

The nexus of intercultural communicative competence and speaking ability: A critical analysis**Article info****Article Type:**

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Abstract

The relationship between intercultural communicative competence (ICC) and the speaking ability of language learners has been a focal point in foreign language education. This study aimed to investigate the relationship between ICC and speaking ability as demonstrated by Iranian EFL learners in an online Advanced Communication course, as well as their perceptions of how it impacted their language learning needs and objectives. The research utilized an explanatory mixed-method approach, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative methodologies for gathering and analyzing data. The testing group consisted of 154 undergraduate English language translation students, encompassing both male and female. Participants selected through convenience sampling. Data collection involved a homogeneity test, a speaking test evaluated by two raters, an ICC questionnaire, and a semi-structured interview. By employing Pearson Correlation and thematic analysis to analyze the data, the study unveiled a significant relationship between ICC and speaking ability, demonstrating potential benefits for both language learners and educators aiming to enhance linguistic and cultural speaking proficiency.

Keywords: Foreign Language Learning, Intercultural Communicative Competence, Speaking Ability

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1. Introduction

The relationship between intercultural communicative competence (ICC) and speaking ability has been a topic of great interest in language education. The continuing effects of globalization have led to the breaking down of traditional cultural barriers, making the skill of effectively communicating across diverse cultures increasingly important. Authors such as Almarza et al. (2015), Bastos and Araújo e Sá (2015), and Hang and Zhang (2023) have highlighted the significance of mastering EFL and the essential role of ICC in cross-cultural communication. This article delves into the intricate relationship between ICC and speaking ability, focusing on the context of Iranian advanced EFL learners, as well as participants' perceptions of how it could affect their language learning necessities and goals, drawing upon the insights of Estaji and Rahimi (2018), Dooly and Vallejo Rubinstein (2018), and Meshkat and Birjandi (2003).

Indeed, by exploring this relationship, the researchers aim to enhance the understanding of how proficiency in speaking ability correlates with the development of ICC, particularly within the context of Iranian EFL learners immersed in an Advanced Communication course. This study's practical implications will benefit educators, researchers, and practitioners in the field of language education, providing insights that can be applied to enhance intercultural communication and language proficiency.

2. Review of the Related Literature

In the ever-changing field of English language education, effective teaching methods now include promoting ICC (Hang & Zhang, 2023). The development of ICC among language learners is crucial for effective communication across cultures. This is particularly important in places like Iran, where English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners interact with diverse cultures and languages online.

Online speaking courses offer various benefits for Iranian EFL students. They enable learners to engage in real-life conversations, interact with classmates from diverse cultural backgrounds, and utilize multimedia tools for improved learning. However, these courses also come with specific challenges (Fathi et al., 2023; Mirzaei & Forouzandeh, 2013). These include a lack of face-to-face interaction, potential

technological difficulties, and the possibility that cultural nuances may be overlooked in virtual exchanges. Addressing these challenges requires collaborative efforts from educators to establish engaging and culturally sensitive virtual classrooms. These environments should promote active participation and create a supportive community atmosphere to ensure that students feel connected and valued in their learning journey (Liao & Li, 2023).

However, several challenges have been identified in this area. According to Ahmed (2023) and Olaya and Gómez Rodríguez (2013), language learners often struggle with effectively communicating in a second language due to a lack of cultural knowledge. This lack of cultural understanding can lead to misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and stereotypes during intercultural communication. Moreover, insufficient emphasis on the speaking ability of language learners within the context of intercultural communication has been noted in the literature. The link between speaking ability and ICC is crucial but often overlooked. By examining the relationship between speaking ability and the development of ICC, it becomes evident that effective spoken communication across cultures heavily relies on an individual's cultural awareness and sensitivity.

Furthermore, the integration of culture into the practice of teaching a second language has been highlighted as a critical challenge in language instruction (Bastos & Araújo e Sá, 2015; Byram, 2012; Choi & Nunan, 2018; Estaji & Tabrizi, 2022). Many studies, including those by Bastos and Araújo e Sá (2015) and Estaji and Tabrizi (2022) emphasize the need for more social and cultural knowledge about the first and second language among learners and language teachers. In addressing the complexities of fostering ICC and speaking ability, it is essential to consider pedagogical strategies and activities that promote cultural sensitivity and effective communication across cultures (McIntosh et al., 2017).

The intricate connection between language and culture has been a significant area of study in Applied Linguistics since its inception in the theory of Linguistic Relativity and the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis. These theories propose that any language's fundamental components are inseparable from its users' perspectives, influencing how a language group perceives the world. Scholars like Reimann (2022) emphasize this correlation, indicating a close relationship between language and culture. Language not only reflects culture, as noted by Cakır (2006) but is also

influenced and shaped by it. Therefore, teaching a language inherently involves teaching its associated culture, as Holme (2010) highlighted. When teaching culture, Cakir (2006) stressed that while factual information holds value, it is not sufficient for insightful learning.

