

Research Article

## Investigating the Effect of Linguistic Knowledge versus Cultural Knowledge in the Formation of Intercultural Competence among Iranian EFL Learners

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### Abstract

Intercultural communication is a widespread matter in today's world with the advent of globalization and social media. Thus, this study focused on exploring the role of cultural knowledge and linguistic knowledge in the formation of intercultural competence. The researchers selected 150 Iranian learners through a purposeful sampling procedure in a qualitative design. By using interviews, observation, and reflective journals the required data was collected. The researchers used inductive analysis and thematic analysis to analyze the collected data. The results revealed that cultural knowledge and linguistic knowledge are both equally important in the formation of intercultural competence of Iranian learners. Also, it was found that Iranian learners make use of both linguistic knowledge and cultural knowledge to have effective communication, build trust and rapport, conflict resolution, and avoid linguistic and cultural misunderstandings. This study holds significant value for language teachers, book writers, and curriculum developers in that they should pay more attention to both linguistic knowledge and cultural knowledge in their teaching, book writing, and curriculum development respectively.

**Keywords:** cultural knowledge, intercultural competence, Iranian EFL learners, linguistic knowledge

## **Introduction**

Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) alluded to the ability to interact aptly and effectively with individuals from miscellaneous cultural records (Deardorff, 2006). Jackson (2014) described intercultural competence as a term including goes beyond a cultural stance to a transcultural point. Bouchard (2017) explicated intercultural communication as the capacity to cope with variations in case of encountering discrepancies in our cultural milieu. According to Gay (2000) and Irvine (2003), culture has a vital bearing on the processes of teaching and learning. Nowadays, an increasing fond for intercultural communication has created a wide range of scholars to exactly and comprehensively look over the terms "language", "culture", and "interculture" as vital concepts in transcultural studies from miscellaneous viewpoints (Sharifian & Jamarani, 2013).

Many studies focused on the role of language, emotion, culture, or knowledge related to these elements. For example, Ghorbani and Dowlatabadi (2023) in a quantitative study proved that language, emotion, and culture could be the main macro-needs in the formation of intercultural communication. In another mixed-methods study, Ghorbani and Dowlatabadi (2024) proved that linguistic needs, affective needs, and cultural needs were the major components of intercultural communicative competence. In the same vein, Hariri (2022) stated that when learners are made cognizant of their own culture, and its discrepancies from other cultures, they will show better responses to people from the other culture(s) and are taught to endure variations and refrain from stereotypes. educators are required to prepare foreign learners for cultural milieus to discover shared common grounds to be selected as a point to start interaction (Hariri, 2022). But there exists still a main gap about to what extent linguistic knowledge and cultural knowledge are important in the formation of intercultural competence especially in Iran's context. Thus, this study is significant as it is going to fill this gap by investigating the role and effect of linguistic knowledge and cultural knowledge among Iranian language learners. This study is also important because the final findings could be a great help for language teachers, book writers, and curriculum developers in Iran's educational system. Therefore, the researchers seek to fill the current gap by using a qualitative design to explore the effect of these two knowledge in intercultural competence in depth.

Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) alluded to the ability to interact aptly and effectively with individuals from miscellaneous cultural records (Deardorff, 2006). Jackson (2014) described intercultural competence as a term including goes beyond a cultural stance to a transcultural point. Bouchard (2017) explicated intercultural communication as the capacity to cope with variations in case of encountering discrepancies in our cultural milieu. Thus, English instructors have to not only allow pupils to master linguistic skills but should ameliorate intercultural competence among them so they can nurture the capacity to communicate fruitfully with persons from variant cultural and linguistic backgrounds in transcultural communities. Considering intercultural competence as the main goal of English language teaching, instructors should place themselves as intercultural and language teachers in such situations (Sercu, 2006, 56).

Generally, language teachers put less emphasis on intercultural competence in their teaching process or even ignore it or deem it as a normal by-product of the second culture teaching process (GU, 2016). Even though, language teachers accentuated the transference of second culture knowledge, they didn't improve the learner's intercultural attitude or skills in reality (Gu, 2016). Lloyd and Härtel (2010) identified three sections of intercultural competence including cognitive, affective, and behavioral sections. The cognitive section explained one's ability to understand and translate data; the affective section defined the emotions, views, and personal features; the behavioral section was pertinent to the behavior that persons show when interacting with other cultural people (Lloyd & Härtel, 2010). Five parts are mentioned in the intercultural competence definition (Byram, 2000) which consist of attitude, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness.

According to Gay (2000), and Irvine (2003), Culture has a vital bearing on the processes of teaching and learning. Nowadays, an increasing fond in intercultural communication has created a wide range of scholars to comprehensively look over the terms *language*, *culture* and *interculture* as vital concepts in transcultural studies from miscellaneous viewpoints (Sharifian & Jamarani, 2013).

