Araucanía Chilean EFL Teachers' Beliefs Regarding Their Intercultural Mediator Role

Creencias sobre el rol de mediador intercultural de profesores de inglés de La Araucanía, Chile

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The Chilean Ministry of Education has introduced an intercultural communication-oriented approach to teaching EFL in consideration of our globalized society and the local social composition of Chile. Although initial teacher education programs have progressively implemented this approach, in-service teachers have not necessarily been educated regarding their role as intercultural mediators. This study's objective was to analyze the beliefs EFL teachers from the La Araucanía region hold regarding their role as intercultural mediators. A qualitative approach was adopted. Sixteen teachers participated in semi-structured interviews and one focus group. Three beliefs teachers hold regarding the intercultural mediator role: (a) a proponent of positive intercultural attitudes, (b) an expander of intercultural contexts, and (c) a guide in finding purpose in learning.

Keywords: English as a foreign language, intercultural communicative competence, mediator role, teachers' beliefs

El Ministerio de Educación de Chile introdujo un enfoque de comunicación intercultural en la enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera. Aunque los programas de formación inicial docente han adoptado progresivamente este enfoque, los docentes en servicio no necesariamente están preparados para reconocer su papel como mediadores interculturales. Este estudio analiza las creencias que los docentes de inglés como lengua extranjera de La Araucanía asumen sobre su rol como mediadores interculturales. Se adoptó un enfoque cualitativo. Dieciséis docentes participaron en entrevistas semiestructuradas y en un grupo de discusión. Las tres creencias que tienen los docentes respecto al rol de mediador intercultural son: (a) proponentes de actitudes interculturales positivas, (b) expansores de contextos interculturales y (c) guías para encontrar un propósito en el aprendizaje.

Palabras clave: competencia comunicativa intercultural, creencias de profesores, inglés como lengua extranjera, rol mediador

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Introduction

The methodology for teaching English has changed worldwide in the last decades due to technological innovations and the social composition of globalized societies (Inomjonov, 2024; Mahyoob et al., 2024). Chile has not been the exception. English teaching moved from a grammar-centered approach in the 1990s to a communicative approach in the 2000s (Donoso, 2020), and then to a recent intercultural communication perspective (Bravo Araya, 2020; Klenner, 2018). This new framework, addressed as the intercultural language teaching and learning approach (Liddicoat, 2011), focuses on developing learners' ability to communicate effectively and appropriately across cultural contexts by fostering intercultural awareness, understanding, and reflection alongside language skills. More recently, this has been referred to as the intercultural communicative language teaching approach, which emphasizes integrating intercultural competence with language teaching by promoting learners' ability to communicate meaningfully across cultures through interaction, reflection, and understanding of cultural diversity (Munandar & Newton, 2021). A recent systematic review of intercultural communicative competence (ICC; Driscoll & Mondaca-Rojas, 2024) found that, in Latin America, Colombian researchers pioneered the study of the methodology (Barletta Manjarrés, 2009). These approaches understand the role of the English teacher as a mediator between students' culture and the cultures they may access using English.

The Chilean Ministry of Education (MINEDUC) has acknowledged this trend and now mandates that English teacher education programs explicitly enhance English as a foreign language (EFL) educators' roles as intercultural mediators. This requirement is cemented in the *2021 Disciplinary Standard E: Culture and Intercultural Competence* (Ministerio de Educación, 2021), which mandates that initial teacher education (ITE) in EFL programs prepare teachers to actively mediate between members of their own culture and those of others. Consequently, the development of this role is no longer optional; future teachers must acquire the didactic skills to design culturally relevant lessons, create inclusive activities, and implement assessments that consider cultural diversity, thereby positioning intercultural mediation as a core professional competency for English educators in Chile.

Before the current ministerial imposition, however, universities were not mandated to include the intercultural aspect in the curricula of English ITE. Thus, it is reasonable to hypothesize that EFL teachers might understand their role as intercultural mediators from preconceptions and informal knowledge about the development of intercultural communication.