Byram (2012) suggests that developing cultural awareness can enhance critical thinking. Integrating language and culture education provides an international and intercultural perspective, enriching the learning experience. Furthermore, the increasing interaction with people from different cultures has sparked debates, conflicts, and human interest. It has made knowledge of cultural issues proactive, no longer solely a response to culture clashes but also a necessity for building lasting relationships (Puspita Dewi, 2023; Simsek, 2014; Symeou & Karagiorgi, 2018).

At first, the concept of communicative competence was developed to understand the process of acquiring a first language. It emphasizes the acquisition of grammatical competence and the ability to use language accurately (Lenkaitis et al., 2020). Additionally, it underscores sociolinguistic competence and its significance in enhancing communicative language teaching (Lopez-Rocha, 2016). Hua (2015) characterizes intercultural competence as an ongoing process involving the development of skills, knowledge, and attitudes and emphasizes its importance for effective communication and behaviour with individuals from different cultures. Furthermore, Boye and Byram (2017) define intercultural competence as the ability to interact successfully with individuals from diverse cultures. ICC is the ability to establish mutual understanding among people with different social identities and interact with individuals as multifaceted human beings possessing multiple identities and individuality (Wei et al., 2021).

In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), ICC has become an essential requirement due to globalization and the integration of diverse communities worldwide (Olaya & Gómez Rodríguez, 2013). Language teaching aims to equip learners with both linguistic rules and cultural awareness to navigate cultural differences, avoid misinterpretations, and understand life in foreign cultures. ICC differs from intercultural competence in fields such as human resource management, psychology, anthropology, and communication studies, as it explicitly addresses second language learning and teaching and the cultural sensitivities associated with them (Yeh & Lai, 2019).

Boye and Byram (2017) state that ICC depends on an individual's communicative competence in a foreign language and their intercultural proficiency when using that language. Consequently, all foreign language users exhibit a combination of intercultural and communicative competence, constituting ICC.

To enhance ICC, teachers encourage students to engage in activities that develop intercultural knowledge and skills for communication in target communities. Teachers are advised to integrate intercultural issues into the curriculum, materials, and classroom activities, providing students with opportunities to learn and practice skills related to reflecting, interpreting, communicating, and interacting within the target culture (Byram, 2012).

Byram (1997) asserts that successful communication depends on the abilities of both interlocutors, even if one is using their native language. The concept of ICC emphasizes the need for both parties to possess knowledge, attitudes, and skills that aid understanding and enable them to navigate potential misunderstandings and communication breakdowns resulting from cultural differences. Ultimately, the concept of ICC suggests that effective communication in a second or foreign language within a foreign culture requires communicators to acquire skills and abilities supporting their assimilation into other cultures (Britton & Lorimer Leonard, 2020).

In language education, ICC encompasses the ability to effectively and appropriately interact with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. Prominent authors such as Bastos and Araújo e Sá (2015), Byram (2012), and Choi and Nunan (2018) have extensively studied ICC, highlighting its pivotal role in fostering learners' cultural awareness and their capacity to communicate across different cultures. Conversely, speaking ability forms a fundamental aspect of language proficiency. Recent studies by Ismailov (2021) and Lopez-Rocha (2016) have underscored the critical importance of speaking skills in language acquisition. These authors have explored various pedagogical approaches to enhance spoken communication proficiency among language learners.

The relationship between ICC and speaking ability has garnered increasing attention in educational research. Authors such as Eren (2023) and Estaji and Tabrizi (2022) have delved into the correlation between ICC and speaking proficiency, highlighting the interdependent nature of these two components in language learning.

Their studies suggest that a strong foundation in ICC can positively impact learners' speaking ability, particularly in intercultural communication. Furthermore, McIntosh et al. (2017) and Allen (2008) have explored the connection between cultural understanding and speaking proficiency. Their work emphasizes the role of cultural knowledge in enhancing learners' speaking skills and highlights the significance of integrating cultural content into language instruction to promote effective communication. The literature underscores a clear interrelationship between ICC and speaking ability in language learning. The studies by various authors highlight the importance of ICC in fostering cultural awareness and effective intercultural communication, which might positively impact learners' speaking proficiency. This suggests that integrating ICC and speaking skills in language education might be crucial for promoting comprehensive language competence. This research will provide insights into how ICC influences the speaking skills of Iranian learners, taking into account the country's unique cultural dynamics and language education environment. Ultimately, the following research questions were recognized:

1. Is there any statistically significant relationship between ICC and the speaking ability of Iranian EFL learners?
2. How do Iranian EFL learners perceive the relationship between ICC and speaking ability and its impact on meeting their language learning needs and objectives?

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

To conduct the study, the researchers utilized convenience sampling, selecting seven intact classes from two branches of Islamic Azad University. All students in these seven classes participated in the quantitative phase of the study. To ensure ethical standards, informed consent procedures and confidentiality measures were implemented, confirming that participants were aware of the purpose of the study and that their privacy was protected. In the quantitative phase, 154 advanced EFL students pursuing a Bachelor's degree in English translation participated, while 60 students participated in the qualitative phase. The smaller number of participants in the qualitative phase was due to the targeted nature of this phase, which aimed to gather in-depth insights from a selected group of students willing and able to provide more

detailed feedback on their experiences and perspectives. This approach allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomena being studied.

