential for their daily-life, both inside and outside the school.

The lesson continued with a class discussion about the book *The color purple* by Alice Walker, in which the students shared their general opinions about the plot and the characters they favoured the most. All the students had a personal laptop and the

teacher requested them to look for online reviews about the book and indicate their agreement or disagreement with them.

The lesson lasted 45 minutes and at the end the students were asked to participate in the study and their agreement was granted. The conclusion reached after the class observation was that the inquiry-based approach was being used proactively in the classroom. The students showed eagerness in asking questions and looking for the answers online. Technology also played a big part during the lesson, with the teacher asking the students to use internet resources to find out some information, and with the students themselves seeking answers to their questions online. Evidently, the availability of laptops for each student made it easier for the teacher to use online resources in the classroom.

Results of the questionnaires

General information

Table 3.2

Gender of participants country-wise

	<i>Azerbaijan</i>	<i>Colombia</i>
<i>Male</i>	25	23
<i>Female</i>	17	34
<i>Total per country</i>	42	57

For the complete sample, a total of 51.5% were female and 48.5% were male.

The age range was from 15 until 18 years old, 46% of the students were 15 years old, 30% of the students were 16 years old, 16% of the students were 17 years old, 8% of the students were 18 years old.

The country of origin of most students corresponded with their country of residence: Azerbaijan= 36, Colombia= 43, Venezuela= 10, United States= 3, Dagestan= 2, and Argentina, Egypt, Iran, Russia, and Ukraine= 1. A total of 42% of the respondents reside in Azerbaijan and 58% reside in Colombia.

All the Colombian residents cited Spanish as their mother tongue, including the students whose country of origin is the United States. An assumption can be made that their place of birth was USA, but they were raised in Colombia. As for the Azerbaijani residents, most of them cited Azerbaijani as their mother tongue, 3 students stated English as theirs, and the rest gave the following replies:

Table 3.3

What is your mother tongue?					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Arabic	1	2.4	2.4	2.4
	Azerbaijani	26	61.9	61.9	64.3
	Dagestani	1	2.4	2.4	66.7
	English	3	7.1	7.1	73.8
	Farsi	1	2.4	2.4	76.2
	Russian	9	21.4	21.4	97.6
	Turkish	1	2.4	2.4	100.0
	Total	42	100.0	100.0	

Results of the online resources and English culture questionnaire

All the questionnaires used in the study were given to all the participants. A total of 100 students participated in the study, 43 students from Azerbaijan and 57 from Colombia. However, 1 student from Class 11A-1 gave incorrect input of information, so they were excluded from the analysis.

Regarding how often the teachers use online resources in the classroom, 78.7% of the Azerbaijani students stated that their teachers used online resources very frequently, 16.6% replied sometimes, while only 4.7% said rarely. As for the case of the Colombian students there was a variation, where only 54.4% said that their teachers frequently use online resources, 43.85% said sometimes, and a very slight percentage of 1.75% said rarely. In general terms, in both countries the use of online resources in the classroom is quite significant.

As for the type of online resources used in the classroom, the results were very uniform across the countries. Students from both countries claimed that the most used internet resource was visual media, followed by collaborative tools, databases, news media, social media and forums.

When asked about the time they spend online for non-school related purposes, 52% of the students in Azerbaijan claimed to be online from 3 to 6 hours, 21% less than 3 hours and 26% more than 6 hours. In Colombia it was about the same ratio 57% of the students in Azerbaijan claimed to be online from 3 to 6 hours, but there was a slight variation for the rest 28% less than 3 hours and 14% more than 6 hours. In both cases, the students stated that around 70% of their internet use was non-school related.

There was a significant variation regarding the interaction with English content online. Around 85% of the Azerbaijani learners interact mostly with English content online, while only 39% of Colombians do the same. In terms of the type of content they interact with, there was no major difference between the countries with social media taking the lead, followed by learning websites, games, streaming platforms and news media. The main interactions reported on social networking sites are first of all, looking at audio-visual content, followed by chatting, reading posts, and lastly

commenting on posts. We can conclude that the preferred interaction in social media is passive.

