Suggested Practices for Developing Intercultural Communication Competences in Early English Language Lessons Based on a Systematic Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

In today's globalised world, the development of Intercultural Communicative Competence is at the forefront of English Language Teaching, since it enhances students' effective language learning as well as encourages them to gain a better and broader understanding not only of their own world, but also of the world around them. However, literature review on this topic is quite limited as regards early English language learning. Therefore, the aim of this systematic review is to provide insight on the teaching practices, techniques and learning activities employed by English language teachers in early English language learning so as to integrate the intercultural dimension in their lessons and develop their learners' intercultural communicative competence. Data was collected from three databases Scopus, Eric, Elsevier and Google Scholar, based on predefined criteria. Findings indicate that various teaching methods, techniques and learning activities, popular in ELT, can be adapted to promote intercultural learning in early English language teaching. Moreover, online learning along with the use of different web tools and platforms, set a positive learning environment for successful intercultural interactions among culturally and linguistically diverse learners.

Keywords: Early Childhood, English Language, Intercultural Communicative Competence, Teaching Practices.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Since the advent of globalization, modern societies are marked by increasing cultural, linguistic, ethnic and social diversity, leading to growing intercultural encounters among citizens (Zhang & Zhou, 2019; Breka & Petravić, 2015). Consequently, acquiring and mastering intercultural awareness is considered of utmost importance, especially in the educational world (Wang *et al*., 2023). Schools constitute the core for promoting and developing significant values, skills and knowledge that will shape the citizens of tomorrow's world. English as a lingua franca, is used for international communication among people beyond their linguistic and cultural boundaries (Nguyen *et al*., 2021; Iswandari & Ardi, 2022). Accordingly, English language teaching should intend to provide a holistic approach to language learning, which means not to focus solely on developing learners' linguistic awareness but also incorporate an intercultural view during the learning process. This way, learners will be able to cultivate a global perspective towards other cultures, they will enhance their understanding of their own identity and will build strong communication skills, so as to effectively interact with others (Council of Europe, 2020).

Several secondary schools and universities have implemented the intercultural dimension into ELT, providing useful insight to teachers, academics, education practitioners, curriculum designers and teacher training instructors, regarding the teaching methods, practices and strategies adopted as well as the outcomes of their interventions. However, as regards early English language learning, research on teachers' practices and methods, seems to be quite insufficient on learners of this level. Hence, the purpose of this systematic review is to shed light on the teaching practices employed in early language teaching and learning in order to develop early English language learners' intercultural communicative competence.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The driving wave of globalization along with migration and the huge advances in technology, have altered the sociocultural landscape of modern societies in recent years, as more and more citizens from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds learn to co-exist in the same society, carrying with them their own beliefs, prejudices and stereotypes (Zhang & Zhou, 2019).

Consequently, in this era of increasing cultural diversity[1] and multilingualism, being culturally aware as well as having cultivated strong communication skills in order to successfully interact with people worldwide, has become of great importance (Karras, 2021; Papadopoulos, 2018; Tran & Duong, 2018). In this regard, education seems to be the key factor, so as to impart the significant values of global citizenship, such as understanding, accepting and respecting culturally as well as linguistically diverse social identities (Karras, 2021). Schools constitute the core of shaping and cultivating students' personal and social development, so as to gain valuable knowledge and skills that would help them in the long term, as future citizens of society (Papadopoulos, 2018).

A. Communicative Language Learnings and Communicative Competence Headings

In fact, learning about foreign cultures and people from around the world has been part of foreign language education over the past few decades (Byram, 1989). Although, in the first place, the emphasis was mainly given on the linguistic part of foreign language instruction, the focus shifted with the advent of communicative language teaching in the 1980s (Reid, 2014; Karras, 2021). Communicative language learning aimed at developing learners' communicative competence, in the sense that speakers had to use the target language appropriately in social contexts (Hymes, 1972/1986). That meant learners needed to expand their knowledge beyond the grammatical rules and structures or the vocabulary of the target language and instead, they had to learn how to utilize this knowledge properly in order to exchange information and interact effectively with others in any social setting (Banjongjit & Boonmoh, 2018). However, the specific approach failed to systematically integrate language and culture teaching (Crozet & Liddicoat, 1999), which led to the introduction of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) in 1997 by Byram.

