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Curricular strengths, weaknesses and opportunities for an intercultural orientation in a FL Teacher Education Program¹

Fortalezas, debilidades y oportunidades curriculares para una orientación intercultural en un programa de Licenciatura en Lenguas Extranjeras

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Abstract

This paper presents partial results of an ongoing study (a qualitative case study) on the promotion and assessment of an intercultural orientation across the curriculum of a Foreign Languages Teacher Education Program, at a Colombian public university. **Objective:** The first stage of such study aimed at analyzing the faculty's perceptions ($n=12$) about what they consider curricular strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for an intercultural orientation. **Methodology:** Data were collected by means of semi-structured interviews to professors and administrative stakeholders from the undergraduate program. Data were subjected to thematic analysis with the use of *Nvivo*. **Results:** Results suggest that faculty deem it necessary to reach consensus about theoretical concepts such as culture and interculturality, and that professional development can be a strategy to formally take on an intercultural endeavor in a teacher education program. **Conclusions:** The paper comes to an end with discussion and implications for other FL teacher education programs in Colombia seeking to pursue an intercultural orientation in their curricula.

Keywords: Case Study, Intercultural Curriculum, Interculturality, Teacher Education, Teachers' Perceptions.

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Resumen

Este artículo presenta resultados parciales de una investigación en proceso (un estudio de caso cualitativo) sobre la promoción y evaluación de una orientación intercultural a través del currículo de un programa de Licenciatura en Lenguas Extranjeras, en una universidad pública colombiana. **Objetivo:** la primera etapa de dicho estudio se enfocó en analizar las percepciones del cuerpo docente ($n=12$) sobre lo que ellos consideraban fortalezas, debilidades y oportunidades para una orientación intercultural. **Metodología:** los datos fueron recogidos mediante entrevistas semiestructuradas a docentes y administrativos del programa de pregrado. Estos datos fueron sometidos a análisis temático mediante el uso de *Nvivo*. **Resultados:** los resultados sugieren que el cuerpo docente considera necesario alcanzar un consenso sobre conceptos teóricos tales como cultura e interculturalidad, y que el Desarrollo Profesional puede ser una estrategia para embarcarse formalmente en una iniciativa intercultural en un programa de formación de docentes. **Conclusiones:** el artículo concluye con discusión e implicaciones para otros programas de licenciatura en lenguas extranjeras en interesados en una orientación intercultural para sus currículos.

Palabras clave: currículo intercultural, estudio de caso, formación de docentes, interculturalidad, percepciones de docentes.

Introduction

In a world where potential conflict with people of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds is increasingly the norm, the field of Intercultural Studies and the concept of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) have received a great deal of attention. However, one topic that still remains rather unexplored is the promotion of ICC across the curriculum of Foreign Language Teacher Education programs (hereinafter FLTEP). [Fantini \(2019\)](#) states that despite the commitment by many countries to integrate foreign languages and intercultural approaches into their curriculum, the quality of such attempts varies dramatically from country to country, and in many cases, “language is often taught without adequate cultural context” (p. 40), which means that culture continues to be marginal to the curriculum of communicative language teaching. The FLTEP at Universidad del Valle is no exception, and although faculty consider ICC a must in language teaching ([Faustino-Ruiz and Patiño-Rojas, 2021](#)), there is no concrete proposal for the promotion of an intercultural orientation in this particular context.

With this in mind, a Qualitative Case Study was proposed ([Creswell and Creswell, 2018](#)) with a threefold purpose: to carry out an in-depth analysis of the FLTEP curriculum, to conduct a Professional Development program whereby faculty negotiate and reach an intercultural orientation, and to design and implement a curricular model for the promotion of ICC. The study comprises 4 phases, and this paper presents results of Phase #1, which was devoted to identifying strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for ICC development across the curriculum of the FLTEP from Universidad del Valle. To this end, semi-structured interviews with teacher educators were conducted to find out where and how they think ICC can be integrated into the curriculum of the program, and whether they advocate for a particular ICC model. The sample population was composed by twelve professors, chosen

through purposeful sampling to ensure the presence of four administrative stakeholders within the sample. Information gathered from the interviews was analyzed by means of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Theoretical Framework

On defining Curriculum

The word curriculum has been polysemically used as a synonym for a study plan, a single syllabus, a set of standards, the ends or the means to education, among many other options (Posner, 2004). Given the multivalent nature of the term, this study adopted a comprehensive definition of curriculum, encompassing all philosophical and ideological assumptions underlying the pedagogical processes, the objectives, and contents, as well as the concatenation of forms of instruction and evaluation in a study plan (González-Montejo, 2019; Núñez-París, 2008). Starting from this definition, the design, assessment, or reform of curriculum imply the analysis of and the intervention in the various constitutive levels of the philosophy and academic praxis of a given institution. Bearing this in mind, the analysis of the curriculum of the FLTEP in this study zeroed in on the three levels of curriculum planning proposed by Deng (2010): the institutional level (encompassing official documents, the educational project of a given institution, and the national objectives for education); the programmatic level (which includes specific planning for areas, as well as course syllabi); and the enacted level (which gathers all classroom materials, lesson plans, and activities design).

