

Research Article

Construction of Intercultural Savoirs Through Interculturally-Laden Tasks: An Iranian Experience

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(Received:2022/07/23; Accepted:2022/12/06)

Online publication: 2023/11/05

Abstract

A long-standing concern reverberating over the minds of intercultural scholars is how best to incorporate intercultural issues in English language teaching, an issue on which there has been little research in EFL contexts. To fill this gap, this qualitative study examined the efficacy of interculturally-laden tasks in promoting Iranian learners' intercultural competency in Anzali, Guilan province, Iran. Thus, a group of 22 Iranian intermediate EFL learners were recruited through convenience sampling from a pool of 44 according to their score on Oxford Quick Placement Test. All the participants were 12 females and 10 males aged 21-30. Then, they attended eighteen sessions of intercultural training using *Mirrors and Windows: An intercultural communication textbook* and completed seven intercultural tasks as a pretest and posttest. The data was collected through seven intercultural tasks and reflective worksheets. Drawing on the qualitative content analysis of intercultural tasks, the findings revealed that the tasks could help the participants increase their intercultural competence. Moreover, three themes were emerged from the analysis of the reflective worksheets as follow: (1) the participants' evaluation of the ICC course and intercultural tasks, (2) perceptions regarding intercultural development and (3) language skills and anxiety. The implications and suggestions for further research are discussed.

Keywords: Byram ICC model, intercultural communicative competence, interculturally-laden tasks, Iranian EFL learners, reflective worksheet

Introduction

Nowadays, intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is an increasingly crucial dimension in the field of foreign language education and individuals all over the world are experiencing more and more cross-cultural interactions as a consequence of globalization (Hismanoglu, 2011). From the point of view of Byram (2000), intercultural competence is “the ability to interact effectively with people of cultures other than one’s own” (p. 297). In other words, ICC comprises an understanding of the diverse behaviors and values of individuals and the capability to engage with them in a non-judgmental manner. Hence, in order to conduct efficient intercultural engagement through a common language, such as English, it is vital to have a sufficient understanding of the cultural background of the target language and its lingua-cultural traditions and conventions. This is because language and culture are understood to be fundamentally intertwined, and interdependent for interaction (Sevimel-Sahin, 2020).

Based on Hismanoglu (2011), ICC tasks in EFL settings involve behavioral and speech patterns such as adequate verbal themes, culture shock, prejudice and stereotyping, non-verbal interaction, beginning and ending a conversation, gendered identities, intercultural relationships and personal space. Moloney and Harbone (2010) also highlight that intercultural classroom practice comprises “asking students to think and act appropriately within a growing knowledge of the culture within language” (p. 281). This method requires instructional planning that provides a place and time for exploration, evaluation, reflection and cross-cultural engagement.

Numerous scholars have asserted that foreign language curricula in the EFL environment are primarily exam-focused (Gholami Pasand, Amerian, & Mohammadi, 2021; Tran & Duong, 2018). The educational system prioritizes the evolution of linguistic competence and communication skills over the growth of intercultural awareness. Instructors’ workload, paucity of sensitivity and appropriate experience, inadequate facilities and infrastructure and time constraints are the primary reasons why intercultural concepts are overlooked in English classrooms (Tran & Duong, 2018). Additionally, foreign language education has historically attempted to “instruct the concept of culture” by contrasting lists of concrete differences between both the learners’ local culture and the target cultures and establishing national generalizations and cultural biases and stereotypes (Svarstad, 2016). On the other hand, various tasks in English language resources and materials were constructed to equip students

with knowledge and practice of English through reading, listening and also language center activities. However, the information and understanding they provide are inadequate and of little use in real multicultural encounters. Nevertheless, intercultural activities were significantly underrepresented in foreign language resources, while intercultural activities facilitated intercultural competency and abilities (Abid & Moalla, 2020). Therefore, intercultural competence needs to possess particular traits and characteristics to deal with intercultural experiences and encounters. Sercu (2005) identified the following characteristics that contributed to the development of the ICC:

The willingness to engage with the foreign culture, self-awareness and the ability to look upon oneself from the outside, the ability to see the world through the others' eyes, the ability to cope with uncertainty, the ability to act as a cultural mediator, the ability to evaluate others' points of view, the ability to consciously use culture learning skills and to read the cultural context, and the understanding that individuals cannot be reduced to their collective identities. (p. 2)

Numerous scholars have explored the content of ICC in the literature in light of these qualities (e.g., Baker, 2012; Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006; Fantini, 2012; Hismanoglu, 2011; Huang, 2014; Lazar, 2003). Byram (1997) has been recognized as the main figure among these researchers, since the others have endorsed his concept of ICC. From Byram's (1997) point of view, ICC consists of three fundamental components: knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

The knowledge component contains different communicative practices in diverse socio-cultural situations, cultural awareness and understanding, culture-specific and sociolinguistic information; the skills component encompasses the capacity to apply that knowledge appropriately and adaptably through observing, interpreting, evaluating, and relating; and the attitudes component encompasses the capacity to respect and appreciate others, to tolerate uncertainty, to acknowledge various identities, and to be tolerant of others' values and beliefs (Byram, 2000; Deardorff, 2006). In terms of the model and its components, it is considered that ICC has a developmental nature; that is, it is not permanent, but rather "a lifelong learning" (Zheng, 2014, p. 76). Thus, ICC may be enhanced by increasing cultural awareness, language-related attitudes and behaviors, all of which are necessary for effective intercultural encounters (Alptekin, 2002; Ozuorcun, 2014).