The participants had enrolled in Advanced Communication courses delivered through an online platform (VADANA). The research aimed to investigate the relationship between ICC and speaking proficiency as well as the perceptions of the participants on how it impacted their language learning needs and objectives. Table 2.1 presents demographic information regarding the gender and age distribution of the participants. Of the 154 individuals surveyed, 55 were male (35.72%) and 99 were female (64.28%). In terms of age, 96 respondents were under 20 years old (62.34%), 47 were aged between 21 and 26 (30.52%), and 11 were over 26 years old (7.14%). The table also reveals a higher proportion of females (64.28%) than males (35.72%) in the surveyed population. Additionally, the majority (62.34%) were under 20, indicating a relatively young demographic profile. The smaller percentages in the older age groups suggest a predominantly young sample.

Table 1.

Demographic Information

		Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	55	35.72
	Female	99	64.28
	Total	154	100.0
Age	< 20	96	62.34
	21-26	47	30.52
	>26	11	7.14
	Total	154	100.0

In order to ensure the participants were well-informed and their information was safeguarded, the researchers followed informed consent procedures and confidentiality measures. The participants were provided with clear and understandable information about the objectives, procedures, and benefits of the study, as well as their rights. They provided voluntary consent before participating. The researchers assured the participants that their data would be kept confidential and anonymous whenever possible. This involved removing identifying information and using codes or pseudonyms to protect their identities. By following these ethical guidelines and practices, the researchers ensured that the participants were well-informed about the purposes of the study and that their information was handled with care and confidentiality.

3.2. Instruments

Considering the instruments, the researchers used the following:

First, the researchers used the Oxford Placement Test (OPT) to assess participants' English proficiency. The test measures grammar and language usage and is known for its reliability in accurately placing students in suitable language courses. It covers reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills and provides automated scoring and detailed feedback. Developed by Oxford University Press, the test is widely used and ensures consistent and dependable outcomes.

The test enjoyed a reliability index of .83. The reliability index of .83 can be considered as "appropriate" based on the criteria proposed by Fulcher and Davidson, (2007, p. 107), who believe that "Tests that do not achieve reliabilities of 0.7 are normally considered to be too unreliable for use, and high-stakes tests are generally expected to have reliability estimates in excess of 0.8 or even 0.9".

Second, a questionnaire (ICCQ) constructed based on Deardorff framework by Mirzaei and Forouzandeh (2013) was adapted to measure participants' intercultural communicative competence. This framework relies on some intercultural experts' thoughts—and is very relevant to L2-learning settings. Moreover, the instrument received two experts' judgments. The questionnaire assesses knowledge, skills, and attitude through a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Knowledge items evaluate cultural self-awareness, culture-related information, linguistic knowledge, and sociolinguistic awareness. Skill items assess the participants' skill to communicate and transfer meaning across cultures. Lastly, attitude items measure the participants' respect and openness to different cultures and their ambiguity tolerance. Prior to execution, the questionnaire underwent preliminary testing to guarantee clarity and comprehension among participants. The prosperous pilot study illustrated that students grasped the items and scale, confirming the questionnaire's reliability. It possessed a satisfactory reliability estimate (= .71) using Cronbach's alpha.

Third, the researchers developed the speaking test, which consisted of two separate parts. The first section was adapted from the IELTS test; the speaking part and the second section was based on the ability of students to discuss cultural subjects. IELTS, the International English Language Testing System, intends to

calculate the language proficiency of non-native speakers of English. It evaluates the examinees speaking, listening, reading and writing skills. It is designed for both academic and vocational purposes. However, IELTS is perceived to have embedded cultural biases in its subjects and construction (McCarthy & Zhang, 2023). They noticed cultural biases regarding Western culture in the speaking test content. Some scholars perceive this as a potential problem. However, in this study, as the focus was on cultural issues, it seems reasonable to use a culture-based test to measure the speaking ability of the learners to support the results obtained from the ICC questionnaire.

In the second part of the speaking test, the researchers aimed to study learners' speaking skills regarding their ability to communicate and discuss cultural and intercultural issues with a classmate. Therefore, learners in groups of two were presented with cultural subjects like stereotypes, celebrations in different countries, pets and their role in families and other related topics, and they were supposed to think for a minute and discuss together for another minute and then start to speak with each other. Again, two raters (IELTS trainers) administered this speaking test, and they rated it. Their ratings demonstrated acceptable inter-rater reliability. This detailed approach allowed for a comprehensive analysis of the participants' speaking abilities.

Forth, in the qualitative phase, a semi-structured interview was conducted to gather participants' thoughts and opinions about cultural and intercultural issues, their importance in learning a language, their likelihood of learning them now and in the future, and their preferred ways to learn them. The semi-structured format allowed for flexibility in questioning, enabling participants to express their views openly while ensuring that all relevant topics were covered. Additionally, the interviews aimed to understand the importance of including cultural and intercultural issues in the foreign language learning programs. The researcher ensured the reliability and validity of the interview questions through a comprehensive process. This involved employing a semi-structured interview format to ensure consistency in question wording, order, and scoring criteria. To further validate the questions, three experts in the field ensured that the interview questions directly aligned with competencies and assessed relevant constructs related to the topic and objective of the study.

