**Research Article**

# Comparing intercultural competence in lower secondary English and French classrooms in Norway: An overview study

Julie Casoli-Uvsløkk*
University of Oslo

Eva Thue Vold
University of Oslo

**Abstract:** The purpose of this study is to compare and analyze evidence of intercultural competence across 22 lower secondary English-as-a-second-language and French-as-a-foreign-language classrooms in Norway based on video observations of naturally occurring instruction. We recorded minimum four consecutive lessons in each classroom across two school years, totaling 90 lessons. Research on intercultural competence in second and foreign language classrooms has involved analyses of curricula, textbooks, literary texts in class, and intervention studies, but few scholars have observed naturally occurring instruction. Even fewer studies have used video observations to compare language subjects. This study aims to fill this gap by providing an overview of how intercultural competence is addressed in English and French instruction and identifying similarities and differences between the two subjects. Using the model elaborated in the *Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture* (RFCDC) as an analytical lens, we found that the model's area *knowledge and critical understanding* was most prominent in both subjects and that cultural stereotypes both occurred and were challenged by students across subjects. However, we found more, and more varied, evidence of intercultural competence in the English classrooms, where topics were studied in-depth, whereas the French classes often studied an array of topics more superficially.

**Keywords:** Intercultural competence, RFCDC, English-as-a-second-language, French-as-a-foreign-language, stereotypes

## 1 Introduction

The necessity of developing intercultural competence cannot be overstated in today's world. Societies have become increasingly heterogeneous and complex, making them challenging for young learners to navigate. The development of intercultural competence is strongly correlated to education for democratic global citizenship. This connection is particularly salient in the *Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture* (RFCDC; Council of Europe [CoE], 2018a, 2018b, 2018c), which contains a model that comprises four competence areas: *values*, *attitudes*, *skills*, and *knowledge and critical understanding*. Each area has specific competences, 15 of which have been deemed intercultural by the authors of the *Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters* (CoE, 2022). Research on democracy and global citizenship has increasingly integrated intercultural reflections, while research on intercultural aspects in

*Corresponding author: Julie Casoli-Uvsløkk, E-mail: j.c.uvslokk@ils.uio.no

language education has engaged in reflections on democracy and citizenship (Byram, 2008; Lütge et al., 2022; Porto et al., 2018; Schultz & Blom, 2023). Intercultural competence is necessary for enacting democratic global citizenship, making it crucial to introduce the concept of intercultural competence in schools and treat students as active citizens of their society, particularly in foreign language subjects, where students necessarily encounter other cultures.

Studies on intercultural competence within language classrooms have focused on analyses of curricula, textbooks, or literary texts, and some have proposed specific teaching methods to elicit intercultural competence. Few have examined naturally occurring classroom observations, and even fewer have used video observations to compare across subjects. This study maps 90 video-recorded lessons in 22 language classrooms at six lower secondary schools in Norway, where English and French are taught as second or foreign languages. We aim to illuminate different intercultural competence areas in English and French instruction and to identify similarities and differences between the two subjects using the RFCDC model as an analytical lens. Through video observation of naturally occurring instruction, the current study provides insights into how intercultural competence is addressed in language lessons.

The research questions for this study are as follows: RQ1) How frequently are the intercultural competence areas of *values*, *attitudes*, *skills*, and *knowledge and critical understanding* observed in 22 English and French lower secondary classrooms in Norway? RQ2) What are the similarities and differences between how intercultural competence is addressed in the two language subjects?

## 2   Context

Intercultural competence is a central component in the Norwegian national curricula for the English subject and the foreign language subject, as in other Scandinavian countries (Danish Ministry of Children and Education, 2019a, 2019b; NDET, 2006, 2013, 2017, 2019a, 2019b; Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022a, 2022b). The two most recent curricula in Norway, LK06 (in force during our data collection) and LK20 (in force from 2020), were inspired by *The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR), and LK20 was also inspired by the RFCDC. Both curricula included intercultural competence. The LK06 foreign language curriculum explicitly referred to "intercultural competence," whereas the LK06 English curriculum contained competence aims that implicitly evoked intercultural competence, such as "discuss and elaborate on the way people live and how they socialise in Great Britain, USA and other English-speaking countries and Norway" (NDET, 2013). The newest curriculum (LK20) more strongly emphasized intercultural competence in both subjects, and that more explicitly in the foreign language subject curriculum than in the English subject curriculum.

In Norway, as in the rest of Scandinavia, French is considered a foreign language, whereas English is becoming a second language (Bardel et al., 2023; Brevik, 2019; Fernández & Andersen, 2019; Rindal, 2023; Vold, 2022). Norwegian students learn English from Grade 1 (6 years) as a compulsory subject until Grade 10 (15 years). Those who choose to study an additional foreign language (French, German, or Spanish) in lower secondary school do so from Grades 8 to 10 (13–15 years). According to the Norwegian Directorate of Education and Training (NDET), students choosing a foreign language subject in Norway are expected to reach CEFR level A1 by the end of Grade 10 (NDET, 2020). For the English subject, policy documents make no explicit link to the CEFR levels, but research has indicated that English students score at B1 by the end of Grade 10 (Brevik & Helness, 2018).

# 3 Theoretical framework

The 1980s witnessed the first studies on interculturality in foreign language learning (Byram, 1989; Kramsch, 1988; van Ek, 1986; Zarate, 1986). Since Byram's (1997) seminal study in which he presented a model for intercultural communicative competence developed specifically with foreign language education in mind, the importance of intercultural competence and intercultural learning within language instruction has steadily increased. The CEFR (CoE, 2001) emphasized the importance of concepts such as "intercultural awareness" (p. 103) and "intercultural skills" (p. 104), and today, policy documents and textbooks worldwide integrate intercultural aspects.

Our understanding of intercultural competence is based on the RFCDC, which was developed from an expert team's analyses of 101 schemes of democratic competence and intercultural competence (CoE, 2016, pp. 28–29), and highly influenced by Byram's (1997) model. Therefore, we will first briefly present Byram's work before examining the RFCDC model (CoE, 2018abc). We will explain how we used this model in our study in the Methods section.

Byram (1997) suggested defining intercultural competence "in terms of objectives" (p. 49). Although he used the term "intercultural *communicative* competence" throughout his book, he chose to omit "communicative" in the subsection "Intercultural Competence Defined in Terms of Objectives" to "indicate the emphasis on skills, knowledge and attitudes other than those which are primarily linguistic" (p. 49). He presented objectives linked to the five *savoirs* of his model: attitudes (*savoir être*), knowledge (*savoirs*), skills of interpreting and relating (*savoir comprendre*), skills of discovery and interaction (*savoir apprendre/faire*), and critical cultural awareness/political education (*savoir s'engager*; pp. 50–54). Several of these objectives are early versions of what will be called "descriptors" in the RFCDC.