A large number of qualitative and quantitative studies have been undertaken in a variety of contexts on boosting intercultural competency in language classes. For example, Ware (2013) investigated the degree to which a 15-week online

intercultural program in English improved learners' ICC. In another research undertaking, Kusumaningputri and Widodothis (2018) explored the use of digitally-photographed intercultural activities in an Indonesian context and detected that the use of both intercultural tasks and digital photographs might increase EFL learners' intercultural awareness. The researchers conclude that the utilization of digital photographs in combination with pedagogic ICC activities helps students develop a critical understanding of sociocultural reality. Rezaei and Naghibian (2018) explored how a 14-week intercultural syllabus of American English short stories increased Iranian students' intercultural competency. The findings revealed that the participants' fostered their intercultural competency based on Byram's ICC paradigm. The implication of their study suggests the integration of literary texts into teaching culture. Like in the previous studies, Birjandi and Khatib (2018) investigated the efficacy of using literary texts in increasing ICC level within a language classroom.

In another study, Chen and Zheng (2019) propose the use of transformative culture-learning journals to promote the intercultural development of EFL learners. Zhang (2020) carried out a cross-cultural study to examine the affordances of a contemporary Chinese TV drama in building Chinese EFL learners' ICC. Another study by Karimi, Chalak, and Heidari Tabrizi (2019) investigated how photovoice could promote intercultural sensitivity and reflective thinking in 48 intermediate L2 learners. Their community-based participatory action research reveals that the photovoice group (PG) improved significantly and outperformed their counterparts in the control group on all five intercultural questionnaire categories. In another attempt, Ghasemi Mighani, Yazdani Moghaddam, and Mohseni (2020) designed an intercultural course with pedagogical ICC activities to boost Iranian EFL learners' intercultural understanding in a classroom. The results confirmed their proposed ICC program, revealing that the overall ICC level of the participants had enhanced significantly as a result of the intercultural training course. Similarly, Gholami Pasand et al. (2021) put forward how online interactions among participants of diverse cultural affiliations promote Iranian EFL learners' ICC development. To this end, intercultural subjects were selected and addressed using *Mirrors and Windows: An intercultural communication textbook*. The findings confirmed that learners' engagement in ICC training and online exchange may afford them a chance to increase their intercultural sensitivity.

As the research literature indicates, a burgeoning number of ICC studies have been conducted outside the Iranian context and few studies have been done in

the Iranian EFL contexts. All of the aforementioned research emphasizes the necessity of cultivating an EFL learner's intercultural competency. Thus, this study examines the impact of intercultural training and tasks on Iranian learners' ICC in both traditional learning contexts (through the ICC textbook and classroom environment) and the online platform (Facebook Teacher Group). Moreover, the study scrutinizes how Iranian EFL learners evaluate and perceive Facebook and intercultural tasks (benefits and drawbacks) for effective intercultural interactions. Finally, the research aims to explore the applicability of Byram's (1997) ICC model in the Iranian EFL context. For these aims, the following research questions guide the research:

RQ1. To what extent do intercultural tasks improve Iranian EFL learners' ICC as reflected in their intercultural tasks (writing tasks)?

RQ2. What are the Iranian EFL learners' perceptions of using intercultural tasks and Facebook group (English Teacher group) in developing ICC dimensions?

Method

Participants

The study featured a qualitative approach consisting of intercultural tasks and reflective worksheets. The participants were 22 out of 44 EFL learners (10 males and 12 females) within the age range of 21 and 30 years old. The learners were selected non-randomly. In other words, they were chosen based on what Best and Kahn (2006) identified as convenience sampling (intact class). However, the learners' readiness and willingness to participate in the study was another criterion for selection. The English proficiency level of the learners was homogenized through Oxford Quick Placement Test. All of the students were at the intermediate level, with scores ranging from 30 to 39 out of 60. Their ethnic origins comprised Gilak, Fars, Turks, and Kurds. They had a similar L1 background and had studied English for approximately four years. According to the demographic information, none of the participants had ever attended an ICC training program, and merely four had traveled abroad. The majority of students were university students, studying in various fields such as psychology, civil engineering, law, and business administration. The students were studying the Touchstone series, Level four (McCarthy, et al., 2014) throughout this research at the Tarlak language institution in Anzali, Guilan province.

Instruments/Materials

The following instruments were utilized to gather data:

Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT)

The paper-based version of the Oxford Quick Placement Test (2003) was employed to homogenize the students in this study. The test contains 60 questions in a multiple-choice format. The participants with a score of between 30 and 39 were considered to be at the intermediate level and, as such, were eligible to participate in the research. OQPT was chosen by the researchers to assess the participants' English language proficiency since its validity has been attested to by around 6000 scholars from 60 countries and its reliability index is 0.90 (Geranpayeh, 2003). It is worth noting that in the pilot study, the reliability index for OQPT test was 0.79.

Intercultural Communication Textbook

A course book titled *Mirrors and Windows: An intercultural communication textbook* established by Huber-Krieger, Lázár, and Strange (2003) was used during eighteen sessions to instruct intercultural notions as the main treatment of the study. The textbook has been written for intercultural purposes. The primary objective of the textbook was to increase the students' curiosity and intercultural awareness in their home culture as well as the target cultures by highlighting the similarities and differences between their native and other cultures.