Even though Deng's levels encompass the organizational dimensions of a study plan, Kelly (2004) states that curriculum should not be understood in merely organizational terms, as there must also be room for a moral dimension that renders curriculum a justifiable endeavor in educational terms. For Kelly (2004), this moral dimension of the curriculum encompasses complex and deep aspects such as the promotion of democratic societies, the development of critical positions, and the achievement of social justice; therefore, the conception of curriculum that underlies this article includes the entire conglomerate of values and philosophical postulates which support a program and an institution.

The Need of an Intercultural Orientation at the Core of FLTEP Curricula

Overall, current scholarship abounds with studies emphasizing the importance of intercultural competence in language teaching and the need for a curriculum that integrates knowledge, skills, and attitudes for communicating effectively and appropriately across cultures (East et al., 2022; Álvarez-Valencia et al., 2021; Byram, 2021; Hassim, 2013a; AEF, 2013; Lee et al., 2012). Consequently, the National Ministry of Education in Colombia (MEN) has issued several laws and requirements that prompt the promotion of the intercultural component in all educational levels, a demand which becomes much more salient in the case of foreign language teacher education.

Until now, attempts to comply with these requirements in Colombia have been limited to integrating activities of an intercultural nature in some language classes, almost remedially, and under the logic that the (inter)cultural component is an additive element whereby some content is clipped on to pre-existing curricula. Ramírez-Espinosa (2023b)

shows that most of the national scholarship in the field corresponds to pedagogical experiences carried out as individual initiatives, while some theory-based works prompt the construction of cross-cutting curricular proposals where the intercultural is not treated as ancillary, but as a core element of the curriculum (Ramírez-Espinosa, 2021; Patiño-Rojas and Faustino-Ruiz, 2019; Ramos-Holguín et al., 2019; García-Medina et al., 2012). From the perspective of Deng's (2010) dimensions, this means that the promotion of the intercultural component is found almost exclusively at the enacted dimension; more efforts, then, have to be made to infuse the intercultural endeavor in the institutional, the programmatic, and the moral dimensions.

Only through a meticulous observation and study of the curriculum will an institution be able to ponder the strengths, weaknesses and opportunities to embed an intercultural orientation in all curricular dimensions. Furthermore, such a thorough process must emphasize the understanding that the promotion of an intercultural orientation is not exclusive to foreign language classes. In this regard, Hassim (2013a) states that the development of intercultural competences must occur as a product of a holistic and organized approach, as opposed to initiatives of pigeonholing interculturality to certain areas or fields. Similarly, Halse et al. (2016) conclude that integrative curricular reforms are necessary in which the intercultural vision permeates all the components of teacher education. To do this, explicit and intentional training is essential, so that teacher educators understand their work as part of an epistemological framework.

Importance of Faculty's Perceptions in the Collective Appraisal of Curriculum

One of the first tasks in redesigning curricula must be to listen to the voices of the teachers, their perceptions of the curriculum, as well as their critical assessment of the strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities that hinder or catapult a new theoretical and practical orientation to the institution's curriculum. Teachers act as mediators between institutional policies and classroom work, and therefore facilitating their participation in curricular design democratizes its construction, and harmonizes the established policies with the practical reality of the classroom. Regarding this matter, Kelly (2004) states that many failed attempts to bring about curriculum change stem from viewing teachers as mere implementers (deliverers) of the curriculum instead of agents participating in its appraisal and construction.

In other words, it is paramount to take account of the significance of teachers' perceptions in education. These perceptions, influenced by educational, intellectual, and political ideologies, need to be negotiated and find a space in the curriculum. Teachers' beliefs, their methods, and the specific educational contexts they work in collectively constitute what Kelly (2004) refers to as an "expressive culture" (p. 23). This expressive culture, in turn, plays a significant role in the hidden curriculum that encompasses the implicit ways of thinking and doing things that contribute to the program's overall identity. The moral aspect of the curriculum is embedded in these perceptions. Since each institution has unique needs, understanding the perspectives of all curriculum stakeholders is crucial. The conception of language and culture also plays a role in shaping teaching and learning practices, which may need to be maintained, enhanced, or changed in order to better align with theoretical frameworks and institutional policies.

Methodology

Context

This research is carried out in a Colombian public university, the largest State-funded university in southwestern Colombia. This university has a School of Language Sciences, which houses a Foreign Language Teacher Education program, with a tradition of more than 30 years preparing teachers for secondary education. The program's curriculum consists of 4 fundamental components: the foreign language component (including English and French), the pedagogical component, the Linguistics component, and the first language component.

Data Collection Instrument and Participants

One semi-structured interview was conducted with a sample of 12 teacher educators. The group of interviewees was chosen by means of purposeful sampling, and they represent 34% of the faculty that supports the FLTEP at Univalle. For the sake of representativity, two main criteria were applied for sampling: a) that the teachers had taught any of the courses in the mandatory components of the curriculum (English, French, linguistics, research, and pedagogy); and b) that the sample included four teacher educators who are also the main administrative stakeholders of the FLTEP (the Director of the School of Language Sciences, the Chair of the program, the FL Department Chair, and the two Academic Coordinators from the English and French Areas). The data collection instrument consisted of an interview protocol with nine questions (see Appendix 1). Interviews were conducted mainly in Spanish, although participants would occasionally switch to English or French to talk about certain concepts. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes each, for a total of 9 hours of recording.