Byram (1997) maintained that foreign students, i.e., intercultural speakers, can link the knowledge pertinent to second language cultures to their language

ability to utilize language appropriately as the role of the English language has widely turned into an international language Garrido and Alvarez (2006) claimed that to get intercultural speakers it is indispensable to create motivation for language students. As a result, language is not separate from cultures, societies, and milieus (Garrido & Alvarez, 2006).

Samovar et al. (2007) explained the concept of culture as a dramatically intricate, abstract term that has a severe effect on every respect of living. Linguistic capacity is the largest hurdle for international pupils. learners confront language problems in language skills and sub-skills because the means of communication in institutions is English. Many students confront production and understanding problems because English is not their native language though they can speak English (Malakloluntu & Selan, 2011). Language enables persons to develop human traits by learning from experiences; language allows a person to synchronize thoughts and transmit them to another person (Fantini, 1997). Generally speaking, language is considered as a means of cultural development. Language is the First tool of keeping the culture and is the means of transferring culture to new generations (Samovar et al., 2007).

Using language as a means to develop intercultural competence could lead to removing bias and stereotypes and in this way, it leads to the creation of bilingualism and biculturalism (Fantini, 2006). Teaching cultural issues in English classes is an old topic in education and most of the instructors asserted that it is rare to teach a second language without teaching its culture (Kramsh, 2013). Li et al. (2004) in his study emphasized that it is not probable for non-native learners to learn the language without acquiring the cultural elements and that teaching culture has an eye-catching effect on the EFL classroom by saying that the combination of culture and language should be regarded as the final purpose for foreign language teaching and learning. Culture reflects language (Liddicoat, 2008), and is represented and transmitted by language from one generation to the next. Language states cultural realities into words and, is shaped by culture (Kramsch, 1998).

Individuals might encounter various problems in transcultural interactions. The knowledge of the target culture is an inseparable agent as the fundamentals of the language. What is more related was that having no cultural or intercultural

awareness could act as a big obstacle in the understanding of a message that is correct and comprehensible from a linguistic approach. Totally, people are much less patient and tolerant of cultural misunderstandings and cultural shocks compared to grammatical and vocabulary mistakes. (Jie, 2010).

Ghorbani and Dowlatabadi (2023) chose 100 Iranian language teachers in their study and they proved that culture-based instruction was an efficient device in enhancing the intercultural communication levels of Iranian teachers. Also, Ghorbani and Dowlatabadi (2023) in a quantitative study proved that language, emotion, and culture could be the main macro-needs in the formation of intercultural communication. In another mixed-methods study, Ghorbani and Dowlatabadi (2024) proved that linguistic needs, affective needs, and cultural needs were the major components of intercultural communicative competence.

Transcultural interactions concentrate on community features, patterns of thought, different nations, and language-related agents. It also consisted of cultural factors, linguistic factors, and individual styles (Lauring, 2011). Teachers and learners tried to develop cultural identities based on linguistic and cultural elements from their first and second languages and cultures. English language teaching creates the milieu of creating such identities to help students become intercultural speakers (Zhang, 2015). People confront miscellaneous problems in their intercultural interactions and linguistic data is as important as cultural data in intercultural communications but a lack of intercultural awareness could lead to linguistic and cultural misunderstandings. In aggregate, people were much less tolerant of culture-based confusions and culture-based problems compared to grammatical or word slips (Jie, 2010).

Many scholars accentuated that it is impossible to demarcate between language and culture and culture plays an eye-catching role in the language teaching process all over the world. (Almutairi, 2021; Civelek & Toplu, 2021; Ghavamnia, 2020). Culture can be described as something learned, and transferred from one generation to the next, through human behaviors and linguistic communication, often in the form of face-to-face interaction, and without stable frontiers, meaning various concepts based on different situations (Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2012). Snowdon (2018) explained culture as patterns of conduct that

have some congruence and continuation within generations but differentiate among particular groups or populations.

Hariri (2022) stated that when learners became cognizant of their first culture, and its discrepancies from other cultures, they will show better responses to people from the other culture(s) and are taught to endure variations and refrain from stereotypes. Educators are required to prepare foreign learners for cultural milieus to discover common points to be selected as a point to start interaction (Hariri, 2022). It is maintained that culture is the nucleus of the language, and acquaintance with the second culture can be helpful to reinforce the second and foreign language students' English learning. Thus, to have efficient communication and interaction with other English language users, acquiring cultural knowledge is a must. Thus, pupils can utilize a language efficiently, only after cultural matters become a major part of language acquisition procedure (Mohammed, 2020).