In a later publication, Byram et al. (2002) proposed definitions of various aspects of interculturality. They emphasized the importance of language learners' ability "to interact with speakers of other languages on equal terms, and to be aware of their own identities and those of their interlocutors" (p. 7), and they defined intercultural competence as "[the learners'] ability to ensure a shared understanding by people of different social identities, and their ability to interact with people as complex human beings with multiple identities and their own individuality" (pp. 9–10). These definitions highlight that intercultural competence is related to understanding oneself and the "other" and that one individual can have multiple identities. Reflecting on their own multiple identities allows language learners to more easily understand this multiplicity in their interlocutors and to avoid stereotypical depictions of the "other." Although widely referred to in scholarly work and influential in policy development, Byram's understanding of intercultural competence has also received significant critique, notably regarding the possibility of assessing intercultural competence (Dervin, 2010; Hoff, 2020a). Byram has responded to this critique in a new edition of his 1997 book (Byram, 2021).

The RFCDC model proposed 20 Competences for Democratic Culture, divided into four competence areas: *values*, *attitudes*, *skills*, and *knowledge and critical understanding* (CoE, 2018a). Each competence has a set of descriptors, often corresponding with Byram's "objectives." These descriptors are presented in two parts: a smaller selection of important "key descriptors" and a comprehensive "full bank of validated descriptors," identified with specific "ID numbers" (CoE, 2018b).

*Attitudes*, *skills*, and *knowledge* appear in both Byram's work and the RFCDC's competence areas. Byram's "critical cultural awareness/political education" has been connected to his category of "knowledge" to form *knowledge and critical understanding* in the RFCDC. The

competence area *values* is new, and it was only implicitly present in Byram's work in the emphasis on "the responsibility of learners, in their 'critical cultural awareness / *savoir s'engager*', to be aware of their own values" (Byram, 2020, p. 182). The values presented in the RFCDC mirror those of the Council of Europe and its member states, specifically its "three 'pillars' of human rights, democracy and the rule of law, and the valuing of diversity" (Byram, 2020, p. 182).

The RFCDC presents competences for "democratic culture," thus moving beyond intercultural competence. Still, interculturality, especially "intercultural dialogue," holds a central place in the document. The authors stated that the framework's "purpose is to provide a comprehensive resource to plan and implement teaching, learning, and assessing of CDC [competences of democratic culture] and intercultural dialogue" (CoE, 2018a, p. 19). In the *Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters* (CoE, 2022), the authors confirmed that "interculturality entails a number of underlying competences, as described in the RFCDC" (p. 14), highlighting 15 of the 20 competences as being specifically intercultural.

**Figure 1**

*The RFCDC Model with 15 Intercultural Competences Indicated by Red Arrows (CoE, 2022, p. 39, reprinted with permission)*
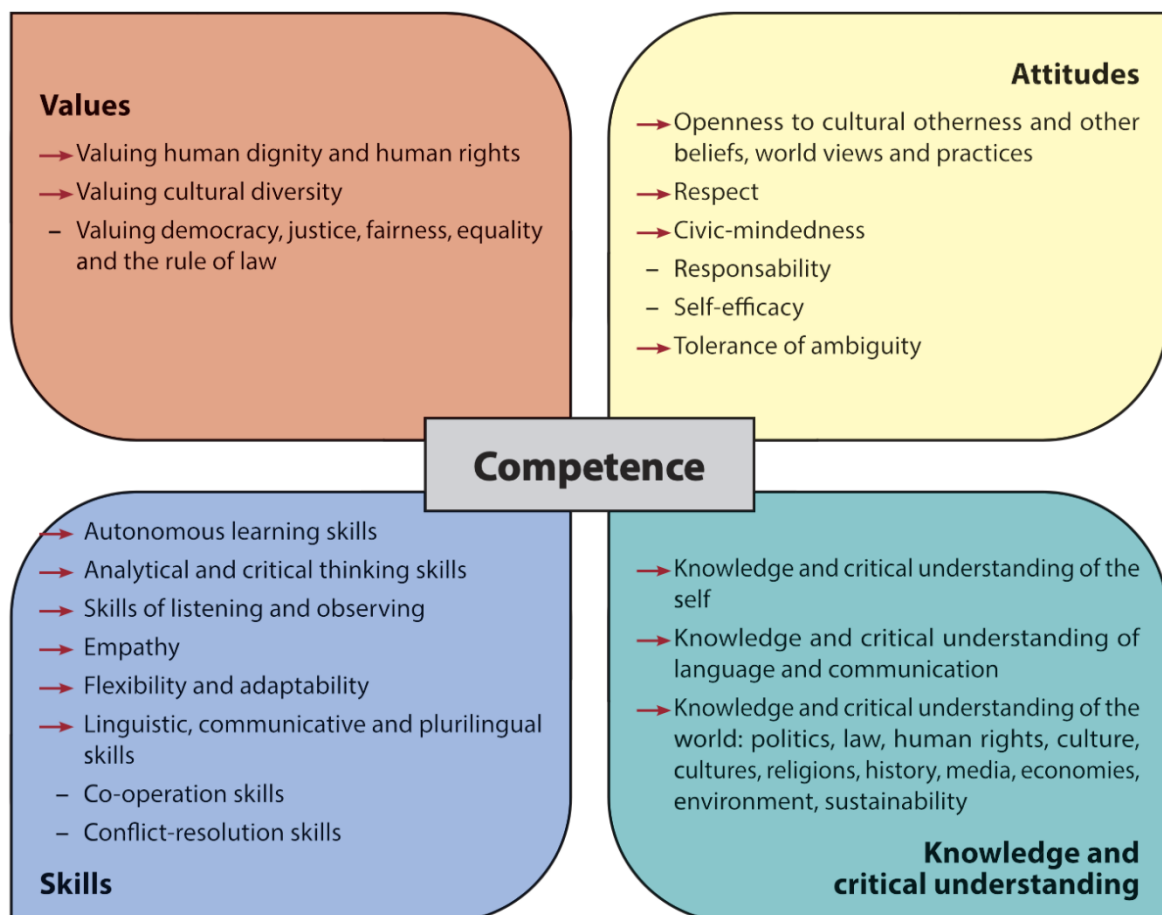
# 4 Literature review

Research on intercultural competence within second and foreign language instruction is a field of rapid development, with many scholarly books and articles investigating aspects of the topic. For this article, we have adopted a practice perspective and concentrated on studies concerned with the Scandinavian educational context. Studies set in Denmark and Sweden are relevant for the Norwegian context because the education systems in the three countries are similar.

