Breaking Cultural Barriers in English as a Foreign Language

An approach to how Intercultural Competence is developed within English teaching in a selection of schools in Sweden.

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Abstract

The study is based on recent national curricula that emphasize the importance of the promotion of intercultural competence through language teaching. The aim is to investigate the teachers’ views on how the learning of intercultural competence can be fostered in the teaching of English as a foreign language and how this is physically reflected in the classroom environment. The findings show that there is a huge scope for the development of intercultural objectives in English teaching. The study also shows that although the teachers express strong support in the promotion of intercultural competence, they, however, experience uncertainty regarding strategies in classroom teaching. This uncertainty is attributed to unclear directives in curricula, lack of resources and the teachers’ lack of familiarity with the target language cultures.

Keywords: intercultural competence, intercultural dimension, multicultural.
Sammanfattning

Den här studien tar sin utgångspunkt i de senaste styrdokumenten som betonar Vikten av att interkulturell kompetens ska främjas genom språkundervisningen. Syftet är att undersöka lärares syn på hur lärande av interkulturell kompetens kan främjas i undervisningen av engelska som främmande språk och hur detta speglas i den fysiska klassrumsmiljön. Resultaten visar att det behövs utveckling av interkulturella mål i engelskundervisningen. Studien visar också att även om lärarna önskar främja interkulturell kompetens visar de osäkerhet beträffande didaktiska strategier för detta. Enligt lärarna upplevs denna osäkerhet dels på grund av otydliga direktiv i styrdokumenten och skolans bristande resurser och dels eftersom de anser sig sakna tillräcklig förortenhet med målspråkets kulturer.
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1. Introduction

When I started my practical training as a teacher in English, I noticed the confidence Swedish students have of their knowledge of the English language. Most of the students believe that they have a good grasp of this language. This comes as no surprise since Sweden, like other multicultural communities around the world is overflowed with the English language; thanks to the influence of American television, films, foreign advertisements, youth culture and not to mention, the media and internet as other forms of sources. This great exposure makes English a relatively easy target language to acquire in terms of linguistic competence in comparison to other foreign language. English as a foreign language has a vital role both in Swedish community as a whole and in Swedish education. In fact, the language is taught as a compulsory subject from primary up to secondary education.

During my practical at my placement school, I decided that I would present my native country of Australia as a basis for a school project for my English B students. Prior to the presentation, the group was asked what they know about this nation. However, to my surprise, the students had very little to tell of what they know about Australia or its culture despite their daily exposure to English. I suspect that, since the English exposure of the English learners comes mainly from the influence of American culture, most students (at least in my placement school) do not obtain sufficient facts about other English cultures other than American and British cultures. This experience has motivated me to find out how intercultural awareness is treated in foreign language teaching. And since cultural diversity is now an everyday phenomenon in most Swedish classrooms, it is interesting to know as to what extent the teaching of English is exploited by the educators in effort to promote the acquisition of intercultural competence.

1.1 Background

In recent years, Swedish schools and other schools in other parts of the world – where English is taught as a foreign language – have made some adaptations concerning the teaching of English as a foreign language. Thanks to globalization, international job opportunities and integration of various cultures, the teachers of what is considered as the global language now face a new challenge: to prepare their learners for future meetings with other English speakers from other parts of the world but whose cultures may be completely distinct from their own.
In Swedish classrooms alone, the presence of children and youths of diverse ethnicity is nowadays a common fact. These children from different ethnic backgrounds may have the skills to communicate with each other through linguistic competence of English but may not necessarily have the skills to understand each other in terms of social and cultural aspects. Therefore, foreign language teachers and educators are anticipated to utilize the cultural diversity in their classrooms to its full potential in order to promote the acquisition of intercultural competence in their learners. The question however, is whether intercultural dimension in language learning is being taken seriously in both primary and secondary levels in EFL teaching in Swedish schools.

The Swedish curriculum for the compulsory school, the pre-school class and the leisure-time centre Lgr11 (Skolverket, 2010), recognises intercultural dimension as a vital component of language teaching and deeply emphasizes its promotion. It is stipulated that in all forms of education, well-balanced perspectives must be established; emphasizing on the importance of international perspectives for future development of our youths.

It is important to have an international perspective, to be able to understand one’s own reality in a global context and to create international solidarity, as well as prepare for a society with close contacts across cultural and national borders. Having an international perspective also involves developing an understanding of cultural diversity within the country (p. 12).

In addition to promoting the skills necessary for international contacts, the curriculum (Skolverket, 2010) also emphasizes the need to impart our youths the democratic values such as tolerance and empathy of other cultures and their people. The curriculum’s advocacy of understanding and tolerance comes as an endeavour to combat discriminations towards one’s race, gender, ethnicity, faith and even of one’s own sexual orientation. Furthermore, the curriculum considers the school as a cultural and social meeting place, and thus encourages that xenophobia and all types of intolerance towards other’s culture or identity shall be prevented and corrected through knowledge, active measures and open discussions.

In the Swedish curriculum for upper secondary level, GY11 – Läroplan, examensmål och gymnasiegemensamma ämnen för gymnasieskola (Skolverket, 2011), culture awareness through the teaching of language is one of the aims expressed in the syllabus of the English subject. It is stipulated that the learners of English should be given the best possible
opportunity to develop knowledge about social and cultural phenomena in different contexts and regions of the world where English is used (p. 53). (my translation).

The CEFR \(^1\) by Council of Europe (2002) or *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment* whose role is to develop guiding principles for language teaching firmly supports intercultural understanding in foreign language teaching and suggests that educators and teachers have the role of promoting to their learners greater mutual understanding and acceptance of differences in our multicultural and multilingual societies.

In the forthcoming section of Literature Review, earlier researches on intercultural competence in language education and key concepts that are relevant to this study will be presented.

\[^1\] Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment is developed by the Council of Europe to provide a comprehensive basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses and curriculum guidelines.
1.2 Aim
The aim of this study is to gain insight into the dimension of intercultural learning in foreign language classes by examining from the teachers’ perspectives, how the acquisition of intercultural competence can be fostered in the teaching of English as a foreign language.

1.3 Research questions
The significant questions this paper will deal with are the following:

1) What are the English teachers’ views on teaching intercultural competence?

2) What is the EFL teachers’ attitude towards the promotion of the intercultural competence?

3) As far as developing intercultural competence amongst the pupils, what factors do English teachers consider as promoting or preventing?

4) How do the teachers experience the current development of intercultural dimension inside their classrooms and what do they consider as obstacles to its development?

1.4 Outline of this study
The essay consists of literature study with main focus on foreign language teaching and its primary role in the acquisition of intercultural learning. The key concepts of the study such as: intercultural competence, culture and intercultural are discussed as constituent elements of theoretical framework. Six teachers from primary and high school (of separate municipalities) are approached for the research whereby qualitative interviews and class observations are conducted. In the Result section, the findings are summarized and discussed, thereafter; the paper’s summary, conclusion and further research are presented.
2. Literature review

This section will present some of the earlier researches on intercultural competence in language teaching and some key concepts that are deemed relevant to the focus of this examination which is the fostering of intercultural competence in the classrooms of EFL.

2.1 Previous research

In Sweden, there is little research known regarding either the scope of intercultural learning in EFL classrooms or the promotion of intercultural competence to the learners of English as a foreign language. A study done by Eva Larzén (2005) on the intercultural competence amongst Finnish and Swedish teachers of EFL indicates that the teachers express willingness to integrate intercultural learning with cognitive and linguistic components of language education. The study, however, shows that there is very little support from school managements to help teachers accomplish their tasks in promoting the teaching of cultures.

