Promoting intercultural competence and social awareness through cooperative activities in higher education

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to provide a teaching proposal that highlights the importance of intercultural competence and social issues in ELT. This article offers some activities to introduce cultural aspects and social topics in an English subject taught in the degree in English Studies. For its framework of analysis, the study draws on a competence-based curriculum, so that students develop social awareness and critical thinking at the same time as they become intercultural citizens. A survey was prepared to find out students' opinions about the methodology used and the competences they had acquired. The study reveals that introducing intercultural competences and social awareness helps students be aware of social realities and offers opportunities for them to be respectful of cultural differences.

Keywords: cooperative learning, higher education, intercultural and social competences, social awareness, teaching-learning process.

RESUMEN

Este estudio ofrece una propuesta de enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera en la que está presente la competencia intercultural y temas sociales en una asignatura del grado en Estudios Ingleses. Como marco del estudio, este trabajo se centra en un currículum basado en competencias con el fin de que el alumnado desarrolle la conciencia social y el pensamiento crítico al mismo tiempo que avanza como ciudadanía intercultural. Se preparó una encuesta para conocer la opinión del alumnado sobre la metodología utilizada y las competencias que había adquirido. El estudio revela que introducir la competencia intercultural y la conciencia social ayuda al alumnado a tomar conciencia de distintas realidades sociales y ofrece oportunidades para ser respetuosos con las diferencias culturales.

Palabras clave: aprendizaje cooperativo, competencias interculturales y sociales, conciencia social, educación superior, proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje.

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Introduction

One of the characteristics of the 21st century is globalization: human beings are able to move from one place to another in order to find a job, to study, to have a holiday, or to know other cultures, among other reasons. Consequently, having some cultural knowledge about the places people are going to visit is important. Moreover, it is essential to deepen our understanding of other cultures in order to learn new things, to contrast one's own culture with that of others and to deconstruct cultural stereotypes. In this sense, teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) in the degree of English Studies in Spain makes us think about the importance of introducing a cultural component in the language classroom, so that students are able to establish connections between culture and language (Barletta, 2009).

It is necessary to consider the different ways in which culture can be taught in tertiary education so that students make the most of the subject and they do not concentrate only on learning the structural and grammatical aspects of the language. Therefore, it is essential to establish connections between the language that is taught and the culture that frames that language (Clouet, 2013; Cuartas Álvarez, 2020).

Our teaching proposal will give special attention to introducing cultural and social content in the teaching-learning process in two main ways: 1) by asking students to prepare oral presentations on current topics of their choice, in order to evaluate their oral skills and different social competences, and 2) by using texts on social topics. The purpose of these activities is to make students think about the differences between cultures and to increase their cultural knowledge so that they become more open-minded citizens and are able to respect cultural differences.

We understand that education in general and classroom practices in particular are social. Therefore, the teaching-learning process should help students to grow aware of what is happening in society, to understand social processes and to be active in changing or developing those processes, following Moss, Barletta, Chamorro, and Mizuno (2015, p. 69): "Recognizing the social dimension of classroom interaction, language education should include developing resources for effective citizens who understand historical and social processes and how they can individually or collectively participate in those processes."

One of the main objectives of this paper is to propose some activities that introduce cultural aspects and therefore promote intercultural competence in the teaching-learning process. Another objective is to point out the importance of teaching based on intercultural competences, so that the knowledge that students obtain goes beyond the communicative aspects of a language. It is also an objective to use texts with social content in order to highlight the acquisition of social competences and encourage critical thinking framed in a cooperative methodology. We will observe the way in which the different activities proposed in section 5 incorporate the said competences. A survey completed anonymously by the students at the end of the semester will show their opinions of the methodology and the activities proposed.

Our educational proposal aims to help students advance as global citizens who are committed to cultural diversity, equal opportunities and solidarity. Therefore, university classrooms should offer opportunities for students to deepen their commitment to both local and global realities. This can be done by promoting a teaching proposal that gives importance to intercultural and social competences, like the one presented in this article.