As for the most commonly used applications and websites, *Youtube* takes the lead, followed by *Instagram* and *Tiktok*. *Google*, *Netflix*, *Whatsapp*, *Spotify*, *Snapchat*, and gaming apps were also reported in both countries. About 50% of the Azerbaijani learners and 40% of the Colombian ones, said to have frequent online interactions with people from other countries.

In relation to the notions about English culture specifically, a set of items was included in the questionnaire. When asked about what their thoughts are when thinking about an “English culture”, most Colombian learners had as a point of reference the United States, its flag, places to visit, food, Hollywood, and consumerism culture. They referred more to products of the culture or what is known as the “little C” [58], some sample answers are as follows: “*Ribs, American soccer and the 4th of July*”, “*flag of united states, places, persons*”. While Azerbaijani students were less focused on a specific place and more intend on listing elements of the “big C” [58], such as behaviour and mentality, some sample answers are the following: “*Flexible, easy to interact, polite*”, “*expressive, different, fascinating*”.

The country that comes to mind first when thinking about an English culture is United States for the Colombian students, followed by England, Australia and New Zealand. For Azerbaijani learners, the first referent is England, followed by USA.

40% of the participants stated that the best way to learn about English culture is by using online resources, such as social networks and streaming services, followed by 30% that believe the best way to gain cultural knowledge is by interacting with native speakers. This was evidenced by the 70% of students that claimed they get most of their cultural knowledge from the internet.

Results for the intercultural competence questionnaire

The second questionnaire used in the study was based on the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS) developed by Chen and Starosta [15]. The results were measured in a 5-point Likert scale (from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree), with 5 items reverse-scored (items 4, 6, 8, 14, 15). The results of the adapted 16-item scale are presented below.

The data was measured on 5-point scale, where the level of proficiency in the intercultural competence was as follows: 1= very low, 2= low, 3= medium, 4= high, 5= very.

Table 3.4

Intercultural competence questionnaire results

<i>Item</i>	<i>Azerbaijan</i>	<i>Colombia</i>
<i>1</i>	4.02	3.54
<i>2</i>	4.17	4.05
<i>3</i>	3.57	3.27
<i>4</i>	2.76	2.54
<i>5</i>	3.62	3.16
<i>6</i>	2.43	2.80
<i>7</i>	4.26	4.04
<i>8</i>	3	3.07
<i>9</i>	3.48	3.36
<i>10</i>	3.38	3.71
<i>11</i>	3.63	3.59
<i>12</i>	3.57	3.66

13	3.24	3.54
14	2.21	2.55
15	3.05	2.86
16	3.74	3.70
<i>Average</i>	3.38	3.34

For interaction engagement, the average score was 3.5 for both countries, which translates into a medium level of proficiency, with a high proficiency in item 2 (enjoy interactions with people from different cultures). A slight variation was noted for item 14 (avoid interactions with people from other cultures) for each country, with Azerbaijan taking a low score and Colombia a medium score.

The data related to respect of cultural differences was very homogeneous across the countries with an average score of 3. There was a high performance for item 7 (respect for different values), but low performance regarding items 15 and 14 related to stereotypes and close-mindedness.

The factor of interaction confidence was also virtually the same for the participants of both countries, with an average of 3.45. However, there was a variation in item 1, Azerbaijani students reported to feel slightly more confident when interacting with people from other cultures.

Enjoyment of the interaction was the highest rated factor, with an average score of 3.6 for both countries, with no major variation amongst the items and countries. As for the attentiveness factor, the average score was 3.4 across the countries, with Azerbaijanis obtaining a somewhat higher score resulting in a variation of 0.14.

The total score obtained by averaging all the items included in the scale was 3.38 for Azerbaijani students and 3.34 for Colombian students. It can be concluded that there

is an insignificant difference in the development of the intercultural competence for students in both countries according to this questionnaire.

Results for the intercultural competence test

The data collected regarding the intercultural competence test was the result of a critical analysis done by the students about several hypothetical situations, which are potentially problematic due to cultural differences. The test was based on the one developed by Ruth Vila [69].

A total of 9 multiple choice items were assessed and the responses were assigned the following values depending on their suitability in an interculturally-minded context: 5= very strong, 4= sufficient, 3= ambivalent, 2= insufficient, 1= very weak.