Data Analysis

All interviews were thoroughly transcribed and uploaded for coding on Nvivo. Descriptive coding and process coding were the main forms of organizing information (Saldaña, 2015; Miles et al., 2014). A total of 176 initial codes resulted from the first coding process. Then, a thematic analysis was conducted with the data, following strictly the six-stage process proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), as well as by Maguire and Delahunt (2017).

Results

From the 12 participants' interview, thematic analysis segmentation produced 687 excerpts. Four themes were identified, with a total of 15 sub-themes, presented in Table 1.

The following section elaborates on the themes and sub-themes. Verbatim excerpts have been translated to English, paying close attention to the original tone, register, and word choice enacted by participants. Names of participants have been changed by pseudonyms in Quechua language to preserve their anonymity.

Table 1
Themes and Sub-themes

| Themes | Sub-themes |
|--|--|
| 1. Appraisal of Curricular Strengths | Strengths related to curricular components |
| | Strengths related to program stakeholders |
| | Strengths related to the institutional context |
| | Strengths associated with the faculty's understanding of culture and the intercultural |
| 2. Appraisal of Curricular Weaknesses | Curricular weaknesses at the policy level |
| | Curricular weaknesses at the practical level |
| 3. Appraisal of Curricular Opportunities | Opportunities for an Intercultural Orientation in the Curricular Reform |
| | Opportunities for an Intercultural Orientation in the Social Context |
| 4. Professional Development for an Intercultural Orientation | |

Theme #1: Appraisal of curricular strengths by faculty members

The participants perceive the curriculum of the FLTEP at Univalle as a very solid and consolidated construction that has undergone through several evaluations, reforms, self-assessment and high-quality accreditation processes, and therefore offers many strengths for the development of an intercultural orientation. The strengths perceived by the participants fall into four categories that appeared as sub-themes in the analysis: a) Curriculum components; b) Program stakeholders; c) Institutional context; and d) Faculty's understanding of culture and the intercultural.

First, regarding the main components that make up the FLTEP coursework, the areas of linguistics, language pedagogy, and research are put forward as a fundamental infrastructure for the comprehensive preparation of future language teachers, and the way these areas are integrated is viewed as an opportunity for intercultural orientation from a transversal perspective:

The different axes and areas that make up the program, meaning the language component, the linguistics component, the mother tongue component, the research and pedagogy components... I believe that having all these components is very enriching for future teachers, and it is a strength because [students] are actually shown how diversity and interculturality look like in different disciplines (Xareni's interview, line 311).

This conception that interculturality can be promoted in any subject, and not exclusively in foreign language classes, is fundamental in the redesign of an intercultural curriculum. In the words of [Hassim et al., \(2020\)](#) "intercultural language learning requires the construction of curriculum that views intercultural interactions as pervasive in all language learning contexts" (p. 80). Similarly, participants brought up that studying two

foreign languages simultaneously is a salient strength, especially because similar programs nationwide only have one foreign language. This resonates with other studies that advocate for multilingual practices as a trigger for intercultural reflection and development (Hernández and Berdugo, 2023; Tejada and de Mejía, 2023; Hacking et al., 2017). Not only does a multilingual context enable practices such as translanguaging and dialogical third spaces (Tejada and de Mejía, 2023), but it also contributes to contest the hegemony of the English language in Colombia (Guerrero-Nieto and Quintero-Polo, 2023).

Second, in terms of the program's stakeholders, participants perceive that the faculty of the FLTEP is composed by teacher educators whose life experiences and academic backgrounds grant them a multicultural profile, as well as a critical, pedagogical, and methodological solvency that might focus toward enhancing an intercultural endeavor. Teacher educators are perceived as experts on (inter)cultural issues, which is a salient advantage if an intercultural orientation in the program is to be set in train. In addition, the participants highlight their colleagues' role in research as a strength, given the intellectual production on the subject that derives from such a role. Furthermore, the participants highlight as a strength the faculty's genuine interest in interculturality as an essential element in the FLTEP. The need, the relevance, and the intention to promote an intercultural orientation seems to be a recurrent topic in various discussion scenarios of the faculty, which testify to a positive perception about ushering in a new orientation in the curriculum. Along the same line, emphasis is placed on students as intercultural and diverse subjects who bring richness to the program. The students of the program are perceived as individuals who contribute their identitarian, cultural, and linguistic intersections to the composition of a diverse environment in the class:

When we talk about students, it [interculturality] is also there, whether we are aware of it or not, right? Either because of their ethnicity, their age, their regional origin, their location in the city and things like that. We have very intercultural students because they are very connected to different things (Nayarak's interview, line 117)

The acknowledgement of stakeholders as input for the development of intercultural competencies is decisive in the potential success of an intercultural curriculum, since stakeholders embody a great deal of diversity that is often neglected; In this regard, Ramírez-Espinoza (2023a) asserts that on university campuses "there are often missed opportunities in the local diversity that, if taken advantage of, would constitute a rich source of intercultural practice" (p. 9); according to this author this diversity, embodied by the local stakeholders constitutes a solid foundations for promoting intercultural relationships. This connects directly with the third subtheme, which portrays curricular strengths related to the institutional context. Besides stakeholders, the institution's participation in high-quality accreditation processes is highlighted as "a very useful tool to gauge how the program is going and allows for a constant diagnosis" (Nayarak's interview, line 260). Likewise, the participants consider that state-funded institutions allow for flexibility to deploy curricular decisions and curricular innovations.