Michael Byram, professor of Education at the University of Durham, England (cited in Council of Europe, 2002), and the leading figure in the topics of foreign language and cultural studies, explains intercultural dimension as an important key component of language teaching in that it aims to develop learners as intercultural speakers or mediators. Intercultural dimension in foreign language teaching prepares the language learners for future communication and interaction in appropriate ways. In essence, interaction in appropriate ways means showing respect and acknowledgement towards other people from other cultures as individuals whilst recognizing others’ identities, values and beliefs. Intercultural dimension in language teaching, according to Byram (1997), neither compromises nor reduces the linguistic and other cognitive aspects of language learning but helps the learners instead to see intercultural interactions as enriching experiences.

2.1.1 Effective guidelines

After a study done by LACE ³ (Languages and Cultures in Europe, 2007) on the scope and extent of intercultural competence in foreign language education in compulsory education in European countries (such as Denmark and Norway), it has been suggested that foreign language teaching can be enhanced if intercultural competence is properly promoted

³ Languages and Cultures in Europe
alongside linguistic skills. However, the report reveals that the difficulty most teachers face in terms of fostering intercultural learning is interpreting exactly how and what the curricula mean and more importantly, how to apply these objectives into practice in the language classrooms.

2.1.2 Familiarity and attitudes

An international collaboration by several foreign language teachers from seven countries (Belgium, Poland, Mexico, Greece, Bulgaria, Spain and Sweden) was conducted in order to investigate intercultural competence in foreign language teaching. The pupils’ familiarity with the foreign cultures associated with the target language they are learning is one of the main focuses of the investigation and is deemed as significant to the acquisition of intercultural competence. The authors, Méndez García and Sercu (2005), conclude after the result of the investigation, that the teachers of EFL wishing to promote intercultural competence are required to recognize not only their pupils’ current levels of familiarity with the cultures of the target language, but also their attitudes towards the foreign cultures and the peoples associated with the foreign language they are learning.

According to Byram (1997), attitudes are one of the most important factors in the model of intercultural communicative competence. The attitudes Byram refers to in terms of intercultural communication concern the negative attitudes towards people who are perceived as different in relation to their culture, beliefs, behaviours and values. These attitudes represent prejudice and stereotype which often cause unsuccessful interaction (ibid, 1997). Byram explains that in order to make a successful intercultural interaction, one cannot simply rely on positive attitudes since even positive prejudice can hinder mutual understanding.
Attitudes of openness, curiosity and readiness to put aside judgement towards one’s cultural meanings, beliefs and behaviours are the key elements teachers of EFL should strive to impart to our youths (ibid).

2.2 Culture

The concept of culture is highlighted throughout this study; therefore, I shall present to the readers the differentiation of its meanings.
Culture is one of those words or concepts that are readily used by everyone but cannot be explain with a precise definition. Säljö (2007) in Lärande i praktiken defines culture as the “set of ideas, values, knowledge and other resources that we acquire through interaction with the outside world” (p. 17) (my translation from Swedish). The resources that Säljö refers to are both in forms of material and immaterial. Everything that surrounds us has a significant role that goes hand in hand in the development of ideas and knowledge which in turn leads to the creation of a culture. Säljö emphasizes the uniqueness that we, humans as species have – in comparison to other living species on earth – that is, the ability to process our surroundings through our intellectual and physical tools which are cultural and of non-nature origin (ibid). Thus, the manners in which we communicate and interact within a culture and with others from another culture/s depend on how we process our experiences through our intellectual and physical tools.

The Centre for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (CARLA) in the United States, whose role is to improve the nation’s capacity to teach and learn foreign languages effectively, suggests that culture manifests itself in people’s behaviours and the way in which we interact (University of Minnesota, 2012). Thus, we can interpret that culture in its broadest sense, reflects the different patterns of behaviours and human’s understanding of those of another group; a process that is learned through socialization and interaction.

Culture can be understood in different ways depending on what field or whose view is in question. On language teaching’s perspective, Giroux (as cited in Gagnestam, 2003) claims all school subjects are culture and that everyone creates culture. In my opinion, the discussions of different values, norms and social traditions of other cultures are important aspects of foreign language teaching and should be treated with more awareness. The teacher’s perception of culture has a significant influence on how she/he teaches culture awareness and how the students would acquire knowledge of the culture/s associated with the language being taught.

2.2.1 Culture and language

One does not have to be associated in the language or culture profession to agree that culture and language are intimately related and that the former would not have existed without the latter and vice versa. Gagnestam (2003) quotes Risager’s view that language and culture are

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4 Med kultur menar jag således den uppsättning av idéer, värderingar, kunskaper och andra resurser som vi förvärvar genom interaktion med omvärlden.
phenomena that “cannot be separated”. Language comes in different forms: verbal and non-verbal, for example, signs, body language, and images. It transmits our thoughts and actions as well as defines the people of the civilization or culture where it is spoken.

Tornberg (1997), teacher and renowned author of books on language didactics quotes language as is suggested by the European Council:

- Language is a means of communication
- Language is an action
- Language has content
- Functions of language are the focus

Tornberg sees the language as having significant role on the increasing internalisation process across the globe and that there are two significant dimensions to this role:

- Language is an expression of a cultural community
- Intercultural understanding is a goal of language teaching (ibid).

Vygotsky (cited in Dysthe, 2003) saw the relationship between the language and thought and saw language as a mediator between us and the world. Since the language mediates the world to us as Vygotsky suggests, it only makes sense to have a degree of familiarity of the culture/s of the particular language of interest. 5 Dysthe refers also to Säljö’s claim that “Language is simultaneously a collective, interactive and individual socio-cultural tool. Therefore, it can act as a link between culture, interaction and individual thinking” (ibid). As Byram (1997) suggests, “successful communication is not judged solely in terms of the efficiency of information exchange. It is focused on establishing and maintaining relationships” (p. 3).

Learning the linguistic aspects of the target language is hardly sufficient when learning a foreign language. The foreign language learner must also learn the different cultural aspects of which the target language represents. These cultural aspects may include the historical background, social practices, customs and beliefs as well as values of the specific group in which the language is spoken.

5 “Spåket är samtidigt ett kollektivt, ett interaktivt och ett individuellt sociokulturell redskap. Det är därför det kan fungera som en bindeledd mellan kultur, interaktion och individers tänkande”.
A quote from Joyce Valdes (1986) reflects how familiarity with the culture of the target language not only dispels certain disbelief and misconceptions the foreign speaker has of this culture, but it also brings awareness of his own. “At the base of intercultural understanding is a recognition of the ways in which two cultures resemble one another as well as the ways in which they differ” (ibid, p. 49). Indeed, the learner gains not only awareness of cultural differences but also awareness of how he/she relates to these differences.

2.3 Intercultural

According to Nationalencyklopedin (2012), the concept intercultural refers to processes in which people with different languages and cultures communicate and interact with each other (my translation). The concept indicates not only social interaction between two people from different cultures but also the importance of co-existing with positive attitudes in a multicultural society.