Several scholars in Scandinavian countries have studied the role of intercultural aspects in English subject curricula (Heggernes, 2022; Hoff, 2020b; Risager, 2016; Speitz & Myklevold, 2022) or in foreign language subject curricula (Gregersen, 2009, 2010; Löbl, 2022; Risager, 2016; Vold, 2014). Studies have shown that although intercultural competence is considered an important stage in the process of learning a foreign language, the main focus is on written and oral communication skills (Gregersen, 2010; Löbl, 2022; Vold, 2014). However, communicative competences are not necessarily in competition with intercultural competence; rather, they are interconnected (Vold, 2014). Although English and foreign language curricula in Denmark have adopted a global perspective, Gregersen (2009) and Risager (2016) showed that the idea of languages being spoken "within" certain countries is still dominant, overshadowing transnational perspectives and the existence of minority languages and cultures. Finally, the Norwegian core curriculum – which is the overriding framework that all teachers must consider when planning their teaching in Norway – entails that "all school subjects must provide learners with the opportunity to explore issues and topics in depth rather than at a superficial level" (Hoff, 2020b, p. 80; see also Speitz & Myklevold, 2022). As such, both foreign languages and English subjects in Norwegian lower secondary schools are required to provide in-depth intercultural instruction.

Another important research strand has focused on intercultural competence in English or foreign language textbooks (Aronsson, 2019; Brown & Habegger-Conti, 2017; Eide, 2012; Gjesdal et al., 2017; Löbl, 2022; Lund, 2012, 2019; Risager, 2021; Vajta, 2012b, 2017). Several studies noted the prominence of static and often stereotypical depictions of cultural aspects (Brown & Habegger-Conti, 2017; Eide, 2012; Gjesdal et al., 2017; Lund, 2012, 2019; Löbl, 2022; Vajta, 2012b, 2017) and claimed that the national cultural paradigm was dominant in most textbooks (Aronsson, 2019; Löbl, 2022; Risager, 2021; Vajta, 2012b, 2017). Löbl (2022) showed that the intercultural dimension in French textbooks in Denmark was mainly concerned with knowledge rather than with skills and attitudes. In some cases, textbooks address situations that might foster intercultural reflection, leaving the contextualization and discussion of these situations to the teachers (Gjesdal et al., 2017). Many textbooks also used literary texts in which the students encountered a plurality of different cultures (Lund, 2012, p. 50). Still, Lund (2019) revealed that textbooks tended to perpetuate rather than challenge stereotypes, and she concluded that "adequate teaching and learning materials related to questions of context and culture in English and foreign language education have yet not been developed" (p. 269).

In recent years, several intervention studies have investigated the use of authentic texts in English and foreign language classrooms in Scandinavia (Bradley, 2013; Heggernes, 2019; Hoff, 2017; Husung & Jeannin, 2016). These studies showed how working with literary texts or picture books inspired students to explore transsubjective cultural identities (Husung & Jeannin, 2016) or to reflect critically on the complexities of intercultural encounters (Hoff, 2017; Heggernes, 2019). Bradley (2013) investigated how blogging with L1 users about literary topics helped English students develop intercultural competence. Other intervention studies have shown that specific intercultural teaching schemes can help students develop an intercultural metalanguage (Svarstad, 2021), enable them to develop intercultural competence

through self-evaluation (Vajta, 2012a) or systematic analyses of intercultural encounters (Dypedahl, 2022), and improve their motivation by studying cultures they felt were "closer to their own" (Rocher Hahlin, 2020, p. 6). Finally, Rindal et al. (2020) conducted the only study we found on intercultural competence in the Scandinavian context to involve the observation of naturally occurring instruction. They found a preponderance of "big C" culture (e.g., history, national institutions, literature, and the arts; Kramsch, 2006) in two observed lower secondary English classrooms in Norway. However, focusing on the sole English subject, they did not address the comparative aspect.

# 5 Methods

This study is part of the Linking Instruction and Student Experiences (LISE) project, a large-scale video-based classroom observation study approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data. The project collected video recordings of naturally occurring instruction in seven lower secondary schools in three large school districts in Norway at different data collection points (Brevik, 2019; Vold & Brkan, 2020). This article uses data from the 2015–2017 school years, which offers a unique dataset of video observations in six subjects (including English and French) following the same schools over two school years (Grades 9 and 10, students aged 13–16). One school did not offer French, and another withdrew from the project after the first school year. This article thus follows the same English and French classes from six schools in Grade 9 and five in Grade 10.

## 5.1 Recruitment and participants

The schools were selected to include urban, suburban, and rural schools from areas with different socioeconomic statuses. Participating teachers, students, and parents all provided written, informed, and voluntary consent (NESH, 2021).

Thirteen teachers and their classes participated in the study. The classes varied in size. The English classes typically had between 20 and 30 students. The French classes were smaller and typically had between 10 and 20 students. Altogether, 163 English students and 85 French students participated. Many students participated in both subjects. One teacher (S02) taught both subjects. Two English classes (S09 and S17) changed teachers from Grade 9 to Grade 10. The teachers' profiles varied in terms of professional experience and educational background (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Overview of Sample: Schools and Teachers*

| Schools | | | | | Teachers | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Subject | School | Year | Grade | No. of lessons | Gender | Age | ECTS in subject | Teaching experience (years) |
| English | S02 | 2015-16 | 9 | 4 | Female* | 40-49 | 300 | 10-20 |
| | S07 | 2015-16 | 9 | 4 | Male | 20-29 | 61-90 | 5-15 |
| | | 2016-17 | 10 | 4 | | | | |
| | S09 | 2015-16 | 9 | 4 | Female | 60+ | 31-60 | 25+ |
| | | 2016-17 | 10 | 4 | Female | 30-39 | none | 25+ |
| | S13 | 2015-16 | 9 | 4 | Female | 20-29 | 31-60 | 3-10 |
| | | 2016-17 | 10 | 4 | | | | |
| | S17 | 2015-16 | 9 | 4 | Male | 20-29 | 61-90 | < 3 |
| | | 2016-17 | 10 | 5 | Female | 40-49 | 61-90 | 20-30 |
| | S50 | 2015-16 | 9 | 4 | Male | 40-49 | 31-60 | 10-20 |
| | | 2016-17 | 10 | 4 | | | | |
| French | S02 | 2015-16 | 9 | 4 | Female* | 40-49 | 120 | 10-20 |
| | S07 | 2015-16 | 9 | 4 | Female | 50-59 | 61-90 | 25+ |
| | | 2016-17 | 10 | 4 | | | | |
| | S09 | 2015-16 | 9 | 5 | Male | 40-49 | 300 | 10-20 |
| | | 2016-17 | 10 | 4 | | | | |
| | S13 | 2015-16 | 9 | 4 | Female | 40-49 | 31-60 | 10-20 |
| | | | | 4 | | | | |
| | | 2016-17 | 10 | | | | | |
| | S17 | 2015-16 | 9 | 4 | Female | 50-59 | 31-60 | 20-30 |
| | | 2016-17 | 10 | 4 | | | | |
| | S50 | 2015-16 | 9 | 4 | Female | 40-49 | 300 | < 3 |
| | | 2016-17 | 10 | 4 | | | | |
| **Total** | **22 classes** | | | **90 lessons** | **13* teachers** | | | |

*At S02, the same teacher taught English and French.