B. Intercultural Communicative Competence and ICC Models

A lot of scholars and researchers have tried to conceptualize the particular notion, providing a number of definitions. Byram defined Intercultural Communicative Competence as the ability "to interact with people from another country and culture in a foreign language" (Byram, 1997, p. 71). Some researchers considered ICC as "a complex of abilities needed to perform effectively and appropriately when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself" (Fantini & Tirmizi, 2006, p. 12), or "the intercultural competence or intercultural communicative competence typically include the attitudes, skills and knowledge required in appropriate communications when interacting across difference" (Deardorff, 2020, p. 5), while others describe it as the successful and appropriate communication in diverse cultural contexts (Barrett *et al.*, 2014; Lazár, 2003; Chen & Starosta, 1998).

On the basis of the aforementioned definitions a number of ICC frameworks have been proposed in the relevant literature, with two of them standing out, as regards foreign language teaching and learning. First, Byram's model (1997/ 2021), emphasized the need for the *intercultural speaker,* referring to speakers of different languages and identities who communicate as well as interact effectively, building up and preserving strong interpersonal relations. This requires learners to develop five different aspects of ICC namely, attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction as well as critical cultural awareness/political education (ibid).

In essence, *attitudes* refer to one's willingness to be curious as well as open towards others who are culturally different, show empathy towards them and be ready to engage with other cultures in order to gain a better cultural understanding and successfully interact in actual intercultural situations (ibid; Nguyen *et al.*, 2021). *Knowledge and skills of interpreting and relating,* involve learning about other cultures as well as social groups and being able to interpret, explain and comprehend the different perspectives between one's culture and the others' (ibid). *Skills of discovery and interaction* relate to the interlocutors' ability to acquire new knowledge of cultures, cultural practices as well as skills, and use them while interacting in real-life contexts with culturally different interlocutors. Lastly, *critical cultural awareness/ political education* refers to the speakers' ability to assess critically during the intercultural exchanges, on the basis of "specific criteria, perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures" (Byram, 1997, p. 50).

Deardorff's model (2006) extended Byram's model by proposing some additional aspects of ICC. In particular, her model comprised of five dimensions: requisite attitudes (being open and respectful towards people of different cultural backgrounds as well as being curious to discover and welcome different cultures), knowledge and comprehension (having knowledge, understanding and awareness of other cultures), skills (being equipped with the skills of active listener, observer, interpreter of other people's perspectives while interacting with them, so as interlocutors to be able to assess not only their own culture but also the other cultures), desired internal outcome (employing an ethnorelative perspective, showing empathy, having adaptability and flexibility) as well as external outcome (communicating successfully and properly with culturally diverse people), (ibid).

C. English Language Teaching and Learning and Learner's Development of ICC

In this respect, English is a global language (lingua franca), used by millions of people of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds worldwide in order to exchange information and communicate with each other (Gedik Bal & Savas, 2022; Nguyen *et al.*, 2021; Tran & Dang, 2014; Young & Sachdev, 2011). As Baker and Feng (2022, p. 14) report, English is considered "the language of globalization and internalization and the prerequisite to effective communication in intercultural communities". Hence, it is of utmost significance for English language teachers to incorporate the intercultural dimension in their lessons and develop their learners ICC (Cuartas-Álvarez, 2020; Toscu & Erten, 2020). Through English language teaching learners raise their

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[1] Cultural diversity is a broad complex concept which relates to the coexistence of human beings "of diverse knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, laws, customs, religions, languages, abilities and disabilities, genders, ethnicities, races, nationalities, etc." (Lin, 2019, p.1).

intercultural awareness, by familiarizing themselves not only with their culture but also with different ones, understanding this way, the relation among the diverse cultures (Byram, 2009). Hence, learners come to a point where they respect, value and accept cultural diversity and they are prepared for their intercultural interactions with other people of different cultures around the globe (Byram, 2015; Byram & Wagner, 2018). These implications stemming from integrating the intercultural dimension into language teaching have also been acknowledged by the Council of Europe (2001/ 2018), which promotes the intercultural approach into foreign language education throughout its frameworks for language pedagogy, namely Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture, (Council of Europe 2001, 2018). Consequently, English language teachers play the role of a catalyst so as to successfully integrate the intercultural dimension[2] into their teaching and develop their learners' ICC. However, although an intercultural view of English language learning has been part of the language teaching pedagogy over the past few decades, and research has indicated that teachers realize the merits of integrating it into their teaching procedure, it seems that in reality, they fail to apply an intercultural approach systematically into their teaching practices (Nguyen *et al*., 2021; Tolosa *et al*., 2018; Driscoll *et al*., Cable, 2013; Brunsmeier, 2016; Byram *et al*., 2013). On the basis of relevant literature (Gu, 2016; Tran & Dang, 2014; Cheewasukthaworn & Suwanarak, 2017). This is mainly due to the fact that English language teachers lack of clear and sufficient guidelines for the integration of such practices into their teaching.