Gagnestam (2003) sees the concept as not only a reference frame but also a method and frame for future action and collaboration between people of different cultures. Gagnestam also suggests that a society can be described as multicultural even if the different cultures within a society have no association whatsoever with each other. Multiculturalism and interculturalism thus seem to me to share a common definition and that both concepts require community integration in order for them to exist in society.

In Lgr11, intercultural perspective is discussed several times and is emphasized as an important part of democratic fundamental values. It acknowledges the internalisation of Swedish society and stipulates that we, in democratic school, shall promote to the students the “ability to live with and appreciate the values inherent in cultural diversity” (Skolverket, 2010, p. 9).

2.3.1 The relationship between language and intercultural learning

English foreign language teachers cannot solely concern themselves with educating their learners in matters of communication skills but also in the development of the learners’ personal and social skills. It states in the manifesto of Council of Europe (2002): “Education for intercultural understanding remains central to the Council of Europe’s activities to

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6 Curriculum for the compulsory, the preschool class and the leisure time centre 2011.
promote greater mutual understanding and acceptance of difference in our multicultural and multilingual societies”. Because of today’s competitive job markets, globalization, the ever-advancing technology and the ease of transnational journeys, improvement on intercultural learning is highly encouraged and clearly emphasized in the international and national curricula. Although by any means, knowledge of other cultures is not solely gained through foreign language classes. School subjects such as Social Studies and History, not to mention the media in general are equally valuable resources by which students and even foreign language teachers can draw some of the knowledge.

The Council of Europe (2002) underlines the importance of intercultural dimension in language teaching as valuable source of intercultural awareness which in turn is critical in the preparation of the learners’ inevitable future international contacts.

The subject aims to develop an all-round communicative ability and language skills necessary for international contacts, and an increasingly internationalized labour market to take advantage of the rapid developments taking place in information and communication technology and for future studies. The subject also aims to broaden the perspective of a growing English-speaking world with its diverse cultures (p. 16).

Thus, to sustain the recommendation of the national curricula’s promotion of the intercultural learning objectives, foreign language educators need to ensure that they, too, have the essential competencies, knowledge and familiarity of some of the cultures in which the target language is spoken.

Sercu (2005) defines foreign language education as intercultural. If we take Swedish school as an example, like most schools elsewhere in the world, Sweden has a growing presence of cultural diversity (with the presence of different ethnic and linguistic background), not to mention the Swedish culture itself. Sercu sees foreign language classroom as “connecting learners to a world that is culturally different from their own” (ibid, p.1).

We may view foreign language classrooms as the meeting place of these blends of cultures while English language itself serves as bridge that connects everyone from all corners of the world equipped with a tool for better and mutual understanding. Further, Sercu points out that the cultural diversity in the classroom has many potential and possibilities that could be exploited by the teachers and educators in order to promote the acquisition of the intercultural competence in their learners (ibid).
Council of Europe (as cited in Tornberg 2000: 22) discusses the list below which states the culture-related abilities that the language learners must develop:

- The ability to bring the culture of origin and the foreign culture into relation with each other;
- Cultural sensitivity and the ability to identify 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 misunderstanding and conflict situations.

Tornberg (2002) interprets the list as “culture that can be understood as uniform and linked partly to the language learner’s “culture”, the culture of origin, but also to the foreign “culture” foreign culture and that the culture knowledge and conflict preparedness are primarily intended for future meetings to speak the target language” (p.22). Tornberg’s interpretation of the significance of the intercultural competence to the language learner could not have been more accurate.

2.3.2 The role of school in intercultural learning

Byram (1997) highlights the importance of the school as an important place where knowledge of the processes of intercultural understanding takes place. Byram’s suggestion is inarguably true since every child (at least all children who are fortunate enough to attend schools) will spend the majority of their lives at school. It is at school – through interaction with own peers – that they first develop social skills; observe and gradually adapt to the patterns of behaviours of other members of that community; and learn values and beliefs that make up what we call culture.

In her dissertation, Gagnestam (2003) discusses the role the school plays in communicating and recreating cultural values. Gagnestam’s assertion is supported by the curriculum (Skolverket, 2011) where the school’s role in fostering democratic values is highly emphasized: “The school has an important task not only to communicate and recreate cultural values based on democratic foundations but also to prepare our youths in having a solid understanding of cultural diversity within the country and beyond borders” (p. 12).
Having a good command of the target language is hardly enough when learning a foreign language. It is of utmost importance to have an understanding or some degree of familiarity of the different aspects of the culture in which the language is spoken – its religion, values, norms and traditions. And perhaps what is equally important is to understand or have some knowledge of other cultures that are associated or have had a historical attachment with that particular culture or civilization.

In a multi-diverse school environment, Lorentz (2009) points out the teachers’ role as significant in creating motivation and conditions that would ensure effective communication between individuals of different social and cultural backgrounds. Hence, in today’s internationalised world, the school and its employees are expected to possess the qualities that would both shape and motivate the learners to become socially competent interlocutors. However, it would be impossible – to say the least, that a foreign language teacher should acquire the knowledge of all the cultures of the target language; nor can she/he be anticipated to have experienced many of these cultures (Council of Europe, 2002). Nonetheless, she/he has the task to develop skills of intercultural interaction as well as examine his/her attitude towards other social groups or identities from another culture.

2.4 Intercultural competence

In the anthology, *Interkulturella perspektiv: pedagogik i mångkulturella lärandemiljöer*, Lorentz and Bergstedt (2006) interpret the concept of intercultural competence as an action, a movement, which depict an interaction between people from two different cultures (my translation from Swedish). Lorentz and Bergstedt’s explanation of intercultural competence as a physical action differs to that of Michael Byram’s (1997) knowledge of acquisition of skills, attitudes and cultural awareness that are necessary in communicating interculturally.

Sercu (2005) explains that in order for any individual to cope with intercultural experiences requires a number of intercultural competencies and characteristics. He refers to these characteristics and competencies as the person’s willingness to engage with another person/s from the foreign culture with an awareness of his/her own culture. Not the least, Sercu suggests, intercultural competence is the ability to see the world through the others’ eyes, the ability to cope with uncertainty, the ability to act as a cultural mediator, the ability to recognise others’ points of view, and understanding that individuals cannot be reduced to their collective identities (ibid, p. 2).
The Council of Europe (2002) defines intercultural competence as a shared understanding by which different people of different social identities readily acknowledge each other’s individualities and different perspectives. This definition is modified from the concept of communicative competence which refers to “a person’s ability to act in a foreign language in a linguistically, sociolinguistically and pragmatically appropriate way” (ibid, p. 9).

Tornberg (2000) claims that competence, regardless of its interpretation, is an entirely individually-centred concept. However, she does not consider competence as a pre-determined criterion in which an individual must live up to, but rather a one-way ability that is considered to evolve regardless of any context it could be used (ibid). In terms of intercultural competence, Tornberg sees intercultural competence as a future-directed concept that should be developed over time to be eventually applied in meeting people from other cultures (ibid, p. 72). Thus, an intercultural competent individual can be described as an individual who are able to deal with people from the target language and who is able to reflect on similarities and differences while developing an understanding of other people.

From all of the interpretations above, I have come to perceive intercultural competence as an essential tool which function is to break cultural barriers for the generation of today and for the generation of the future.

2.4.1 Intercultural competence and the language learners

It has been suggested that the objective of language learning is no longer defined in terms of the acquisition of communicative competence in a foreign language but rather is defined in terms of intercultural competence (Sercu, 2005). Although there is a strong emphasis on the curricula on intercultural objectives in language teaching, little is known however, about the current status of intercultural competence amongst the educators and their learners.