Table 3.5

Intercultural competence test results

<i>Item</i>	<i>Azerbaijan</i>	<i>Colombia</i>
<i>17</i>	3.64	3.89
<i>18</i>	4.31	4.27
<i>19</i>	4.33	4.34
<i>20</i>	4.67	4.43
<i>21</i>	3.45	3.13
<i>22</i>	2.55	2.62
<i>23</i>	3.79	3.82
<i>24</i>	4.24	4.13
<i>25</i>	4.50	3.63
<i>Average</i>	<i>3.94</i>	<i>3.81</i>

There was no significant variance in the average total score for both countries, Colombia= 3.81, Azerbaijan= 3.94. The highest scoring item 20 was related to differences in turn-taking during conversation, with students from both countries agreeing that conversation pace and turn-taking may vary across cultures, the average score for this was 4.5. Items 18, 19, 24 had a medium score of 4.2 representing the willingness from the learners' part to ask for clarification, develop relationships while managing uncertainty, and explore new ways to communicate. Item 22 was the lowest ranking for both countries with an average score of 2.5, it referred to reconciling the needs of the stakeholders, where a scenario about needing to patiently guide a new foreign student towards being more active in a group project was proposed. Items 17, 21, 23 had a medium score of 3.6 and were related to taking risks to establish new relationships and adapting the communication style by respecting personal space. There was a variance found in item 25, Colombian students obtained a lower score of 3.6 when compared to their Azerbaijani counterparts that had a score of 4.5. This specific item is related to personal space. The results clearly display the different points of view regarding physical contact while interacting with people that are held by the learners of each country.

In general, the results of this questionnaire show a sufficient level of the intercultural competence in both countries. In most scenarios presented, the learners were able choose the options that may cause less conflict in different intercultural communicative situations. They were mostly willing to set aside their own cultural expectations in order to accommodate another point of view.

All in all, the responses to these different scenarios displayed sufficient skills to approach problematic situations. The students displayed sufficient intercultural sensitivity, intercultural communication, building commitment and managing uncertainty skills.

CONCLUSION

This study's aim was to carry out a cross-cultural comparison of the online interactions of high school students while analysing at the same time, their intercultural competence development. In the introduction, a general overview of the study was given, where the current state of research, the object and subject of the study, its significance, goals, and methodology were stated.

The literature review indicated the emergence of the intercultural competence as a pillar of language education. It highlighted the historically-held view of the separation of language and culture in the language classrooms, while giving the various definitions of culture and exposing the undeniable link between these two notions. It showed how culture has traditionally been addressed in the language classrooms as an extra element that was taught intermittently and at a surface level. Another important point discussed in the literature review was the significance of the communicative language teaching approach, where extra-linguistic elements, such as sociocultural factors were brought forward as essential for successful communication across cultures.

This propelled the emergence of the intercultural competence as one of the backbones of language teaching and learning. Now, culture is not regarded as an extra element of language, instead it is recognized as an intrinsic part of it. Educators became aware that linguistic elements are embedded with cultural nuances that need to be understood if effective communication is to be achieved. At the same time, it was accepted that non-linguistic elements, such as gestures, looks, and sounds can also be culturally-charged and need to be considered as potentially problematic in intercultural interactions, so learners need to be aware of the possible connotations of the same. The many factors that come into play in a communication act are being

accepted as crucial components of the language acquisition process. There was a shift towards a more culturally-centred language approach, in which the essential nature of culture was hailed as a turning point for language learners aiming to become actual effective communicators.

Several models for the intercultural competence proposed by different authors were listed. A general sense of the set of skills required to be considered as sufficiently prepared for real-world international interactions, was expressed. These models showed the necessity of having certain skills and traits, such as curiosity, openness, awareness of one's own cultural identity, empathy, tolerance of ambiguity, acceptance, adaptation, etc. The aforementioned, are considered as desirable traits for "global citizens" and are the focus of the most prominent intercultural competence models.