Language teachers have to develop tasks that improve the development of intercultural skills to assist foreign students in becoming more capable in terms of cultural knowledge and communication. Byram (1997) accentuated the necessity to develop tasks and processes where foreign or other cultures, conducts, rules, and values are perceived to aid students to create intercultural communicative competence. So, cultural instruction is becoming important in the area of English language teaching (Khataee, 2018) and when writing language syllabi, there should be far more focus on the cultural and intercultural issues, major cultural concepts and terms, and types of culture to use the most suitable teaching guidelines to help foreign students overcome the cultural schisms. Fungchomchoei and Kardkanklai (2016) asserted that Thai teachers respectively have adequate knowledge of intercultural communication needed in an English teaching milieu, but they could use their knowledge in their classrooms.

Intercultural language learning alludes to the use of language to develop an intercultural understanding. Students should learn how to combine and use cultural knowledge in their speaking and writing skills (Eun, 2010). Many researches have shown that combining intercultural language learning can have a big benefit for students. Chen and Yang (2016) described that learners who took

part in an intercultural interaction improved their language skills, cultural knowledge, and attitudes toward other cultures.

Language instructors should become arbiters between cultures. Language instructors could handle variations in their classrooms better if they could understand and see their own cultures and target cultures accurately (Ramos, 2013, p. 207). Gómez (2012) performed a study to recognize how English students acquire intercultural competence through the study of literary texts and, on the other hand, which teaching styles could be helpful to aid these students in developing intercultural ability through the study of literary texts. Gómez (2012) proved that combining language and literature in English as a foreign language not only forms a communicative reading task but also the opportunity to build cultural knowledge through social interaction.

English language as a lingua franca acts as a big bridge for communication among people from multiple languages and cultures. Acquisition of English language as a second language requires more than learning syntactical and lexical rules. What is more important is being able to utilize what you have learned via successful communication tasks and how this cultural knowledge could affect communication. Also, learning English could lead to an understanding of the relationship between language and culture in any society (Husein & Zairai, 2012). Denying the effect of cultural knowledge in intercultural relations is impossible and acquiring cultural knowledge is a must for language learners in language teaching and learning courses (Lin, Gu & Lu, 1990).

Ho (2011) studied the effect of cultural content and intercultural communication on language teaching and concluded that most of the learners rarely participated in intercultural activities in language classrooms. Vo (2017) examined language students' perceptions of intercultural communication competence in language classes. All participants agreed about growing intercultural communication competencies by enhancing their understanding of other cultures through learning or using English. Anyway, the results revealed that language instructors faced problems such as time, lack of cultural knowledge, and English setting. Thus, learners focused more on linguistic assets rather than cultural information (Nguyen, 2013).

Oberste-Berghaus (2024) showed that intercultural competence consists of cultural knowledge, intercultural skills, cultural awareness, and adaptability. Thus, language instructors should use authentic materials with cultural content to foster learners' autonomy and provide opportunities for experiential and reflective learning. Also, the results revealed that language teachers should be trained to develop intercultural understanding and nurture intercultural skills in their students. Thus, the current study's objective is to discover the importance of linguistic knowledge versus cultural knowledge in the formation of intercultural competence among Iranian EFL learners and in this way, the researchers are going to answer to the following research questions:

1. To what extent does linguistic knowledge influence the ability of Iranian language learners to communicate effectively in intercultural contexts, as compared to cultural knowledge?
2. What role does cultural knowledge play in shaping the attitudes and behaviors of Iranian language learners towards intercultural communication, in comparison to linguistic knowledge?
3. Which one is more effective and important in the formation of intercultural competence for Iranian language learners: linguistic or cultural knowledge?

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The current study consists of 150 English language learners from two English institutes in Tehran. The researchers selected learners with upper-intermediate and advanced levels through a purposeful sampling procedure to serve the qualitative purpose of the study. Purposeful sampling is a method widely utilized in qualitative studies for selecting and identifying data-rich cases. Also, factors such as availability, willingness to participate, and ability to transmit experiences and opinions should be taken into account (Patton,2014; Bernard,2017). The age range of the participants was between 18 to 25.

### **Design and Context of Study**



The current study used an interpretivism paradigm (Nickerson, 2022), accompanied by a qualitative approach to disclose the hidden meaning and new concepts. The researchers utilized exploratory qualitative research to probe and discover the answers to the current study research questions. In other words, the researchers used qualitative design to be able to gauge the research problem deeply and directly. The current study is performed in Iran, Tehran city.