Lorenz (as cited in Emelie Thid, 2011, p. 6) describes intercultural competence as, “the ability to communicate effectively in intercultural situations and being able to relate to a variety of cultural contexts” (my translation). Lorenz’s interpretation of intercultural competence validates the need for the language learner to learn not only the skills to engage in an intercultural encounter, but also to understand the essence of each other’s cultural identities. That is, to have a sense of sensitivity as well as knowledge about the other person’s culture, religious background and ethnicity.
Kaikkonen (as cited in Larzén 2005, p. 39) explains, “the most important goal of foreign language education is to help learners grow out of the shell of their mother tongue and their own culture.” The shell used by Kaikkonen is a metaphor for one’s personal awareness of the world around him or her.

The manner in which intercultural approach is carried out in the English classroom is of an absolute importance to the foreign language teacher or educator. Michael Byram (as cited in Council of Europe, 2002, p. 13) suggests that educators and teachers “cannot ignore the need to ensure that their learners are not just acquiring linguistic skills and knowledge”. Byram explains further, that because intercultural competence posits as one of the aims of language learning, it is thus seen as being of a prescriptive nature. Prescription, he explains, can be related to norms, for instance, “normative standards of human rights” (ibid, p. 9).

Evidently, intercultural competence is an essential aspect of learning based on democratic values to impart to the foreign language learner. “To be interculturally competent is to think and act in morally desirable ways, and to set intercultural competence as an aim of language teaching is to prescribe the ways in which people ought to act” (ibid, p. 10).
3. Method

This section illustrates how the investigation was carried out, what method is chosen in the implementation and the selection of the respondents for the practical implementation.

3.1 Qualitative interview

Jan Trost (2010) explains that there are three types of interviews: the structured, semi-structured and unstructured. Trost explains further that the qualitative method of interview is an effective method if one wants to try to understand the different ways people think, react or to differentiate the varying patterns of actions. The semi-structured type of interview enables the interviewer to ask questions in a flexible way which would help obtain deeper understanding and knowledge from the person being interviewed (ibid). Therefore, I have chosen semi-structured type of qualitative interview in order to create a relaxed atmosphere where I could gain the participant’s trust as well as deeper understanding of the responses. Kvale (1997) suggests that the quality of the interview process depend largely on the interviewer’s ability to gain trust and confidence of the interviewee.

The interview is also complemented with class observations to obtain some evidence that would support the statements given by the informants in terms of their implementation of the intercultural objectives, as well as to observe the teachers’ attitudes to intercultural competence.

3.2 Class observations

The observations seek evidence as to how the teachers of EFL work to develop intercultural competence in the classroom. According to Johansson and Svedner (2010), one may choose to conduct observation using categories of your choice. The observations are confined to three elements that may reflect the teachers’ teaching practice which in turn may reveal the teachers’ dispositions towards the promotion of intercultural competence acquisition:

- Representation of the English world in the classrooms.
- Intercultural components of lesson plans.
- Learning materials in classroom situations
The representation of the English world in the classroom (for example, in the forms of maps, flags, posters and arts) may serve as an indicator of the teachers’ interest in promoting the students’ familiarity with other English-speaking nations besides USA and Britain. The intercultural components of lesson plans should indicate not only the teachers’ distribution of teaching time between language and cultural components but also the strategies used in terms of foreign culture teaching. Finally, the selection of learning materials for classroom situations may indicate as to which cultural aspects are considered in terms of promoting intercultural competence.

3.3 Selection of respondents

The whole study relied mainly on the interview of six English teachers from an upper secondary school and a primary school (year nine). A total of six observations were conducted, that being four class observations of English A and B and two of year nine classes in primary. Conducting the interviews from schools of separate municipalities shall help determine the current status of intercultural competence in the English classes and what factors affect its implementation.

I refer to the schools as school A and school B. The school A being the compulsory one and school B being the high school. School A has around 375 students both from the main municipality and surrounding areas. School B has 250 students; the majority being from the municipality and surrounding areas as well as from different parts of Sweden including foreign students. The respective respondents are sought for the interview and contacted through the headmasters of the schools, thereafter I presented myself to them in person. Five of the six respondents have teaching experiences between five to fifteen years while one of them has less than a year experience and age between 55 and 30 years of age. Because both schools are located in small communities, I decided not to disclose the genders of the respondents so as not to give out their true identities and instead, described them in the investigation as being all females. It is worth to mention that the aim of the investigation is not in any case reliant on the gender of the respondents. Each interview was followed by a class observation and the whole process being carried out over a period of two weeks.
3.4 The respondents

The respondents for the interviews consist of six teachers from two separate schools and are located in two separate municipalities. These municipalities are quite small and it would have been easy to detect identities of who participated in the interviews, therefore, I chose to state the respondents’ genders as all being female in order to avoid the easy detection of their identities. Moreover, the study I have chosen is not gender-related area; thus, the genders of the respondents are not of importance in the investigation.

Respondent 1 works both in high school and primary school in the same municipality. She has been a teacher in both schools for over 15 years. Respondent 1 has an extensive experience of travels abroad as a visitor and has also worked in a cruise ship where English language is the lingua franca. She has also travelled to Australia some years ago for a month holiday.

Respondent 2 teaches mainly English in high school. She has been in the educational occupation for eight years. She has four groups of English students, in which two of the groups comprise of 25 students and the other groups are athletes. Respondent 2’s experience of an English-speaking country involved a three months work in United States. She has also been to England a couple of occasions but for no more than two weeks holiday.

Respondent 3 comes from a family that has teaching background. She is newly graduated and has no previous experience as a teacher. She teaches English A and B classes in high school. The respondent has never been to any English cultures and credits her familiarity with the English cultures from her parents’ experiences.

Respondent 4 has been a teacher for over 15 years. She has travelled to many European countries except England and has an ambition to travel extensively in the future.

Respondent 5 is a teacher in Swedish and English in high school and has been a teacher for 18 years. This respondent has three groups of English A and a group of English B which are of considerably small numbers.

Respondent 6 has only been teaching in Sweden for less than a year although she has had 5 years of English teaching experiences in her home country in Eastern Europe. She teaches both in high school and in primary school.
3.5 Ethical considerations
In the investigations the research ethical considerations have been taken into considerations as suggested in Johansson and Svedner (2010). All the respondents were informed before the interview the purpose of the investigation and were assured that the data gathered from them are strictly for the use of the thesis and not for any other purposes. They are also informed of their right to terminate the interview at anytime (Johansson and Svedner, 2010). Johansson and Svedner confirm, that through courteous and concise manner, the interviewer should give the respondent an opportunity to give informed consent to participate.

The anonymity of the schools and the respondents are taken into consideration by referring to the schools as “school A” and “school B”. Likewise, the respondents are not named by referring to each one as “respondent 1” and so on to avoid as much as possible being identified (ibid).

3.6 Implementation
The relevant questions (see appendix) for the interviews were well prepared beforehand in order to have the interviews run as efficient as possible and to avoid unnecessary delay of time for the interviewees. Both the ethical considerations and purpose of the interviews were written and explained orally to the respondents.

I had an intention to record all of the interviews but unfortunately only four of the six interviews were recorded successfully. The background noises in the location where the other interviews were conducted made it impossible to record; nevertheless, I still managed to obtain all the information needed as good as all the other interviews.