3.3. Procedure

The research utilized an explanatory mixed-method approach, incorporating qualitative and quantitative methodologies for gathering and analyzing data to investigate the relationship between ICC and speaking ability, as well as how learners perceived this nexus in their language learning process. This methodological decision facilitated a more in-depth exploration of the research questions, allowing the researchers to gain insights from various perspectives and validate the findings through multiple lenses. Indeed, embracing a mixed-method design aimed to strengthen the rigor and comprehensiveness of the analysis, ultimately contributing to a more robust understanding of the investigated phenomenon. Moreover, integrating both qualitative and quantitative data enhanced the accuracy and reliability of the findings (Riazi & Candlin, 2014).

To carry out the study, the researcher used convenience sampling to select seven intact classes from two branches of Islamic Azad University. The study was conducted after a two-and-a-half-month (ten sessions) Advanced Communication course provided through VADANA, an online platform designed specifically for Islamic Azad University. VADANA offers a wide range of courses across different disciplines, providing students with access to quality education regardless of location. The platform is customized to meet the educational needs of the university students. It includes features such as interactive video lectures, discussion forums, and assessment tools to enhance the learning experience.

Prior to the experiment, the OPT test was used to ensure the homogeneity of the participants. Subsequently, the intervention commenced with ten sessions. Different strategies, like using culture capsules and culture narratives, were used to enhance participants' cultural awareness. Each session involved the presentation of an online PowerPoint that delved into various aspects of cultural distinctions between Iran and the English-speaking countries. The titles of the PowerPoints for each session were as follows: Pets, Fast food, The changing families, Parenting culture, Clothing culture, Superstitions, Taboo, Body language, Norms, and Ceremonies. These topics provided insights into various aspects of the English-speaking countries' cultures, including social practices, beliefs, and traditions, enriching students' understanding of the target society.

The first session was presented as a sample, allowing researchers to observe initial responses, behaviors, or outcomes within each group. This sampling method provides insight into the characteristics or dynamics of the participants early in the study, serving as a basis for further analysis or comparison throughout the research process. Also, one of the researchers used an online PowerPoint format to present a culture capsule titled “Pets.” Through this presentation, the researcher delved into various aspects of pet culture, providing insights into the diverse practices and attitudes surrounding pet ownership. This approach allowed participants to explore and understand the nuances of English-speaking countries’ attitudes and behaviors towards pets, offering valuable cultural context and fostering cross-cultural understanding.

Following the presentation, that researcher initiated a discussion by posing three questions that directly related to the material covered in the presentation. These questions served to encourage audience engagement, clarify key points, and stimulate critical thinking about the presented topics. By encouraging questions, the presenter fostered a deeper understanding of the subject matter and created an opportunity for attendees to actively participate in the discourse.

1. Do you have or have you ever had a pet?
2. Are pets an essential part of your culture?
3. What differences and similarities exist in how people treat their pets in English-speaking countries and your home country?

Following the presentation, group discussions commenced, allowing participants to engage in an in-depth analysis and reflection on the content. During these discussions, participants actively delved into various cultural points presented in the session, exchanging perspectives, insights, and personal experiences. Through dialogue and discourse, they collectively explored the nuances of the cultural topics, fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation of the subject matter. These group discussions facilitated knowledge sharing, critical thinking, and the exploration of diverse cultural perspectives among participants.

After the session, students engaged in a comparative analysis, systematically comparing the cultural insights extracted from the capsule with their personal cultural heritage and encounters. By juxtaposing these elements, participants gained a holistic

perspective on cultural differences, fostering a more profound comprehension of cultural variations. This structured methodology enabled students to identify disparities and prompted them to reflect critically on their cultural viewpoints in the context of the information presented. This process encouraged participants to broaden their CCA and develop a more nuanced understanding of cultural diversity. The remaining nine sessions followed a similar procedural structure and were conducted in close succession. However, each session differed in the method used to convey cultural insights.

The researchers assessed the students' speaking proficiency and ICC following the intervention. The ICC of the participants was measured through a meticulously designed and tailored questionnaire that took into account specific aspects relevant to cultural issues. In addition to this, in order to capture a comprehensive understanding of the participants' speaking proficiency, detailed tests were employed to assess various components of their verbal communication skills.

The speaking test was divided into two distinct sections. The first part was based on the IELTS format. In the second part, the researchers focused on evaluating learners' speaking skills, specifically their capacity to engage in discussions about cultural and intercultural topics with a partner. Participants worked in pairs and received prompts on various cultural themes, including stereotypes, celebrations in different countries, the significance of pets within families, and similar subjects. They were instructed to reflect for a minute and then discuss their ideas together for another minute before conversing directly with each other. The test was administered and scored by two raters, both of whom were IELTS trainers. Their evaluations showed good inter-rater reliability, enabling a thorough assessment of the participants' speaking abilities.