### **Instruments**

The current research utilized three major tools for the data-gathering process: structured interviews, reflective journals, and participant observation. A structured interview was selected to simplify a thorough comprehension of the participants' notions, conducts, experiences, and phenomena related to the research topic. The researchers decided to use structured interview as it enhanced the consistency and objectivity of the research process and also mitigate the research bias and participants' discrimination and also this type of interview provided more straightforward and congruent answers based on the research topic and purpose. Reflective journal and Participant observation were used to produce rich and exact qualitative information, allowing for a deeper understanding of the social context and experiences under investigation. Also, it should be mentioned that the researchers of the current study consulted with several colleagues and experts in intercultural studies to gather their opinions about various interview questions but the final decision is made by the main researchers of the present study, and thus The interview questions were formulated by the researchers according to the purpose of the study as follows:

1. To what extent do you think linguistic knowledge is important and effective in acquiring intercultural competence?
2. Do you think that to what extent cultural knowledge is important and effective in acquiring intercultural competence?
3. Which one do you think is more important and effective in acquiring intercultural competence: linguistic knowledge or cultural knowledge?

Besides structured interviews, the researchers used the participants' observations and reflective journals to collect the other required data for the current research study. Regarding reflective journals, the students were asked to

write their reflections about their experiences of doing intercultural role-plays and tasks as well as their feelings and experiences about reading cultural and intercultural passages and completing related tasks, focusing on to what extent these intercultural passages and conversations could contribute to improve their intercultural communicative competence compared to learning linguistic points.

### **Data collection procedure**

The current study consisted of three cycles of data collection, that is, the researchers collected data from interview sessions, observation sessions, and reflective journals respectively. Group Interview sessions lasted 20 minutes for each group of participants and then the interviews were recorded and transcribed for subsequent analyses. It should be noted that the participants could answer the interview questions in English or their mother tongue, Farsi. Since the number of participants was high (150 participants), the researchers divided the participants into groups of five, that is, 30 groups for interview sessions (group interviews). It should be noted that the participants were from various ethnic groups but they mostly used Persian language and English language in their English classes at English institutes. To ensure content validity, all questions in the interview were discussed with another researcher until an inter-rater agreement was reached. Moreover, the researchers were actively involved in class observation by allocating 150 hours to observe the students' performance in intercultural tasks, that is, intercultural role-plays and conversations based on designing intercultural topics. Also, the researchers asked participants to write their feelings and thoughts in their journals during the research process. In other words, regarding reflective journals, the students were asked to write their reflections about their experiences of doing intercultural role-plays and tasks and also their feelings and experiences about reading cultural and intercultural passages and tasks and that to what extent these intercultural passages and conversations could help to improve their intercultural communicative competence compared to learning linguistic points. After finishing the research process, the participants shared their reflective journals with the researchers to read, assess, and evaluate the reflections.

## **Data analysis**

The researchers used inductive content analysis and thematic analysis to analyze the collected data. A detailed qualitative content analysis of the transcripts, reflective journals, and observation was carried out by the researchers. After reading and rereading the transcripts of the interviews, journals, and observation reports thoroughly, key categories were identified in the corpus of the data that reflected students' attitudes and practices toward intercultural competence. The researchers used initial and secondary coding processes (in vivo and descriptive codes) to extract the required codes and categories and then based on Braun and Clark's (2006) model of thematic analysis, all the categories and themes were extracted. Concerning the observation sessions, the researchers attended the students' classes with the permission of the teachers to observe the students' performance in intercultural role-plays and conversations to take notes. All the observation points were written by the researchers without intruding on the performance of the students. The researchers only write what they observe. After finishing the observation sessions which lasted for 150 hours, that is, one hour for each student, the researchers analyzed the reports to extract the main points of the observation process and compare their performance with what they said in interview sessions to show whether there exist consistency or inconsistency between their attitude and practice or not. Regarding the reflective journals, the researchers collected the journals of the students and analyzed the students' writings thematically to extract the core themes and points and then report the findings qualitatively. It should be noted that the researchers also used Kember et al.'s (2008) coding process for analyzing reflective journals which include stages such as understanding, reflection, and critical reflection.

## **Results**

This section deals with the analysis of the interview data and, reflective journals and observation reports. At first, the analysis of the interview transcripts is explained fully, and then the reflective and observation reports are clarified. The interview analysis is tabulated and elaborated based on Braun and Clark's (2006) thematic analysis model. The following tables show the codes and themes for each interview question. The first interview question is:

**IQ.** Do you think that to what extent linguistic knowledge is important and effective in acquiring intercultural competence?

**RQ:** To what extent does linguistic knowledge influence the ability of Iranian language learners to communicate effectively in intercultural contexts, as compared to cultural knowledge?

Table 1 shows the codes and themes for the above-mentioned research question and interview question. All codes and themes were extracted through initial and secondary coding analysis and a careful thematic analysis process. The codes are written in the form of in vivo and descriptive codes.