Trost (2010) recommends that the interviewer should find a way in which he/she could initiate the interview by first, creating a relaxed atmosphere by initiating the meetings with questions that are irrelevant to the purpose of the interviews. I have allowed a limit of an hour as a time frame for each interview which I felt was sufficient to express my intention and to obtain the information I needed. Trost suggests that “interview with its contents and scope should not take too long”; dragging the interview unnecessarily “may indicate a certain lack of respect” to the interviewee (p. 82).
3.7 Method’s reliability and validity

After reading the work of Johansson and Svedner, (2010) I decided that semi-structured qualitative interview is more reliable for this type of investigation than quantitative method. In the book they point out that interview, especially qualitative, is the most frequently used method in writing theses within the teacher education and often gives the most interesting results.

According to Johansson and Svedner (2010), qualitative interviews should preferably conducted by recording them on tape. This should be done with consideration by first asking the interviewee’s for their consent, and reassure him/her that no one else besides the interviewer has an access to the information given. Recording of the interviews have both advantages and disadvantages points (Trost, 2010). One of the negative points of recording the interview is that some people do not like to be recorded and that they may feel uncomfortable. On the positive side, by recording the interview, according to Trost enables the interviewer to concentrate on the questions and answers instead of becoming preoccupied with taking down of the notes (ibid).

Reliability, in terms of research studies, must show results that are credible and reliable (Johannsson and Svedner, 2010). In essence, the interviewer must have an open mind and pays attention to circumstances that may influence the result of the questions asked. On conducting the interviews, I have created questions that are based from my own views and experiences as a trainee teacher. The knowledge and information obtained through these interviews and observations were then analysed to produce a qualitative result.

Likewise, validity means that the gathered data can show credible and trustworthy results; that is, that the result can be defended when challenged (ibid). By critically examining what is supposed to be examined and the procedure and materials used in the examination are consistent with the intended purpose, the investigation should show a credible, defensible and compelling result (Kvale, 1997). The qualitative interviews, observations and the number of respondents chosen for this study have been carefully thought of and considered to obtain answers to my questions (see appendix) on the status of intercultural learning and promotion of intercultural competence.
4. Results

The section below illustrates the findings of the investigations which are based on my choice of study area. The analysis corroborates with the main theme of the study which is to examine the status of intercultural dimension in EFL teaching and how teachers of EFL think intercultural competence can be promoted to the learners of English as a foreign language. By following the suggestion of Trost (2010), the interviews were conducted with direct type of questions and are as concise as possible in order to produce straight-forward answers, thus, avoiding confusion and misleading information. Once all the materials are gathered, information and data were transcribed to obtain a clear overview before analysis. The results of the observations were also taken into consideration for the analysis of the results. Mainly, to see the correlation between what is actual in the classroom (in terms of the development and promotion of intercultural competence) and the teachers’ given statements of personal experiences of the development of intercultural competence in their English teaching.

The result of the interviews is presented through four different categories, namely: “Experiences of cultures associated with the target language”, which would help indicate the intercultural competence of the teachers and to see what significance these experiences have on the acquisition of intercultural competence. This is followed by “The significance of intercultural competence to the teacher of EFL”, which focuses on the teacher’s perception of intercultural competence, how do they perceive the significance of intercultural concept to the language teaching and what are their perceptions of their role in the acquisition of intercultural competence. The third category is “Promotion and application”, which would indicate the teachers’ attitude towards the promotion of intercultural competence. The fourth category is “The development” which would give indication of the current status of the development of intercultural dimension in foreign language teaching.

4.1 Experiences of cultures associated with the target language

This area takes a look into the respondents’ personal experiences of the English world and how these experiences contribute to the teachers’ role in the promotion of intercultural competence in their learners. Of the six respondents, only 3 (Respondents 1, 2 and 5) have had experience of an English culture.
Respondent 1 has been to Australia twice for a holiday. She retells some of her experiences as very positive and shows an interest in knowing a lot more about Australian culture to share with her pupils. The respondent feels confident and is happy to share with her pupils her knowledge of Australia but admits that she would like to know more about the country. She considers her experience in Australia as useful when giving a thematic project to her pupils.

Respondent 2’s experience involved a 3-month work experience in the United States. Although Respondent 2 had been to the United States once, she feels a certain degree of inadequacy as an English teacher because she does not consider the length of her experience as have given her sufficient knowledge of the American culture. Furthermore, her visit to America happened when she was barely out of her teen; thus, she considers her experience forgotten. The respondent relies mainly on obtaining knowledge about English cultures from the internet and history books.

Respondent 3 attributes her knowledge of the American cultures to the fact that her father had travelled extensively in America as a young college student. Nonetheless, without any personal experience of the English cultures, she admits having shortcoming as an English teacher. When asked if she thinks her lack of experience hinders her teaching of cultures, she replied that it is more a matter of insecurity as a teacher rather than a hinder.

Respondent 4 has never been to any English-speaking country but plans to visit Ireland in the near future. She expresses desire for an opportunity to experience the English-speaking world and to obtain sufficient knowledge of those cultures so that she has something to impart to her learners. The respondent feels strongly about having personal experiences of cultures of target language as huge advantage as a language teacher; nevertheless, she claims that there are other ways to overcome this shortcoming. She says that there is always the feeling of inadequacy when she incorporates cultures in her lessons.

Respondent 5 has also been on a holiday to Australia and speaks of her experiences with great interest. Like Respondent 1, she also shows keen interest on the Australian culture and often uses her knowledge of the Australian culture on her English classes. One cannot help notice that she feels confident when telling stories about places she has visited in Australia and some of the traditions she knows about the Australian culture. She wishes she could visit Australia again.
Respondent 6 who has never before travelled to any English country feels the same way as Respondent 2 and says she has some reservations and insecurities in terms of intercultural competence as an English teacher. She too, relies only on information she gathers from the internet and textbooks they use in classes.

All teachers say that a first-hand experience of the culture of the target language they teach would be advantageous to their teaching of the English language. Moreover, they all express desires to visit any English cultures to gain more knowledge to bring into their classrooms.

4.2 The significance of intercultural competence to the teacher of EFL

The question deals with the teachers’ view of the significance of learning intercultural skills for the English learners. Interestingly, all the respondents say that they have never heard of the term “intercultural competence” before. However, they responded that they understand that the term refers to cultural objectives prescribed by the curriculum. When asked how they view the curricular objective in terms of intercultural competence in language learning, two of them claim that they do not remember seeing the term “intercultural competence” on the curriculum. The other respondents add that there are no clear formulations on the curriculum as to how the objectives would be best promoted. When asked what role the school management plays in the promotion of intercultural competence amongst the English teachers, the respondents claim that the issue of intercultural competency has never been discussed between the school and the teachers. Nor has the school management formulated a program in which the English teachers’ intercultural competency can be increased for the sake of the promotion of intercultural knowledge in the classes.

In regards to what the teachers consider as the role of intercultural competence in foreign language teaching. The interpretations are as follows:

- It helps develop the students’ knowledge and existence of other English cultures;
- It helps develop the students’ skills and know-how of understanding other people’s culture and traditions;
- It helps develop awareness of other’s attitudes, political and religious views and traditions;

However, the attitudes towards the importance of intercultural learning in English teaching vary amongst the respondents. Three of the respondents claim that the aspect of intercultural
competence in language learning is as essential as the linguistic and cognitive aspects of language learning while two suggest linguistic and cognitive aspects shall take precedence. One respondent’s comment indicate uncertainty of which perspective should be given higher priority and said that “students cannot be assessed at the end of the day for not knowing little or a lot about other cultures, but they are certainly being assessed for their linguistic and cognitive knowledge”.