The next section offers the theoretical background. Section 2 concentrates on the context and the participants of this research. The next section consists of the methodology used for the study. Section 4 describes the main activities used in EFL in order to introduce intercultural and social competences in the teaching-learning process. The last two sections of the article offer a discussion and the main conclusions.

Theoretical background

Introducing intercultural competences explicitly in the curriculum implies that students are given opportunities to be aware of other social realities that might be very different from their own and to

be more interculturally competent, defined in Meyer's words (1991, p. 138) as the ability "to behave adequately in a flexible manner when confronted with actions, attitudes and expectations of representatives of foreign cultures". Similarly, Clouet (2013, p. 142) defines intercultural skills in the following way:

> […] intercultural skills which are defined as the ability of the learners to bring the culture of origin, i.e. the native culture of the learners, and the foreign culture into relation with each other; the ability to be sensitive and use a variety of strategies for contact with those from other cultures; the capacity to fulfil the role of cultural intermediary between one's own culture and the foreign culture and to deal effectively with intercultural misunderstandings and conflict situations; and the ability to overcome stereotyped relationships.

Intercultural competences have received attention in foreign language teaching since the nineties (Byram, 1997, 2000; Byram & Fleming, 1998; Byram & Zárate, 1994, 1997; Kramsch, 1995; Meyer, 1991, among other authors). However, this is an area that requires further study because many teachers lack training and resources in introducing these competences in the language classroom (Girik Allo, 2018; Vinagre, 2014), i.e., more classroom experiences need to be shared in order to encourage teachers to adopt this approach.

We consider that all learning is rooted in a social setting (Antón, 2010). However, in addition to one's own culture and context, it is necessary to introduce aspects of other cultures and contexts, so that students can learn from other cultures and acquire intercultural competences, or "the ability to understand and relate to people from other countries" (Byram, 1997, p. 5). This is especially relevant in the case of the English language because it is a widespread lingua franca. Byram (1997, p. 3) states that establishing and maintaining relationships with others is more important than exchanging the information itself. Thus, Byram (1997) claims that to be competent from the intercultural point of view means being able to interact effectively, using linguistic and non-linguistic resources with people from another country in a foreign language. This is the definition used in this article.

Following Meyer (2000), we understand that there is a combination of social and communicative skills in intercultural competence. For this reason, it is important to consider the social competences that students acquire while learning English, such as the ability to work collaboratively, the ability to solve conflicts, and have leadership and communication skills (Tallón & Sikora, 2011). Taking into consideration these competences, students understand the importance of effective communication. In this sense, learning a language is seen as an interpersonal and intercultural process through which cultural differences can be observed (Güneş & Mede, 2019; Rodrigo Alsina, 2003). This implies that different beliefs, values and behaviours are present in the teaching-learning process so that students learn from each other.

To know a foreign language and to have the ability to communicate involves not only knowing the grammatical structures but also understanding the culture in which the language is spoken and learning how that culture is related to others, including one's own. In addition, language has an emotional and a social component (Beck, Kumschick, Eid & Klann-Delius, 2011). In fact, if the language under study is a lingua franca such as English, it is essential to take into account aspects of the social realities where that language is used. Therefore, it is necessary that students studying a foreign language, in this case English, develop skills and competences related to intercultural communication, so that they can interact on equal terms with people from other cultures.

Introducing intercultural competences in the teaching-learning process is important for promoting peaceful communication and respect for diversity (Baesler & Lauricella, 2014; Kruger, 2012) because students will be given opportunities to work with these competences and to observe their relationships with the demands of the labour market. Intercultural competences play a key role in society because they allow us to meet the demands and challenges of the present socio-cultural reality while offering the possibility of understanding different cultures (Priegue & Leiva, 2012).