The question of which culture to teach was raised as well. Routinely, when talking about an English language culture, the associations most commonly made in classrooms and textbooks were American or British culture. It was seldom conveyed to the learners that English is considered as a multicultural language, since it is the lingua franca of the 21st century, widely spoken as a second language around the world, and an official language in many countries. Thus, the aim of the intercultural competence is not to merely state surface cultural elements of a specific country, instead its aim is to help the learners communicate in intercultural environments, regardless of the country or language. The skills needed for this, as presented above, constitute mostly traits that can be easily interchangeable across languages and cultures. This also gives room to the notion of the reduced importance of nativism. Traditionally, native speakerism was highly regarded as a desirable, if not necessary, trait for teachers, and as a goal for learners. However, it was gathered that with the increasing importance given to the intercultural component, it can be argued that

non-nativism represents a bigger advantage when interacting in different cultural settings.

Teachers and students play a pivotal role in the process of acquiring the skills necessary to navigate intercultural scenarios. It was concluded that from their part, teachers are urged to actively work towards improving their own intercultural competence. They also need to maximize the utilization of technological resources inside and outside the classroom, to aid the learners in the acquisition of these essential skills. While students need to, first of all, become aware of their own cultural identity in order to be able to move towards traversing other cultural landscapes. At the same time, they need to strive for taking full advantage of the internet resources available to them to engage in more intercultural interactions, preferably with their peers. This will help them understand the potential issues they may encounter when interacting with opposite world-views, and the strategies they may use in various situations to minimize misunderstandings.

The assessment of the intercultural competence is a focal point of the study. It was stated in the theoretical section of the dissertation, how an ideal assessment of this competence should be done over time. The need for an initial assessment to find the current level of the intercultural skills in the students was also highlighted. The most prominent assessment tools found in the literature were presented as well, with two of them later becoming the basis of the practical portion of the study. These tools sought to assess the level of the competence by presenting items representing the different skills and traits considered as desirable to achieve successful communication across cultures. Skills like self-expression, communication strategies, adaptation, flexibility, respect of differences, engagement, intercultural sensitivity, managing uncertainty, etc. were found to be indispensable for the current language learner.

The fact that there is no standardized tool in which this competence may be assessed was explained. It was suggested that it is counterproductive to expect equal results in the acquisition of intercultural skills in the learners. Educators need to account for how some personality traits may affect the students' handling of uncertain situations and culturally-challenging scenarios. This needs to be minded to when conducting regular assessments of the intercultural competence.

The final part of the literature review signalled the key role played by the technological advancements, globalisation, and immigration. These factors contributed to the increasing demand for teachers to ensure that the learners are sufficiently equipped with the skills necessary to communicate successfully in intercultural settings.

It was concluded that the internet is the most powerful tool that can be used to develop and strengthen intercultural traits in the learners. This is due to its accessibility and flexibility, which are major factors for educators when deciding which resources to use in the classroom. The internet has the additional advantage of being very attractive to diverse sets of students, so it can be used as a tool to increase motivation, while promoting the acquisition of intercultural skills.

Different ways in which the internet can be used towards this purpose were presented. The use of resources specifically geared towards a certain demographic, like social media, was suggested as a significant factor that increases motivation and encourages engagement in cross-cultural communication.

The practical portion of this study comprised a cross-cultural examination of 10th and 11th grade students from an International Baccalaureate school in Baku, Azerbaijan, and another in Bogota, Colombia. Data from 99 participants, 42 from Azerbaijan and 57 from Colombia, was recollected and analysed in order to find information, such

as the proclivity towards using online resources to interact with English content, the type of content most interacted with, the level of the intercultural competence of the study participants, among others.

The methodological approach of this study presented a class observation and discussion with teachers as qualitative data collection tools. Both helped in reaching the decision of which student groups would participate in the study, and reiterated the viability of conducting a cross-cultural study that encompassed a school in Azerbaijan and another in Colombia, by confirming the common framework used by International Baccalaureate schools around the world. This framework consisted mainly on an inquiry-based methodology, the use of English as the language of instruction, and the goal of forming internationally-minded students, who are aware of their place in the world, that they should strive to make the world a better place, and that they should possess the qualities that would allow them to peacefully share the world with other people, regardless of their origin.