The topics included in the book were time, dietary patterns, verbal and non-verbal communication, differences in handling gender differences, female soldiers, dislocated polygamy, personal space, educational system, slang and informal terms, complaining and criticizing. The rationale for selecting the ICC textbook as the main treatment of the study was its diverse intercultural and critical incident tasks that encourage learners to think about cultural differences and similarities in order to prepare them for intercultural communication. Furthermore, the textbook is recommended by some ICC researchers (e.g., Hoominian, Fazilatfar, & Yazdanimoghadam, 2021; Piasecka, 2011; Rahimi & Soltani, 2011).

Intercultural Tasks (ICC Tasks)

Seven ICC tasks (what does 'tomorrow' mean to you, directness: Complaining

and criticizing, organically grown food and different diets, teacher, gender discrimination, cultural differences in raising children and dislocated polygamy) were chosen from *Mirrors and Windows: An intercultural textbook* to understand the participants' ICC development. These ICC tasks resemble pedagogical tasks and are consistent with the ICC philosophy, which encourages learners to discuss intercultural issues and probe cultural differences and similarities.

The tasks started with a reading passage and multiple questions to urge the participants to think about their home and target cultures. In their entries, participants were expected to respond to the questions in an average of 200 words. Participants were given ICC tasks as both a pre- and post-task. Therefore, the researchers would be able to track their developments as a consequence of intercultural instruction and ICC tasks by directed content analysis and pre-existing theory, which is Byram's ICC theory in the current study.

These seven ICC tasks were chosen based on their potential to yield opportunities to explore cultural differences and their ability to draw a multiplicity of judgments and viewpoints. It is worth noting that the seven intercultural tasks were piloted to determine their efficiency in terms of eliciting intercultural judgments and reflections before embarking on the real procedure of the study.

Reflective Worksheets

Journal entries, diaries, logs, and reflective worksheets are recognized as useful introspective data collection methods (Rezaei & Naghibian, 2018). In this research, part of the data related to ICC tasks was gathered using reflective worksheets. This instrument reflected the participants' perspectives, opinions, and experiences related to the ICC materials, tasks and Facebook English group. The participants were required to complete a reflective worksheet after each two sessions of the class (i.e., after each chapter of the ICC textbook). The worksheet had two main purposes: first, to check the students' reflections on enhancing their attitudes, intercultural understanding and skills. Second, it utilized to obtain participants' feedback on the instructional material and methodology. Consequently, the worksheets served both an instructional and research function.

Procedure

In the preliminary stage of the data collection process, the participants were asked to complete the background questionnaire and the placement test.

Afterward, seven ICC tasks were used to assess the participants' current intercultural awareness as well as their own culture.

Given that, in EFL situations, components of culture have traditionally been seen as static and homogeneous, and EFL learners depend heavily on preconceptions (stereotypes) and overgeneralization. Therefore, following the placement test and seven intercultural tasks, participants' major stereotypes were elicited and grouped into five categories as shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Categories of Stereotypes

Categories of stereotypes	Instances of the participants' responses	Response Percent
1. Mannerism	For foreigners, time is a very valuable concept They have special eating habits and etiquettes They respect and value the law Majority of them are ignorant about the Middle-Eastern countries They are very strict in the workplace Most of them are racist They are very smart and noble	60.08%
2. Xenophobic Ideologies	Many English speakers have anti-Iranian Sentiment They usually keep a social distance with us. Many foreigners think there exist gender discrimination in Iran	20.06%
3. Gender Remarks	Women are messy and unclean Feminism as a Western artefact	12%
4. Political Issues	Westernization and Colonialization	4%
5. Other Issues	They prefer the casual style Many Americans are lazy and obese	3%

The main instructional processes were commenced after identifying the main learners' stereotypes. The learners were required to attend eighteen sessions of ICC training. Each session of the class lasts approximately 90 minutes. The course was held twice a week. The main objective of the course was to build and enhance learners' intercultural communicative competence. The treatment was conducted by one of the researchers of this study. The first session was devoted to introducing the course, presenting its objectives and requirements and also

answering the participants' questions. Afterward, the following procedures were consistently followed during each session.

The researchers utilized *Mirrors and Windows: An intercultural textbook* and all seven units of the textbook were taught. Noteworthy to remark is that the researcher also employed the recommendations for intercultural development (Byram, 1997) and *Tips for teaching culture: Practical approaches to intercultural communication* written by Wintergerst and McVeigh (2011).

In the initial stage of the study, the researcher presented some thought-provoking warm-up questions on the topic of each unit in an effort to awaken the participants' awareness of and interest in the subject. Throughout each section of the book, participants were motivated to read different reading texts about various cultures, as well as engage in ethnographic exercises, critical incidents, role plays and a variety of other classroom activities.

In one of the exercises discussing eating patterns in various cultures, for instance, students explored the preparation and serving of meals in their home culture and some others. In additional activities addressing the centrality of the notion of time, participants were required to rate themselves on a scale of timeliness and to compare their local norm and culture to those of other cultures on comparable dimensions. Afterward, students were required to make a contrast and comparison between their native culture and that of English-speaking countries.

A further point is that during the project tasks section of the units, the participants were split up into small groups of four, with mixed gender and desire. Each group member undertook a particular intercultural task. For example, group A researched "the notion of time, delay and rites of passage in different cultures" and its connection to power and authority. Group B probed "gender identities in different cultures". Group C covered "silence and turn-taking, bringing up baby and personal space", whilst group D scrutinized "eating patterns, agro-business, romantic love and dislocated polygamy in dissimilar cultures. Through these intercultural practices, learners engaged in active thinking, and gathered information that was debated, compared, and contrasted in small groups. Liu and Zhang (2014) argue that, such group interaction strengthens learners' conceptual frameworks of meaning and improves their knowledge, attitudes, and abilities. In the subsequent phase, each group was expected to report their research to other groups and ultimately to the wider learning community (the whole class). Throughout the discussions and debates, the students employed a variety of teaching strategies, including comparison and

contrast, discovery, reflection, analysis and critical thinking, questioning their preconceptions and predetermined judgments in order to complete the tasks. These strategies were assumed to cultivate intercultural competence in the participants (Deardorff, 2009). In addition, the language section of the textbook pushed students to learn more about language through culture and enhance their linguistic competency in order to discuss intercultural topics through a variety of exercises and projects.