In the qualitative phase, the researcher conducted focused group semi-structured interviews with 60 students in six two-hour sessions, each session lasting 15 to 30 minutes. The students were divided into twelve groups of five. Before conducting the interviews, procedures for obtaining informed consent were established to uphold ethical standards. All interviews were in English and recorded. The sessions began with the ice-breaking questions to quickly engage the students and set the stage for the main part of the interview. Several key strategies were implemented to ensure the reliability and dependability of the interviews. The

researchers conducted initial pilot tests with two interviewees to identify and correct potential issues in the questions or format. The researchers then used expert reviews to ensure the interview questions adequately covered the intended topic and to provide feedback on the relevance and clarity of the questions. In addition, the researchers utilized multiple raters, where more than one person evaluated the responses, and calculated inter-rater reliability to ensure consistent interpretation of responses, minimizing individual biases. The researchers continuously refined and adjusted the questions based on feedback and findings from initial interviews to improve clarity and relevance. Each interview followed a standardized structure and procedure to ensure consistency.

Participants' thoughts, feelings, and perceptions about ICC and speaking ability were obtained in this phase. Content analysis was used to scrutinize the gathered data and gain deeper insights into the subject matter. The qualitative findings were combined with quantitative data to comprehensively address the research questions. This collective analysis resulted in a more nuanced interpretation of the outcome of the study.

Detailed notes and documentation were maintained during each interview session to accurately and objectively capture responses. These strategies collectively aimed to uphold the reliability and dependability of the interview process, ensuring that candidate evaluations were fair, consistent, and aligned with the desired criteria.

4. Results and Discussion

This study was undertaken to achieve the following two objectives. First, it explored any significant correlation between speaking ability and ICC. Second, it unveiled Iranian EFL learners' perceptions of the relationship between ICC and speaking ability and its impact on meeting their language learning needs and objectives.

The data collected were analyzed through Pearson Correlation, using SPSS in the quantitative phase and MAXQDA in the qualitative phase to analyze the content of the interviews as data analysis tools.

4.1. Quantitative Phase

The first research question stated, “Is there any statistically significant correlation between speaking ability and intercultural communicative competence?” Using the statistical technique of Pearson Correlation, assumes the normality of the data and homogeneity of variances. Table 2 shows the skewness and kurtosis indices of normality. Since all values were within the ranges of ± 2 , it was concluded that the normality assumption was achieved. It should be noted that the criteria of ± 2 were proposed by Bachman (2005), Bae and Bachman (2010), and George and Mallery (2020).

Table 2.

Skewness and Kurtosis Indices of Normality

Group		N	Skewness		Kurtosis	
			Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
G1	OPT	50	-.200	.337	.653	.662
	SP test	50	.200	.337	-.601	.662
	ICC Q	50	.018	.337	-.333	.662
G2	OPT	49	-.579	.340	.537	.668
	SP test	49	-.234	.340	-.297	.668
	ICC Q	49	.050	.340	-.626	.668
G3	OPT	55	-.238	.322	-.258	.634
	SP test	55	.259	.322	.095	.634
	ICC Q	55	-.096	.322	-.251	.634

Note. OPT = Oxford Placement Test, SP = Speaking, and ICC = Intercultural Communicative Competence.

Besides the assumption of normality, which was explored, Pearson Correlation considers the homogeneity of groups’ variances. The non-significant results of the Levene’s test (Table 3) indicated that the assumption of homogeneity of variances was retained on the ICC test ($F(2, 151) = 2.17, p > .05$).

Table 3.

Levene’s Test of Homogeneity of Variances for Intercultural Communicative Competence Questionnaire

		Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
ICC Q	Based on Mean	2.195	2	151	.115
	Based on Median	2.175	2	151	.117
	Based on Median and with adjusted df	2.175	2	143.779	.117
	Based on trimmed mean	2.179	2	151	.117

Table 4 shows the KR-21 reliability index for the OPT test. The test enjoyed a reliability index of .83. The reliability index of .83 can be considered as “appropriate” based on the criteria proposed by Fulcher and Davidson (2007, p. 107) who believed that, “Tests that do not achieve reliabilities of 0.7 are normally considered to be too unreliable for use, and high-stakes tests are generally expected to have reliability estimates in excess of 0.8 or even 0.9”.

Table 4.

Descriptive Statistics and KR-21 Reliability for Oxford Placement Test

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
OPT	154	2	49	29.04	9.137	83.477
KR-21	.83					

Table 5 shows Cronbach’s alpha reliability indices for ICC. It enjoyed reliability indice of .950. The reliability indices for ICC can be considered appropriate, as noted by Tseng et al. (2006), Dörnyei and Taguchi (2009) who believed that Cronbach’s alpha value of .70 is the adequate reliability index for an instrument. However, George and Mallery (2020, p. 244) believe that, “there is no set interpretation as to what is an acceptable alpha value. A rule of thumb that applies to most situations is; >.9 excellent, >.8 good, > .7 acceptable, >.6 questionable, >.5 poor and < .5 unacceptable”. Based on these criteria, it can be concluded that the ICC enjoyed excellent, i.e. $\geq .90$ reliability indices.