From the observation specifically, it can be concluded that an inquiry-based teaching approach and the easy access to online resources by learners during lesson time, can greatly improve and enrich the learning process. This is especially true, when one of the aims of this process is to foster intercultural skills in the students, since online resources are the most accessible way to encourage intercultural interactions.

The quantitative data collected through questionnaires aided in concluding that while the country of origin may account, at least in part, for some variation in the way learners perceive different intercultural situations. At least in the case of the sample groups studied from these two international schools, said variation was at most, minimally found. Instead, it appears that the international framework of these

schools, has fostered a more intercultural mindset in the students across both countries.

The data also revealed that most learners understand the significance of online resources in their learning journeys. Azerbaijani students appeared to be more willing to continuously engage in intercultural interactions online by mostly interacting with English content. While their Colombian counterparts did so at a lesser degree. It can be stated that perhaps the monolingual-centred culture of a country like Colombia may encourage less interaction in languages other than Spanish, even if said languages are the norm in the classroom. Azerbaijani learners may feel more at ease engaging in multilingual interactions due to the multilingual nature of their country. The data also highlighted a slightly different in the frequency of use of online resources by teachers in the classroom. It was deduced that Azerbaijani teachers have a slightly higher tendency to use these types of resources than their Colombian peers.

Moreover, it was concluded that most learners are eager to use internet resources outside of the classroom, they have a high tendency of using social media, mainly to look at content and to chat. This claim is clearly supported by the literature.

From the questionnaires focused on the intercultural competence, it can be concluded that learners have a high level of respect towards other cultures, and a medium to high level of tolerance of uncertainty and adaptation and flexibility. Most learners have at least participated in some intercultural interactions online and offline, which equipped them with a certain degree of real-life experience in how to achieve effective intercultural communication.

This study can serve as basis for educators to understand how high school learners tend to be very similarly minded even across cultures. It may serve as a point of

reference for how a more inquiry-based methodology, where students are at the centre of the learning process, where they have agency and claim ownership over their learning, can perhaps contribute to the development of the intercultural competence. Teachers may see a need to re-examine their approaches and may find value in the suggestion that in order to create highly motivated learners, the internet can be considered the holy-grail of language education. This is especially true if the focus is placed on fostering intercultural skills. There is no better alternative for encouraging students to engage in constant intercultural interactions, where their own interests are taken into account, and where the possibility of broadening their horizons is always around the corner.

Educators need to readily come to terms with the new technological era and to re-examine the way they approach language teaching. They need to find new ways to foster students' independence, taking into account their interests, and taking full advantage of online resources inside and outside the classroom. Social media, audio-visual media, games, databases, collaboration tools, are some of the available resources which can be used during the lessons. Educators can also encourage students to interact with English language content outside of the classroom in order to maximize the usefulness of these tools.

Finally, this dissertation puts forward a proposal for creating cross-cultural collaborative projects so that learners can easily acquire intercultural skills. Within the IB schools' network for example, a project like this may be realized more easily, since there is already an understanding that the learners will be able to communicate using the English language and there is an accessible schools' network. Wikis, forums, online discussions, blogs, among others can be handy resources to be used in a project of this kind. As for the case of regular schools, this type of project is also viable, if not a bit harder to carry out. At the government level, teachers may put

forward a proposal to their respective education ministry to create a network of schools across different countries, so that different collaborative projects involving both students and teachers can come to fruition. At the school level, teachers can put forward the same proposal to their school directors, or they can independently arrange a specific cross-cultural project with their classes. Internet can be used to reach out to different schools and teachers in other countries to gauge their interest in joining a collaborative network or project. Something like this would be game changing for the development of the intercultural competence in the students.

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Internet Resources

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Discussion Questions

1. How does the IB Program work?
2. What is the difference between an ordinary school and IB school?
3. What is the students' profile for IB schools?
4. What is the methodology used in these classrooms?
5. Is the use of online resources common in the classroom?
6. Are students encouraged to use online resources at home?
7. What are your views about interculturalism?
8. How do you think is the intercultural competence of your students?
9. What groups do you think will be adequate to carry out the study?