It is worth mentioning though, that in spite of the challenges, the integration of the intercultural dimension into English language teaching with a view to develop learners' ICC, has mainly been implemented in the secondary and tertiary education. As literature review reveals, several scholars and researchers (Sobkowiak, 2021; Fajriyah *et al*., 2020; Sercu *et al*., 2020; Fernández-Agüero & Chancay-Cedeño, 2019; Rodríguez-Izquierdo, 2022; Vo, 2017) have explored the implementation of ICC, gaining valuable insights as regards the teaching practices, techniques and methods adopted by teachers. On the contrary, there seems to be a limitation of research that closely examines intercultural classroom practices during English language learning, regarding childhood and especially kindergarten or primary education (Howard *et al*., 2019; Brunsmeier, 2017; Wang *et al*., 2023; Smakova & Paulsrud, 2020). Studies with reference to learners of the primary context have mainly focused on discussing the potential stemming from intercultural learning for children (Wang, *et al*., 2023).

This study focuses on research studies regarding either early- primary schools or kindergartens, exploring a number of useful teaching methods, strategies, techniques and activities, which can develop young learners' intercultural communicative competence through the teaching and learning of the English language. The main research question is as follows:

What kind of practices, methods and techniques are followed by English language teachers within their teaching with young learners (ages 4 to 12 years old) so as to develop their learners' ICC?

III. METHODOLOGY OF REVIEW

Strategy and Selection Criteria: The methodology was based on the PRISMA guidelines with regard to systematic reviews and meta-analyses. The search for studies was carried out in multiple databases, namely Scopus, Eric, ScienceDirect and Google Scholar, as we wanted to extract articles published in high impact journals. The selected articles had to be published between 2008 to 2022 in the English language. The research was completed by the end of April 2023, although there was not a specific time limitation.

A. Search Terms

The search terms used in order to examine the relevance of the various research studies found, consisted of the following keywords: intercultural communicative competence and intercultural communication, in combination with words such as activities, development, practices, techniques, early childhood or kindergarten and early primary school.

B. Application of Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied in order to evaluate the detected studies and select the most relevant ones to include in this review. The inclusion criteria involved peer-reviewed articles, case studies, theoretical studies as well as open-access articles. Additionally, book reviews, editorials, posters, dissertations and presentations were excluded. These criteria were applied because the authors of this study wanted to identify robust practices and methods which can enrich EFL teachers' pedagogical practices while implementing intercultural learning in their lessons with a view to encourage their young learners to raise their Intercultural Communicative Competence.

IV. SELECTED STUDIES

The selected studies were examined individually for their relevance to the present research. The initial search resulted in 100 articles, which were examined in terms of their relevance to early childhood English language learning. This resulted in the exclusion of 88 studies which related to secondary or tertiary educational context. Hence, after the application of the inclusion and exclusion criteria, only 12 were considered relevant and were accordingly analyzed by PRSMA flow diagram (Haddaway *et al*., 2022) (Fig. 1).

As it can be seen in Table I, twelve studies (Alcaraz-Mármol, 2020; Alexiou & Kokla, 2019; Penderi, 2022; Rog, 2015; Karras, 2021; Banjongjit & Boonmoh, 2018; Thinhatruc, 2016; Reid, 2015; Dai, 2011; Chlopek, 2008; Porto, 2015; Jarosz *et al*., 2021) were included in our review. All the studies report a range of practical techniques, strategies and teaching methods that EFL teachers can employ while teaching young learners (aged between 4 to 12) in order to integrate the intercultural dimension in their lessons and help their learners cultivate their intercultural communicative competence (Table I).