However, it is not easy to work with these types of competences, and they are not easy to evaluate (Byram, 2009; Byrnes, 2008; Fantini, 2000; Vinagre, 2010, 2014). This article intends to be a contribution to the necessity of introducing intercultural competence when teaching EFL, by making

it clear that the activities carried out in the classroom can promote not only the development of linguistic competence but also intercultural competence, as discussed in section 4 of this article.

Moreover, this article will highlight the importance of working with authentic texts on cultural aspects and global issues. This approach is effective in introducing intercultural aspects in teaching, because students get to know social realities different from their own by delving into real texts. In fact, this approach also helps to develop what Byram (1997, p. 63–64) characterises as 'critical cultural awareness', i.e., the ability to evaluate critically different aspects in one's own culture and in other cultures. Consequently, equity, respect and social justice can be promoted by making students think about the topics of the texts chosen (see section 4) and by exploiting the texts not only from the grammatical point of view but also considering the ideology and values and their function in a broad communicative process.

Context and participants

The subject English Language V is based on cultural and social content so that students can develop social consciousness and responsibility by working on social issues. It is a core subject taught in the third year of the degree in English Studies (*Grado en Estudios Ingleses*) at the University of Alicante. It is taught four hours a week. Each hour is devoted to different skills so that students get to level C1 at the end of the academic year. Students continue working on level C1 with the subject English Language VI in the second semester, following the guidelines of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) proposed by the Council of Europe in 2001.

Oral skills were given special attention, so one hour was used for students to make a cooperative oral presentation on a social topic and another hour was for participating in a debate on the same topic as the oral presentation. These activities took place each week and contributed to the development of critical thinking and to the understanding of global issues. The fact that these activities integrated different competences and skills was the reason we decided to discuss them in detail in section 5. In addition, aspects of academic writing (the main cohesive devices, the structure and language of the academic essay, the main formal and functional aspects of the main text types) were revised one hour a week. The last hour was devoted to the revision of the main grammatical aspects that level C1 requires (passive voice, reported speech, inversion, etc.).

There were 91 students registered in the subject during the academic year 2019–2020 of which 70 were female and 21 were male. Students were divided in two groups: 45 people registered in group 1 and 46 in group 2. Sixteen people received an Erasmus grant and studied in other European universities. Consequently, the actual number of students who participated in the activities presented in this article was 35 in group 1 and 40 in group 2.

All the students studied English as a compulsory subject in the first and second years of the degree, which means that they attained level B1 in the first year and level B2 in the second year. Most of the students were 21 years old, and they wanted to work as primary or secondary school English teachers. There were also students who wanted to work as translators or interpreters in Spain or abroad.

Methodology

The methodology is mainly qualitative-descriptive and it is based on the teacher's observation during the teaching-learning process and on the notes that she took. The design of this didactic experience started with the teacher selecting the different activities that students had to do. The selection of the activities was determined by their appropriateness to introduce intercultural and social competences in the teaching-learning process.

Students had to work on the following activities during the semester: the preparation of and participation in an oral presentation and a debate on a social topic, the cooperative analysis of the main cohesive devices found in Mandela's *Discourse of Inauguration as President*, the linguistic and visual analysis of a text on women and the writing of an essay based on a text on gender of their own choice, and participation in two group tutorials. The social nature of the texts selected contributed to

developing students' critical skills and to expanding their knowledge of other cultures and social issues.

This is practitioner research, so the teacher decided to use a cooperative teaching methodology due to the high number of students registered in the subject. For this reason, students were asked at the beginning of the academic year to organise themselves in groups of five or six so that they could work cooperatively during the semester; they were free to organise the groups. Each group had a group coordinator, a student to be in contact with the teacher during the learning process to answer questions, if there were any.

Due to limitations of space, we offer a detailed description of two of the activities students had to prepare during the semester: group oral presentations and debates and the use of multimodal texts on ethnicity and gender (see sections 4.1 and 4.2).