Additionally, considering the context of the La Araucanía region, the commonly understood definition of interculturality is associated with the relationship between the Mapuche people and the Chilean State (Crow, 2016).[1] Chile, whose economic policy is neoliberal, has adopted a political approach to interculturality that is classified as functional (Walsh, 2010). Regardless, there is an ongoing struggle to incorporate critical emancipatory interculturality in all spheres of society (Quilaqueo & Sartorello, 2018). Thus, it is plausible that EFL teachers in La Araucanía conceptualize their role as intercultural mediators through the lens of critical interculturality, a framework deeply embedded in the historical and cultural dynamics of southern Chile.

Against this background, this study aims to analyze the beliefs EFL teachers in La Araucanía hold about their role as intercultural mediators. Understanding what teachers believe about their role as intercultural

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1 La Araucanía is a southern region of Chile historically recognized as the main territory of the Mapuche people, the largest Indigenous group in the country. This makes it the epicenter of intercultural relations and the related socio-political tensions in Chile. The region's distinctiveness for this study lies in the ongoing conflict, often referred to as the Mapuche Conflict, which involves disputes over ancestral land and natural resources, as well as demands for greater autonomy and political recognition. These historical and current tensions profoundly shape local educational practices and the understanding of interculturality.

mediators in the EFL classroom will inform professional development on developing ICC.

Literature Review

In today's globalized society, learning English has become essential due to its status as a lingua franca, facilitating intercultural communication, granting access to global knowledge, and contributing to global citizenship skills. In the context of EFL learning, promoting global citizenship involves developing learners' ability to communicate across diverse cultural and linguistic boundaries, thus equipping them with the skills necessary to participate actively and responsibly in a globalized world (Byram, 2008; UNESCO, 2015). However, being a global citizen also requires considering the needs of the local context. In the case of foreign language learning, it is relevant to understand the interplay between global influences and local realities. This local–global interplay has been conceptualized as "glocal" (Feng & Kim, 2023). Adopting a glocal approach involves recognizing and valuing learners' local cultural identities while developing their capacity to engage with global issues and diverse cultural contexts through English (Canagarajah, 2018; Holliday, 2019). Thus, in this glocal context of EFL learning, the role of teachers as intercultural mediators becomes significant, as this mediation occurs between their students and the cultures and people they encounter while learning English.

English Teachers as Intercultural Mediators

Recent contributions to intercultural studies in language teaching have highlighted the importance of developing ICC among EFL teachers and learners (Byram, 2021). For both, ICC involves more than just linguistic and sociolinguistic knowledge; it requires interpreting and understanding different worldviews and cultural perspectives, interacting and communicating effectively with individuals from different cultural backgrounds beyond anglophone contexts (Fantini,

2020), being aware of and respecting cultural differences, and resolving any conflicts that may arise (Polat & Metin, 2012). Several theoretical models have been produced to understand ICC. Influential examples include Hammer's (2009, 2012), who offers the Intercultural Development Continuum model, and Chen's (2017), who presents a triangular ICC model comprising intercultural sensitivity (Chen & Starosta, 2000), intercultural effectiveness (Portalla & Chen, 2010), and intercultural awareness (Chen & Starosta, 1998). In the TEFL area, the most influential is Byram's (2021) *savoirs* model, organized around five knowledge components. Particularly for teachers, it requires them to adopt the role of an intercultural mediator. Mediation, in this sense, is understood as facilitating learners' ability to bridge cultural differences, promoting intercultural understanding and communication skills for interacting with people from other cultures through English (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). As intercultural mediators, EFL teachers guide students in developing awareness of their own and others' cultures and encourage reflection, critical thinking, and effective interaction in culturally diverse contexts (Byram, 2021).

EFL teachers can motivate students to explore and reflect on cultural differences without judgment or prejudice by creating a supportive classroom environment that encourages students to challenge their assumptions and biases, promoting a more open-minded and inclusive approach to intercultural communication (Padua & Gonzalez Smith, 2020). EFL teachers also need to overcome cultural imbalances (Eno et al., 2019; Klenner Loebel et al., 2021), address reconciling contradictions between culturally related ideologies in materials and teaching practices (Hoff, 2020), and embrace critical pedagogies that promote intercultural understanding and challenge homogenizing approaches (Fang & Baker, 2021; Fang et al., 2024).