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[2] The intercultural dimension refers to the notion of culture which is incorporated into ELT, so as learners to reflect on how their language and culture associates with the target language and culture, which results in their development of ICC (Nguyen et al., 2021).
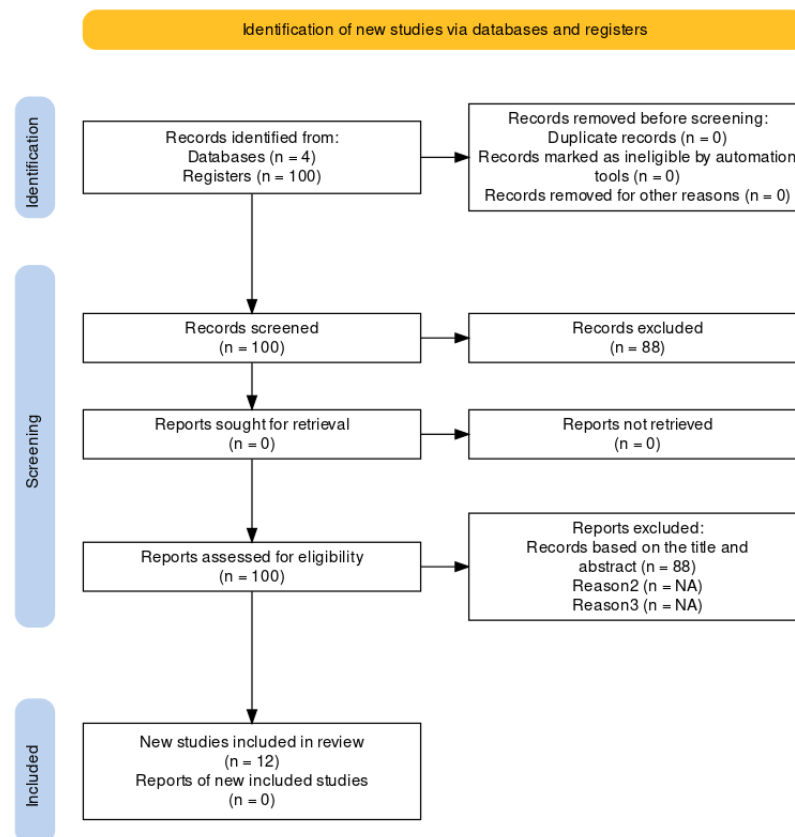
Fig. 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram for Study Selection.

TABLE I: AN OVERVIEW OF COLLECTED STUDIES

Author, year	Title	Findings
Alcaraz-Mármol (2020)	Developing intercultural communication in the EFL primary education classroom: Internationalization through virtual team collaboration with eTwinning	Project-based learning and collaborative learning through a virtual learning environment (eTwinning platform), promote ls'[3] development of ICC.
Reid (2015)	Techniques Developing Intercultural Communicative Competences in English Language Lessons	Common ELT techniques can be adapted to develop ls' ICC in the EFL classroom.
Alexiou and Kokla (2019)	Teaching Cultural Elements and Pro-social Behaviour to Preschoolers through Peppa Pig	*Peppa Pig* cartoon series can familiarize early English language learners with cultural diversity, introduce them cultural elements and teach them important values.
Rog (2015)	Intercultural education at a pre-school level in the context of Polish Kindergarten Curriculum Changes	Kindergarten programmes for EFL teaching integrate the intercultural dimension in their methodology along with teaching practices that raise ls' ICC.
Karras (2021)	Raising Intercultural Awareness in Teaching Young Learners in EFL Classes	Practical suggestions in order to include the intercultural dimension in the EFL setting: embrace the cultural diversity of one's classroom and integrate it in the lesson, use time capsules for ls' cultures, films, series or cartoons, children's books, role-play, collaborative projects, enrich the classroom with maps, posters or realia of different cultures.
Banjongjit and Boonmoh (2018)	Teachers' [4]Perceptions towards Promoting Intercultural Communicative Competence in the EFL Classroom	Ts employ strategies such as role-play, storytelling based on learners' personal experience, class reflection on reading material and class discussions to promote their ls' ICC in the EFL setting.
Thinhatruc (2016)	Incorporating Culture Teaching into EFL Classrooms	Pre-service Ts expect to raise intercultural speakers in the EFL classrooms, by using games, songs, postcards and TPR in order to incorporate intercultural aspects in their lessons.
Dai (2011)	Practical Techniques for Cultural-based Language Teaching in the EFL Classroom	Combining teaching resources, using authentic materials and employing topic-oriented activities are some of the practical techniques suggested that can integrate culture teaching in the EFL context.
Chlopek (2008)	The Intercultural Approach to EFL Teaching and Learning	Ls' engagement in activities that integrate authentic materials, group interaction and discussions, encourage them to reflect on their native culture and on other cultures and embrace an objective view towards cultural diversity.
Jarosz *et al.* (2021)	Developing Selected Aspects of Intercultural Communicative Competence in the EFL Lower Primary Classroom: Learners'Perceptions of Online Culture-Based Lessons	English language learning blended in the topics of the different subjects of the Polish school curriculum, encourages early language ls' intercultural acceptance, appreciation and understanding.