Table 5.

Reliability Statistics

	Cronbach’s Alpha	N of Items
ICC Q	.950	22

Finally, Table 6 shows the inter-rater reliability indices for speaking tests. The results showed that there were significant agreements between the two raters on speaking tests($r(152) = .949$ representing a large effect size, $p < .05$).

Table 6.

Pearson Correlations for speaking tests

		Speaking R2
Speaking T	Pearson Correlation	.840**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	154

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 7 shows the results of the Pearson Correlation. The results ($r(152[1]) = .783$ representing a large effect size [2], $p < .05$) indicated that there was a significant correlation between speaking ability and ICC.

Table 7.

Pearson Correlation between Speaking and ICC

		Intercultural Communicative Competence
Speaking	Pearson Correlation	.783**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	154

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

4.2. Qualitative Phase

The second research question addressed Iranian learners' perceptions of the relationship between Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) and their speaking ability and the influence of this relationship on their language learning needs and objectives.

To answer this qualitative research question, the researcher employed MAXQDA, a comprehensive qualitative data analysis software designed to support the systematic analysis of textual data. MAXQDA facilitates the organization, coding, and interpretation of qualitative data from various sources, including text, audio, and video. By utilizing the tools available in MAXQDA, the researcher could explore themes, identify patterns, and uncover nuanced insights within the qualitative responses collected during the study. This approach ensured a rigorous thematic analysis, allowing for a detailed examination of the qualitative data. Specifically, the researcher engaged in coding and categorizing data segments, which facilitated the identification of recurring themes and the analysis of relationships among different data elements. Additionally, MAXQDA's visualization and reporting features provided further support in presenting findings clearly and coherently, thereby enhancing the overall validity

and reliability of the qualitative analysis.

Upon collecting the qualitative data, the researcher undertook a systematic effort to identify emerging patterns through content analysis with MAXQDA. This method effectively transformed a substantial data volume into organized and concise summaries of key findings. By identifying and categorizing specific words, themes, or concepts, the researcher could assess the presence and frequency of these elements.

The analysis involved coding the data into manageable segments, which were scrutinized to reveal patterns and trends. This systematic approach allowed for an accurate interpretation of participants' experiences and perspectives, fostering a comprehensive understanding of their viewpoints. By categorizing the data, content analysis enabled an in-depth exploration of participants' perceptions and experiences related to various issues, providing valuable insights. Consequently, this method empowered the researcher to draw meaningful conclusions regarding the participants' perceptions of cultural nuances and the relationship between ICC and speaking ability.

4.2.3. Interview Results

4.2.3.1. Understanding of Cultural Nuances

In the interviews, Iranian EFL learners emphasized the significance of ICC in language education. ICC is essential for developing speaking ability, fostering a deeper understanding of cultural nuances, and facilitating effective communication in a global context.

ICC is a fundamental component of speaking. It involves preparing individuals with the attitudes, knowledge, and skills needed to navigate cultural diversity effectively. (Some students stated this idea in the interviews but in different words.)

Or

ICC goes beyond surface-level cultural understanding. It empowers language learners to critically evaluate both explicit and implicit aspects of cultural values, enabling a more profound comprehension of the intricacies within diverse cultural contexts. (Some students expressed this opinion in the interviews but in different words.)

Or

The development of ICC is not just important, it's empowering for effective

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communication in a global context. It equips language learners with the potentiality to engage critically with cultural differences, contributing to successful and respectful communication across borders. (Some students stated this attitude in the interviews but in different words.)

The qualitative analysis underscores the importance of understanding cultural nuances, which resonates with the quantitative findings. By acknowledging and incorporating cultural nuances into interventions, such as language learning programs or intercultural training, practitioners can better address learners' diverse needs and contexts, ultimately enhancing their ability to effectively communicate and interact across cultures.

4.2.3.2. Recognition of Learners' Perceptions' Crucial Role in Fostering Intercultural Competence

The participants stated that their perceptions were crucial in shaping their attitudes towards ICC in language learning.

Perceptions are instrumental in guiding and influencing how learners perceive and engage with intercultural aspects of language learning (As stated by a student).

Or

Learners' perceptions impact their learning approaches, affecting how they acquire intercultural competence in language education. (Some students stated this idea in the interviews but in different words.)

Or

We are increasingly encouraged and expected to integrate more intercultural elements into our teaching practices, reflecting the growing recognition of our perceptions' crucial role in fostering intercultural competence among us. (Some students stated this attitude in the interviews but in different words.)

This finding underscores the importance of considering learners' perspectives and experiences in intercultural education initiatives. By recognizing and integrating learners' perceptions into the educational process, educators can effectively enhance students' intercultural competence, leading to more successful intercultural communication and interaction.