Finally, the fourth subtheme showcases strengths associated with how faculty understand the concepts of culture and the intercultural. Participants expressed a wide array of definitions of the concept of culture as a complex phenomenon that extends far

beyond geographically-defined folklore manifestations. They share a broad definition of cultures as plural, dynamic, complex, and ever-changing phenomena. For the participants, cultures constitute complex, multifaceted and multilayered concept, a phenomenon of a mixed nature between the individual and the collective that arises in social interaction, and that produces forms of representation and belonging to different simultaneous expressions:

One belongs to many groups, to many cultures, so there is no such thing as a unique culture [...] When I think of cultures, I don't necessarily think of the foreign ones, I think in terms of subcultures [...] because culture is present in the age, in gender, in the family, in the social stratum, in the field you study (Sikaru's interview, line 32).

For me [interculturality] is a social model of promoting diversity, equity, of establishing horizontal relationships between individuals. (Hakan's interview, line 54).

These conceptions about culture and interculturality are linked to critical positions on the part of the participants, who put forward a definition of interculturality as a tool for social transformation, and for egalitarian dialogue between social groups. Participants glimpse a vision of interculturality as an integral objective in the preparation of better citizens and better human beings, and not necessarily as a classroom objective that adds content to foreign language classes. These perceptions portray what [Fielding et al. \(2023\)](#) call a transformative representation of interculturality, whereby the focus relies on developing and strengthening students' own identities to actively engage in human exchanges that may have an impact in society, and not so much in merely reflecting about similarities and differences between cultural groups. This is a social model based on respect for differences in thought, and an appreciation and promotion of diversity as a fundamental characteristic of human beings and the groups they comprise.

Theme #2: Appraisal of curricular weaknesses by faculty members

The participants claim that a notorious weakness is the traditional way in which curricula are organized in subjects. Especially participants who have been in administrative roles assert that the curricular model in higher education thwarts dialogue between fields of knowledge, and restricts academic collaboration between teachers. For the participants, a subject-based curriculum is a form of colonized organization of education that severely hampers flexibility and interdisciplinarity. Similarly, the rigidity in traditional curricula is perceived as a form of violence against students' diversity, because curricular systems standardize the academic offer in an attempt to homogenize the preparation of future professionals. More particularly, at the level of internal policies of the academic program, the participants consider that the main curricular weakness is the lack of explicit objectives and theoretical definitions related to interculturality in the program's official documents. Participants notice a lack of clarity about the expected graduate profile in relation to intercultural preparation, which according to them would boost the impact of teachers beyond the classroom. For the participants, the Program's Educational Project (PEP), which is the document that guides the curricular decisions of the FLTEP, needs to explicitly state basic theoretical notions, as well as the intercultural competences that future foreign language teachers need:

The PEP and the School hint at these notions [of culture and interculturality], but perhaps they should be made more tangible and specific. For example, what is our institutional definition of culture?, or interculturality? How do we understand the assessment of interculturality? This should be defined more precisely (Akapana's interview, line 327).

Participants also consider that a major weakness is the lack of methodological guidelines for the promotion of an intercultural orientation in language teaching, so they deem impossible to guarantee a fundamental core to foster interculturality, and consequently there is no way to secure either a common preparation for all pre-service teachers, this due to the fact that the theoretical interpretations and pedagogical decisions “depends on the teacher's good faith, on how he will develop his course, or what he wants to do” (Maywa's interview, line 62). Another perceived weakness is the lack of teamwork on the part of the faculty. Either because the workload is heavy and the professors are busy with individual matters, or because there have been academic and personal ruptures between faculty members, some institutional dynamics hinder the possibilities of group training and of constant dialogue between peers for the construction of academic agreements. It is worth mentioning that this weakness felt by teachers is related to a crucial aspect in the development of curricular proposals, which is the joint work between all the stakeholders of an institution. Developing an intercultural orientation in any curriculum needs from all faculty to be onboard if the effort is expected to function and yield positive results; in other words, for an intercultural curriculum undertaking to work, it must be sustainable. In this regard, [Hassim et al., \(2020\)](#) suggests that institutions interested in developing an intercultural orientation in their curricula should aim for a stage in which there is direct communication between faculty and administrative staff, followed by engagement with students and the surrounding community. This will certainly generate constant collaborative work to produce curricular and pedagogical redesigns, as well as transformation within the school and the community. It is not without reason that the participants in this study feel that their individual desires to include cultural aspects in the classroom are not enough, but that a larger, more generalized and institutional effort is required to be able to transform the curriculum.