Note also that the building blocks of the methodology utilized during the current study were awareness-raising discussions through individual, pair and group work as well as small group research and projects. Participants were required to role-play a dialogue throughout each session.

For instance, students staged a role-play titled "intercultural interactions. The goal was to boost students' understanding of the significance of verbal and nonverbal interaction. The role-plays may empower learners to experience cultural shock for a few seconds.

It is worth mentioning that each two sessions of the class dedicated to one chapter of the textbook. It means that each chapter was taught in two sessions according to the major sections of the book (i.e., reflecting on your own culture, discovering other cultures, ICC tasks, critical incidents and language work). Regarding intercultural tasks, in the first session, 15 minutes for each task were allocated for the pre-test (105 minutes in total). Additionally, at the end of each chapter of the text book (main treatment); the students were given the intercultural tasks related to that chapter as a posttest (15 minutes). This process continued until the last session. For instance, in chapter one (Rock around the clock), one task was selected entitled "What does tomorrow mean to you?" for both the pretest and posttest. Moreover, in each of the two sessions of the class, a worksheet was given to the participants and posed some questions to be answered regarding their perceptions of the intercultural course, tasks, and Facebook group. There were seven reflective worksheets in total.

In the second phase of the study, aside from course hours, the participants were asked to become members of a social networking site/media (i.e., Facebook) entitled "English Teachers". The site is available to the public and has a membership of over 69.000. The group was founded for a range of reasons such as studying English, exchanging resources and debating topics linked to English language learning and teaching. The participants had become members of the group and then they discussed intercultural tasks and a series of discussion

questions followed by the tasks. Moreover, they attempted to challenge their stereotypes and preconceptions with the members of the group and examine the truth of their stereotypes. Following that, the students were expected to discuss their findings in small group discussions in class.

Data Analysis

In this study, the intercultural task data (writing task) was analyzed mostly deductively and sometimes inductively, and then additional themes were detected as they emerged from the data. That is, the researchers used a combination of emerging and predetermined themes.

Based on Hsieh and Shannon (2005), three most widely used types of qualitative content analysis methods are directed, summative and conversational. They claimed that directed content analysis is a deductive approach based on pre-existing theory in the literature (i.e., Byram's ICC theory in the present study). Moreover, the ICC themes were recognized, labeled and related to the primary categories derived from the literature (i.e., Byram's ICC *savoirs*). More specifically, intercultural attitudes (*savoir etre*), intercultural knowledge (*savoirs*), skills of interpreting and relating (*savoir comprendre*), skills of discovery and interaction (*savoir apprendre/faire*), and critical cultural awareness (*savoirs' engager*) were classified as five predetermined categories of ICC themes. The researchers then reread the data to identify further themes (see Table 3). Following this, using summative content analysis as a more quantitative method, count the frequency of ICC components in the participants' intercultural tasks. It is worth noting that the unit of analysis was meaningful phrases rather than individual words.

Additionally, the qualitative content analysis of the participants' responses to reflective worksheets permitted the triangulation of data, which contributed to proper understanding of the research concerns. The researchers also used Byram's ICC model as a framework for investigating the impact of ICC training, ICC tasks and social media (Facebook) on the development of learners' intercultural attitudes, knowledge and skills. Based on Giorgi's (1985) guidelines, the analysis was conducted in several steps. Initially, all datasets (reflective worksheets) were repeatedly read to get a broad overview. The data were then analyzed and recognized in light of the five components of the Byram ICC model and the operational descriptions of each theme. In order to ensure the rigor of the qualitative content analysis, two members of the researcher team

(Ph.D. holders) checked the analysis of the participants' ICC tasks and reflective worksheets.

Findings

Findings from Intercultural Tasks

A total number of 154 ICC post-tasks were read and analyzed. Five intercultural themes were categorized: intercultural knowledge (savoirs), intercultural skills (savoir apprendre), skills (savoir comprendre), intercultural attitudes (savoir etre), and critical cultural awareness. Table 2 illustrates the frequency and percent of intercultural themes found in the participants' ICC tasks.

Table 2
Themes from ICC Tasks

Intercultural themes	Frequency of the occurrence	percent
Intercultural Knowledge	40	14.38%
Intercultural Attitudes	70	25.18%
Skills of discovery and interaction	68	24.47%
Skills of interpreting and relating	55	19.79%
Critical cultural awareness	45	16.18%

As depicted in Table 2, intercultural attitude (savoir etre) had the largest number of instances with 70 occurrences (25.18%), whereas intercultural knowledge had the lowest frequency with 40 occurrences (14.38%). Based on Byram's (1997) ICC framework, the skills of interaction and discovery (savoir apprendre/faire) relate to the capacity to learn new knowledge and information about target cultures, and also the capability to apply this new knowledge in real cross-cultural encounters. The learners' excerpts revealed plenty of references to this dimension (68 occurrences). In addition, there is some progress in the learners' skills of interpreting and relating elements (19.79%). There were 45 instances of critical cultural awareness (savoirs' engager) (16.18%). The discussion section provides a more detailed description of the findings. In addition to the instances identified as participants' ICC growth, further analysis of learners' ICC tasks uncovered three additional themes (see Table 3).