[3] Ls' is used as an abbreviation for learners.

[4] Ts is used as an abbreviation for teachers.

Author, year	Title	Findings
Porto (2015)	Ecological and intercultural citizenship in the primary English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom: an online project in Argentina, Cambridge Journal of Education	Online collaborative project-based learning can cultivate ls' ecological and intercultural citizenship in the primary EFL context. Ls reflect on significant values, develop intercultural communication skills and become intercultural mediators.
Penderi (2022)	Developing Kindergarten Instructional Designers to Support the Development of 21st Century Competencies: Factors Related to Kindergarten English Language Introduction and the New Greek Preschool Curriculum	ELT activities and practices, such as collaboration among schools from different countries, project-based lessons on ls' native country or others, recording of a song or a message in English or in another language, creation of a digital story in English, can enhance early language ls' ICC in kindergarten.

V. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The selected articles for this research come from different parts worldwide, including Greece, China, Vietnam, Poland, Thailand, Slovakia, Argentina, Spain, and Japan.

First, one study involved collaboration between learners in two countries, specifically Spain and Poland, through the eTwinning platform. Specifically, Alcaraz-Mármol (2020) aimed to investigate whether young learners can enhance their Intercultural Communicative Competence by collaborating virtually on a project with learners of another country, communicating solely in English, through the eTwinning platform. More specifically, 38 Spanish primary school learners of the 6th grade were divided into two groups in order to work on a project related to pollution. The first group had to collaborate with Polish learners through eTwinning, whereas the second one, worked on the same project cooperating with learners from their class, without using the particular platform, following the typical communicative teaching methodology.

The learners of both teams watched videos about pollution, discussed and tried to come up with solutions to specific environmental problems. Additionally, they worked with their group members on the creation of a digital poster, which they had to present orally in front of the participants of the experiment. After the intervention, only the Spanish learners' intercultural communicative competence was measured, through a questionnaire based on a Likert scale, examining specific parameters[5] extracted from the CERF (Council of Europe, 2018). The results indicate that the group of learners who collaborated with the Polish students, through the eTwinning platform, raised their intercultural communicative competence to a greater extent than the other group. Consequently, English language learning through telecollaboration sets the scene for intercultural learning and contributes to primary school learners' development of intercultural communicative competence.

In the same vein, Jarosz *et al.* (2021) explored young (aged between 8 to 9 years old) EFL learners' development of intercultural communicative competence in an online learning environment (during distance learning because of the Covid-19 lockdown) in Poland. The EFL lessons carried out throughout the study, were based on the content covered in the Polish curriculum of primary education, in an attempt to create cross-curricular connections between the English language and the different subjects of the Polish curriculum taught by the primary school teacher. The learners were divided into two groups and every week they attended two 45-minute lessons, which mainly focused on teaching vocabulary. Their level of competence in the English language was A1, based on the CERF (Council of Europe, 2018). The cultural elements were taught through practicing the English language and they were not introduced to learners separately. All the lessons were designed on the basis of Byram's model (1997) and the language tasks aimed to encourage learners to reflect on their native culture as well as on the target one. This way, learners were able to make cultural interconnections between the two cultures, raising their awareness on the existence of different cultural identities along with their own, learning to show appreciation towards other cultures and developing a more objective perspective towards cultural diversity.

Additionally, Porto (2015) explored learners' development of intercultural citizenship in the primary English language classroom, through an online collaborative project between Argentinian and Danish students. At the same time, the project aimed to cultivate learners' ecological citizenship, by raising their ecological consciousness with regard to the protection of the environment from a global perspective. Specifically, 50 Argentinian students and 20 Danish ones, carried out different problem-solving tasks related to environmental issues, which engaged them in experiential learning and required them to do research, use audiovisual material, produce posters and banners.