## 5.2 Data collection

During video data collection, we used a synchronized set-up with two palm-sized, wall-mounted cameras, one teacher microphone, and one class microphone. The cameras simultaneously recorded the same lesson from the back and front of the classroom. Students who did not consent to video recording were placed outside the view of the camera. The microphones captured the teacher and whole-class discourse reasonably well. Student–student interactions were sometimes captured and sometimes not, depending on the students' position in relation to the microphone.

Previous research has suggested that observing four lessons is sufficient to obtain an overview of teaching practices (Cohen et al., 2016; Klette et al., 2017). We recorded four consecutive lessons in each subject in each classroom for each school year, except for English 10, S17, and French 9, S09, where we recorded five consecutive lessons because lessons four and five constituted one continuous period. The duration of lessons varied, averaging 54 minutes.

## 5.3 Data analysis

When coding the videos for evidence of intercultural competence, we used the RFCDC as our analytical lens. The RFCDC model was developed to help design teaching, learning, and assessment of competences for democratic culture (CoE, 2018abc). It operationalizes democratic and intercultural competences into *attitudes*, *skills*, *values*, and *knowledge and critical understanding*. Specifically, we used the descriptors for the 15 competences identified as relevant for intercultural competence by the *Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters* (CoE, 2022). These 15 sets of descriptors describe characteristics of competences that may be directly observed (see Section 5.5 for limitations). These descriptors and the definitions and presentations provided in the *Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters* (CoE, 2022) thus functioned as an observation manual during the coding process. Although the model was not originally developed for this purpose, the fact that the descriptors are concrete, coherent, and observable, encouraged us to pilot it as an observation manual in this study.

We watched the video recordings of the 90 lessons to identify evidence of any descriptor subsumed under the 15 competences in Figure 1. For each lesson, we looked for all four areas and assigned a score of 1 for *knowledge and critical understanding* if we observed evidence of this area; a score of 1 for *skills* if we observed evidence of *skills*; a score of 1 for *attitudes* if we observed evidence of *attitudes*; a score of 1 for *values* if we observed evidence of *values*; and a score 0 if no evidence was observed. Additionally, we noted the topic that the class was working on and any evident subtypes of the four areas.

For example, a lesson about the history of Native Americans was assigned a score of 1 for *knowledge and critical understanding* because we found evidence of the sub-competence "knowledge and critical understanding of the world: politics, law, human rights, culture, cultures, religions, history, media, economies, environment, sustainability". More specifically, we determined that the class worked with knowledge and critical understanding of cultures and history by reading textbook texts about Native American history, giving presentations about Native American cultures and history, and discussing these topics in class, occasionally stressing the internal heterogeneity within these cultures. These activities fit with the descriptors "can describe several different cultures, especially the values, customs and practices which are common in those cultures" (ID 2018)1 and "can describe basic cultural practices (e.g., eating habits, greeting practices, ways of addressing people, politeness) in one other culture" (ID 2016). We assigned the same lesson a score of 1 for *skills* based on the class's discussion about how being forced into the white man's culture must have felt for the Native Americans, which we interpreted as evidence of "skills of empathy" ("expresses compassion for people who are being treated unfairly" [ID 1303]; "expresses sympathy about other people's misfortunes" [ID 1311]). The sub-competence "analytical and critical thinking skills" is defined as "the ability to understand and interpret the values, perspectives, practices and products of another culture by comparing them to corresponding things in one's own culture and to see the similarities and the differences between them" (CoE, 2022, p. 38). We also found evidence of such skills when the class compared how Native Americans used the sun instead of the clock and valued nature over technical progress. This discussion also aligned with the descriptor "can analyse different points of view, products or practices found in other cultures" (ID 1122).

Values and attitudes are states of mind that might be less evident than knowledge and skills. However, people can express interest, curiosity, and respect with regard to other cultures, and they can explicitly express their values in discussions. Whenever this occurred in class, we assigned the relevant lesson with a score of 1 for the competence in question. For instance, in a

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1 The ID numbers in parentheses refer to the number of the descriptor as specified in the RFCDC.

lesson about teenage pregnancy, the class discussed the differences between Norway and English-speaking countries. One student expressed admiration for single mothers, stating that "today, if you see a single mother, you don't think of her as a weak person, that got left with a child. You think of her as a strong individual who can actually raise a child by herself. At least, I do. And I think that's changed a lot." Others went on to express acceptance for single mothers, single fathers, and gay parenting. We interpreted this discussion as evidence of the sub-competence "valuing cultural diversity", specifically the descriptor "expresses the view that the cultural diversity within a society should be positively valued and appreciated" (ID 204), and assigned a score of 1 for *values*. Later, the same class worked on a theatrical adaptation of Berlie Doherty's 1991 young-adult novel *Dear Nobody*. The teacher asked the students to adopt different perspectives on the young female protagonist's pregnancy by writing sentences representing the views of a neighbor, the female protagonist's mother, a teacher, and the male protagonist's father. We assigned this lesson a score of 1 for *attitudes* with evidence of the sub-competence "openness to cultural otherness" because it fits with the descriptor "expresses curiosity about other beliefs and interpretations and other cultural orientations and affiliations" (ID 404).

## 5.4 Double coding

We both coded 20 of the 90 videotaped lessons (22%), while Author1 coded the remaining 70 lessons alone. The coding process took place in several steps to ensure an acceptable interrater agreement.

First, Author1 watched all the videos and found 10 that were particularly difficult to code for evidence of intercultural competence, resulting in their selection for double coding. We both coded these 10 lessons independently, noting the evidence of different sub-competences and our rationale for judging these competences as present in the video. We then met to discuss and compare our coding and justifications. We used Excel to calculate the percentage of absolute agreement between the two raters (Graham et al., 2012). The agreement rate was 75% for these 10 challenging lessons. Our discussion revealed that the differences primarily stemmed from different interpretations of the competence area *skills*, in particular the subcategories "skills of listening and observing" and "autonomous learning skills". We had interpreted these slightly differently, resulting in one author being more generous than the other. This imbalance was caused by the general nature of some descriptors, such as "actively listens to others" (ID 1203) and "accomplishes learning tasks independently" (ID1003). Despite the general terms, the implicit context is intercultural learning, and they must be read and understood within the framework of the general description of the competence area in question. Following our discussion, we therefore agreed to consider these descriptors as present only when the observed skill was linked to an interculturally related task or topic and when it resonated with the definitions in CoE (2022). Consequently, in situations when the class simply watched a video, we did not score 1 for "skills of listening and observing". However, a lesson in which a class compared two videos dramatizing the same short story to interpret the characters' feelings from their facial expressions was scored 1 for "skills of listening and observing" in line with CoE's (2022) definition:

> the ability to pay close attention not only to what is being said but also to how it is being said through the use of tone, pitch, loudness, rate, and fluency of voice, and the ability to pay close attention to the person's accompanying body language, especially their eye movements, facial expressions and gestures. (p. 36)

Following these discussions, Author2 double coded another 10 lessons, and a new comparison was run. These 10 lessons were selected to ensure an even distribution between schools and subjects but were selected at random within each subgroup. This time, the agreement rate reached 90%, which according to literature in the field, is considered satisfactory (Graham et al., 2012, p. 9). Author1 coded the rest of the material alone, adjusting her coding to the established principles.