Effective intercultural mediation in the EFL classroom requires implementing various teaching strategies, including (a) incorporating authentic

literature, videos, and articles from different cultures into the curriculum to expose students to different cultural perspectives (Gómez, 2012); (b) prompting discussions on cultural topics that encourage students to share their experiences and perspectives while also respecting and valuing the viewpoints of others (Gómez Rodríguez, 2015); (c) providing opportunities for collaborative projects where students from different cultural backgrounds can work together to solve problems (Reid & Garson, 2016); and (d) creating a safe and inclusive classroom environment where students express opinions and beliefs without fear of judgment or discrimination (Terare, 2019). These strategies foster intercultural understanding and empathy, and enhance students' foreign and first language skills.

EFL Teachers' Beliefs About Their Intercultural Mediator Role

Teachers' beliefs are the implicit understandings, assumptions, and perceptions that teachers hold about teaching, learning, and their professional roles (Borg, 2003). They play a crucial role in shaping teachers' classroom practices and interactions. These beliefs are constructed through formal education and professional development and are influenced by personal experiences, cultural backgrounds, and contextual factors (Levin, 2015). Teachers' perceptions of their responsibility as intercultural mediators significantly influence their pedagogical choices, the selection of materials, and how they address cultural aspects in their language teaching practices.

Assuming an intercultural mediator role requires teachers' self-reflection on their beliefs about their identities and praxis (Cuartas Álvarez, 2020). Teachers can develop their identity as intercultural mediators through educational interventions, practical experience, and ongoing critical reflection (Gong et al., 2022). Through educational interventions, such as professional development programs, teachers can gain theoretical knowledge and pedagogical strate-

gies to address intercultural communication in the EFL classroom effectively. Practical experience should further help shape teachers' identities as intercultural mediators. During practical teaching experiences, teachers should find the opportunity to apply their theoretical knowledge and expertise to real-life intercultural encounters in the classroom. They ought to learn to adapt their teaching methods, integrate culturally responsive materials, and foster intercultural dialogue among their students. Ongoing critical reflection allows teachers to develop a strong sense of self and be confident in their cultural identities (Mede & Gunes, 2019).

EFL teachers, as intercultural mediators, know and understand the diversity of their students' backgrounds and the power dynamics that may be present in the classroom (Wang et al., 2022). By critically reflecting on the power dynamics present in intercultural dialogue, teachers can take steps to challenge and disrupt unequal power structures. Lastly, teachers can actively seek opportunities to learn about different cultures and languages and incorporate this knowledge into their teaching practices.

Method

This study used qualitative research with an interpretative approach, chosen to assess participants' beliefs through their discursive constructions. These were then interpreted by the research team in light of existing literature. Triangulation was further enhanced by involving multiple researchers in the analysis (Patton, 1999).

Participants and Data Collection

EFL teachers who have been teaching in primary and/or secondary schools in the La Araucanía region in Chile participated in 13 semi-structured interviews and one focus group. Descriptive data regarding the teachers who participated in the study are presented in Table 1. Participants were recruited using convenience

Table 1. Description of Participants

ID	Gender	Age	Teaching experience	School context of teaching experience	Participation
P1	Female	33	8 years	Urban public, urban charter	Individual interview
P2	Male	32	9 years	Urban public, urban charter, urban private	Individual interview
P3	Female	33	9 years	Urban public, urban charter	Individual interview
P4	Male	31	7 years	Urban public	Individual interview
P5	Female	24	2 years	Rural public, urban charter, urban public	Individual interview
P6	Male	32	9 years	Urban public, urban charter	Individual interview
P7	Male	36	9 years	Urban public, urban charter	Individual interview
P8	Female	32	8 years	Urban charter	Individual interview
P9	Female	55	18 years	Urban charter	Individual interview
P10	Female	41	10 years	Urban private	Individual interview
P11	Female	32	10 years	Urban charter	Individual interview
P12	Female	60	25 years	Rural, urban charter, urban private	Individual interview
P13	Female	56	20 years	Rural public, university	Individual interview
F14	Male	50	20 years	Rural public, urban private, university	Focus group
F15	Female	45	15 years	Rural public	Focus group
F16	Female	40	17 years	Urban charter, rural public	Focus group