There were 75 students who participated: 7 groups of 5 people in group 1, and 7 groups of 5 people and one of 6 in group 2. The fact that there were different groups meant the teacher was strict with time management. Students' participation in these activities was 15% of the final grade. They took place during the first two weeks of the semester, and each activity was done during two practical hours; the language used in the classroom was English.

This article presents an example of an active methodology in which students are the protagonists of the teaching-learning process. Cooperation plays a key role in the methodology, because students have to work with others and be active to achieve the objectives of the various activities. At the end of the teaching-learning process the students who had participated in the cooperative activities completed a survey (Appendix 1) in order to give their opinions about the methodology and to observe if they had acquired the content, competences and skills expected up to a certain extent.

Approaching some activities to introduce intercultural aspects in an EFL subject in higher education

This section describes a series of activities on social issues framed in a cooperative methodology in a compulsory English subject. The following activities have been selected because they allow the integration of different skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing and interaction) with the introduction of the intercultural and social competences in the classroom. Moreover, they facilitate critical thinking and social awareness foregrounded in higher education.

Introducing intercultural aspects in an EFL subject in higher education by cooperative oral presentations and debates

As mentioned in the methodology section, students were organised in groups. Each group had to prepare an oral presentation introducing intercultural aspects and including social content. For this reason, at the beginning of the semester, the teacher explained the main characteristics of an effective oral presentation using PowerPoint and Prezi presentations. After that, several videos with different speakers giving a presentation were shown so that students could analyse the main positive aspects and points that could be improved by the presenters.

Students began to make their oral presentations in week four in the semester so they could have time to get organised and to apply what they had learned in the previous weeks. The teacher emphasised some aspects that each oral presentation should consider: 1) it had to incorporate intercultural aspects and social content; 2) it had to be cooperative; 3) it had to include bibliographical references; 4) it had to have good time management because each student had to talk for ten minutes.

The teacher reached consensus with students about the main aspects that were taken into consideration to evaluate the oral presentations. Then a rubric was prepared considering the following aspects: grammar and syntax (five marks), fluency and pronunciation (five marks), organization and research (five marks), content of the presentation including intercultural and social issues (four marks), body language and interaction with the audience (three marks) and visual devices and multimodality used in the presentation (three marks) (see Appendix 2). The oral presentation was a very important activity, because it was worth 25% of the final mark.

The day of the oral presentation students were required to give an outline to the teacher with the following information: the names of the group members, a list of the main sections of the oral presentation, a section devoted to vocabulary with at least ten words they had learnt preparing the topic, and the main bibliographical references used to prepare the presentation. Students also included a section with some questions to use in the cooperative debate that would take place in the next practical section.

The main criteria in preparing the oral presentations were that students had to incorporate any area related to intercultural aspects and to highlight cultural and social content. This meant students decided to talk about a country they had visited, and they referred to some of the main cultural aspects they observed in their visit. Consequently, they referred to traditions, food, celebrations, and religion, among other issues. Although they had to do research on the country selected, they could also speak about their personal experiences and include some anecdotes. Most of the students had been to English-speaking countries in order to practise their English, but there were also oral presentations about China, India, and Nepal. In this sense, when talking about countries such as those just mentioned, students pointed out the main differences they found with their own culture and probed into cultural aspects that got their attention, such as the way women are treated or the role of religion and certain spiritual practices.

Other students decided to talk about differences in education that could be observed, for example, in Spain, England and Australia. They did research in order to show the main similarities and differences in education in the countries under analysis. Moreover, they explored the pros and cons of each system, taking into consideration different things, such as the calendar, the evaluation system, and the types of subjects. Special attention was given to postgraduate studies so that this information could be useful for students who wanted to study abroad once they got their degree in Spain. The topics chosen for the oral presentations showed that students were open and curious to know about other cultures.