4.2.3.3. Practical Aspects of Integrating ICC into Language Learning

Some participants discussed Iranian EFL learners' perceptions, practices, and challenges regarding raising their ICC. In other words, they talked about the extent to which the courses corresponded to their needs and objectives in language learning. It reveals insights into the practical aspects of integrating intercultural competence into language learning, acknowledging success and obstacles. EFL learners face several challenges in enhancing their ICC.

Learning ICC encounters challenges due to the absence of a universally accepted model, making it difficult to establish a consistent framework for intercultural communication. (Some students expressed this opinion in the interviews but in different words.)

Or

EFL teachers may not be adequately prepared to incorporate ICC into language classes, which can hinder the effective transfer of these skills to learners (As acknowledged by a student).

Or

The rapidly globalized world presents new cultural dynamics, and learners may need help to keep up with diverse cultural nuances, affecting their ICC development (As admitted by a student).

Or

EFL teachers' beliefs and practices vary, impacting the consistency and effectiveness of ICC instruction in developing speaking ability. Aligning these aspects is crucial for a coherent approach to intercultural competence. (a student stated in the interview)

The qualitative results complement the quantitative findings by providing deeper insights into the observed outcomes. Furthermore, delving into the qualitative analysis sheds light on the practical implications of embedding intercultural competence within language learning.

4.2.3.4. Interdependence of Language and Culture

The assessment of ICC in Iranian EFL learners was recognized as crucial. The interdependence of language and culture was emphasized, acknowledging the need for learners to develop cultural awareness alongside language proficiency and

speaking ability.

Recognizing the crucial role of assessing intercultural competence in Iranian EFL learners is essential. It would help to enhance their power to navigate and communicate efficiently in diverse cultural contexts. (Some students mentioned this opinion in the interviews but in different words.)

Therefore, it was recognized that language learning is not isolated from cultural understanding; instead, they are intricately linked and mutually enriching. So, developing ICC serves effectively to promote language skills including speaking and foster a more profound appreciation of diverse cultures.

4.2.3.5. Exposure to Diverse Cultures

Some participants focused on different cultural aspects in Iran and expressed their perceptions of ICC. The findings contribute to understanding how learners can benefit from developing intercultural competence in a diverse educational setting.

Exposure to diverse cultures fosters empathy and a deeper understanding of others' perspectives, promoting a more inclusive environment for all learners and educators (As suggested by a student).

Or

ICC improves communication skills by enabling learners to navigate linguistic and cultural differences, making them more effective communicators in multicultural contexts (As noted by a student).

Or

Learners become better-equipped global citizens with a heightened awareness of cultural diversity, preparing them for engagement in an interconnected world (Some students stated this attitude in the interviews but in different words.).

Or

By developing ICC, learners become culturally sensitive, appreciating and respecting differences in values, behaviors, and customs (Some students emphasized on this in the interviews but in different words.).

Or

ICC enhances academic and professional success, as individuals who can effectively collaborate in diverse teams are sought after in today's globalized workforce (Some students noted in the interviews but in different words.).

The combination of qualitative and quantitative findings illustrates the significant relationship between ICC and speaking ability. The qualitative emphasis on cultural exposure complemented the quantitative outcomes, providing deeper insights into the mechanisms underlying ICC development. More precisely, Iranian EFL learners recognize the intrinsic connection between ICC, and their language learning goals including the ability to speak. The emphasis is on preparing learners to navigate cross-cultural communication effectively.

4.2.3.6. The Significance of Intercultural Competence Courses in Foreign Language Teaching and Learning

The participants emphasized the significant impact of ICC training courses on EFL learners' cultural awareness. The assessment of ICC in Iranian EFL learners revealed the heightened significance of ICC in foreign language teaching and learning, emphasizing the positive influence of such courses.

Introducing cultural knowledge through EFL course materials positively influences our attitudes toward different cultures, fostering a more profound cultural awareness (Some students revealed this attitude in the interviews but in different words.).

Or

The ICC framework is pivotal in elevating our understanding of native cultures (As claimed by a student).

Or

I think teaching culture in EFL classrooms improves our awareness and curiosity towards different cultures, contributing significantly to our cultural understanding (Some students expressed this opinion in the interviews but in different words.).

4.2.3.7. Encouragement for Language Learner's Learning Opportunities

ICC courses encourage language learners to find learning opportunities that guide them in observing the clear connection between language and culture. Learners recognized the significance of cultural understanding in language acquisition including speaking ability.

ICC in the foreign language classroom provides practical lessons for fostering a deep understanding of culture alongside language learning (Some students

stated this idea in the interviews but in different words.).

Or

The relationship between language and culture is intricate and complex; a specific language often points to a distinct cultural group. ICC is crucial for language learners (Some students suggested this in the interviews but in different words.).

4.2.3.8. ICC and Speaking Ability

In the Iranian EFL context, learners perceive the relationship between ICC and speaking ability as highly impactful. It is evident that learners who develop ICC experience improvements in their speaking abilities. By understanding various cultural contexts, they gain confidence and fluency in conversations. This enhancement is crucial as it allows learners to engage more effectively and appropriately in diverse communicative situations, thereby comprehensively meeting their language learning goals. Iranian EFL learners see ICC as a vital component in achieving both linguistic proficiency and cultural awareness, which are essential for successful communication in a globalized world.