(Golzar et al., 2022) and snowball sampling (Parker et al., 2019). The sample size was determined by data saturation, as no new information emerged in the final interviews. Inclusion criteria included teachers with at least 2 years of teaching experience and without formal education in ICC in TEFL. This criterion was important since it would contribute to identifying gaps in the teachers' knowledge, contrasted with the new standards for ITE of MINEDUC. The individual interviews lasted 30 minutes, and the focus group, 45 minutes. The interview guide was developed by the principal author, piloted by one teacher, and approved by external experts. Samples of the questions include, "How can the EFL teacher prompt intercultural communication?" and "What are the characteristics of a teacher as an intercultural mediator?" among others. The interviews and focus group were conducted by the principal researcher. The research was approved by the ethics committee of the university where the research originated, and each participant signed an informed consent form to participate in the study.

In the analysis, the first interview subject is designated Participant 1 (P1). The focus group participants are designated with an F. The interviews, recordings, and transcriptions were in Spanish, and the authors translated the extracts for this publication.

Data Analysis

The interviews were analyzed following the thematic analysis steps proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The first step was an initial approach to the data contained in the transcriptions, which involved reading and re-reading the texts to have an in-depth understanding of participants' reflections. The second step was to identify initial codes from the data. These corresponded to descriptive labels for data fragments that expressed similar ideas or topics. The work was conducted by identifying units of meaning that allowed the analyst to understand participants' utterances in depth. The third step was to look for patterns that emerged from these initial codes and to identify themes in participants' discourse. Themes are broader than codes and represent central ideas or issues expressed

in the data. This step allowed us to reach the first thematic organization around the attributions made by participants. The fourth step was to review and refine themes. At this stage, researchers' triangulation was relevant to ensure data stability. The fifth and last step was to define and name the resulting beliefs assigned to the role of EFL teachers as intercultural mediators. The researchers clearly defined what each belief is and what it is not, and then named it to encapsulate the themes that compose it. The themes emerging from the interviews were interpreted in light of the existing literature on ICC models, EFL learning contexts for developing ICC, and teachers' roles in the learning process. Atlas Ti 8.0 was used to aid analysis.

Findings

The themes emerging from the interviews regarding EFL teachers' role as intercultural mediators were organized into three main beliefs: (a) a proponent of positive intercultural attitudes, (b) an expander of intercultural contexts, and (c) a guide in finding purpose in learning. Each of these beliefs entails specific features of intercultural mediation. Table 2 presents a synthesis of the findings. Each belief is related to the corresponding features of the teachers' intercultural mediation.

The following sections describe each belief and its themes. They are accompanied by excerpts from participants to illustrate the findings.

Belief A: A Proponent of Positive Intercultural Attitudes

EFL teachers believe that being a proponent of positive intercultural attitudes is one of their most essential responsibilities. Participants see intercultural mediation when an EFL teacher openly inculcates positive attitudes toward intercultural communication, such as curiosity, reflection on stereotypes and prejudice, and positive values. These positive attitudes have two facets: one related to the affective sphere of intercultural relations (how their students feel about interacting) and the other to the cognitive sphere (what students learn from interacting).

The first feature of this belief is an attitude of curiosity. Teachers characterize the affective sphere of curiosity as prompting interest in engaging with people with different worldviews. The second facet of curiosity is a cognitive desire to learn about the culture and its aspects, such as beliefs, values, norms, and behaviors. Hence, curiosity can then be characterized as a mixture of a willingness to interact and a willingness to learn. This can be observed in the

Table 2. EFL Teachers' Beliefs Regarding Their Intercultural Mediator Role

	Belief A: A proponent of positive intercultural attitudes	Belief B: An expander of intercultural contexts	Belief C: A guide to finding purpose in learning
Intercultural mediation features. Mediation is performed when teachers:	Motivate attitudes such as: • curiosity • reflection on stereotypes and prejudice • positive values	Consider contexts such as: • home • learning space (teaching/learning conditions and materials) • the global context for learning EFL	Lead the learning process in: • establishing a learning purpose • being a co-learner • motivating the least privileged

following excerpt, in which P4 highlights the importance of knowing the traditions and customs of the cultures associated with the target language and mentions the importance of creating this feeling of positive curiosity towards interacting with others:

> It is about understanding the culture you are learning about. To learn a language, you need to know the culture; you need to be immersed in the traditions and customs of the target language so that you can understand what is said and the context in which it is said.