**Table 1**  
*Codes for the First Interview Questions*

<b>Codes</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Effective communication	<b>51</b>	<b>34</b>
Reduce linguistic misunderstanding	<b>24</b>	<b>16</b>
Build rapport/trust/respect	<b>24</b>	<b>16</b>
Adaptability and flexibility	<b>51</b>	<b>34</b>
Total	<b>150</b>	<b>100</b>

The collected data and codes in Table 1 reveal the effect and importance of linguistic knowledge in the formation of intercultural communication among Iranian learners. The participants believed that linguistic knowledge is important for successful intercultural communication since linguistic knowledge could lead to effective communication among various cultural backgrounds individuals, reducing linguistic misunderstanding, better conveyance of accurate emotions and thoughts, building rapport, trust, and respect, and fostering stronger connection by

being flexible and adaptable. Also, linguistic knowledge could help meaningful interaction and bridge the communication gaps which lead to mutual intercultural understanding. In other words, participants maintained that the use of linguistic knowledge as a direct means of communication is essential for fruitful intercultural communication. The codes of Table 1 showed that the highest frequency and percent belonged to effective communication and adaptability/flexibility and the next percent and frequency belonged to reducing misunderstanding and building rapport, respect, and trust. Table 2 reveals the codes and data for the second interview and research question:

**IQ:** Do you think that to what extent cultural knowledge is important and effective to acquire intercultural competence?

**RQ:** What role does cultural knowledge play in shaping the attitudes and behaviors of Iranian language learners towards intercultural communication, in comparison to linguistic knowledge?

**Table 2**  
*Codes for the Second Interview Question*

<b>Codes</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>(%)</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Avoid cultural misunderstanding	<b>24</b>		<b>16</b>
Navigate cross-cultural interaction	<b>24</b>		<b>16</b>
Adaptability and flexibility	<b>27</b>		<b>18</b>
Building rapport/trust/respect	<b>27</b>		<b>18</b>
Cross-cultural understanding	<b>12</b>		<b>8</b>
Context Interpretation	<b>12</b>		<b>8</b>
Conflict resolution	<b>24</b>		<b>16</b>
Total	<b>150</b>		<b>100</b>

The collected data and codes in Table 2 reveal the effect and importance of cultural knowledge in the formation of intercultural communication among Iranian learners. The participants believed that cultural knowledge is important for successful intercultural communication since it avoids cultural misunderstanding, navigates cross-cultural interaction, fosters adaptability and

flexibility, builds rapport and respect, reinforces cross-cultural understanding, and also helps the interpretation of context and conflict resolution. In other words, the participants held that cultural knowledge could help them navigate and understand the norms, behaviors, and values of other cultures. Also, cultural knowledge helps to adapt their communication styles in diverse cultural settings to communicate successfully in intercultural contexts and develop intercultural competence. In the meantime, cultural knowledge allows participants to interpret the context of intercultural communication more effectively. By recognizing cultural cues, non-verbal communication, and subtle nuances in intercultural interactions, participants can adjust their attitudes and behaviors to be more culturally appropriate and responsive in communicative exchanges. Also, cultural knowledge equips language learners with the skills to navigate conflicts or misunderstandings that may arise in intercultural communication. By understanding the cultural context of communication, learners can approach disagreements or challenges with cultural sensitivity, seeking resolutions that consider cultural nuances. Table 3 shows the codes and data for the third interview and research questions:

**IQ:** Which one do you think is more important and effective in acquiring intercultural competence: linguistic knowledge or cultural knowledge?

**RQ:** Which one is more effective and important in the formation of intercultural competence for Iranian language learners: linguistic or cultural knowledge?

**Table 3**

*Codes for the Third Interview Question*

<b>Codes</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent (%)</b>
Equally important	<b>75</b>	<b>50</b>
Equally significant	<b>30</b>	<b>20</b>
Both crucial	<b>30</b>	<b>20</b>
Fifty-fifty percent	<b>15</b>	<b>10</b>
Total	<b>150</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 3 revealed that both cultural knowledge and linguistic knowledge are crucial for intercultural communication and they both have a crucial role and effect in the formation of intercultural competence. Linguistic knowledge and cultural knowledge are equally important since both of them help to effective communication, better adaptation and flexibility, and understanding and navigation of cultural norms, values, and behaviors. In other words, to be truly intercultural competent, the participants believed that they should balance between linguistic and cultural knowledge to be able to build relations across cultural boundaries and communicate intercultural. Linguistic knowledge is used for direct communication but cultural knowledge is used for indirect communication such as interpretation of context, building rapport, and understanding social rules. Overall, the integration of the linguistic and cultural competence enhances individuals' intercultural competence by facilitating effective communication, promoting cross-cultural understanding, and fostering adaptability in diverse cultural settings.