Table 3

Additional Themes from ICC Tasks

Additional Themes	Frequency of the occurrence	percent
Neutral self-cultural judgment and of the cultural others	5	33%
Negative judgment of self-culture and of the cultural others	6	40%
Positive judgment of L2 cultures	4	26%

As demonstrated in Table 3, there were 6 occurrences of the negative judgment of self and other cultures. In contrast, neutral self-cultural judgment and judgment of the other cultures, as well as positive judgment of L2 cultures, were almost identical, with 5 and 4 instances, respectively. Below are the participants' excerpts indicating the presence of intercultural themes in their ICC tasks.

Knowledge (Saviors)

Excerpt 1: What does 'tomorrow' mean to you? One shared:

In Arab countries "Tomorrow" used to say "no" in a polite way. But it depends upon the possibility of completing the task assigned within the time frame of 1 or 2 days. If somebody says tomorrow we will deliver your product it means we have to deliver it tomorrow or maximum day after tomorrow otherwise the customer will get offended if I fail and it takes longer time than expected. So the best way to avoid hurting your customer and keep them calm is to give him a reason and tell him why you couldn't complete the task in the given time frame and also apologize for that.

Excerpt 2: Organically grown food and different diets Task

As some countries have different religions in their country, their cultures also vary depending on their faith. I respect them irrespective of whether that person is vegetarian, vegan, non-vegetarian. Everyone comfortably follows their choices of diet.

Attitudes (savoir etre)

Excerpt 1: Organically Grown food and Different Diets Task

Because I am keen on making friends with them, I am eager to understand more about their greetings and behaviors.

Excerpt 2: Cultural differences in raising children Task

As a mother, I am very interested in knowing cultural differences in raising children, because it helps me train good children.

Skills of discovery and interaction (Savoir pprendre/faire)

Excerpt 1:

Different countries have their own eating habits. People of one country may like a certain thing, while people of another country hate it. I respect that people have different diets and preferences. I am interested in knowing about different diets and trying new foods. It is as fascinating as communication with foreigners and getting to know their lifestyle.

Skills of Interpreting and Relating Instances

Excerpt 1:

In Iran and other countries, unreasonable and irrational traditions and rituals still exist in the societies.

Excerpt 2:

I think all people around the world have many things in common. However, individuals differ in terms of their habits, customs and ways of life.

Critical Cultural Awareness

Excerpt 1:

Today, women are more conscious of their roles and position than they were in the past; thus, they do not tolerate gender differences. Gender discrimination still exists in Iran and in other countries of the world. This problem goes back to the past, and it takes a long time to be removed. Women are discriminated against in various domains like in the society, workplace, and family. In Iranian society like other societies, gender

discrimination occurs and sometime women are ignorant. Although this problem is felt all over the world and not limited to our society.

Additional Themes from ICC Tasks

Excerpt 1: 'Teacher' Negative judgment of self-culture and positive judgment of L2 cultures

In our country, teachers are poor and are not well-paid. In western cultures, teachers are really patient when parents complain about their teaching methods, and they are very eager to answer students' questions again and again. We do not see such patience in our teachers.

Excerpt 2: 'Directness' Neutral self-cultural judgment and of the cultural others

People from other cultures tend to be direct. They express explicitly their thought in conversation, while Iranian people like to be more indirect when giving their views.

Pre-diagnosis of the Participants' ICC Level

Some excerpts of the pre-test data are given below:

In Iran, women care for children, which is a wonderful thing since it promotes peacefulness for children; other cultures should follow our own ways.

People in our country cannot express their views directly because it makes others uncomfortable, but in other countries, people are very frank.

In Iran, teachers do not have a good financial situation and are very dependent on the government, and they are always protesting for extra pay, and I don't think this is the case in other countries.

Reflective Worksheets Findings

The participants' overall intercultural learning experiences through the textbook, intercultural tasks and Facebook group were gathered through reflective worksheets. There were three significant themes emerging from the responses: (1) the participants' evaluation of the ICC course and intercultural tasks, (2) perceptions regarding intercultural development and (3) language skills and anxiety.

The Participants' Evaluation of the ICC Course and ICC Tasks

The participants' evaluation of the ICC course and ICC tasks are illustrated in Table 4.

Table 4

The participants' Perceptions Toward the ICC Course

Learners' Perceptions	Number of Instances	Percentage
I thought this kind of cultural learning would enable to enhance my English skills and abilities.	19	19.79
After completing the course, I was able to accept a new way to learn English and culture via Facebook group (English Teacher).	15	15.62%
It was worth studying about different cultures since the project can expand our horizons.	18	18.75%
Cultural tasks and activities were not difficult for me.	9	09.37%
I am delighted I actively participated in the cultural class. I experienced a wonderful sense of achievement upon completion.	20	20.83%
The class interactive context and technology-enhanced learning environment	15	15.62%

As demonstrated in Table 4, the vast majority of the participants believed that the course had a significant impact on their language development (19.79%), because they would be required to utilize English with foreign interlocutors. One student commented, *“Interaction and discussing intercultural tasks with*

foreigners will help improve my English skills”. Another one commented, “I have a chance to learn and practice English more effectively”. One said, “It is an effective method of learning English”.