Debates promoted communication, because students in charge of them had to encourage interaction among their classmates. Communication is an essential competence in a foreign language subject, hence the teaching-learning process is designed to offer students as many opportunities as possible to participate in discussion so that they can use English in both formal and informal contexts with the help of the teacher. In this sense, the subject was designed to give students opportunities to express their opinions in front of their classmates and to disagree in a respectful way. Therefore, the teacher emphasized that they could learn a lot by listening to students with very different opinions.

Leadership was also promoted because the students who organised the debate had to prepare the questions and resources (some students used videos in order to emphasize a particular aspect or to establish connections between the oral presentations and the debates), to manage time and make sure that everybody participated, at the same time that they promoted respect for different opinions. Moreover, sometimes there were conflicts because students did not agree. When this happened, it was important to point out that differences enrich us and that there was always something to learn from others' opinions. All the said competences are important for the labour market.

At the beginning of the semester, the teacher made clear that debates should not consist only of asking questions about the topic of the oral presentation. In fact, the debate is a didactic technique that promotes creativity, because it can be organised in different ways. The teacher explained various cooperative techniques that could be used in order to prepare successful debates in the classroom, such as the following: students were numbered 1 and 2 in order to divide the classroom into two big groups; number 1 would be in favour of the topic under discussion, and number 2 would be against it. Another technique consisted of asking for five volunteers; they stood in the centre of the classroom and chose the classmates they wanted to work with. Each group had to think about and discuss the answers to various questions. Once they were discussed in the small groups, the answers were shared in front of everybody by a group leader chosen by the group. The purpose of these techniques is to promote communication and interaction, and the development of different competences and critical thinking.

Introducing intercultural aspects in EFL though specific activities in higher education

There are various social topics to introduce intercultural and social competences in a foreign language classroom. We decided to choose ethnicity and gender because they are two global issues that are normally associated with stereotypes. Therefore, both topics and the deconstruction of stereotypes are appropriate in making students think about and be critical of cultural aspects connected with ethnicity and gender. In addition, the social nature of both topics facilitates the acquisition of social competences. These competences can be used to facilitate social transformations in higher education (Tallón & Sikora, 2011). In addition, the analysis of texts presented in this section concentrates on the function of different texts taking into consideration the context in which each text will be used and its communicative aim (Martin, 2015).

Working with multimodal texts on ethnicity diversity is appropriate for introducing intercultural aspects in an English classroom. Ethnicity can be a controversial issue because it can be associated with stereotypes and with attitudes of superiority and inferiority. This topic is suitable in promoting respect for people of different ethnicities, no matter if they are very different from our own. It is also an appropriate topic for students to gain social competences such as communication or cooperation.

Multimodal texts use more than one mode of communication in order to create meaning; for example, they can combine written text and visuals. The photographs used in this kind of text facilitate students' thinking about global issues so that they can be critical of certain topics and develop competences such as social awareness. The use of multimodal texts means students are able to read visuals and observe how the visual elements of each text combine with the written language. For this reason, the teacher decided to explain the basic principles of visual grammar that Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) propose (information value, salience and framing). The main purpose of introducing this framework is that students read the visual and the written elements in this kind of text and observe that the linguistic and visual choices are not random but have a specific communicative purpose.

Working with texts on ethnicity in an English subject in higher education

The teacher started asking students about the main stereotypes associated with Spain and Spanish people so that they could organise their ideas about what is generally thought about their country. Then, the teacher wanted students to think about the social reality of people from different ethnic groups and different cultural backgrounds. For this reason, in order to organise the first activity, the teacher selected multimodal texts in which people of different ethnicities were represented. The classroom was organised in five groups, and each group was given two texts. Students were asked to write down the main cultural differences they observed in the texts. Having done that, each group shared the texts with the other groups and commented on what they had written down. The other groups had to add cultural differences they could think of, looking at the texts.