### **Results of the Observation and Reflective Journal Reports**

The researchers actively took part in 150 hours of learners' English classes conducted in Iran. Before reporting the findings of observations from these classes, it is important to provide an overview of the classroom. Each class consisted of 30 students and lasted one hour. The teachers of the classrooms talked both in English and Persian language. The reports are presented as follows:

The researchers took part in the learner's classes to observe the class teaching and learning process and also the tasks done in the classroom. The focus of the researchers was on the cultural and intercultural tasks and points. The researchers observed that all teachers explained the cultural and intercultural issues of each lesson both in English and Persian. After explaining, comparing, and contrasting the points between Iranian culture and other cultures, the students were asked to take part in various role-plays focusing on cultural and intercultural points. It is worth mentioning that language teachers mostly focus on transferring the knowledge and skill elements of intercultural communication to their students. Diverse cultural and intercultural topics were chosen for the role-plays by teachers and students such as driving in other countries, going to restaurants, meeting friends from different countries, studying as a learner in another country, and so

on. The topics and content of the role-plays revealed that most of the cultural and intercultural issues in language classes were explained by using Iranian culture and another culture via role-plays. The students took diverse cultural identities in their role-plays for example one was an Iranian person and another was an Indian person. Then, they talked and shared the data and information about various things in their conversation. One interesting example was the role of two friends from Iran and England who talked to each other about their cultures and societies. What all these role-plays had in common was that all learners tried their best to use all linguistic knowledge including words, idioms, proverbs, and diverse simple and complex grammatical structures to convey their intentions accurately in a cultural situation and it seemed that Iranian learners mostly rely on their language knowledge and ability in cultural and intercultural situations. Most of the learners in some cases resorted to simple sentences and structures to have a good connection with their interlocutors and in other cases, they used complicated words and structures to show their hegemony and mastery over language ability to their addressee. All learners negotiated meaning in their role-plays to avoid misunderstanding and adapt themselves to their addressee. Also, they tried to create a sense of humor and trust by using their linguistic knowledge adeptly and telling jokes. Also, it was observed that in many cases the learners explained their own identities and cultural rules to their interlocutors to avoid conflict and interpret their cultural context to increase awareness to avoid intercultural failure. To summarize, the content of the role-plays revealed that Iranian learners make use of both cultural and linguistic knowledge to build trust, respect, and rapport and also avoid cultural and linguistic misunderstandings but the researchers discovered in their observation process that Iranian learners relied much more on their language knowledge and ability compared to cultural knowledge in their role-plays and intercultural communications. It seemed that Iranian learners showed more interest in linguistic elements rather than cultural elements in their communications and the linguistic needs of the students were more important than the cultural needs of the learners in their interactions tried to obviate all hurdles and challenges even cultural and intercultural challenges through their linguistic ability.

The results of the reflective journals also revealed that learners had diverse feelings, attitudes, and perceptions regarding using linguistic knowledge and cultural knowledge in their intercultural interactions. The learners used diverse



phrases and clauses such as “for me, I think, as far as I know, as far as I can use,” which revealed that learners understand and reflect on what they have written in their journals. For example, one of the learners (Mina) wrote that “I have no choice but to improve my language to be able to communicate fluently in other countries with my would-be friends” or another one (Maryam) wrote that “If I improved my English level and speaking skills, I will be able to understand my foreign friend better and also I can get more familiar with their cultures”.

The findings disclosed that all learners understand the importance of language knowledge and cultural knowledge but the journals revealed that Iranian learners are more interested in relying on their linguistic ability to communicate. However, the analysis revealed that the learners all agreed that both linguistic knowledge and cultural knowledge are equally important. For example, one of the learners (Sara) wrote in her journal that “if I knew the culture and rules of my foreign friends, I would be able to avoid misunderstandings as I knew the cultural differences”. The learners become aware of the point that acquiring cultural knowledge is pivotal for having successful intercultural communication. Many other learners wrote sentences such as “If I want to live in a different country, I need both cultural knowledge and linguistic knowledge as I may face both language and cultural problems.” Or “We should learn both the language and culture of any country to be able to build relations and make friends or understand their culture to have an improved communication”. All these reflective sentences revealed that learners believed that they should gain mastery over both linguistic and cultural knowledge to become better intercultural speakers in their intercultural communications. To summarize, it should be pointed out that all learners concurred that both linguistic and cultural knowledge are equally vital for intercultural communication and they should make use of both of them in their relations to understand the situation and resolve the challenges and conflicts. The results of the reflective journal disclosed that there is a fifty-fifty percent relationship between linguistic knowledge and cultural knowledge in the formation of intercultural competence of Iranian learners (see appendix A for more sample answers).