4.3 Promotion and application

The topic focuses on the teachers’ attitude to the promotion of learners’ acquisition of intercultural competence and in what ways this promotion is applied in practice.

When asked what their perceptions are with reference to their role in fostering increased knowledge of other cultures, the respondents gave different views. According to Respondent 1, there is not much more they can do to promote intercultural objectives other than what is emphasized in the curriculum and what their resources allow. Respondent 4 believes that the students gain intercultural skills from the environment outside the school. She also stressed her opinion that the success of increased knowledge of culture of the youths lies between the municipality and the school. She suggests that the municipality and the school should organize more cultural programs such as theatre and art exhibitions to which the youths could go. Respondents 2 and 5 claim that linguistic and communicative competence is prioritised more although they understand that intercultural learning is also important. These same respondents claim that there is no clear concept as to how they should assess intercultural or cultural knowledge on the learners.

The views were similar amongst the respondents in regards to making use of opportunities such as, visits of native speakers to the school or correspondence with other countries of the target language and use of authentic materials as much as possible. However, the chance of having an English native speaker for a visitor, according to them, happens very rarely.

Respondent 5 believes on the importance of reading news (either on the internet, newspapers or television) as a source of intercultural knowledge; and that following the daily news of the English world is an effective learning tool.
Below is a list of varying strategies and approaches presented to the teachers in order to determine classroom practices in relation to promoting the knowledge of other cultures associated to the English language:

- **Textbooks** – all six teachers use textbooks that contain different cultures of the target language.

- **Films to illustrate an aspect of the foreign culture**– All teachers use films. Four say “now” and ”then”, depending on how much time they have; while two say “often”, depending on the lesson plan.

- **Authentic materials** – all of the teachers have used authentic materials in the target language in the forms of newspapers, TV and radio reportage and programmes, newspapers, magazines;

- **Internet** – All teachers have access to the internet and use it regularly. In Respondent 5’s word, Internet is a blessing to the teachers and students. Respondent 4 says that the internet brings the world into the classroom. Two teachers from the other municipality have less access to internet due to the shortage of computers.

- **Themes** – Each respondents use the themes treated in textbooks such as: sports, food, leisure and home. Religious and politics are very seldom used by the teachers.

- **Schools visits abroad and exchanges** – All the respondents have expressed the desire to be able to take their students for a visit abroad but do not have the opportunity due to lack of resources.

- **Cross-cultural dialogues** – only Respondent 5’s English class has a contact with students from students abroad by exchanging mails as pen-friends. Respondent 1 tells of the program called “etwinning”\(^7\) which is available to modern language teachers and students (www.etwinning.net). Retrieved on 19-06-12). All the English teachers know about the program but no one has tried it so far. Four of them say it is time consuming to organize something new.

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\(^7\) Etwinning is a coined name for Community Schools in Europe, an online tool designed to help teachers from at least two participating European countries where they can virtually meet and discuss projects and ideas.
• Literature and the arts – All six respondents confirm that they do not use literature as often as they should because they find it time consuming. Cultural art in the forms of images, paintings and photographs is very seldom used while music is a popular choice of activity by all the respondents.

4.4 The development
This perspective focuses on the teachers’ views of the current status of the development of intercultural competence in their English classrooms and how they experience its development.

The majority of my informants claim that the situations in their classrooms as far as learning materials are concerned is satisfactory. Several of them have suggested that there are many methods outside the classroom from which their students can learn intercultural skills. Respondents 4 and 5 even claim that authentic materials are everywhere and that all it takes is “one’s imagination” to turn these resources towards intercultural objectives. Internet has been mentioned by four of the respondents as a “heaven sent” in terms of a source of information by which they claim, “the world is taken into the classroom”.

Three of the respondents referred back to their experiences as students and claim that there are certainly better strategies and more materials available now for their students than when they themselves were students. Furthermore, they even claimed that their students are more aware of other cultures now than they were as young students. When asked where they thought these students gained the intercultural awareness from, “outside the classroom”, was the response. The term “outside the classroom” meant for them, through television, internet, music and cinemas. In addition, two of the respondents said that it is now very common for families to travel abroad with their children; something that rarely happened in the respondents’ time as youths. These comments certainly indicate distinction of cultural knowledge by which the teachers see as obtainable/unobtainable in the classroom.

As for the questions of how do the school contribute in the improvement of the intercultural skills for the learners, all of the respondents were unanimous in their statements that it is impossible to organize extra activities when assistance and resources are non-existent.

In regards to their opinions of the intercultural content in their learning materials, all the respondents claim that they are satisfied with the representation of English cultures in their
textbooks. On the contrary, dissatisfaction is evident in terms of cultural activities e.g. field trips, intercultural contacts and so forth. Lack of time and finance has been named by all the respondents as main obstacles in promoting extra activities for English classes.

4.5 Observations

4.5.1 Visits to English classes
On my unscheduled visits to the English classrooms, I looked for evidence of how the English cultures are represented and how intercultural learning is physically reflected in the classes. At least 3 classrooms (in school B) have a map of the United Kingdom pasted on the classroom walls while the other two have posters bearing pictures of English sceneries (one had Big Ben of England) and the other with a picture of Kew gardens, also of England. The pictures were obviously made as a project by the students. It pays to mention that on the hallway of one school, a large map of United Kingdom is pasted on the wall but so was a map of France. The classrooms from school A which are shared by other foreign language had no obvious representations of English cultures.

4.5.2 The Lessons:
After each class observations the respondents were subsequently asked as to what purposes the lessons aimed to achieve. The question was flexible and not directly leading to the acquisition of intercultural competence so as not to influence the respondents’ answers.

Respondent 1’s class (upper secondary English B): The Respondent had class presentation of Kenya. One of her students is from Kenya which the teacher has been grateful to gather much information about Kenya’s culture and tradition and the significance of the English to the Kenyans.

Respondent 2’s class (year 9): The Respondent’s lesson for the day focused on grammar. The difference between American and British spellings was mentioned and explained to the class. The respondent did not elaborate on what purpose this lesson aimed to achieve besides that it helps the students learn the differences in the spellings of the same language but of two cultures.

Respondent 3’s class (upper secondary English B): The students have just started a theme work on Shakespeare. They were using internet to gather more information as well as reading the condensed leaflet of Romeo & Juliet. The respondent had not
intended to use this thematic work towards the acquisition of intercultural competence but simply to familiarize the students to the history of British literature.

Respondent 4’s class (upper secondary English B): The lesson for the day was based on a chapter from a textbook which topic focuses on teen-age problem from Ireland. The respondent sees this topic as a perfect example in which the students – regardless of cultural differences and distance – can relate with.

Respondent 5’s class (year 9): The students were continuing with reading of *The diary of Anne Frank*. Other than the fact that it was an English text and history, the respondent had not given any other purpose that relates to intercultural/cultural competence.

Respondent 6’s class (upper secondary English A): The class watched an English comedy called *Keeping up appearances* on Youtube which was followed by a class discussion; mainly on the characterization of each characters and the plot of the series. Although one can see the cultural perspectives through the representation of the characters (mainly of Hyacinth – the main character), the respondent did not indicate that the series can be of some advantage to intercultural/cultural understanding.