The second activity started by asking a student from each group to choose a paper with the name of one of the continents. Each group got a different continent. First, students had to choose one country in the continent and write down the main stereotypes associated with it. Second, they had to think about the main cultural knowledge associated with the continent. Third, a person of another group came to the center of the classroom. She/he had a sticker on the forehead with the name of the nationality chosen by another group to work on stereotypes. People from the other groups began to mention stereotypes related to the people of that country, until the person at the center guessed which one it was. Finally, students had to write down five advantages and five disadvantages of belonging to that nationality and to the continent it is in. They also had to suggest some ways to deal with the disadvantages. When they finished, they shared their ideas with the other groups. Then a debate started about the possible reasons why the different stereotypes had originated.

The purpose of the activities presented in this section is for students to explore ethnic and cultural differences, the contrast between other cultures and their own and the construction of cultural identity (Coates, 2012). We also consider it important to introduce gender in the language classroom so that students understand the cultural differences associated with gender and deconstruct gender stereotypes. The activities presented in the following section show this.

Working with texts on gender in an English subject in higher education

The teacher gave students multimodal texts on women from different cultures. Students were asked to prepare a list with the main stereotypes they knew about women and men in general and women and men of other cultures. The purpose of this activity was to make students aware of the main stereotypes they had about gender, so that they could observe the way in which stereotypes offer a narrow view of a certain reality, in this case gender (Coates, 2012).

The teacher selected different multimodal texts published by non-governmental organizations where women from different cultures were represented. Students were divided into six groups, and each group had to analyse a text paying attention to the main cohesive devices found in the written text and the main aspects related to visual grammar found in the visual. In addition, students were asked to write a paragraph summarising the group's opinion about the social reality of the woman represented, based on the analysis that they had prepared. Once this was done, the teacher gave the paragraph written by one group to another group so that they could read what another group had written. All the groups concluded that the general tendency is to represent women as victimized, in need of help from countries in the North.

The next activity consisted of dividing the classroom into four groups. Two groups were given a multimodal text from advertising on the importance of women's physical appearance, and the other two were given a text on violence against women. Students had to think of the ideology behind each text and of the way the written and the visual language on each text contributed to foreground that ideology. Students who analysed the texts from advertising concluded that women were used to advertise a product and as objects of desire. Those who analysed texts on gender violence made clear that women suffer violence because of some of the ideas of the patriarchal system that support men's superiority. Having done the analysis, students were invited to participate in an informal discussion about the main roles women have in society and the main areas where they are not equal to men.

Then, students were asked to select a multimodal text where women were represented. Students had to write an argumentative essay based on that text. The text chosen would contribute to students growing critical about the social reality of women.

The fact that students had to analyse multimodal texts where women were represented meant that they were able to interpret the reality of other human beings and, consequently, they could integrate it with their own reality. In this way, they were able to show empathy with realities that are different from their own at the same time as they broadened their perspective as global citizens.

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Discussion

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The teaching proposal presented in this article highlights the importance of interpreting intercultural aspects and of designing activities taking into consideration social competences. In fact, using social topics and an intercultural and social competence-based teaching proposal like the one presented in this paper offer the possibility of highlighting the importance of introducing cultural aspects and respect for diversity in the language classroom (Bajaj, 2008).

One of the aims of the proposed activities in sections 4.1 and 4.2 was for students to reflect on different cultural realities and be aware of ethnic and gender differences. Another objective was for students to appreciate and respect cultural diversity, so that the integration of culturally different people was highlighted. At the same time, the activities encouraged peaceful coexistence and solidarity so that students could enrich their understanding while they learnt. The goal of the activities was also to help students to develop their ability to understand and interact with other cultures. Thus, we are faced with activities that help break stereotypes and prejudices that limit us and make us look at reality in a very narrow way.

Consequently, the activities presented in the previous section help students to understand cultural realities different from their own. Therefore, students have a global vision of the world, in order to be enriched and to better understand their own reality and that of others. Different cultures, experiences and positions enrich people, which implies that differences are not understood as something negative. In addition, working with intercultural competences helps overcome

ethnocentric models in which the overvaluation of the knowledge of the majority culture lead to rejection or undervaluation of the knowledge of other cultures.