The learners had to exchange and discuss their ideas on the particular environmental issues and collaborate, by interacting with each other in English, through skype or a wiki, which worked as their virtual classroom. As a result, through this multidimensional project, English language learners of primary education, not only raised their critical thinking and their linguistic awareness during the phases of the project, but they also built strong intercultural communication skills through their engagement in active intercultural dialogue. Last but not least, learners developed their intercultural communicative competence, as through their collaboration, communication and interaction with each other, they broadened their horizons regarding other cultures, the different values, thoughts or views of culturally and linguistically diverse people.

Moreover, two studies identify different techniques and activities which EFL teachers can implement in early English language teaching and learning in order to promote their learners' development of Intercultural Communicative Competence. In more detail, Reid (2015) presents a theoretical overview of practices and techniques that cultivate early language learners' Intercultural Communicative

[5] These parameters regard learners' cultural sensitivity, their ability to employ strategies in order to interact with others from different cultures, their capacity to successfully mediate among different cultures and confront incidents of intercultural misconceptions, disagreements or stereotyping (Council of Europe, 2018).

Competence in English language lessons, on the basis of the relevant literature. To begin with, the *comparison method* promotes learners' engagement in finding similarities and differences among target cultures and their native one, (for instance, a task asking them to compare and contrast a typical school day, food or sports between two countries), enhancing therefore, their socio-cultural knowledge. *The cultural assimilation,* requires learners to reflect on a critical incident which would probably confuse them, such as non-verbal greetings among different cultures. The technique of *cultural capsule* which creates opportunities for classroom interaction and discussion on different customs or habits among cultures. Another effective practice presented in the paper is *cultural island* which refers to the decoration of a classroom with posters and pictures of well-known people or places, promoting the diverse cultural element in the classroom.

Other techniques discussed involve *reformulation* of a story to a classmate or *noticing* specific elements related to a topic, *prediction* on the context of a topic-based lesson exploring different cultural aspects*, Total Physical Response (TPR)* (acting out different gestures and acknowledge their meanings in different cultures, *role play (engaging learners in real world situations), drama* (learners perform instances of miscommunication among people of different cultural backgrounds)*, treasure hunt* (doing research for a project exploring a culture-based topic), *personal diaries, journals* and *portfolios* (asking learners to keep a record of personal experiences with regard to other cultures that have been explored throughout the lessons, giving them the chance to reflect on what they have experienced). Most of the aforementioned techniques are common while teaching a foreign language; however, as seen, they can be successfully adapted for teaching culture in the EFL classroom (Jiang *et al.*, 2022).

Chlopek (2008) focused on the intercultural dimension in teaching, providing teachers with useful ideas on activities and resources in order to help their EFL learners become more multiculturally aware and embrace cultural diversity. The suggested activities are divided into three stages. In the first stage, learners are engaged with activities that help them reflect on their native culture and consider it from an objective perspective. In the second stage emphasis is placed on broadening learners' objective stance, by teaching them about the cultures of the English-speaking countries through a comparison to their native culture. In the final stage, learners increase their understanding of multiculturalism, by learning about diverse cultures worldwide. All these stages involve activities that engage learners in various authentic materials, group interaction and discussions. Last but not least, other beneficial techniques recommended in the article in order to incorporate the intercultural dimension in the early EFL classroom, include student or email exchanges and project-based learning.

Another study focuses solely on providing EFL teachers with practical techniques and useful tips for culture-based language teaching. According to Dai (2011), it is really important for teachers to employ a combination of teaching resources (audiovisual material, magazines, newspapers, literature, photographs), so as to integrate culture teaching in the EFL context. *Topic-oriented activities* can encourage learners express their views on the basis of their own cultural influences, leading to fruitful classroom discussions. In addition, *activity logs* motivate learners to keep record of their culture learning experiences inside or outside the classroom environment, giving them the opportunity to review and rethink what they have acquired. As the author states, activity logs can work as a form of feedback between the students and the teacher, as the latter can observe the students' progress on a specific topic. Furthermore, learners' exposure to *authentic materials*, such as dialogues from films can definitely contribute to culture-based language teaching and reinforce learners' multicultural awareness. Other types of activities which promote culture-based learning comprise songs, role play, games, field trips and doing research (on a topic with regard to the target language, lead to learners' active participation in the target culture as well as language).

Alexiou and Kokla (2019) concentrated on identifying (multi)cultural elements as well as cultural values promoted in preschool learners through the use of a popular children's TV series, namely Peppa Pig. The researchers watched and transcribed 216 episodes of the cartoon series, creating a Peppa Pig vocabulary compilation, which was interpreted through the qualitative approach. Findings reveal that Peppa Pig embraces multiculturalism as the characters included in the series are of diverse nationalities and consequently of different cultural backgrounds, they favour equality and promote cultural elements. In addition, Peppa promotes respect towards the characters of different identity, while their customs and traditions are presented in the episodes. An *International Day* episode is included in the series as well, portraying cultural diversity and promoting significant values, such as a peaceful living among countries.