## 5.5 Limitations

This coding procedure provided an overview of different aspects of intercultural competence in language lessons; however, it did not provide insight into how much teaching time was devoted to such competences. Even short comments could qualify as evidence if they fit a relevant descriptor. Moreover, we did not distinguish between evidence stemming from the teacher and evidence stemming from the students. Since we were interested in the presence and facilitation of intercultural competence in language lessons, we also counted as evidence activities where the teachers *prompted* intercultural competence, although we could not observe whether the students successfully acquired such competences. In one lesson, the teacher prompted the students to adapt their presentation of Norway to their audience, which consisted of French adolescents. We counted this as evidence of "linguistic, communicative and plurilingual skills", since the teacher's prompt fit the descriptor "can adjust and modify his/her own linguistic and communicative behaviour to use the communicative conventions that are appropriate to his/her interlocutor" (ID 1519). Nevertheless, we cannot know the extent to which the students successfully adapted their communication.

## 6   Findings

This section presents the results of the two phases of analysis. First, we provide quantitative findings on the four intercultural competence areas from the analyzed lessons. Second, we present results from qualitative analyses of the lessons, showing two patterns of instruction that highlight some distinct features of how intercultural competence is addressed in lower secondary English and French lessons.

## 6.1 RQ1: How frequently are the intercultural competence areas of *values*, *attitudes*, *skills*, and *knowledge and critical understanding* manifested in 22 English and French lower secondary classrooms in Norway?

Figure 2 shows the number of lessons in which we identified intercultural competence areas in each subject at each school. We found evidence of intercultural competence in all classrooms except English 9 at S17 and French 10 at S09. We observed evidence of *knowledge and critical understanding* in 60 lessons across all classrooms except English 9 at S02, English 9 at S17, and French 10 at S09. Moreover, we found evidence of *skills* in 33 lessons in both subjects at all schools, except French at one school (S50), although not always during both years at each school. Of note, we found evidence of *attitudes* in 12 lessons and *values* in 10 lessons, but only in English classes (S07, S09, S17, S50). Finally, we calculated overall intercultural competence

scores which included all four competence areas. The maximum possible score for a classroom in which we filmed four lessons, would be 16. The maximum possible score for a school with four classrooms – English 9, English 10, French 9, French 10 – and four lessons filmed in each classroom, would be 64. This score was almost identical in S09 ($n = 21$), S13 ($n = 20$), S17 ($n = 17$), and S50 ($n = 17$). It was considerably higher in S07 ($n = 35$) and lower in S02 ($n = 5$). It must, however, be noted that at S02, we only observed Grade 9 English and French classrooms, so for this school, the maximum possible score would be 32.
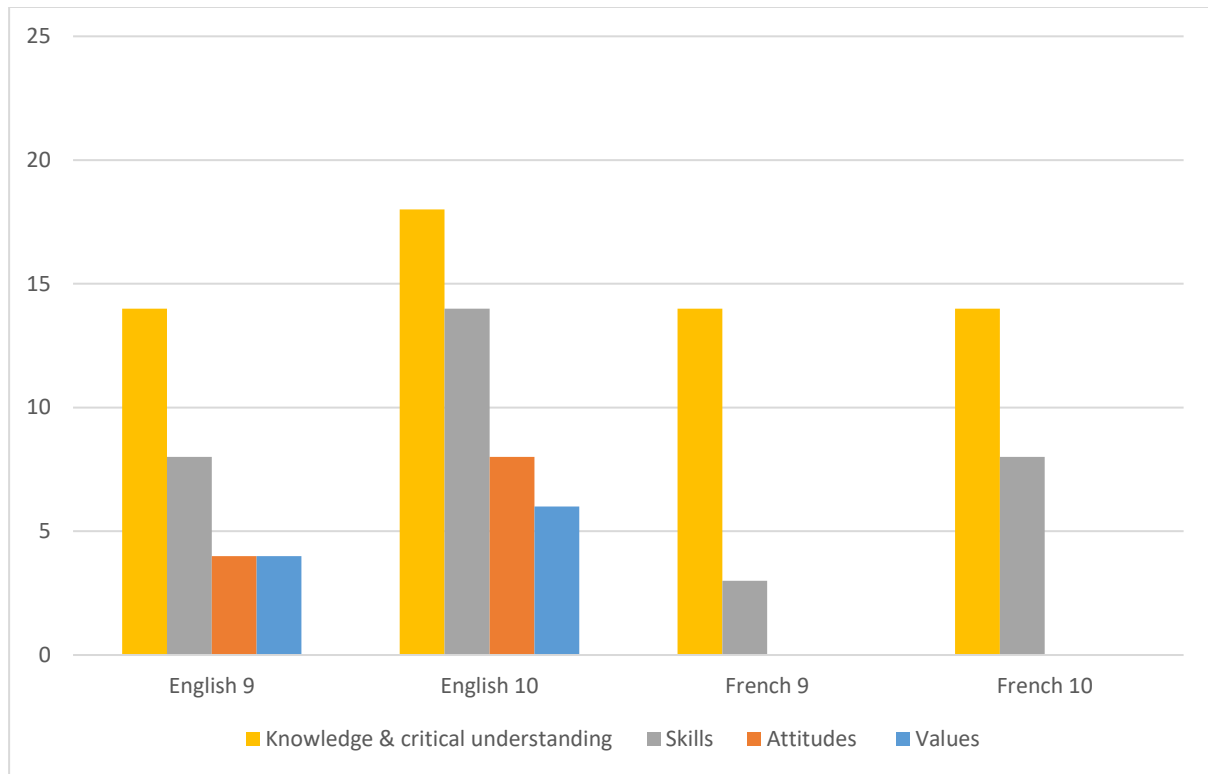
**Figure 2**