Theme #3: Appraisal of curricular opportunities by faculty members

The participants identified different elements that they consider valuable opportunities to develop an intercultural orientation in the FLTEP. These opportunities were classified into three sub-themes, the first being the moment of curricular reform that the university is currently going through, which prompts teachers to discuss curricular models within their programs and course syllabi. Currently, the University has proposed a curricular reform contemplated in Resolution 136 of December 2017. This document regulates undergraduate programs in light of laws issued by the National Ministry of Education (MEN), which establish quality standards for teacher education programs in the country. The reform implies revising course descriptors, and adjusting course syllabi (now called micro-curricula) to a new structure that harmonizes learning objectives, achievement indicators, and learning outcomes. All this work is seen by the participants as a positive contingency to openly discuss an intercultural orientation in the preparation of language teachers, and to agree upon some common ground among teacher educators. Similarly, the curricular reform is seen as an

opportunity for the intercultural perspective to permeate other curricular elements of the program, beyond foreign language courses. In this way, the participants consider paramount to rethink elements such as research, translation, and senior thesis as potential sources of intercultural promotion, critical thinking, and interdisciplinary work. This connects with the appraisal of curricular strengths, as participants once again bring up the idea of infusing interculturality in all the subjects of the coursework. This notion transcends trivializing visions of the intercultural as a handful of tokenistic activities or topics in language classes, and ushers in an idea of a holistic curriculum that prepares intercultural mediators through a well-grounded philosophy that cascades through all subjects and elements of the coursework. In fact, [Halse et al., \(2016\)](#) note that the least effective attempts at developing intercultural competencies are those where work was limited to a handful of subjects. The intercultural endeavor should not be just an additional content, but an institutional undertaking with a fundamental philosophy that helps students transform their way of thinking, acting and interacting with others, within a framework of respect for diversity and constant self-questioning about our own prejudices ([Banks, 1997](#)).

In other words, the curricular reform has allowed the participants to identify transversality as a way to infuse the intercultural vision throughout the already existing components of the curriculum, without necessarily adding something new as a remedial element. Likewise, transversality is seen as a strategy for faculty to agree upon common objectives, and as a way to offer a more balanced preparation to all pre-service teachers:

We would have to agree on some common elements that have to be transversal to all subjects, so that we do not end up doing, in good faith, what we individually think is the right thing. The [intercultural] component is a bit messy because we do not have clear objectives by level, we don't have a transversal plan yet (Sumak's interview, line 387).

The second sub-theme is related to the social context that surrounds the University, together with its realities and human beings that compose them, as imminent conveniences for the practice of interculturality. This context, however, is multifaceted, as the participants refer to at least three different layers of the social fabric. In the first place, the macro context at the national level is highlighted, characterized by deep cracks of inequity and by recent situations of conflict, social unrest and protest. In addition, a recent and unprecedented wave of migration from the neighboring country of Venezuela, which has made the national scene a hive of diverse voices claiming legitimate rights:

Right now we have some issues that set the tone for the [intercultural] discussion, the social upheaval of the national strike, and the migration from Venezuela are issues that put the discussion on the table. It is no longer theory, it is all about how I actually react to these issues [...] perhaps now we are more willing to discuss interculturality because we are more prone to come across these contacts... we realize that we are different from the neighbor right here, from the neighbor in the seat of the bus, and interculturality is the possibility of acknowledging that difference is always present (Sikaru's interview, line 304).

Second, the participants speak of a more local context, at the level of the city of Cali, a city that holds the second place in Latin America with the largest Afro-descendant

population, in addition to its proximity to indigenous communities that also converge in the region; these characteristics, sometimes overlooked, are an inexhaustible source of richness and diversity that, according to the participants, can contribute to the exploration of otherness in the program. And finally, the institutional context of the University is highlighted as a diverse academic scenario, in which different types of thought converge, which are the basis for intercultural dialogue. To this respect, [Ramírez-Espinosa \(2023a\)](#) asserts that Colombian campuses are small-scale representations of the country's cultural diversity and therefore they offer multiple possibilities to engage in intercultural exchange. These resulting in the development of empathy for otherness, openness to difference and, above all, awareness of the ways we engage in interaction with a different other. To support his argument, [Ramírez-Espinosa \(2023a\)](#) introduces the narratives of four university students (a transgender man, a blind woman, an indigenous woman, and a deaf man) who share how their diversity implied intercultural challenges to navigate life on campus. For this author "these local intercultural practices would be solid foundations for promoting intercultural relations abroad, based primarily on the recognition of who we are, in order to respect who others are" (p. 9.). By the same token, [Brito et al. \(2024\)](#) argue that universities should be enablers or facilitators of intercultural dialogue; however, besides the intercultural opportunities in gender, ethnicity, and body functions, mentioned previously, these authors mention that immigration is a underrepresented construct in the intercultural dialogue within campuses, yet is the main cause of racism, stereotyping and social discrimination in the same settings. Thus, the participants in this present study have noticed that stakeholders embody a vast array of identities determined by their genders, religions, ethnic backgrounds, regional backgrounds, physicalities, etc., that constitute sources of cultural difference, and therefore sources of intercultural dialogue. This is how one participant explains it:

We have great potential in our university due to the contact with indigenous communities, their thought and their forms of organization, how decisions are made, how the idea of Cabildo [indigenous council] is exercised, how the "word circles" work, these things can begin to open the onto-epistemological toolbox on how information is collected, how research is done...at the university we will always have the opportunity to investigate not only minority cultures, but also urban cultures (Jarawi's interview, line 287).