Furthermore, Penderi (2022), in her paper, discussed some pedagogical implications stemming from the introduction of the English language in preschool education, suggesting cross-curricular activities which can enhance kindergarten learners' Intercultural Communicative Competence in the EFL classroom. The researcher highlighted the importance of the persona doll, who sets the scene for intercultural communication to take place, as the puppet is a foreigner, carrying its own cultural identity, working in this way, as the intercultural mediator among the different cultures and creating opportunities for learners' intercultural interactions. Moreover, the article suggests different teaching practices which can be employed by EFL teachers in order to enhance their learners' Intercultural Communicative Competence, such as collaboration among schools from different countries, project-based lessons on learners' countries or other countries of their interest, recording a song or a message in English or even in another language and creating a story with pictures that can be enriched with music or dialogues in English.

Róg (2015) focused on exploring and analyzing thoroughly syllabi of kindergarten foreign language teacher training courses, teaching programmes and kindergarten programmes for teaching English as a foreign language of the Polish educational system in order to examine whether the intercultural approach is incorporated in English language teaching of this level. The interpretation of the findings showed that intercultural education is completely absent from pre-service kindergarten teachers training courses, while at the same time the analysis of kindergarten teaching programmes revealed that most of them make some

references regarding only the teaching of the native culture. Interestingly, the kindergarten programmes for teaching English as a foreign language include practices along with methodology for integrating the intercultural approach in the teaching process and promoting young learners' development of Intercultural Communicative Competence. Some of the suggested methods include:

• The Audiolingual method, through the use of mechanical techniques, memorization and repetition of the rehearsed material.

• The Audiovisual method, through the use of a visual stimulus.

• The Direct Method, promoting children's active participation in a genuine conversation in a foreign language.

• The Communicative Method, which emphasizes the creation of a meaningful and purposeful interaction through language.

• Total Physical Response, which encourages children's effective learning through by reacting to verbal input through their body movement.

• The Drama Method, which engages children in acting out popular characters from fairy tales and stories in the target language.

• The Natural Approach, which encourages foreign language learning directly by focusing solely on communication skills rather than on grammar.

Some of the recommended techniques comprise songs, videos, games, drama, teaching about different cultures and showing respect for them (ibid).

In addition, two studies investigate pre-service EFL teachers' as well as in -service EFL teachers' perceptions with regard to the promotion of ICC and culture teaching in the EFL classroom, presenting strategies employed in the lessons. In more detail, Banjongjit and Boonmoh (2018) explored teachers' perceptions in relation to ICC development in the EFL classroom, and particularly on the strategies they employ for promoting ICC in their lessons. The sample of the study consisted of seven teachers at the School of Liberal Arts, King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi (KMUTT), who taught LNG 103 English for Workplace Communication. The findings of the study indicate that teachers perceive ICC as an interesting and important concept that should be incorporated and promoted in their classes. Moreover, they perceive it as the ability to be culturally aware and open, to show respect as well as communicate effectively with people of different cultural background and lastly, to have requisite skills (listening, noticing, comprehending, evaluating), in order to understand others. As regards the strategies used for the promotion of ICC, they include role-play, storytelling based on learners' personal experience, class reflection on reading material and class discussions.

In this regard, Thinhatruc (2016) examined the perceptions and practices of pre-service EFL teachers, who had completed a requisite course, namely Cross-Cultural Communication in Language Teaching. The results reveal that the English teachers-to-be realize the importance of integrating different cultures in their EFL classrooms as well as the need to encourage the notion of the intercultural speaker in their lessons. Consequently, they anticipate to include activities based on games, songs, postcards and TPR

in order to meet the aims of their culturally-oriented lessons.