*Scores for Evidence of Intercultural Competence*
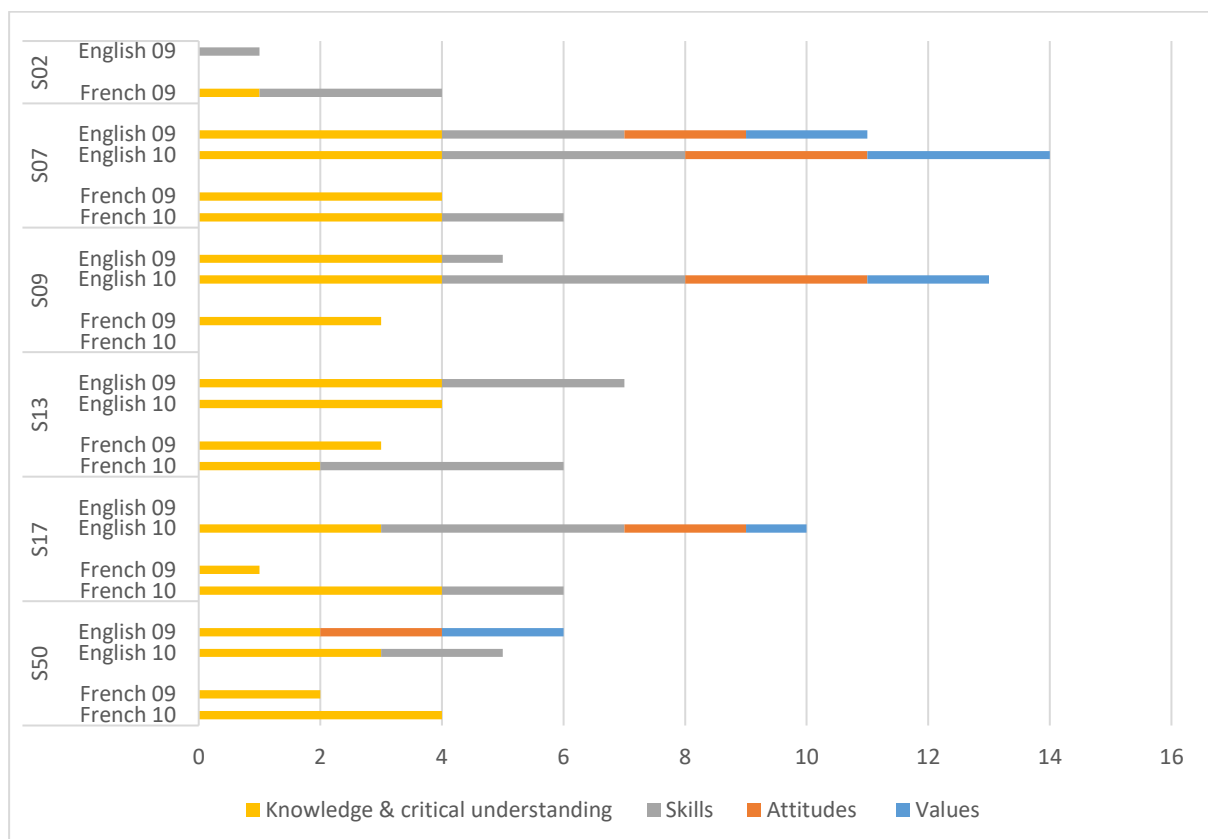


*Note*. The total score (N = 115) is higher than the total number of lessons (N = 90), because each of the four competence areas may have been observed in each lesson.

A second finding concerns development from Grade 9 to Grade 10. In both subjects, intercultural competence was more prominent in Grade 10 ($n = 68$) than in Grade 9 ($n = 47$). Excluding S02, where we observed only Grade 9, the difference was even more striking ($n = 68$ vs. $n = 42$). Figure 3 shows a noticeable increase in all four competence areas from Grade 9 to Grade 10 in English classrooms. In the French classrooms, we identified an increase in the area *skills* (from $n = 3$ to $n = 8$), while the number of lessons in which we observed evidence of *knowledge and critical understanding* was similar for both grades.

**Figure 3**

*Scores for Evidence of Intercultural Competence (N = 115) by Grade and Subject*



Figures 2 and 3 also reveal that we observed evidence of intercultural competence more often in English lessons (*n* = 76) than in French lessons (*n* = 39). This overall tendency was present in all schools except S02. In addition, the presence of intercultural competence was generally more varied in English than in French lessons. We identified evidence of all four competence areas in English instruction, whereas we found only *skills* and *knowledge and critical understanding* in French lessons. Nevertheless, we also found a similarity between the subjects in that the competence area *knowledge and critical understanding* was dominant (*n* = 32 in the English lessons; *n* = 28 in the French lessons), followed by *skills* (*n* = 22 in English; *n* = 11 in French).

## 6.2 RQ2: What are the similarities and differences between how intercultural competence is addressed in the two language subjects?

To investigate qualitative similarities and differences in the observed classrooms, we first identified which topics were on the agenda in the observation period and then analyzed examples from classrooms showing noticeable patterns across the two subjects. Table 2 shows which topics were taught in the classrooms.

**Table 2**

*Overview of Themes*

| Subject | School | Year | Grade | Themes | Lessons with IC | IC score |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| English | S02 | 2015-16 | 9 | US and British literature | 1 | 1 |
| | S07 | 2015-16 | 9 | History of England and Ireland | 4 | 11 |
| | | 2016-17 | 10 | US presidential election | 4 | 14 |
| | S09 | 2015-16 | 9 | Native Americans | 4 | 5 |
| | | 2016-17 | 10 | Death penalty | 4 | 13 |
| | S13 | 2015-16 | 9 | US history | 4 | 7 |
| | | 2016-17 | 10 | Native peoples, the world today | 4 | 4 |
| | S17 | 2015-16 | 9 | Literary genres | 0 | 0 |
| | | 2016-17 | 10 | British literature, teenage pregnancy | 5 | 10 |
| | S50 | 2015-16 | 9 | British literature, US and British culture | 4 | 6 |
| | | 2016-17 | 10 | US literature, my future | 4 | 5 |
| French | S02 | 2015-16 | 9 | Home and family | 3 | 4 |
| | S07 | 2015-16 | 9 | Food and drinks | 4 | 4 |
| | | 2016-17 | 10 | French-speaking countries, *la francophonie* | 4 | 6 |
| | S09 | 2015-16 | 9 | Numbers | 3 | 3 |
| | | 2016-17 | 10 | Grammar | 0 | 0 |
| | S13 | 2015-16 | 9 | World news, food, spare time, friendship | 3 | 3 |
| | | 2016-17 | 10 | Food, student exchange | 4 | 6 |
| | S17 | 2015-16 | 9 | Making an appointment | 1 | 1 |
| | | 2016-17 | 10 | Geography, individual presentations | 4 | 6 |
| | S50 | 2015-16 | 9 | Sports, Edith Piaf | 2 | 2 |
| | | 2016-17 | 10 | Literature, French-speaking countries | 4 | 4 |

*Note*. Lessons with IC = number of lessons in which intercultural competence was observed. IC score = a component score of the number of lessons multiplied by the number of intercultural areas observed (e.g., 4 lessons x 4 areas = IC score 16).

This overview reveals that a preponderance of historical, social, and "big C" cultural topics (e.g., history, national institutions, literature, and the arts) were addressed in the English classrooms, whereas those in the French classrooms were often connected to "small c" culture (e.g., customs, beliefs, ways of behaving, and food; Kramsch, 2006). This distinction was not absolute; the main "big C" exception in the French classrooms was a focus on French-speaking countries around the world. At several schools, the French teachers presented an array of different topics during one week, whereas the English teachers more often proposed one central topic that students studied in depth during one week or more.