Theme #4 The need for Professional Development to Deploy an Intercultural Orientation

Throughout the interviews, the participants consistently expressed a strong need for training in intercultural issues. On the one hand, the interest they show in undertaking an intercultural orientation in their courses is dependent on being able to feel sufficiently confident that they are doing it right. All the participants agree that their knowledge about (inter)cultural issues comes from training they have received outside the institution, either because of their academic background, their personal interest and participation in events, conferences and workshops, or because they have seen and taken ideas from their colleagues. However, they also agree on the need for an institutional initiative of professional development (PD), so that the curricular decisions that are made are informed by a set of common theoretical and practical principles. PD is seen as a way to overcome

the curricular weaknesses identified, as it would encourage collective work among colleagues, and would potentially allow for the transversality of the intercultural component:

It [professional development] would be a way to guarantee some common knowledge in what we do, it would allow us to work on a sort gradation of the intercultural component, a sort of sequencing, but clearly that has to be the result of collective work (Tupak's interview, line 257).

The possibility of a PD program seems to excite the participants, who express their expectations of how such a program should be conducted and what its main features should be. In fact, Hassim (2013b; 2013c) shows that teachers need to be empowered by means of formal training in order for them to feel capable of undertaking curricular reforms and redesigns around an intercultural core. In a similar vein, and in the local context, Hernández-Gaviria and Berdugo-Torres (2023) claim that PD may guide teachers in the construction of projects aiming at the promotion of dialogue between communities, languages and cultures. Finally, Cuartas-Álvarez (2020), in his study with in-service language teachers, also advocates for formal training as a powerful and transformative tool whereby teachers were able to renew their visions of interculturality, which lead to the collaborative building of an intercultural orientation that transformed their pedagogical praxis.

Among the main characteristics that all the participants agree upon is the hope that it will be a permanent program, and one that could lead the entire faculty to self-evaluate, to measure their own levels of openness to otherness, their acceptance of diversity, and to put their own intercultural competencies to the test:

This [intercultural orientation] requires a lot of effort, especially teamwork and very important preparation for professional development, and that's where we should question how intercultural we are. Some colleagues still think that some cultural expressions are better than others [...] they invalidate other forms of knowledge, so I think that before asking our students to become intercultural beings, we have to look at ourselves (Sumak's interview, line 527)

Silvia [Rivera Cusicanqui] says that we need to learn to tell the truth without hurting each other, and I think it has to do with [...] how I see myself, how others see me, and also the recognition that we are all biased beings, aren't we? In professional development there are opportunities to have conversations that are not easy, but that we need to have, we have to look at how intercultural we are in order to be a little better in the world (Inty's interview, line 388).

For the participants, the training must aim, on the one hand, to establish common ground for the faculty, and on the other hand, it must allow collaboration around practical strategies for the promotion of an interculturality. In terms of the contents for the PDP, participants suggest the study of the main models of interculturality and the main theoretical paradigms in the field of intercultural communicative competence. Likewise, it is expected that learning about these theoretical bases will make the PDP a space in which the faculty makes decisions about the definitions of culture and interculturality that will be adopted as cornerstones of the curriculum. Furthermore, all the participants agree on the

need to learn about the current discussion around the assessment of intercultural competencies, if it is possible at all to think of an evaluative paradigm, and what that would imply for a transversal curricular proposal in the FLTEP.

Alternatively, in methodological terms, the participants highlight the need for the PDP to include a robust component on the design and adaptation of materials for the promotion of intercultural competencies in the classroom. Likewise, all the participants agree in requesting that the PDP include a component of sharing meaningful experiences of their colleagues, so that a common bank of activities and materials is built from which everyone can benefit. According to the participants, this would allow them to expand their strategies to foster and assess intercultural competencies within the classroom. Finally, there is consensus among the participants about including in the PDP a pedagogical component that would be focused on how a class, a course or a pedagogical sequence is designed from an intercultural perspective.

Discussion and Implications

The study reveals that participants have strong pride in their curriculum, perceiving it as a robust foundation capable of supporting a new curricular perspective. The FLTEP components (Linguistics, pedagogy, foreign languages, research) are viewed as favorable assets for fostering intercultural orientation in language teaching. This gains significance when considering the need for curriculum to pervasively incorporate intercultural language learning across all learning contexts (Hassim et al., 2020). Accreditation processes lead to positive evaluations from expert peers, driving continuous curriculum enhancement and participant confidence. Positive curriculum perceptions and openness to intercultural approaches support the design of a new curricular proposal, as successful curricular innovation hinges on faculty's trust in theoretical foundations and collaborative teamwork (Kelly, 2004), and fostering a positive, conscious, and intentional intercultural attitude is vital for shaping intercultural language teachers' profiles (Peña-Dix, 2022).