The second feature of intercultural mediation is the need to motivate students to develop a reflective attitude towards stereotypes and prejudice based on ethnocentric views of culture. Reflecting on stereotypes and prejudice would allow students to enhance their positive attitudes toward learning about other cultures from an affective facet, since they would be able to develop empathy toward others and, from a cognitive facet, know the rationales behind cultural differences. As described in the following excerpt, teachers consider this reflection to be fundamental.

> First, I think we should be aware of stereotypes [when teaching EFL] because students also need to be aware of them, and perhaps start educating them about the formation of stereotypes, labels, and prejudices. There are ways to address that; one can address it in discussion classes. I think we must be careful with that. (P13)

Prompting curiosity and critical reflection on stereotypes and prejudice leads to another feature of this belief: the motivation behind attitudes that entail positive values, such as respect for differences, acceptance of cultural diversity, and an interest in engaging with people and realities that might be alien to the individual but could enrich their worldviews. According to the participants, these positive values result from contrasting cultural patterns and contribute to students' integral formation. In the following excerpts, P7 elaborates on how contrasting

cultural patterns is the first step to understanding and respecting cultural differences. The participant ponders that the EFL teacher's role is to guide that reflection, while F15 focuses on the EFL teacher's role in contributing to the integral formation of students and how intercultural communication contributes to reflecting on diverse areas of human development, such as global communication, moral development, and personal wellness, as positive values. These attitudes align with the development of global citizenship competencies.

> The teacher has to teach in English elements that are proper to their students' culture. If you can make students contrast this with others, then they can respect other cultures as well, so our role is very important. (P7)
>
> I believe that this allows you to approach not only concepts but also the integral formation of people. You can discuss communication, values formation, self-care, or any topic you propose. In this sense, the role of teachers is very important because they know about the different subjects and are open to approaching many topics. (F15)

Belief B: An Expander of Intercultural Contexts

This belief describes the role of the English teacher as overseeing diverse cultural realities (local and foreign) and expanding students' cultural backgrounds, enabling them to broaden their worldviews through intercultural awareness. The intercultural mediation in this role happens when the teacher considers (a) students' home contexts, (b) the learning context, and (c) the global context for learning EFL.

For the participants, it is relevant to understand different sociocultural realities of the students' home context, such as being children of migrants or Indigenous people, and how these might influence the learning process. P4 reflects on the importance of connecting EFL with students' daily lives, thus incorporating students' contexts into the learning process:

"We try to incorporate culture without leaving aside the children's context because that is important. In other words, we cannot try to teach English out of the context of what they have in their daily lives."

This home context theme connects with Belief C, which is related to finding purpose in learning the language. By understanding students' cultural backgrounds, EFL teachers would better understand students' learning rationales and motivations for learning the language. In this way, they could provide their students with the most suitable strategies to prompt interest in intercultural communication.

Another feature of this belief is understanding the learning context in terms of the appropriate teaching/learning materials and conditions. Participants mention that selecting appropriate materials is crucial to prompt interest in intercultural communication. In this regard, teachers reflect critically on the materials (e.g., planning samples, textbooks) provided by governmental institutions, which they consider to be biased and stereotypical. Participants indicated that EFL teachers should be cautious about the materials they select, adapt, or create to teach the language, connecting this topic to Belief A regarding reflection on prejudice and stereotypes. Participant F16 reflects on the stereotypes in the textbooks provided by MINEDUC, exemplifying the representation of the Mapuche:

> The Ministry's English language textbooks are adapted, but they contain some misconceptions about other cultures or local cultures; for example, at the beginning, the language used for that culture is not appropriate, saying that the Mapuche people "existed," when they still exist. So, I question whether the adapted texts sometimes omit information that is true in real life.