Finally, an article presents a theoretical review of the significance of English in developing language awareness along with communicative competence, but also enhancing a sense of cultural pluralism in any given educational environment. Specifically, Karras (2021) concentrated on the importance of developing young learners' intercultural awareness through EFL teaching and learning, discussing extensively main concepts of intercultural education and making practical recommendations on how to embrace the intercultural dimension in the EFL teaching process, based on the relevant literature available as well as on self-reflection from personal experience. First and foremost, teachers need to take into consideration the cultural diversity of their classrooms and try to implement it in their lessons; for instance, to encourage learners bring material or realia based on their culture and present it to their classmates. As he states, culture should be incorporated in the lessons. Language teaching and culture teaching should complement each other and should not be treated independently. Other techniques suggested to enhance and promote students' intercultural awareness, involve time capsules regarding students' cultures, films, series or cartoons, children's books, role-play, collaboration with other students internationally and classroom enrichment with maps, posters or other realia.

As demonstrated, most of the detected studies propose non-conventional teaching methods (i.e., project-based learning, collaborative learning, experiential learning, online learning etc.) and different techniques (i.e., prediction, noticing, reformulation, role-play, cultural assimilation etc.) through the combination of multiple learning resources and activities in order to broaden young learners' intercultural awareness in the EFL classroom. The results indicate that the use of authentic materials is quite beneficial for culture-based lessons and when combined with audiovisual materials or multimedia, they can trigger young learners' interest in exploring other cultures (Chlopek, 2008; Dai, 2011).

Moreover, collaborative learning between learners of different cultural contexts along with the use of new technologies motivates early English language learners to enrich their knowledge on cultural values and enhances their intercultural interaction and communication (Alcaraz-Mármol, 2020). In addition, online learning environments and telecollaboration through online tools and platforms, enhance learners' intercultural interactions and encourage them to make cross-cultural interrelations with learners of other countries, fostering the development of ICC. Last but not least, most of the collected studies, recommend teaching practices, methods and techniques which are quite popular in English language teaching to learners of this context. However, as it can be concluded from these studies, the aforementioned activities, methods and practices, if designed and modified to promote intercultural learning, they can also be applicable to integrate the intercultural dimension while teaching English at this level (Jiang *et al.*, 2022). The total findings of these studies are outlined below (Table II).

TABLE II: THE ARRANGEMENT OF CHANNELS

Teaching Methods/ Strategies	Techniques	Learning Resources/Materials/ Activities
Total Physical Response	group discussions	authentic materials
Collaborative learning	student exchanges	audiovisual material
Project-based learning	drama	cartoons, films, songs
Topic-oriented learning	role play	kids' literature
Experiential learning	prediction	postcards
Blended learning	noticing	photographs
Online learning	cultural assimilation	realia (puppets, toys)
The Audiolingual Method	cultural capsule	magazines, newspapers
The Audiovisual Method	cultural island	educational games
The Direct Method	reformulation of a story	activity logs
The Communicative Method	treasure hunt	mind maps
The Natural Approach	personal diaries, journals, portfolios	email exchanges
Research-based learning		time capsules

VI. CONCLUSION

This systematic review study tried to map and critically reflect upon the teaching practices, methods and strategies employed by EFL teachers in order to incorporate the intercultural dimension while teaching English to children (aged between 4 to 12 years old), aiming to foster their ICC. Interestingly, the studies reviewed, share several commonalities which help us draw some overall conclusions. First, regarding the teaching methods, most researchers suggest experiential learning in combination to project-based learning through problem-solving tasks, which are considered to enhance learners' intercultural awareness and understanding of themselves and the others. Moreover, collaborative learning among learners of different cultures or countries through an online learning environment, facilitates learners' intercultural interactions, promotes intercultural communication and helps them obtain a broader scope of the different cultural perspectives. Hence, learners practice learning English by enriching their experiences in the actual social world, becoming in this way, intercultural speakers who overcome their cultural prejudices as well as stereotypes and mediate successfully among the different cultures and languages (Thome-Williams, 2016). Authentic materials along with audiovisual aids increase children's motivation and assist their intercultural learning, as they facilitate them to reflect on the world around them and consequently themselves, developing their intercultural communicative competence. Last but not least, several of the methods and practices suggested in the detected studies are not new to ELT pedagogy; though as seen, EFL teachers can modify them accordingly and adapt them in order to implement the intercultural dimension in their lessons.

In conclusion, one limitation of this systematic review is that the detected studies, involve a restricted range of countries worldwide, so it would be interesting to see how EFL teachers integrate the intercultural dimension in early childhood English language learning in other parts of the world as well. Furthermore, a wider range of research studies that would provide qualitative data by testing in practice the aforementioned teaching methods, practices and strategies to students, would definitely enrich our knowledge on this topic and provide additional valuable insight on the existing literature.

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