### **Discussion**

The current paper tried to explore the role and effect of linguistic knowledge and cultural knowledge on the intercultural competence of Iranian learners. Through purposeful sampling, 150 learners were selected as the

participants, and by using structured interviews, participant observation, and reflective journals the required data were collected. The researchers used inductive content analysis and thematic analysis to analyze the data and the findings revealed that Iranian learners believed that linguistic knowledge and cultural knowledge are equally significant in the formation of intercultural communication. Also, the findings revealed that Iranian learners used both linguistic knowledge and cultural knowledge for diverse purposes including interpretation of context, understanding context, conflict resolution, adaptability and flexibility, effective communication, and building trust, rapport, and respect. The findings of this study can be supported by miscellaneous studies mentioned in the review literature section.

Sharifian and Jamarani (2013) asserted that language and culture are vital concepts in intercultural studies which supported the current study findings as this study substantiated that linguistic knowledge and cultural knowledge are the main elements in the formation of intercultural competence of Iranian learners. Also, Byram (1997) and Garrido and Alvarez (2006) accentuated that language and culture can't be separated and the learners should link their cultural knowledge to their language ability which is in sync with the findings of the current study.

Samovar et al. (2007) and Malakloluntu and Selan (2011) believed that language is the first means to transmit culture which is in harmony with the current study as the results of reflective journal and observation reports disclosed that the Iranian learners used their linguistic knowledge to obviate cultural conflicts and misunderstandings. In the same vein, Jie (2010) stated that foreign students face both linguistic and cultural challenges in intercultural situations but they are less tolerant towards cultural problems which supports the reflective findings of the current study as the Iranian learners asserted that they need to improve their linguistic and cultural knowledge to prevent from encountering any types of misunderstanding and problems in other cultures and countries.

In two eye-catching studies, Ghorbani and Dowlatabadi (2023, 2024) proved that language or linguistic needs and culture or cultural needs are the main macro-elements of intercultural communication from Iranian language teachers' viewpoints. These two studies supported the current study as this study also focused on the role and effect of linguistic and cultural knowledge in the intercultural competence of Iranian learners. Thus, all three studies substantiated that language and culture or linguistic knowledge and cultural knowledge are the

main factors in the formation of intercultural communication and intercultural competence.

Lauring (2011) and Zhang (2015) emphasized the importance of linguistic factors and cultural factors in intercultural communication and also pointed out that English teachers should work on both cultural points and the language ability of the students to prevent facing linguistic and cultural misunderstandings which are in harmony with the findings of the current study. Also, Hariri (2022) and Mohammed (2020) proved that learners are cognizant of the importance of cultural and language knowledge in their communication and they knew that cultural knowledge is a must for communication and they should acquire cultural knowledge by improving their linguistic knowledge. So, the two studies supported the findings of the current study that cultural knowledge and linguistic knowledge are equally significant in the formation of intercultural communication.

Eun (2010) and Chen and Yang (2016) revealed that learners should learn how to combine their language skills with their cultural knowledge to improve the quality of their intercultural communication which is in accord with the present study as the learners asserted in their reflections that they need both cultural knowledge and linguistic knowledge to have an effective communication. Last but not least, Vo (2017), Nguyen (2013), and Oberste-Berghaus (2024) revealed that learners may focus more on linguistic knowledge rather than cultural knowledge and students should learn both linguistic and cultural knowledge through authentic tasks and content to gain intercultural competence through reflective and experiential learning. Thus, the current study also made use of reflective journals and role-plays to improve the intercultural competence of Iranian learners.

To summarize, the findings of the present study and review literature section complement and support each other in that learners need both linguistic knowledge and cultural knowledge to have effective intercultural communication and avoid diverse linguistic and cultural conflicts and misunderstandings. It is also proved that cultural knowledge and linguistic knowledge have a fifty-fifty role in the formation of intercultural competence among Iranian learners but the Iranian learners first relied on their linguistic repertoires and then tend to use their cultural knowledge. Using both linguistic knowledge and cultural knowledge is a must for becoming a competent intercultural speaker in intercultural situations.