Another distinctive pattern found across English and French classrooms was that many lessons touched upon stereotypes. To study this qualitatively and show both similarities and differences across the two subjects, we will examine two illustrative passages from English classrooms and two passages from French classrooms. The topics studied in the English classrooms were "death penalty" (S09) and "teenage pregnancy" (S17). In the French classrooms, the topics were "food" (S13) and "individual presentations" (S17).

Significantly, in both English classrooms, the students worked thoroughly on one topic in all the observed lessons, and both topics addressed "big C" culture regarding essential parts of human life, namely, life, death, and women's right to bodily autonomy. Several students were deeply committed to the topics and participated actively in class discussions. The agendas in the French classrooms presented several topics. The topic "food" is a classical "small c" topic, whereas the individual student presentation addressed the "big C" topic, "presidential election."

In English 10 at S09, the students had been studying the death penalty for one week when filming started. During the first observed lesson, the class was split into six groups, each with a specific assignment. They had read a text about three young men convicted for the abduction,

rape, and murder of a young woman, blaming each other for the murder. Each group was assigned to argue either in favor of or against the death penalty for one of the young men. The teacher instructed students to ignore their own opinions and adopt the view formulated in their specific tasks. After a long whole-class discussion, during which the teacher wrote down the groups' arguments on the blackboard, she asked the students to express their own opinions and evaluate the different arguments. Through these two approaches, the students trained their intercultural analytical and critical thinking skills, seeking both to understand how other people think and to express their own opinions.

When expressing their opinions, the students engaged in complex discussions about racial stereotypes and racism in the United States. Most students argued that the young African American man was more likely to be sentenced to death than the two other men. One student, however, claimed that this did not necessarily signify that this person was innocent:

**Transcript 1**

*English 10, S09, statements in English.*

Student1: I think the reason, Style and Smith… dragged Walton into this is because he's black and they knew he would get the blame. […]
Student2: Maybe Walton knew he wouldn't be accused because he's black, so he dared to do it because he thought that because of the racism… that he would...
Teacher: So… it's a double negative, actually. Yes. So, Sam Walton thought that if I join, I could get the blame because I'm black, but because society has developed so much, I will not get the blame at all because if I get the blame, it would be racism. Yes. Interesting thought.

Hence, both students addressed the issues of racism in the United States and reflected on how everyone involved might take advantage of stereotypes. The teacher let all the students voice their diverse opinions and sometimes helped them formulate their ideas, although she did not necessarily agree with them. Thus, all students were given the ability to participate in this "big C" discussion on the death penalty, racism, and racial stereotypes.

In English 10 at S17, the class worked on the topic of "teenage pregnancy." After having established that the percentage of teenage pregnancy was significantly higher in the United Kingdom than in Norway, the teacher asked the students to reflect upon this finding and compare the countries. After some discussion, the teacher proposed that one possible reason for the differences was that teenage pregnancy and sexuality are widespread topics in schools in Norway, whereas they are much less taught in the United Kingdom. One student agreed with the teacher's proposition and added the following comparison between the status of teachers in Norway and English-speaking countries:

**Transcript 2**

*English 10, S17, statement in English.*

Student: […] the way you look at a teacher when you live in an English-speaking country, […] is, like, you're a student, you're under the teacher, the teacher is above you, the teacher is only good, and you cannot say anything bad about the teacher. That's the series of views that you have of your teacher. We, here in Norway, I think, have a lot more, like, a teacher is a person that I can talk to, a teacher is a person that's a lot more like me, that's not all that different from my parents, for example.

The student pointed out possible differences between school systems in Norway and English-speaking countries concerning the authority of teachers. However, the presentation of teachers in English-speaking countries was quite stereotypical. The teacher did not explicitly question

or try to nuance this student's point of view, but kept to the specific topic of teenage pregnancy and insisted on factual differences between Norway and the United Kingdom in this matter. The students discussed different perspectives on the topic, such as the roles of religion and social taboos. Several students felt concerned about the topic of teenage pregnancy, and the teacher invited them to reflect upon how they would have reacted if they or someone they knew experienced teenage pregnancy. Students also expressed acceptance of single mothers, single fathers, and gay parents, challenging stereotypes about how families are composed.

In French 10 at S13, the students worked in groups on a presentation for a competition between French classes in the region, where the assignment was to make a video presenting Norway to a young exchange student from France. The assignment explicitly required students to include reflections on cultural differences in their presentations. Many students had included reflections on differences related to food in their work, so the teacher started the lesson by showing a brief film, in French, on food in France before dividing into groups. In one group, the following discussion with the teacher took place:

**Transcript 3**

*French 10, S13, statements in Norwegian (our translation), except for French terms.*

> Student1: Is it correct that *escargots* are snails?
> Teacher: *Oui.*
> Student2: What's this frog, frog le… is it common to eat that?
> Student1: I don't think it's common to eat frog.
> Teacher: Frog legs, oysters...
> Student1: Is it common to eat that?
> Teacher: No, I don't believe that oysters are on the dining table every day.

In the film, foods such as cheese, baguette, and bouillabaisse were presented as "typical" French food, but the film featured interviews with young French people who stated that they often ate pasta, Algerian sauce, and kebabs, showing diversity beyond "French cuisine." In Transcript 3, the students demonstrated awareness of such stereotypes about French food, asking the teacher if it is common for French people to eat frog legs and oysters and assuming that it is not. In this intercultural situation of presenting Norway to a French student, they were careful not to assume that all French ate snails, frog legs, and oysters, thus challenging stereotypes in a "small c" context.

In French 10 at S17, the students worked on presentations on a subject of their own choice and discussed their initial ideas with the teacher. In Transcript 4, the student was working on a presentation on a candidate for the French presidential election in 2017, François Fillon, who represented the traditional right-wing party *Les Républicains*.

**Transcript 4**

*French 10, S17, statements in Norwegian (our translation).*

> Student: I have chosen the ongoing election in France […] about François Fillon […] I haven't gotten any further than finding sources and writing a little bit, like… or… gained some insight into the matter.
> Teacher: Yes... The electoral system in France is quite complicated.
> Student: Yes, I have collected some information on the electoral system because I'm interested in that, and then […] I am going to address this thing with his partner…
> Teacher: And then you might address how the political system in France is… I almost said… rife with corruption, compared to Norway.
> Student: Is it rife with corruption?
> Teacher: Yes, it is not so much [inaudible]. Well, I am maybe exaggerating a bit. […]
> Student: He has employed both […] his children […], and his wife for a job they haven't done. […] He reminds you a bit of Donald Trump, he's kind of a friend of Putin, and he's involved in quite a few scandals, despite that he, or… it seems a bit like a double standard of morality, […] his campaign has focused on him being honest and having moral convictions.