A majority of participants (15.62%) expressed satisfaction with their ICC training as a new way to learn both English and culture after completing it, and 18.75% said that the training had assisted them in broadening their horizons and perspectives on a variety of issues. For instance, one participant said, “*The class is amazing. Interacting with people from other countries via Facebook group and in-class discussions allow us to get a true cultural understanding*”. Furthermore, they appreciated the benefit and value of the course's interactive context and technology-enhanced learning environment (i.e., Facebook, 15.62%). Meanwhile, 20.83% of them acknowledged their feelings of accomplishment upon completion and 09.37% expressed that the tasks were not difficult for them.

Perceptions Regarding Intercultural Development

Anchored to Byram's ICC theory, the students' ICC improvement was examined in three main dimensions including, knowledge, attitudes, and skills.

Knowledge, attitudes and skills

In accordance with the data gathered through the reflective worksheets, the vast majority of participants mentioned that the ICC tasks, training and discussion on Facebook group may assist them in developing the skills essential for cultural engagements. Table 5 represents different dimensions.

Table 5

The Effects of the Course and Tasks in Developing Learners' ICC

1. In the enhancement of knowledge, the ICC course assisted them to	Number of Instances	Percentage
- gain authentic information	15	09.14%
-learn about multiple cultures and my own culture	14	08.53%
-understand that each nation has its own value systems and beliefs	18	10.97%
-realize the similarities and differences across cultures	13	07.92%

2. In the development of attitudes, the ICC course		
-stimulated my curiosity and willingness toward multiple cultures	20	12.19%
- helped me look at our home and target cultures from different perspectives	9	05.48%
- enabled me to have an attitude of openness regarding other target cultures	16	09.75%
-allowed me to think and explore the present situation of my native and local culture	10	06.09%
-encouraged me to more intercultural exchanges and interaction.	12	07.31%
3. In the enhancement of skills, the ICC course helped me		
-think and evaluate cross-cultural issues deeply and critically	8	04.87%
-explore and collect cultural issues and information	9	05.48%
-reflect on our own culture	7	04.26%
interact with people of different countries	13	07.92%

The knowledge dimension, as shown in Table 5, was overwhelmingly positive, with approximately (36.56% in total) agreeing that they were able to recognize similarities and differences across cultures and identify the unique characteristics of each culture as a result of the course, as well as gain authentic information and learn about multiple cultures, including their own culture.

In terms of the ICC attitude dimension, the course has the potential to attract students' curiosity and interest in other cultures (12.19%) while concurrently increasing students' research into their own culture (06.09%). The course also fostered an attitude of openness regarding cultures (09.75%), and some participants stated that they were inspired to probe cultures from multiple perspectives (05.48 %), and it also encouraged them to become more involved in intercultural exchange and interaction (07.31%).

In terms of the ICC skill component, some of the learners believed that the course may benefit them in developing the ability to seek and acquire cultural knowledge, as well as engage with foreign interlocutors (05.48%). A further important ICC skill in which the learners could witness their own improvement was critical cultural awareness which included developing the capacity to think about and analyze cultures critically (04.87 %), as well as reflect on their own culture (04.26 %). The data above demonstrate that the intercultural training and

activities had a significant favorable impact on the participants' ability to communicate across cultures.

Language skills and anxiety

In addition to the previously mentioned themes, which included the participants' evaluation of the ICC course and intercultural tasks, as well as their perceptions of intercultural development, a third theme was identified: language skills and anxiety, which is discussed in more detail below.

The learners also agreed that participating in discussions on a Facebook group in the target language is a useful technique for improving their language learning and abilities in that language. They emphasized the growth of reading, writing, and language abilities. *"Facebook provides me with an opportunity to improve my English skills"*, one student said. *"I believe that the discussions were useful for us"*, commented another participant. *"My writing in English has improved as a result of my discussions on Facebook with individuals from diverse cultures"*. Another student said that in order to answer the discussion questions, he first needed to grasp what was being discussed. Another student said, *"I like this class and Facebook a lot since it has helped me improve my English skills while also allowing me to learn about diverse cultures"*. *"It is wonderful to learn about other cultures via the use of English"*.

The participants also reported enhancements in their listening abilities. For instance, one said, *"the voices that shared by foreigners were very interesting and also beneficial for my listening"*. Only a few of them (two learners) expressed dissatisfaction on the use of Facebook for increasing linguistic abilities. For instance, one said, *"I rarely use Facebook for this purpose"*. Another learner stated, *"I prefer using other instruments like Skype or Instagram to practice English"*. Hence, it might be argued that both intercultural training and using social media platforms like Facebook may assist Iranian EFL learners to improve their language skills and intercultural concepts.

Anxiety is another theme in terms of Facebook's use for intercultural learning and discussing intercultural tasks. Some of the participants were at first nervous, but they soon came to terms with the novelty of the event as well as the pleasure of learning about other cultures. Additionally, the most often expressed concerns were about the participants' English language abilities and skills. For example, one of the participants expressed concern about making errors while writing in English, saying, *"I am worried about making mistakes when writing in English"*. Another remarked, *"If I type anything incorrectly, my instructor and students*

will be able to view it in public". "Sometimes I don't want to complete the project, but when I do it, I get interested in it" one of the participants said. However, as the participants grew acclimated to the training and became used to communicating in English in an intercultural setting, their chaotic thinking became more organized, and their sentiments of frustration were changed into feelings of satisfaction and achievement.