Concerning students' teaching/learning conditions, participants said that the learning settings, whether rural or urban, or different school dependencies such as private, state/municipal, or charter, could influence students' learning dispositions, for example, how students find a purpose in learning EFL. Thus, in underprivileged contexts, it becomes the teacher's role to expand students' cultural capital. This connects with Belief C by understanding and managing the contextual conditions. EFL teachers become guides in helping students find purpose in learning EFL. Participant F14 elaborates on their teaching experience in diverse contexts by specifying the differences between rural and urban private schools regarding students' motivation and support to learn a foreign language:

> The teacher is the one who transmits a subject and culture, but it also depends on the type of school. . . . In the rural area, it is difficult for students to accept English as something that will serve them. As a teacher, I was frustrated because I did not have an answer to help them see something functional they would value. On the other hand, it is different in the context of private schools. They have their families, a whole cultural context behind them, and life goals that help your mediation through the English classes.

Intercultural mediation also occurs when teachers consider the global context of EFL learning. Teachers see English as a global language that enables communication with English-speaking cultures and other EFL speakers. Social media, gaming, and leisure activities allow students to connect with the global context of English. Teachers recognize that students interact in various intercultural scenarios, some of which are more familiar than others, and that they need to expand their range of intercultural experiences. For example, P5 invites students to consider interculturality as broader than communication with the local Indigenous peoples:

> Intercultural does not refer only to people of other ethnicities in a country, but also to something more global. So, I think it allows kids to learn about and recognize that there are other realities and cultures, and that learning from them is always meaningful.

Belief C: A Guide to Finding Purpose in Learning

The participants expressed that the EFL teacher should lead a process that reveals the purpose of learning the language, helping students find meaning and significance in their learning activities. One reason to learn English is that it will allow students to connect with people and cultures different from their own. This reason might seem evident in contexts where English is used in students' daily lives. However, in the La Araucanía context, students do not usually have the opportunity to interact with foreigners in English. In this way, the role of the EFL teacher as a guide in finding a purpose for learning the language becomes relevant, as it allows students to broaden their worldviews.

Regarding this belief, the participants mention three features of the intercultural mediation process. Intercultural mediation is performed when the teacher leads the learning process in (a) establishing a learning purpose, (b) being a co-learner, and (c) motivating the least advantaged.

Establishing the learning purpose does not correspond to presenting the class objectives or the learning outcomes, but to the general purpose of learning a foreign language. P1 states that teachers should first develop their own intercultural sensitivity to help students perceive the English language as useful. Then, they would be able to make this sensitivity explicit for their students:

> How that intercultural approach is developed should be much more explicit . . . how [the English culture] is developed in terms of sensitivity because that is the only way English teachers are going to convince themselves first and then make their students see the language as a real tool and as something that really applies to the world, as a life skill.

This excerpt also links to the next theme of this belief, teachers as co-learners. This means that teachers should learn alongside their students and that a co-learner is more than a mediator. By teachers modeling the learning process, students will see a clear route to develop skills, attitudes, and knowledge regarding the language and the cultures they access. In the following excerpt, P11 elaborates on the EFL teacher as a co-learner:

> I believe that a teacher, more than a mediator, should be a participant. What is the difference? The mediator may try to facilitate that this works with the other or generate spaces for what is useful. I see the teacher as a mediator but also as a participant or someone who learns alongside their students.