In this example, where the student wished to write about both the electoral system in France and the François Fillon scandal, the teacher explicitly encouraged her to compare the political systems in Norway and France. Interestingly, she characterized the French political system as "rife with corruption" compared to the Norwegian system. The student seemed to react to this strong and stereotypical expression with astonishment by repeating the teacher's words. Although the teacher rapidly acknowledged that she was exaggerating, this scene is particularly interesting because it shows how easy it is to adopt stereotypical views about another culture. Significantly, the student seemed surprised by this stereotypical depiction and preferred to stay on topic, telling the teacher what she knew about Fillon and explaining why she thought it was adequate to compare him with Donald Trump, thus showing that Fillon's attitude was not necessarily typical French.

# 7  Discussion and Conclusion

We found evidence of intercultural competence in all observed schools and subjects, with the area *knowledge and critical understanding* being clearly dominant in both subjects. This aligns with Löbl (2022), who argued that Danish textbooks focus more on knowledge than on skills and attitudes. However, this finding might also indicate that *knowledge and critical understanding* and *skills* are more often observable than *attitudes* and *values*, which adds a more practical perspective to Hoff's (2020) standpoint that it is ethically questionable to assess students' *attitudes* and *values*.

Moreover, our observations indicated more evidence of intercultural competence in the English classrooms than in the French classrooms, and we found more variation within the English subject. Our observation that the French students often spoke Norwegian when addressing intercultural issues, while the English students showed intercultural *knowledge and critical understanding* and *skills* when speaking English links this difference to the issue of proficiency presented in the context section (Bardel et al., 2023; Brevik, 2019; Fernández & Andersen, 2019; Rindal, 2023; Vold, 2022). It can also be linked to the fact that in French classrooms, communicative competences are prioritized over intercultural competence (Gregersen, 2010; Löbl, 2022; Vold, 2014).

In addition, these differences could be explained by the number of topics addressed in the two subjects. In English classrooms, the class often worked on one specific topic over a longer amount of time, whereas French classes could address several topics within one week. Therefore, the expanded evidence of intercultural competence in the English classrooms can

also be connected to the in-depth exploration of a few selected topics, in contrast to the superficial exploration of several topics in French classes, in line with Hoff's (2020) and Speitz and Myklevold's (2022) observations. The choice of topics may also have influenced the patterns in evidence of intercultural competence in the English classrooms, since the topics often seemed to engage the students and make them feel concerned, prompting them to consider that the cultural issues they studied were "close […] to their own" cultures (Rocher Hahlin, 2020, p. 6). This highlights the importance of considering not only cognitive factors but also affective factors in the development of intercultural competence.

The fact that we found evidence of *values* and *attitudes* in the English classrooms but not in the French classrooms may also indicate that, in addition to the basic, intermediate, and advanced levels for all four competence areas proposed in the RFCDC, there are also different "levels" between the areas of competence. In these six Norwegian schools, *knowledge and critical understanding* and *skills* were the most prominent areas, and *attitudes* and *values* were the least prominent. In addition, we also saw an increase in observations of intercultural competence from Grade 9 to Grade 10, which may indicate a need for progression from intercultural *knowledge and critical understanding* and *skills* to *attitudes* and *values* at a later stage, when students have gained maturity, aptitude for discussion, and proficiency in the studied language. Thus, *attitudes* and *values* may be considered more complex competence areas. However, we do not imply that language teachers should avoid these competence areas in lower secondary education – there may be alternative ways of addressing them, such as through discussions of drawings or reading picturebooks (Brown & Habegger-Conti, 2017; Heggernes, 2019), or by discussing issues pertaining to *attitudes* and *values* in Norwegian.

The overview of topics showed that the variety of intercultural *values*, *attitudes*, *skills*, and *knowledge and critical understanding* found in the English lessons were almost exclusively related to "big C" culture, in line with Rindal et al. (2020), whereas the French lessons mostly contained intercultural *knowledge and critical understanding*, often related to "small c" culture. When investigating this matter, however, we determined that the distinction was not straightforward. In two French classrooms, they worked on French-speaking countries outside of France, a typical "big C" topic. In addition, our qualitative examples included one French student presentation that dealt with the major "big C" topic "presidential election," addressing the French political system and a contemporary instance of corruption. Although "small c" topics seemed to be dominant in the French classrooms, "big C" topics were also clearly present. Intercultural competence can be addressed both when working with "small c" and "big C" topics. However, as mentioned above, some topics addressed in the English classrooms, which can be classified as "big C", seemed to particularly engage the students on a personal level. The affective factors in intercultural competence development, then, seem to be predominant in "big C" topics.

Finally, in the qualitative examples, we saw a mix of openness toward and stereotypical representations of the "other" from both students and teachers. In one example from an English classroom, we observed a student voicing a stereotypical understanding of teachers in English-speaking countries without explicit objections from the teacher. In a French classroom, we saw a teacher describing the French political system as "rife with corruption." These observations show how easy it is to resort to stereotypes when one speaks about other cultures, and they correspond with several scholars' comments on static and stereotypical depictions of the "other's" culture in textbooks (Brown & Habegger-Conti, 2017; Eide, 2012; Gjesdal et al., 2017; Lund, 2012, 2019; Löbl, 2022; Vajta, 2012b, 2017). Conversely, we also observed several examples of non-stereotypical understandings of other cultures and of challenging stereotypes on both "small c" and "big C" levels. These observations show that understandings

of other cultures in second and foreign language classrooms are complex. Although both teachers and students must continue to reflect on which prejudices and stereotypical conceptions they may have of the "other" when engaging in intercultural encounters, these are clearly processes that both teachers and students are already highly engaged in.

In conclusion, we postulate that the main differences between how intercultural competence is present in the two subjects are connected to the topics selected, to the amount of time spent on these topics, and to the students' proficiency in the studied language. Although discussions on intercultural aspects can also occur in Norwegian, French students often study an array of topics more superficially, whereas English students can more easily identify complex cultural topics in English texts, which they study more in-depth. In addition, to improve linguistic proficiency, French students at this level must spend more time learning new aspects of the language than English students at the same level, and thus English teachers can consequently devote more time to intercultural perspectives than French teachers. In light of this finding, it would be interesting to conduct a similar study of more advanced French classrooms to see whether a higher proficiency level among the students would facilitate a stronger and more varied focus on intercultural competence in class. We also identified important similarities between the two subjects. Although we found more evidence of intercultural competence in English classrooms than in French classrooms, the competence area *knowledge and critical understanding* is the most prominent in both English and French, followed by *skills*. In addition, although we identified more "big C" culture in the English classrooms than in the French classrooms, the French lessons were by no means restricted to "small c" issues. Finally, stereotypical depictions of the "other" both occurred and were challenged in both subjects, and both teachers and students worked actively to avoid such stereotypes and explore other cultures with openness and curiosity.

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