### 4.5.3 Learning materials

As part of my investigation, I examined what types of learning materials that promote the knowledge of English cultures are available in the classrooms. Four teachers from school B have good access to computers and internet connections while the teachers from school A have very little use of internet due to shortage of computers.

These four teachers also have an easy access to smart board while the other two teachers from the other municipality have no access whatsoever with the single smart board in the school. She later clarifies the term “no access” as it is not worth the bother to stand on the long list. While it is obvious that their school lacks some of the most essential learning tools, I interpreted the teachers’ attitude as lacking in motivation to persevere and instead, surrendered to the situation. As for textbooks, all teachers have textbooks that contain different parts of English cultures.
4.6 Summary of the results
The purpose of the investigation was to take an insight on the status of intercultural dimension in the teaching of English as a foreign language and to examine from the teachers’ perspectives how the acquisition of intercultural competence can be promoted to the learners of EFL. I have chosen to analyze the content of the results which focuses on the patterns, the relationship and correlation between the materials and the central aspect of the paper.

4.6.1 Personal experiences of cultures associated with target language
To sum up, it shows that only three of the six respondents have had personal experiences of cultures associated with the English language. The lack of personal experience of the culture of the target language leaves the respondents feeling inadequate when teaching culture. However, it is evident from the respondents’ desires to travel to any of English country that they all value experiences as huge advantage to the teaching of the English cultures. Although there is certain insecurity amongst the respondents when incorporating cultures, they nevertheless, feel certain that the intercultural objective of language teaching is not in any way disadvantaged.

4.6.2 The significance of intercultural competence to the teacher of EFL
None of the respondents have heard of the term “intercultural competence” prior to this interview. However, they express an understanding that the concept refers to the cultural objectives stated by the curriculum. The respondents gave different responses, but nevertheless similar views regarding how they perceive the role of intercultural competence in terms of teaching a foreign language. There was a unanimous view that language teachers should have some knowledge of the culture/s of the language they teach; and that the competence should begin from them. Two of the respondents feeling incompetency in terms of conveying knowledge of English cultures to their learners due to the fact that they have never travelled to any English-speaking nations before.

Although the respondents have never heard of the term intercultural competence before, it appears however that they have an awareness of its significance to their foreign language teaching. Moreover, their desires to gain intercultural knowledge of the English cultures and their admission of incompetency in English cultures indicate positive attitude and awareness of their role in conveying this knowledge to the learners.
4.6.3 Promotion and application

In the subject of the promotion of the intercultural competence in English classrooms, there is unison amongst the respondents in their opinions in regards to taking advantage of opportunity when it arises, such as, visits of native speakers to the school. Each one of the respondents expressed the desire to have correspondence with other English schools although none of them are non-committal to make it a priority due to lack of time. In fact, only one of six teachers has cross-cultural communication with students from the United States while the rest of the teachers are still contemplating on using a new program called “etwinning”.

There is an indication of contentment amongst the respondents concerning the status and development of intercultural dimension in English classes. The respondents are happy to maintain the same approaches they have been using for years, i.e. by using the same textbooks and internet in promoting cultural objectives into their teaching. There is however, a contradiction in their statements when they voice out how extremely valuable it would be if they are able to take their students on a visit to any English cultures.

Schools activities such as field trips (either national or abroad), student exchange are non-existent due to lack of resources, according to all respondents. Time and financial support are given by all teachers as significant factors in the exploration of new programs and other avenues in better application of intercultural objectives. Likewise, these factors are given as main obstacles that prevent them from accomplishing their desires concerning intercultural activities.

It also appears that linguistic component is given a higher priority by all than intercultural objectives because these are the structures that are mostly being assessed on. In question of which English-speaking nations do they discuss the most in the classroom or from which they draw their lessons from, four out of six admit having the tendency to give priority to British and American English cultures.

4.6.4 The development of intercultural competence in English teaching

Concerning their experiences of the present development of the intercultural learning, there is an indication on the one hand that the respondents experience the development of intercultural

\[8\] Community for Schools in Europe; an online tool for teachers from at least two European countries where they can virtually meet and discuss or share projects and ideas.
competence amongst the students to be satisfactory. But on the other hand, there is an expression of dissatisfaction on the lack of resources and support in regards to improving the teachers’ skills and knowledge of intercultural education. Further, the respondents are confident of the boundless sources of intercultural materials one can use in teaching cultures besides the teachers’ personal knowledge of English cultures.

While all the informants expressed satisfaction in terms of learning materials, they nonetheless all wished that there could be extra activities to which their students could go to or do besides classroom situations. When asked to clarify what extra activities they view as valuable for their students, they replied, theatre, trip overseas or intercultural contacts with English students abroad. The statements given by the teachers show a tendency on their part that intercultural learning is a separate concept that the students may develop from outside of the school grounds. Moreover, lack of time and finance has been the main obstacles in promoting extra activities for English classes.

4.7 Analysis of classroom observations

The lessons of all classes indicated components of English cultures including grammar lesson where the respondent explained the differences in spellings between American and British English. The presence of cultural diversity in the classroom is taken advantage of by one of the respondents. Obviously, the respondents have no problem as far as obtaining ideas or materials such as: TV programs, literature, music and authentic materials that reinforce the representation of the English cultures.

The textbook appears to be the most trusted and reliable tool for all the respondents. All textbooks feature cultures of several English nations. The Council of Europe (2002) considers textbooks as one of the most useful and most common tools in promoting intercultural dimension in foreign language as long as they can be presented in a way that suggests as authoritative as well as contains intercultural and critical perspective.
5. Discussion

The thesis aimed to gain insight into the dimension of intercultural learning in foreign language classes and to look from the teachers’ perspectives, how the acquisition of intercultural competence can be fostered in the teaching of English as a foreign language. The study is confined in English as a foreign language in both primary (year 9) and upper secondary schools.

5.1 Results discussion

The following paragraphs discuss the results of the investigation on how the teachers of EFL work to promote the acquisition of intercultural competence to the learners.

The result shows that having personal experiences of the cultures associated to the target language play a significant role in the teaching of culture. The teachers gave honest statements that they feel certain inadequacy as being promoters of intercultural knowledge due to their lack of experiences and adequate knowledge of the cultures of the target language.

Perhaps the feeling of inadequacy of not having the competent knowledge of the language they are teaching is justified when we take a look at the suggestion of Ryan and Sercu (2005) on the teacher’s role in increasing the learner’s intercultural competence:

if teachers are to pass on culture-specific and culture-general knowledge to their pupils, prepare their pupils for intercultural contact situations and help them better understand their own cultural identity, they will need a thorough understanding of the target cultures as well as of their own culture, next to some understanding of foreign cultures in general (p. 39).

In my opinion however, the lack of these experiences does not necessarily pose as hindrance to the acquisition of intercultural competence and nor should it hinder the teachers in promoting the development of intercultural learning through the target language.

Lundahl (2009) points out, “English’s emergence as a global language of communication is an aspect of globalization” (p. 71). Thus, today’s English teachers face a challenge in preparing their English learners for future intercultural meeting with other English interlocutors from different cultures. Just exactly how the teachers of English as a foreign
language prepare their learners for future intercultural meeting depends on their perception of intercultural competence in terms of foreign language learning.