Discussion

The findings of the study revealed that there was a significant improvement in Iranian EFL learners' ICC after the eighteen-session ICC course. As indicated in the ICC pre-task results, there was little evidence of intercultural awareness. Put another way, in the initial phase of the study, the majority of participants criticized their home culture (i.e., a sense of anti-culture) and had an affinity to understand the other culture. However, the participants demonstrated an improvement in ICC dimensions in post-ICC tasks due to ICC training and online intercultural interaction. In other words, the ICC training material (*Mirror and Window textbook*), group-based in-class cultural discussions, and interaction with intercultural speakers motivated them to conduct a thorough examination of their native culture and ponder on the similarities and differences between their own and target cultures. The findings of this study are in line with the previous research on cultivating intercultural concepts in EFL contexts and in classroom environments (Esmaeili et al., 2022; Ghasemi Mighani et al., 2020; Gómez, 2012; O'Neil, 2008; Ottoson, 2013; Popescua & Iordachescua, 2015; Rahimi & Soltani, 2011; Rezaei & Naghibian, 2018; Shoman, 2011; Vande Berg, Connor-Linton, & Paige, 2009). Although, the studies lack an analysis of ICC dimensions and the way each ICC component can be influenced by the integration of intercultural dimensions in ELT.

Regarding RQ1, the findings of dimensions of ICC (i.e., knowledge, skills, attitude and critical cultural awareness) revealed that the instances associated with the skills and attitude components outnumbered those associated with the other dimensions. According to Lynch and Hanson (1998), Okayama, Furuto, and Edmondson (2001), the crucial role of attitude in cross-cultural communication is necessary when individuals continue to manage new knowledge and skills in establishing new interactions. The learners' positive attitudes, readiness, willingness and openness to various cultures can be related to youth culture, globalization, social networking sites, the media and their intercultural engagement. Nonetheless, the

participants' instances that were akin to the knowledge component were the less frequently addressed dimension (see Table 2). It is possible that the participants' modest occurrence of the knowledge component refers to a lack of openness and communication across cultures due to Iran's cultural and political hurdles. In the present study, few of the participants had traveled to other countries and the major medium for communicating with native and nonnative speakers was social media and the Internet. Moreover, weakness in tolerating of ambiguity can also be another reason. Although during the ICC training course, students had limited contact with native and nonnative speakers through a social media platform (Facebook) to boost their intercultural awareness and knowledge.

Regarding skills of discovery and interaction component, one possible explanation for learners' progress in this dimension is that through ICC training, group in-class cultural discussions and an online virtue forum (i.e., Facebook); they have practiced asking individuals from other cultures about their views, values and concerns. Meanwhile, there are some excerpts of learners' feedback on how they would react in an intercultural situation in the future. Noting that knowing cultural facts cannot ensure satisfactory results, students should acquire proper skills and attitude to transition from the personal to the interpersonal domain. Hence, students and mostly instructors have to understand that knowing about culture is more significant than studying about a given or particular culture (Dogancay-Aktuna & Hardman, 2018). Put simply, what would help students in cross-cultural encounters is such attitudes and strategies rather than factual information and knowledge about specific cultures.

Regarding skills of interpreting and relating dimension, due to the fact that the majority of the participants lacked direct connection with native speakers in intercultural situations, they realized various cultural viewpoints through texts, the Internet, social media and books. Hence, there were few instances related to this ICC dimension. However, there was improvement compared to the learners' ICC pre-tasks. In particular, during the ICC training course and through various critical incident tasks, students investigated the origins of misunderstandings and strategies to resolve them; they also developed the attitudes of decentering and the skills of comparing. Through comparing events, documents and opinions from a variety of cultures and analyzing how each might seem from different viewpoints (decentering attitudes), students understood how individuals might misinterpret what is said or written by people of different social identities.

Regarding the critical cultural dimension, this element contributes to an individual's capacity to evaluate events utilizing explicit criteria, viewpoints, behaviors and artifacts from one's own and other cultures. On this dimension, a number of the participants' excerpts revealed considerable changes in the learners' perspectives towards their own and target cultures. They endeavored to cultivate a critical awareness of themselves and their values. In this light, they strived to judge diverse cultures rationally, despite the flaws and shortcomings that might be detected in every culture. To be more exact, they modified their predetermined stereotypes and biased perspectives toward target cultures (as shown in Table 1) through the reflection strategy and cultural comparative approach provided by the course. Intercultural training at the meta-culture level, which concentrated on shared values and universal ideas found in all cultures, was supposed to assist learners in increasing critical cultural awareness and thinking patterns.

Akin to the findings of ICC components, Saricorban and Oz (2014) investigated English learners' ICC in Turkish context. They demonstrated a strong positive association between the three dimensions of ICC, but verse to the results of this study, their findings was in favor of the intercultural knowledge dimension. Besides, they found that the levels of intercultural skills and intercultural attitudes were relatively low. Furthermore, the findings coincide with those of Zhou and Griffiths (2011). In their investigation, they discovered that the participants had the highest level of intercultural attitudes and a moderate level of intercultural knowledge.