Intercultural Communicative Competence has greatly enhanced my speaking ability. Understanding different cultural contexts has made me more confident and fluent in my conversations (Some students proposed this opinion in the interviews but in different words.).

Or

By developing ICC, I feel more prepared to engage in discussions with native speakers. It has broadened my perspective and allowed me to use the language more effectively in real-world scenarios (Some students expressed this view in the interviews but in different words.).

In the Iranian EFL context, the development of ICC significantly impacts learners' speaking ability. This preparation comes from a broadened perspective, which helps learners understand and navigate different cultural contexts. Consequently, they can use the language more effectively in real-world scenarios, which aligns with their language learning needs and objectives. This indicates that ICC not only enhances linguistic skills, but also equips learners with the cultural awareness necessary for effective communication.

The relationship between ICC and speaking ability is crucial for meeting my language learning objectives. It helps me to not only learn the language but also to use it appropriately in different cultural settings (Some students stated the same idea in the interviews but in different words.).

In the Iranian EFL context, learners perceive the relationship between ICC and speaking ability as essential for achieving their language learning goals. By developing ICC, learners are better equipped to understand cultural nuances and communicate more confidently and fluently with native speakers. This holistic approach to language learning ensures that learners can meet their objectives by becoming competent and culturally aware speakers, thus enhancing their linguistic skills and intercultural understanding.

Improving my ICC has made my speaking more natural and less forced. I can now interact more easily with people from different cultures, which is essential for my professional goals (Some participants indicated this view in the interviews but in different words.).

In the context of Iranian EFL learners, the students perceive ICC as having a strong and positive impact on their speaking abilities. By improving their ICC, learners find that their speech becomes more natural and spontaneous, reducing the feeling of being forced or artificial. This enhanced ability to communicate effectively with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds is crucial not only for their personal language proficiency but also for their professional aspirations. ICC development equips Iranian EFL learners with the necessary skills to meet their language learning objectives, aligning their speaking proficiency with real-world and professional demands.

Understanding the cultural nuances through ICC training has significantly impacted my speaking proficiency. It has given me the necessary skills to navigate conversations more easily and confidently. (Some students stated the same idea in the interviews but in different words.).

In the Iranian EFL context, learners perceive the relationship between ICC and speaking ability as highly beneficial for their language learning needs and objectives. Specifically, developing ICC through training helps learners grasp cultural nuances, enhancing their speaking proficiency. This improvement enables them to engage in

conversations more effortlessly and confidently. The ability to navigate intercultural interactions effectively meets their objectives of using English in diverse real-world scenarios. It aligns with their professional goals, making them more competent and culturally aware speakers.

5. Conclusion

The study aimed to address two key research questions: the relationship between intercultural communicative competence (ICC) and the speaking ability of Iranian EFL learners and the impact of ICC on learners' perceptions of their language learning needs and objectives. The findings establish a significant positive correlation between these two aspects; as learners' ICC increases, their speaking ability significantly improves. This correlation suggests that learners with a deeper understanding of cultural nuances are more adept at navigating verbal interactions in a foreign language, ultimately influencing their self-perception as competent communicators. Additionally, learners' reflections on their educational experiences reinforce that developing ICC is vital for enhancing linguistic skills and achieving broader language learning goals, thereby cementing the interconnectedness of these research questions.

In conclusion, this study sheds light on the significant relationship between intercultural communicative competence (ICC) and the speaking ability of Iranian EFL learners. The findings indicate that as learners enhance their ICC, their speaking proficiency improves, emphasizing the importance of fostering intercultural skills in language education. Given the growing necessity for effective communication in a globalized world, integrating ICC training into speaking curricula is crucial. Educators must prioritize teaching strategies that promote linguistic skills, cultural awareness, and sensitivity among students.

Moreover, the research highlights EFL learners' perceptions regarding how ICC impacts their language learning objectives. Participants expressed that understanding cultural nuances was vital for developing their speaking skills. This qualitative insight suggests that learners who possess higher ICC are more confident and competent when engaging in spoken interaction across cultures. These insights provide valuable feedback for language educators, enabling them to shape their teaching methods better to meet the learners' communicative needs. The study also underscores the

challenges faced in online learning environments, particularly in the context of Iranian EFL learners. While online speaking courses offer opportunities for authentic interaction, they may also limit face-to-face engagement, essential for creating a culturally rich learning atmosphere. Addressing these challenges will require strategic planning and collaborative efforts among educators to foster an engaging and supportive virtual environment. By adopting culturally responsive teaching practices, educators can better equip language learners to navigate the complexities of intercultural communication.

The findings underscore the need for further research on the intersection of ICC and speaking proficiency within different cultural contexts and educational settings. Future studies could expand on this research by exploring diverse demographics and teaching methodologies, providing a more comprehensive understanding of how ICC can enhance language acquisition. Overall, the exploration of ICC and speaking ability contributes to the academic discourse and improves language education practices, fostering both linguistic and cultural fluency in students.

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