Another feature of intercultural mediation regarding this belief is motivating the least privileged students, which relates to Belief B, expanding students' intercultural contexts. Teachers understand that not all students have the same opportunities to practice the language in their local context. For example, it was mentioned that students from rural areas and lower socioeconomic levels might encounter difficulties in finding a purpose for learning English, contrary to students from urban areas in higher socioeconomic levels, who might have more opportunities to travel abroad or have relatives living in English-speaking countries, providing them opportunities to use the language in authentic conversations and real-life experiences. In this regard, P2 explains perceived contextual differences and reflects on the greater responsibility teachers have in motivating less privileged students to find purpose in learning:

> Depending on the context, it is also a little different. What we try to do at levels where the children are more constrained by their life context is to try, for example, to provide them with authentic materials or, through different types of work or projects, to show them other realities and cultures. Not only those that directly have to do with English, because oftentimes one goes to everything that has to do with English culture, but

through the development of the language itself to show them other realities, other peoples, other customs, and there are different ways to do it, through large projects, research, and presentations.

Discussion

This study sought to analyze the beliefs that EFL teachers in La Araucanía hold about their role as intercultural mediators, which may have originated in informal intercultural experiences. The findings report three main beliefs: that the EFL teacher is seen as (a) a proponent of positive intercultural attitudes, (b) an expander of intercultural contexts, and (c) a guide in finding purpose in learning. Each of these beliefs entails features regarding how mediation takes place.

This study started from the premise that English teachers' beliefs regarding their role as intercultural mediators might originate in informal intercultural experiences lived by the participants and that the tense relationship between the State and the Mapuche people in the La Araucanía Region might influence participants' discourse. The results show that participants included more professional than informal experiences in their discourse, which indicates that teachers are aware of the importance of the topic and that, even when they had not been formally educated, they understood that intercultural communication is part of teaching/learning a foreign language. Teachers introduced how they distinguished local critical interculturality from global citizenship skills and integrated the two. These experienced teachers, who had not been formally instructed in ICC, agreed with Fang et al. (2024) regarding the importance of context in understanding cultural diversity and creating positive outcomes for all students.

Regarding the beliefs encountered, the first relates to being a proponent of positive intercultural attitudes like curiosity, reflecting on stereotypes and prejudices, and positive values. This feature can be connected to intercultural awareness and intercultural sensitivity

(Chen & Starosta, 1998, 2000). The affective sphere of curiosity is closely connected to what the authors describe as intercultural sensitivity, defined as the active desire to appreciate, accept, and hence understand the difference between one's own culture and the culturally distinct interlocutor. The cognitive sphere relates to Chen and Starosta's (1998) intercultural awareness, defined as being aware of how our own cultural conventions affect our reasoning and behavior. However, they highlight only the affective and the cognitive aspects and do not explicitly reference the behavioral aspects (intercultural effectiveness/adroitness; Portalla & Chen, 2010). Developing positive attitudes also relates to what Byram (2021) describes as *savoir-etre*, or a temporary willingness to suspend belief in the correctness or superiority of one's own cultural traits over those of another culture, which is a gateway to initiating interaction. In other words, teachers conceptualize that, to be effective in communicating, students first need to activate an affective dimension of openness to difference, which also relates to the minimization stage in Bennett's (2004) continuum model of intercultural sensitivity, in which subjects de-emphasize cultural differences and start appreciating them as valid representations of reality. De-emphasizing cultural differences would enhance the development of what Byram (2021) describes as *savoir-engager*, which is the ability to critically evaluate one's and others' cultural practices and products based on explicit criteria. In this case, the criteria would be the stereotypes and prejudices that need to be considered and reflected upon when developing ICC. This evaluation requires self-relativization, which means questioning one's beliefs and values and accepting that what other cultures regard as valid or acceptable might differ from one's perspective.

A second belief concerned the EFL teacher as an expander of intercultural context. As the local context for EFL does not allow for actual interaction between students and foreigners in English, teachers

might mainly focus on imaginary future encounters and a sense of curiosity about cultural differences and cultural patterns. This lack of real interaction may affect students' performance in the foreign language, particularly for students from low socioeconomic levels who have fewer opportunities to practice English in real contexts. This aligns with the information national agencies provided regarding students' English proficiency according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR; Council of Europe, 2020). The most recent national assessment (Gobierno de Chile, 2014) found that only 0.8% of students from low socioeconomic levels reach the A2 and B1 levels of the CEFR, while 83.3% of students from high socioeconomic levels do. Regarding this belief, participants also expressed concerns about how the teaching/learning materials were a manifestation of stereotypical societies. This coincides with findings that indicate that textbooks provided by national Ministries of Education for EFL instruction can fail to represent national realities by underrepresenting Indigenous minorities as foreign language learners (Gómez Rodríguez, 2015; Toledo-Sandoval, 2020). Being an expander of intercultural contexts resonates with the current debate regarding the understanding of intercultural communication as a glocal phenomenon (Guilherme, 2007). From this perspective, intercultural education is viewed as cosmopolitan, in which specific interculturalities are immersed and should be considered within the global context (Waghid, 2023).