Once the oral presentation was made and students had received feedback from the teacher, they had to organise a debate based on the same topic as the oral presentation. The purpose of this activity was to help students investigate more deeply into the topic of study and the intercultural aspects connected with it. This activity was very useful in promoting the acquisition of the social competences referred to, communication, leadership, and conflict solving. One of the main objectives of the debate was to give students the opportunity to be in control of the classroom, working as teachers paying attention to the importance of interaction and classroom management.

The fact that students have to prepare oral presentations and organise debates on social topics that incorporate the intercultural component implies that they have to talk about the said topics; this means that they have to reflect on intercultural beliefs and broaden their knowledge about other cultures while they interact. Consequently, by analysing the social realities presented in the multimodal texts, students are able to broaden their perspective on different intercultural aspects that might be different from their own culture.

A fundamental idea shared by the proposed activities is that language is not taught as a subject separate from culture and the context in which it is framed. On the contrary, language is contextualized so that it is easier to see the connection with the social realities in which language is used. In this sense, the relationships between the texts and the context in which they are used are highlighted so that students can always see a practical application of the activities.

By interacting with the texts selected, students are able to discover social realities and to empathize with the social situations presented in the texts. This involves students being able to integrate and establish relationships between other cultures and their own, apart from developing comprehension of and empathy for the cultures and social situations in the texts to be analysed. Therefore, working with texts on social content not only allows students to explore intercultural aspects and to highlight the importance of cultural awareness or respect for diversity but also to develop social competences that they will need for the labour market, such as cooperation, communication, conflict solving and leadership.

The activities described in the previous section integrated different skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing and interaction) so that students could improve all of them and advance to level C1. The selected activities made students work on reading because they had to read in order to do research about the social topics chosen for the oral presentation. Students worked on writing, having to write the outline and the PowerPoint of the oral presentation, and in the essay they were asked to write on gender. Oral skills were also developed by sharing the oral presentation in the classroom and by participating in the weekly debates. Students worked on their listening skills because they had to listen to the opinions of other students. Finally, interaction was enhanced by having to participate in discussions with the other students, by having to discuss with the group the content of the texts, by having to agree on the way the oral presentation was made, etc. The activities also involved students making their own decisions when selecting the topic of the oral presentations or the texts to be analysed, so that they also paid attention to creativity.

The activities described in the previous section made students reflect on their own social reality and contrast it with other social realities. Consequently, these activities help students advance as global citizens at the same time as they develop a globalist vision of reality. This implies that the students participating in the proposed activities grow as human beings. Motivation, curiosity and openness are also developed, so that students can experience different social realities from their own and learn from them. This supports the idea that one's own culture is integrated with others, in order to acquire intercultural competence while observing connecting links and differences between different cultures.

Once students had worked on the various activities, they were asked to complete an anonymous survey on different aspects related to the methodology and activities during the semester. The main results of the survey are the following. In question number 1, the majority of the students

(96%) considered that the university is a place to teach emotional competences, especially social, apart from content, whereas 4% do not agree with that statement.

When students were asked about the main competences they had acquired while working on the oral presentations and debates, 72% said all the competences offered as examples. The remainder chose mainly communication and cooperation (23%). There is also a small group whose choice is social awareness and respect for diversity (5%). In question number 3, most of the students considered that the said competences will be useful for the labour market and for their personal life, 98%, so just 2% gave a negative answer.

Again, the great majority of students (97%) offered a positive answer to question 4 when they were asked if they considered useful that the texts used in the classroom highlighted social issues in order to work on social and intercultural competences and to establish relationships between what was learnt in the classroom and real life.