This study also revealed that participants had some neutral, mostly positive and rarely negative judgments towards their home and target cultures. Some students judged and evaluated their native culture largely negatively and target cultures mostly positively. The greatest degree of dissatisfaction with learners' own culture and acceptance of other cultures was found in activities such as "gender roles in other cultures, gender discrimination, and diverse approaches to education and teachers". This finding differed from that of Snow (2015), who reported that English-speaking students typically viewed themselves as positive and other cultures as negative. Nevertheless, throughout the process of ICC development, individuals sometimes encounter obstacles that hinder their further progress. An instance is the problem of total attachment to other cultures and detachment from one's native culture, i.e., appreciating other cultures while criticizing oneself. Based on Bennet's development model of intercultural

sensitivity (1993), this stage is referred to as the "defense stage" (Hammer, Bennett, & Wiseman, 2003). At this level, according to Chen and Zheng (2019), "the learner became aware of cultural differences but constructed a dichotomy between themselves and cultural others, where either their own culture or the other's culture was reckoned as the superior one" (p. 72). Similarly, Gyogi (2016) highlighted that the separation of "self" and "other" cultures might lead to the emergence of cultural biases and preconceptions rather than the objective evaluation of culture. During the ICC training course, the participants tended to emphasize the differences and negative aspects of their own culture, but they rarely acknowledged the similarities and universal concepts that exist across cultures. Likewise, there were some neutral views towards home and foreign cultures. They did not take a stand in favor of any culture, suggesting less biased and more objective thinking and approaches. On occasion, however, it moved from a neutral stance to cultural differences, notably in the tasks "directness: Complaining and criticizing and dislocated polygamy". The finding of this study is in line with the previous research on cultivating intercultural concepts in EFL contexts and in classroom environments (Esmaeili et al., 2022; Ghasemi Mighani et al., 2020; Rahimi & Soltani, 2011; Rezaei & Naghibian, 2018).

Regarding RQ2, the participants' overall intercultural learning experiences through the textbook, intercultural tasks and Facebook group were gathered through reflective worksheets. The participants' responses were divided into three major themes: (1) the participants' appraisal of the ICC course and intercultural tasks, (2) perceptions regarding intercultural development, and (3) language skills and anxiety. As shown in Table 4, the participants had very favorable perspectives regarding the overall project (ICC training). They specifically highlighted the growth in reading, writing and vocabulary abilities. The majority of participants acknowledged the advantages of the ICC training and some of them affirmed its value in widening their horizons. Moreover, they recognized the value of a technology-enhanced learning environment (i.e., Facebook). In other words, in-class debates and ICC task discussions on Facebook group with people of other cultures are much more helpful than merely group-based in-class discussions for the learners' intercultural development. Furthermore, using technology-mediated tools (e.g., Facebook), learners learn to utilize language as well as understand the significance of English language as an international and lingua franca language, which enables them to develop the intrinsic drive to study English. Anxiety is another concern in terms of Facebook

usage for intercultural learning and addressing intercultural tasks. Some of the participants occasionally felt nervous but ultimately welcomed the novel experience along with the thrill of studying cultural concepts. These findings may be compared with the studies done by Wang (2012) and Chen and Yang (2016) who demonstrated how students' language and cultural learning can be boosted with the usage of Facebook. Meanwhile, Hirotani and Fujii (2015) argued that Facebook boosts both language abilities and cross-cultural awareness. Similarly, Thome-Williams (2016) found that Facebook and Skype inspire English learners in terms of sharing ideas, exchanging viewpoints, and learning from peers.

As a final remark, regarding the tendency toward globalization and advancements in the fields of science and technology, having interculturally competent English learners capable of appropriately interacting with individuals from different linguistic and cultural affiliations, seems more essential than ever. In this light, numerous researches have attempted to improve students' ICC in western countries. Nevertheless, there was little research on the evolution of such a fundamental ICC competency in the Iranian context. Accordingly, the current research investigates the effectiveness of promoting the students' ICC using intercultural pedagogical tasks and an online virtue forum (Facebook). The findings verified the enhancement of Iranian EFL learners' ICC through intercultural-oriented tasks and an online platform (Facebook). Furthermore, three primary themes emerged from the analysis of the participants' reflective worksheets: 1) the participants' evaluation of the ICC course and intercultural tasks, 2) perceptions regarding intercultural development and 3) language skills and anxiety.

The findings of the current study may have a number of implications for EFL material developers and language instructors. The findings provide that ICC textbooks and tasks are effective instruments for promoting learners' intercultural sensitivity and competency. Hence, special attention should be given to multicultural features while developing instructional and pedagogical materials to foster students' ICC, tolerance and intercultural abilities. English language teachers have an important role in this process. They should deepen their theoretical and practical understanding of intercultural sensitivity and involve learners in effective cultural and critical incidents and activities to equip them for intercultural communication in the future. On the other hand, pedagogical ICC tasks should be designed to equip students with real cultural experiences. Furthermore, in this digital world, L2 learners should be motivated to collaborate

with members of different cultures through online communication, such as Skype, Facebook, Twitter, or any other computer-mediated tool that provides students with opportunities to learn more about different cultures through a variety of features including group discussions, video sharing, and chatting.

As with all such studies, there are limitations that offer opportunities for further research. The findings call for further research to investigate the generalizability of the efficacy of interculturality-laden tasks in promoting intercultural awareness in diverse similar educational settings. It was beyond the scope of the current study to explore how the students implemented their new intercultural understanding in intercultural contexts; this issue might be investigated in additional research with the same students. Going beyond the focus on Byram's (1997) ICC model, further research employing Bennett's (1993) ICC model and Deardorff's (2006) pyramid ICC model is required. Additional longitudinal research with larger sample sizes may provide data that is more diversified and expansive in scope. Lastly, further analysis of the ICC tasks and reflective worksheets is required to figure out which ICC tasks might work best for the development of students' ICC. One point worth noting here is that this study merely focused on intermediate Iranian learners, while learners with lower or higher levels of English language proficiency may perform differently. Lastly, the ICC training can be extended so that participants' views on how to improve the ICC can be unpacked in more depth.

Declaration of interest: none

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