Regarding the program stakeholders, the participants perceive that the faculty has highly qualified teacher educators who are genuinely interested in the subject of interculturality, and whose experience in research can boost any innovation in the FLTEP curriculum. In a similar fashion, the students are perceived as a source of diversity, which is an advantage that can make contributions to a new curricular proposal. The cultural diversity represented in the local community is seen as a strength for the promotion of interculturality because “members of every school community bring a range of intercultural experiences and perspectives, even if they come from the same cultural group, linguistic background, or nationality” (Hassim et al., 2020). The intercultural curriculum must provide educational responses to the increasingly prolific and noticeable superdiversity in classrooms, and to do so, such superdiversity must be seen as a curricular resource that problematizes differences and capitalizes on them as wealth rather than as a problem. In this sense, the results of this study resonate with current scholarship in Latin America that strives for a comprehensive view of interculturality in higher education (see for example Brito et al., 2024). However, while diversity yields relevant opportunities for meaningful interactions (Bowman, 2010), the mere presence of culturally diverse students and teachers

on campus does not make the population automatically and inherently prompt to develop intercultural skills (Lee et al., 2012; Algers et al., 2000); therefore, a deliberate, premeditatedly and organized work has to be deployed if diversity is to be seen as a curricular resource for intercultural development (Ramírez-Espinosa, 2021). Overall, there is a perception of richness about the different human, theoretical and infrastructural assets involved in the curriculum: teachers and students contribute to the configuration of a potential intercultural atmosphere, there are enough well-articulated subjects for the promotion of an intercultural perspective, the institution is seen as a favorable environment to make adjustments and pedagogical innovations, while the scientific practices of teacher educators translate into research advances that propel processes of new knowledge construction.

In terms of conceptualizations of culture and interculturality as fundamental constructs of the FLTE program, the participants share notions that comprise a critical, broad and complex position of the relations between social groups. In the institutional context, this seems to be a positive evolution in conceptual terms with respect to the results reported in the antecedent study by Faustino and Patiño (2021). In said study, the majority of FLTE faculty at Univalle understood culture from a traditional conception, linked to the idea of culture-nation, which associated intercultural communication, almost exclusively, to a transnational phenomenon. It is inferred that the discussions provoked by such an antecedent has had a gradual effect on the appropriation of a new shared understanding of culture and intercultural communication. This renewed understanding is key in the construction of a curriculum leading to intercultural citizenship, which should be the ultimate outcome of language education (Peña-Dix, 2022; Guilherme, 2002). Such renewed understanding integrates critical and decolonial stances, while envisioning a broad definition of intercultural communication as a phenomenon potentially present in any human encounter; this understanding contrasts outdated perceptions of the intercultural as a phenomenon that is “‘foreign’ both physically distant from the lived world of the learner and culturally foreign as well” (Lo Bianco and Slaughter, 2009, p.31). In the Colombian context, these results represent an important progress with respect to the landscape featured by Rojas-Barreto (2019), who found that Colombian university teachers conceived interculturality mainly as content knowledge that could be added to language classes, while they ignored its affordances “in the search of critical, reflexive, empathetic with others and socially committed professionals” (p. 44). Furthermore, critical and decolonial stances in these new conceptions are fundamental elements in the transition from a catalytic curriculum, where teachers incorporate some cultural aspects in their teaching, to an action-oriented intercultural curriculum, where reflection on (inter)cultural aspects advocate for social change (Hassim et al., 2020).

On the other hand, the weaknesses identified by the participants mainly revolve around shortcomings at the policy level and at the practical level. In the first place, in terms of institutional policies, participants claim that the traditional subject-based organization of curricula in higher education hampers flexibility and restricts innovative and transversal proposals. Likewise, the lack of common theoretical definitions and explicit objectives in the official documents mean that intercultural work is subject to the will and individual decisions of some teachers, which jeopardizes the principle of equality in teaching and

learning. It is worth remembering that a common terminological framework provides security to teachers when making pedagogical and didactic decisions. This framework of theoretical references and definitions for the curriculum must be given within the context of a decolonial undertaking, since the curriculum has the power to create, maintain or reverse idiosyncrasies. Thus, the intercultural perspective can be difficult to establish when there are naturalized and invisible exclusions. Therefore, it is paramount that an intercultural approach in the language teaching curriculum be the product of the decolonization of various constructs such as language, school, cultures, diversity, internationalization, among others. All these constructs, far from being innocuous, obey long-standing ideologies, often permeated and originated in political, economic and theological discourses with colonial, racist, classist, neoliberal, sexist and religious overtones (Dietz and Mateos, 2024). Secondly, at a practical level, participants need to receive from the institution some methodological guidelines and tools for intercultural work. Added to these is a perceived lack of teamwork, since institutional practices seem to prioritize individual work, making the collective construction of curricular agreements almost non-existent. This implies that, in the participants' view, the implementation of an intercultural perspective in the curriculum requires joint work through which training spaces are guaranteed, in which fundamental theoretical and methodological agreements are broadly and democratically discussed. Reaching common ground would provide the faculty with a sense of security regarding the articulation of their teaching to the macro-project of which they are a part, while offering them a broad framework of maneuver to make adaptations according to their own teaching autonomy, their preferences, epistemologies, and methodologies, always with one foot on the cornerstone of interculturality.