The third belief was being a guide in finding a purpose in learning. EFL is a compulsory subject in the Chilean national curriculum. Students' lack of choice has been studied as a factor influencing both their goal-setting and motivation (Fryer et al., 2014). It seems relevant for teachers to establish intercultural communication and intercultural communication skills as extrinsic motivation goals (Ryan & Deci, 2000) to encourage further learning purposes. Students might appraise these goals in terms of future orientation, for

example, in the expectation of engaging in intercultural relations that are interesting or might serve an educational or work-related goal, hence experiencing a sense of self-determination to learn the language (Miller & Brickman, 2004). De Volder and Lens (1982) argue that the teacher's role is crucial in ensuring students' understanding of the instrumental value of a task (i.e., its perceived usefulness), which aids the student in setting real and enduring motivational goals. Another way in which mediation occurs regarding this belief is when teachers take the role of co-learners, which has been described in EFL literature as a horizontal figure, a friendly companion who is not dominating the learning process nor is a fountain of knowledge, but rather someone students can trust (Mezrigui, 2015). It has been studied that this role prompts students' autonomy (Le et al., 2023).

Finally, intercultural didactic strategies can also serve as a tool to motivate students who do not have a stimulating learning environment for EFL. For example, exposure to authentic materials, such as reading authentic texts, has been found to increase motivation towards learning EFL (Namaziandost et al., 2022). Motivation to read in a foreign language can also be prompted by involving family and texts in the native language (Balderas, 2017). For this to be successful, the teacher must understand students' local context, including their families, to avoid misunderstandings and misconceptions about cultural backgrounds, both local and foreign.

Projections and Limitations

The findings point to a need for more effective professional development for in-service teachers, specifically to help them apply this approach to foster deep intercultural sensitivity and awareness in their students. In this regard, teaching experiences such as collaborative online international learning (COIL; O'Dowd, 2016, 2018), developed in contexts of telecollaboration and virtual exchanges, seem viable for

helping students connect effectively (Hackett et al., 2023) with foreign people and their cultures. This teaching/learning strategy is feasible, considering the technology available in Chilean schools and universities. However, some effort would be required from school authorities and government organizations to establish international relations with other institutions pursuing the same objectives.

Regarding possible future research, the qualitative nature of the study could be expanded to develop reliable quantitative instruments to evaluate the in-service and preservice teachers' development of ICC, considering their lived experiences as intercultural mediators. These instruments would reveal the aspects of ITE and professional development that must be addressed to formally educate teachers in incorporating the intercultural approach to EFL teaching. Along this line, identifying group differences in larger samples would also be necessary. Moreover, longitudinal research involving larger numbers of participants could significantly enrich understanding of the aspects of ICC that need to be addressed in professional development.

Conclusions

This study examined the beliefs of EFL teachers in La Araucanía regarding their role as intercultural mediators and identified three key beliefs: being a proponent of positive intercultural attitudes, an expander of intercultural contexts, and a guide in finding a purpose for learning. Findings suggest that professional experiences shape teachers' intercultural mediation beliefs more than informal encounters, and while they emphasize affective and cognitive aspects of intercultural competence, they overlook behavioral dimensions. Teachers recognize the importance of integrating local critical interculturality with global citizenship competencies, addressing stereotypes in teaching materials, and linking language learning to students' future aspirations to enhance motivation. However, the need for structured ICC instruction remains, particularly in developing

intercultural effectiveness. Future research should focus on reliable assessment tools and structured programs such as COIL to better equip teachers for their evolving role as intercultural mediators in diverse learning contexts.

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