APPENDIX B

List of items of the intercultural competence questionnaire

Adapted from Chen, G. M. and Starosta, W.'s scale [15]

1= I am confident when I interact with people from different cultures

2= I enjoy interacting with people from different cultures

3 = When I interact with someone from another culture, I can tell if I hurt their feelings

4= I think my culture is better than other cultures

5= When I interact with someone from another culture, I can tell if they are not interested in what I am saying

6= I feel discouraged when people from different cultures do not agree with my values

7= When I learn that people from different cultures have different values from mine, I feel it is ok

8= I feel it is difficult to open myself up with people from different cultural backgrounds

9= I try to get as much culture-related information as I can when interacting with people from different cultures

10= I am aware there are subtle meanings in my interactions with people from other cultures

11= It is easy for me to make friends with people from other cultures

12= I think it is easy to reach mutual understanding with people from different cultures

13= I often use non-verbal cues to show my understanding when communicating with people from different cultures

14= I avoid situations where I have to interact with people from different cultures

15= When I interact with someone from a different culture, I have in mind generalizations (stereotypes) I have heard about people from that culture

16= I adapt my manner of communication when interacting with people from different cultures to avoid misunderstandings

APPENDIX C

List of items of the intercultural competence test

Adapted from Vila Baños' test [69]

17= You are speaking with someone from a different country and you realize that they are standing very close to you when they are speaking. You also realize that they do the same when talking to other people. What are your thoughts on this?

4-There is no problem with that

1.5-It's not adequate behaviour

5-It must be normal in their country

3-I don't know what to think

18= You are chatting with a native English speaker online and you realize that they are using words and expressions you don't understand. What would you do?

1-Apologize and leave the chat

5-Ask them what the words and expressions mean

2-Tell them to use normal English

3-Wouldn't know what to do

19= You have a new classmate, but they don't speak very well any language you know. The teacher proposes that they sit next to you for all the semester. What would you do?

5-Sit next to them and think that we'll eventually figure out how to communicate

2-Sit next to them, but avoid talking to them until they learn my language better

1-Suggest that they sit next to someone else.

3-Wouldn't know what to do

20= You are having dinner in the house of a friend from another country. All the family is talking excitedly, the topic is interesting, but you don't quite understand a lot of what they're saying because they're speaking very fast and they're speaking over each other. What do you think is happening?

5-It is a normal conversation style for them

3.5 -The way they interrupt each other and change the topic baffles me

1-They are doing this on purpose so I can't understand

3- I wouldn't know what to think

21= You are in a summer camp with people from different countries that speak different languages, some of which you don't know. How would you interact with them?

1-I would try to remain by myself

2.5- I would interact mostly with the people that speak the same languages as me

5-I would try to interact with the people that don't speak the same languages as me

3-Wouldn't know whom to interact with

22= You are doing a project with a new student that just arrived from another country. They speak your language quite well but you notice that they don't speak much, and don't really come up with any ideas for the project, you feel that you are the only one talking and doing the work. What would you do?

5- Try not to talk too much and wait for them to participate at their own pace.

1-Take note not to work with them again in the future

2-Push them to participate more so we can finish the work

3-I wouldn't know what to tell them

23= Your group of friends welcomed a new student from China. This student is very soft-spoken and likes to maintain their personal space, but your group of friends is often quite loud and they are used to getting into each other's personal spaces (hugging, patting each other on the back, standing very close when speaking to each other, etc.). The new student looks quite overwhelmed by this. What would you do?

1-I would just ignore the situation and carry on as usual

2-I would talk to the new student and tell them they need to be like us if they want to be part of the group

5-I would talk to my friends and tell them that we should try to tone down a little bit our usual behaviour in front of the new student

3-I wouldn't know what to do

24= There is a new student in your class that comes from a country you don't know much about. You see the student is often sitting alone. What would you do?

1-I would just ignore the student and carry on

4-I would talk to my friends and tell them they should try to talk to the new student

5-I would approach the new student and ask them about life in their country

3-I wouldn't know what to do

25= The new student in your class comes to you and tells you that they don't like it when you pat their shoulder when talking to them. How would you feel?

5-I would understand it may be a cultural difference and stop patting their shoulder

1-I would get offended because they are rejecting my friendly gesture, and stop interacting with them

2-I would tell them that this is the way we show friendliness in my country, and they should accept it

3- I wouldn't know what to do