Regarding these academic spaces for discussion and decision-making, participants consider that PD could be a strategy to face the challenges and weaknesses identified in the FLTEP curriculum, as well as to make the most of the strengths and opportunities of the context. This is a strategy that had originally been glimpsed in the study by Faustino and Patiño (2020) and was explicitly manifested in the interviews of the present study. According to the participants, the PDP must have very specific characteristics and objectives: it must provide space for defining the fundamental theoretical stances of the program regarding interculturality; it should also encourage collective work in favor of a transversal curricular design that allows the intercultural component to spread throughout the entire coursework; and, finally, it should be the space to share practical strategies and build a bank of materials, in order to expand the repertoire of activities for teaching and evaluating the intercultural component. This desire of the faculty to integrate PD for a curricular reform is consistent with several studies, which claim that new approaches to intercultural endeavors imply institutional support for teachers to assess the curriculum they work for, to learn about new models, to develop tools and strategies in an environment of confidence (Hassim et al., 2020; AEF, 2013; Hassim, 2013b; 2013c).

Conclusion, Caveats and Further Steps

The voices of these participants, although very particular and focused on their immediate local context, reveal interests and concerns that transcend the local setting of this study and can be extrapolated to other institutions and contexts. The participants are

proud of a curriculum that they consider robust and capable of theoretically supporting a renewed approach to teaching foreign languages from an intercultural perspective. To this end, teachers have been transforming and re-shaping their definitions of culture and interculturality, adopting increasingly critical, decolonial and political stances. These stances underpin the notion that the curriculum must assume differences and diversity as an inherent characteristic of every individual. Thus, the curriculum must provide the mechanisms so that differences are not the argument for the biased categorization of “us” and “them”, but rather, these differences must be the central element of the reflection on why they are present, the historical, social and psychological reasons behind them, which will allow for stages of understanding, mediation and transformation.

The results obtained highlight the participants' insistence on revisiting the local as a source of intercultural opportunities. In this regard, [Corbett \(2022\)](#) argues that “the local culture is as legitimate an object of inquiry in an intercultural curriculum as ‘other’ cultures, and that all cultures are subjected to sympathetic but critical scrutiny” (p. 269). This shift towards the local invites us to reflect on the fact that the university curriculum must be committed to its context and the needs of its actors; hence the importance of the curriculum being co-constructed, redesigned, from a democratic bottom-up approach that takes as its basis the reality and diversity of the community. The curriculum must promote intercultural dialogue between all actors in society; this must be a democratic dialogue, open to debate, critical, well-founded and informed. Therefore, the intercultural curriculum must provide the basis for its actors to be able to analyze, understand and dismantle the colonial matrices imposed on the way in which we human beings relate to each other, and at the same time provide the tools for the reconstruction of democratic bases for human interaction and relationships.

With reference to curricular opportunities for the adoption of an intercultural perspective, participants state they are in a favoring setting (both in time and space) that could result, in the improvement of the deficiencies previously identified, whereas in a strategic moment to adopt an intercultural perspective for the program. the sociopolitical situation in Colombia makes more notorious our rich diversity, the difference, the otherness, and the inherent conflict that comes with them. The fact that the participants consider the social context as an opportunity for an intercultural orientation in language teaching is paramount, as “Interculturality in the context of group diversity or other additional cultures or collectives [...] and languages within the same country has rarely been explored empirically” ([Peña-Dix, 2022, p. 177](#)). Thus, the national panorama requires that language teaching from an intercultural perspective be addressed as a fundamental objective in the preparation of future teachers, and not simply as ancillary topics that can be clipped-on to lesson plans. In line with this thinking, [Lo Bianco and Slaughter \(2009\)](#) consider that intercultural innovations need to be based “on practical communication grounded in real-world settings in which identities and purposes of learners are given central importance in curriculum design and which reflect the sociological reality” (p.30). This national requirement aligns with the fundamental principle of the intercultural turn, which underscores ICC as central to the pedagogical context and relationships within foreign language education ([Liddicoat, 2008](#)). In this regard, an intercultural orientation in language

teaching represents an evolution towards ethical and critical education (Peña-Dix, 2022; Crozet, 2017; Porto and Byram, 2015).

Finally, the appraisal of strengths, weaknesses and opportunities presented above constitute only partial results in the first research stage of a much larger project. Such project, a doctoral dissertation, aims at developing an intercultural orientation for the curriculum of a Foreign Language Education Program at a state-funded university in the South-West of Colombia. The first stage of the project collected data from interviews to faculty (examined in this paper) as well as from a documentary analysis of institutional policy documents and course syllabi. The second stage comprises the design of a Professional Development program, in which results from the first stage will inform the decisions on content, mode of delivery and duration. The third stage will be devoted to the joint construction of an in-house model for the promotion of interculturality through the coursework of the program. The fourth stage will delve into the implementation of the in-house model throughout the program's syllabi to determine the impact of the PD program in the participants' praxis. By the end of the dissertation, results of this research project aspire to contribute with a model, open for discussion, adaptation, and academic scrutiny, for the development of intercultural curricula in other Foreign Language Teacher Education programs in Colombia.

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