### **Conclusion**

This study concentrated on the role and effect of cultural knowledge and linguistic knowledge in the formation of Iranian learners' intercultural competence. Thus, by using qualitative procedures such as interviews, reflective journals, and observation the required data was collected and the results revealed that the Iranian learners needed both linguistic and cultural knowledge to have effective communication and also both linguistic knowledge and cultural knowledge are equally significant in the formation of intercultural competence. These findings have diverse implications for language teachers, lesson planners, book writers, and curriculum developers. Language teachers should focus on the use of cultural points and language points in their classes and they should teach both language points and cultural points of their books in their classrooms. Also, lesson planners should focus on allocating time for teaching cultural points in their lesson plans and try not to ignore the role of cultural knowledge in the formation of intercultural communication. Also, book writers should write diverse cultural and intercultural tasks and exercises to help students combine both their linguistic and cultural knowledge in solving the tasks and exercises finally, curriculum developers should develop syllabi and curricula in a way that teachers have sufficient class time and a fixed framework to work on cultural and linguistic knowledge concurrently in their classes. The researchers suggested doing more research on the current topic in quantitative and mixed methods design to compare the results. It is also suggested that this study can be done in other countries and other learners to see the diverse findings. Also, it is suggested to do this study on various proficiency levels of learners in a comparative study or even this study could be done in various countries to compare the results internationally. The researchers hope that this study could be a help for Iranian language teachers and learners and improve the quality of their intercultural teaching in their classrooms. Also, the researchers hoped that this study could divert the attention of language learners towards using cultural knowledge and they encouraged them to use both linguistic knowledge and cultural knowledge also the researchers hoped that all learners could understand that cultural knowledge is as important as linguistic knowledge for their futures in intercultural milieus.

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## Appendix A

### Sample Answers from Students' Journals

It should be mentioned that the researchers wrote exactly what the students had written in their journals because of ethical issues. Thus, there may exist some grammatical or lexical mistakes in their sentences. The researchers used the letter "S" to refer to students.

S1: I want to migrate to a foreign country in the future. I should learn English very well and when I go abroad I will become familiar with their culture.

S2: most of the times, I watch English movies to know their life study and cultural rules. Because I think that to become a fluent speaker we need to know both language and culture.

S3: every day I memorized a lot of idioms and proverbs to make my speaking more nativelike because I like to be very fluent in using my English language when I traveled abroad.

S4: my mother is English teacher and she said to me that I should improve not only my English but also my cultural knowledge about their lives, transportation and rules.

S5: I have traveled to several foreign countries and I know some cultural rules such as taking picture without permission is bad act and it is forbidden.

Though my English was good but I don't know this. So I think that we should know both language and culture of foreign countries.

S6: I have started learning English from my childhood and my English level is near native. I believed that language ability and speaking fluently is very important and when I emigrated to another country I will learn their culture and rules gradually.

S7: as I can't travel abroad now, I have no choice except improving my language knowledge first, whenever, I went abroad and lived there, I would improve my culture and rules of society.

S8: in my opinion, it is better to learn language first and then we can learn the culture by using our language. I know one thing for sure that both language and culture are important for travelers.

S9: whenever I study English, I like to learn new words, idioms and grammatical points to reinforce my English and I watch movies a lot to get familiar with their life styles and culture and also slang words.

#### **Biodata**

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بررسی تأثیر دانش زبانی در مقابل دانش فرهنگی در شکل گیری صلاحیت بین فرهنگی در زبان آموزان ایرانی

زبان انگلیسی

ارتباطات بین فرهنگی یک موضوع گسترده در دنیای امروز با ظهور جهانی شدن و رسانه های اجتماعی است. بنابراین، این مطالعه بر بررسی نقش دانش فرهنگی و دانش زبانی در شکل گیری شایستگی بین فرهنگی متمرکز شده است. پژوهشگران 150 فراگیر ایرانی را با روش نمونه گیری هدفمند در قالب طرح کیفی انتخاب کردند. با استفاده از مصاحبه، مشاهده و مجلات تأملی اطلاعات مورد نیاز جمع آوری شد. محققین برای تجزیه و تحلیل داده های جمع آوری شده از تحلیل استقرایی و تحلیل موضوعی استفاده کردند. نتایج نشان داد که دانش فرهنگی و دانش زبانی هر دو به یک اندازه در شکل گیری شایستگی بین فرهنگی زبان آموزان ایرانی اهمیت دارند. همچنین نشان داده می شود که زبان آموزان ایرانی هم از دانش زبانی و هم از دانش فرهنگی برای برقراری ارتباط مؤثر، ایجاد اعتماد و ارتباط، حل تعارض و اجتناب از سوء تفاهم های زبانی و فرهنگی استفاده می کنند. این مطالعه برای معلمان زبان، نویسندگان کتاب و توسعه دهندگان برنامه درسی مهم است، زیرا آنها باید به ترتیب به دانش زبانی و دانش فرهنگی در تدریس، نوشتن کتاب و توسعه برنامه درسی توجه بیشتری داشته باشند.

دانش زبانی، دانش فرهنگی، شایستگی بین فرهنگی، زبان آموزان ایرانی زبان انگلیسی