In the light of the respondents’ perception of intercultural competence, the respondents claim that they understood the role of which the language teaching plays in terms of acquisition of intercultural knowledge. However, the interviews indicate different perceptions of the concepts cultural/intercultural. The respondents indicate different perceptions of cultural knowledge. They distinguish between cultural knowledge that can be acquired within the school and the cultural knowledge which they believe the students can acquire outside of school. The distinction between what types of cultural knowledge can be taught within and out of school, place a likelihood that the promotion of intercultural competence can be taken for granted or neglected by the teachers and educators.

Moreover, the respondents see intercultural competence acquisition as an unclear objective in the curriculum as well as problematical in terms of assessment of learner’s acquisition in comparison to linguistic and cognitive aspects of language learning. This result parallels previous studies done by Larzén (2005) and Gagnestam (2003) which point out that majority of teachers preferred to undertake cultural objectives from a practical point of view such as factual knowledge than intangible aspects for instance, promoting tolerance and empathy, which are the central components of intercultural learning.

In the light of the teachers’ attitude towards the promotion of intercultural competence, the teachers expressed strong support towards the development of intercultural learning in their teaching. Their desires to gain intercultural knowledge of English cultures coupled with their admission of incompetency of the English cultures are indications of positive attitude towards their role in conveying intercultural skills to their learners. Be that as it may, the teachers are uncertain as to what strategies exactly are required in its promotion. Similar observations made by Larzén (2005) show results whereby teachers of Finland-Swedish comprehensive schools experience being ill-equipped in terms of knowing the appropriate strategies in culture teaching.

Byram (as cited in Council of Europe, 2002) points out that acquiring complete and perfect intercultural competence is an impossible task due to the ever-changing nature of cultures, one’s own social identities and values; and that complete competence is not required in order to be a successful intercultural speaker/mediator. Thus, it cannot be anticipated that foreign
language teachers should have all the knowledge about all the cultures of the target language; nonetheless, their task is to develop skills and question their attitudes towards others’ cultures.

With respect to teachers’ application of promoting intercultural competence, the result shows that despite the expression of support towards its promotion; there appears however, an attitude of casualness in the respondents’ actual attitude towards its promotion. The teachers give higher priority to the linguistic component of EFL teaching since strategies and materials for these components are more readily available. All the respondents believe their students could benefit greatly from direct contact with other speakers of the target language, yet only one of six respondents made this possible; instead, they rely considerably on textbooks and internet. An investigation shows the same conflict in what the Danish teachers of EFL view as positive for the acquisition of intercultural competence (such as direct contacts and school trips), and what they actually put into practice (Sercu, 2005).

Byram (as cited in Council of Europe, 2002) points out the relevance of exchange visit for the English learner:

The visit or exchange is much more than an opportunity to “practice” the language learnt in the classroom. It is a holistic learning experience which provides the means of using intercultural skills and acquiring new attitudes and values (p. 20).

There is a consensus amongst the teachers that a continuing education on intercultural skills for teachers is significant and ought to be provided by the school management if they are to be successful in fostering understanding of foreign cultures to the learners of foreign language.

Lack of motivation is evidently present when majority of the respondents suggest that school trips and direct contacts are not worth the bother when there is hardly any support given towards the English teaching. The teachers give hints of experiences of high workload and lack of understanding from the school management which only worsen the teachers’ motivation.

5.2 Method discussion

The purpose of conducting semi-structured interviews in the study was to obtain deep knowledge of how EFL teachers in Swedish school are accommodating the need for our youths to acquire intercultural skills. Due to the small numbers of informants and time limitation, surveys and quantitative interviews were excluded; thus, the option of qualitative
investigation is chosen. The questions put to the respondents were flexible questions in order to secure comprehensive understanding of the teachers’ views. What I mean by flexible questions is where both the respondent and interviewer can have a discussion without a level of discomfort and at the same time, allows the interviewer to acquire answers to questions that are non-leading.

The choices of schools may have been restricted due to geographical reason. However, the numbers of respondents for the investigation I believe were satisfactory for the purpose of the study. I consider the teachers’ professional experiences to be of great value to the investigation regardless of the varying differences in length of experiences as language teachers. The majority of the teachers have had over ten years behind them as English teachers while two have had less than five; nevertheless, their short experiences as teachers do not affect the purpose of this investigation.

The choice of schools from separate municipalities was to see if there are factors that separate each municipality in their treatment of the intercultural objectives in their school. This decision has paid off and indicates that the results produced are credible. Furthermore, having two separate schools for investigation helped confirm that the present development of intercultural competence is not entirely dependent on individual abilities and motivation but rather several factors.

On the questions of time and locations of the interviews, the busy schedules of some of the respondents made it difficult for us to agree on a more appropriate place for the interviews, thus, compromising the result of two of the recordings.

All respondents were informed of research ethics regarding their rights to terminate, the confidentiality matters of their identities, information and data collected. As mentioned much earlier (see section 3.4 of this work), given the geographical size of where the schools are located, it would have been easy to reveal the true identities of the respondents, as well as “who said what”, thus, the respondents are presented as being all females.

5.3 Conclusion
The aim of this study was to gain insight into the dimension of intercultural learning in foreign language classes how the acquisition of intercultural competence can be fostered in the teaching of English as a foreign language according to the teachers’ perspectives.
The study is confined in English as a foreign language in both in primary (year 9) and upper secondary schools in the western region of Sweden.

Drawing upon the result from the investigation, I conclude that as of present, on account of inadequate support and resources from the school community and the unclear directives of the curricula, the development of intercultural learning hangs in the balance. Clearer directives on the curricula are essential and so is the support of the school community if teachers are to develop better understanding of intercultural learning and fostering of intercultural competence. The obstacles that stand in the way of the fostering of intercultural competence generate frustration amongst the teachers which in the long run leaves the cultural diversity of the classroom neglected and taken for granted.

Much remains to be seen before it can be said that the acquisition of intercultural competence is promoted to its full potential through the teaching of English as a foreign language. Last but not least, much remains to be done in the future towards the attitude to intercultural competence if the school is to be considered as the place that will broaden our youths’ understanding of themselves and those of other cultures.

**Suggestions for further studies**

The present study has focused on teachers’ view of intercultural competence related to English as a foreign language. For future studies, it would be interesting to examine how the head of school or management sees their role on the students’ acquisition of intercultural awareness. Also another interest in terms of the study on intercultural awareness would be to include the students’ view on how they experience the intercultural diversity in the classroom; i.e. if the classroom’s cultural diversity is being exploited for the benefit of intercultural skills.
References


Appendix

1. Have you any experiences (i.e. lived, worked or holidayed) for at least an equivalent of a school term or more in an English-speaking country?

2. How important is it for you as an English teacher to have a personal experience of an English culture?

3. Tell us what you know of the concept intercultural competence?

4. How do you perceive the role of intercultural competence in relation to foreign language teaching?

5. What do you see as important in promoting the development of intercultural competence into your learners?

6. What didactic approaches, methods, or techniques do you consider effective in meeting the objectives prescribed by the curricula in the area of “intercultural competence”?

7. How would you rate the cultural contents in the textbooks/materials that you use for your classes in terms of promoting intercultural competence into your pupils? Choose between:
   1) unsatisfactory       2) satisfactory       3) very satisfactory

8. What can you tell about your experience of the present development of intercultural learning in your English classroom?

9. What do you see as the most important aim in incorporating “realia” in your language teaching?

10. What do you consider as challenges or obstacles facing the development of intercultural competence?