When students were asked in the fifth question about which of the proposed activities had helped them most to acquire intercultural competences, 54% said that both options, 25% chose oral presentations and debates, and 21% chose multimodal texts on social issues. In the sixth question students were asked about what other topics, apart from gender and ethnicity, could be used in order to facilitate the development of intercultural and social competences: 62% said social media; ecology and education were selected by 34%, and 4% chose art, health or sports.

Finally, students were asked if the activities that they had prepared contributed to broadening their perspective about other cultures and to helping them be global citizens. It is significant that all students chose a positive answer, which shows that the activities were effective in developing intercultural competence.

Conclusions

The topics selected for the oral presentations, debates and text analysis contributed to introducing intercultural competence and social awareness in an EFL subject. Consequently, there is a clear connection between the topics studied in the classroom and real life. The activities presented in section 5 facilitate students' ability to explore intercultural aspects at the same time as they improve their skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing and interaction). In fact, the oral presentations and debates integrate all the skills, and the analysis of texts concentrate mainly on reading and writing.

Moreover, the proposed activities contribute to the acquisition of social competences such as cooperation and communication, as the results of the survey make explicit. The said activities also contribute to introducing intercultural competences in the foreign language classroom by highlighting the reality of people belonging to different cultures. Introducing the intercultural component in the teaching-learning process offers the opportunity to use education to produce transformation in students by making them aware of cultural differences and to respect and accept them.

The activities presented in this paper also contribute to students' social awareness by pointing out social realities that are different from their own, including some unfair social situations. In consequence, students can be active and critical citizens by opening their perspective and by doing research and working on topics that include an intercultural component (Barahona, Gratacós & Quintana, 2013). The said competences are useful for the labour market, for the classrooms of those students who want to be teachers and for students' personal life.

In this sense, preparing oral presentations and debates on social topics or working with texts on global issues facilitates students reflecting and being able to become more intercultural at the same time as they improve their English. The results of the survey show that students have broadened their perspective (see section 5) in order to become global citizens, active, critical and responsible human beings who are able to participate actively in the demands of an increasingly multicultural society.

If we want intercultural and social competences to occupy a central place in our teaching practice, it is necessary to design more activities with social content, i.e., it is necessary to provide students with more possibilities to reflect on different social realities. For this reason, the activities presented in this article promote respect for other cultures so that students are able to contribute to equitable relationships among cultures and leave behind ethnocentric attitudes that consider some

cultures more important than others and exclude rather than include. This implies that racism and other forms of discrimination are rejected by promoting integration and diversity as fundamental features of the twenty-first century.

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Appendix 1. Survey

1. Do you believe that the university should be a place to teach emotional competences, especially social, apart from content?

Yes   No

2. What are the main competences that you have acquired with oral presentations and debates?

- Communication   - Cooperation
- Conflict solving   - Leadership
- Other competences:
- Empathy   - Respect for diversity
- Social awareness   - Active listening

3. Do you consider that the said competences will be useful for the labour market and for your personal life?

Yes   No

4. Do you find it useful that the texts used in the classroom highlight social issues in order to work on social and intercultural competences and to establish relationships between what is learned in the classroom and real life?

Yes   No

5. Which of the various activities proposed has helped you most to acquire intercultural competences?

- Oral presentations and debates
- Multimodal texts on social issues

6. What other topics, apart from gender and ethnicity, could be used in order to facilitate the development of intercultural and social competences?

- Ecology   - Education

- Sports   - Social media

- Health   - Art

- Other topics (specify)

7. Do you consider that the activities you have prepared contribute to broadening your perspective about other cultures and to helping you be a global citizen?

Yes   No

Appendix 2: Rubric with the criteria to evaluate oral presentations

Criteria					
Grammar and syntax 5					
Fluency (do not memorize the presentation) Pronunciation 5					
Organization and research done 5					
Content of the presentation including intercultural and social issues 4					
Body language and interaction with the audience (ask questions, do not cover the screen) 3					

Presentation (PP, visual devices, multimodality) 3					
Comments					
Other aspects					

Presentation (PP, visual devices, multimodality)