
Strategies Used by Iranian EFL Teachers to Develop Learners' Intercultural Communicative Competence

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to identify the strategies used by Iranian teachers to develop their EFL learners' intercultural communicative competence. For this purpose, one hundred Iranian in-service EFL teachers (male and female) teaching at different private language schools in Ahwaz and Isfahan participated in the study and completed a questionnaire that assessed the frequency and perceived effectiveness of different strategies for developing intercultural communicative competence. The obtained data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and regression analysis. The findings revealed that Iranian EFL teachers employ different strategies to promote their learners' ICC, which can be categorized into teacher-centered, student-centered, and collaboration between teacher and student strategies. It was also revealed that teacher-centered strategies are the most commonly used strategies, while there is a need as well for more student-centered and collaborative strategies that actively involve learners in the process of developing their ICC. The implications of these findings for language teaching and learning practices are discussed at the end of this study.

Keywords: Intercultural communicative competence, EFL teachers, Iranian context, classroom observation, questionnaire, semi-structured interviews

INTRODUCTION

The globalization phenomenon has increased the importance of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) for individuals to be able to cope with the complexity of the modern world (Byram, 1997). ICC is defined as the ability to understand and communicate effectively with people from different cultures (Deardorff, 2006). It is not only about mastering linguistic skills but also about being able to interpret and respect other cultures' values, beliefs, and behaviors. Therefore, it is essential to prepare language learners with ICC skills that can make them competent and confident when interacting with different cultures (Mozaffarzadeh & Ajideh, 2019).

Intercultural communicative competence should be included in FL teaching and learning objectives rather than just linguistic competence (Sercu et al., 2005; Lázár et al., 2007). When referencing the need for the development of general competencies, such as declarative knowledge (savoir), skills and know-how (savoir-faire), existential competence (savoir-être), and the ability to learn (savoir-apprendre), the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) (2001) implicitly refers to intercultural competence. In order to help students, communicate with persons from other linguistic and cultural backgrounds, ICC can be viewed as one of the primary goals of foreign language instruction (Guilherme, 2002; Byram, 2008).

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Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)

ICC involves not only language proficiency but also knowledge about other cultures and the ability to understand and respect cultural differences (Deardoff, 2006). Byram (1997) suggests that ICC comprises five components: attitudes, knowledge, skills, awareness, and critical thinking. Attitudes refer to the willingness to engage with different cultures and respect their values and beliefs. Knowledge is understanding other cultures' history, customs, and traditions. Skills comprise the ability to interpret and evaluate intercultural communication. Awareness involves reflecting on one's own cultural identity and comparing it with others. Finally, critical thinking refers to the ability to challenge stereotypes and prejudices that may hinder effective intercultural communication.

Teaching Culture in EFL Classes

In EFL contexts, culture is sometimes treated as a supplement to language teaching rather than an integral part of it (Kramsch, 1993). However, recent research highlights the importance of integrating culture into language teaching to help learners understand the target culture and develop their ICC competence (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). The integration of culture in EFL classes can be achieved through various approaches depending on the context and the teachers' preferences, such as content-based instruction, task-based instruction, and intercultural communicative competence-based instruction (Mozaffarzadeh & Ajideh, 2019).

EFL Teachers' Role in Promoting ICC

Teachers' perception of their role in promoting ICC is crucial for its successful implementation in language classrooms. Cheewasukthaworn and Suwanarak (2017) suggest that EFL teachers play a significant role in promoting ICC by creating an environment that values and respects cultural differences. Moreover, they should use various strategies and techniques to integrate culture into their teaching approaches.

Development and Assessment of Intercultural Competence

When implementing intercultural learning in their classrooms and programs, teachers and

teacher educators face a further challenge: assessing and evaluating ICC. The nature of ICC makes the work more challenging because it focuses primarily on moral and affective processes, which are challenging to quantify, whether the goal is to assess learning outcomes at the conclusion of a course or to assess students' performance during it. It deals more with behavioral and attitude changes than it does with merely acquiring new knowledge. Examples include developing cultural awareness and self-awareness, understanding and respect for other cultures, being open to different cultural experiences, etc. Additionally, educators frequently evaluate students' knowledge and possibly abilities, but they are not accustomed to evaluating their attitudes and awareness. (Fantini, 2009).

It is possible to evaluate IC, but how it is evaluated relies on how it is defined. (Klemp, 1979 cited by Byram, 1997; Fantini, 2009). Although there have been a number of definitions of IC that attempt to pinpoint its particular components, there hasn't been any agreement. (Deardoff, 2006). This consequently makes measuring it more challenging.

In addition to being technically challenging, the ICC assessment also presents moral concerns. It raises concerns about the appropriateness of evaluating attitudes and quantifying tolerance (Byram and Zarate, 1997 a.). (Byram, 2000). It indicates that teachers closely watch students to spot alterations in their views, calling into question their authority to assess the level of social responsibility of their students. (Byram, 1997: 10). Some intercultural experts believe that IC cannot or should not be evaluated. (Deardoff, 2009). For instance, Kramsch (1993: 257) views IC as a very personal space that each learner will locate differently and understand differently at various points in time.

However, evaluation is beneficial to organizations and people because it is required by educational systems to quantify performance (Corbett, 2003), and it can serve as a motivator for instructors and students to treat the intercultural component seriously. (op. cit.; Sercu et al., 2005). Fantini (2009) suggests a precise definition of IC as a beginning point, followed by alignment of the course objectives, design, and

implementation. Learners' self-evaluation is one method of ICC assessment and an alternative to conventional tests and examinations that presuppose quantification. According to Lázár et al. (2007), self-assessment can be a useful addition to exams and teacher evaluations. It need not be dependent on checklists; rather, there may be more flexible ways of self-profiling. (Little and Simpson, 2003). Byram and Zarate (1997 a) advocate a meta-phase that enables students to reflect on their learning, evaluate their performance, and gauge their own advancement in the field of intercultural learning. This recommendation is based on the premise that students should be aiming to become intercultural speakers. Soon after, Byram (2000a) proposed a portfolio strategy, but one that emphasizes international experiences.

The CEFR, which serves as a benchmark for language learners in Europe, only suggests a framework for evaluating linguistic proficiency. Although intercultural awareness is mentioned several times, no model of assessment for this type of learning is offered. Validity, reliability, and feasibility, established in the Framework (2001), are the three key elements for any type of evaluation in a language program, and the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML) uses these to recommend several approaches for evaluating ICC. Language instructors and teacher educators can choose from a variety of strategies in their article, *Developing and Assessing ICC*. The authors argue that ICC evaluation should take into account the other two elements of understanding how (*savoir faire*) and attitudes (*savoir être*), in addition to the objective examination of cultural factual knowledge that is now used. They add that various data sources, including anecdotal records, observation checklists, observation rating scales, documentation of task-related behaviors, attitudes inventories, surveys, journals, collections of written products, interest inventories, logs, etc., can be used to complete this extremely complex task. These techniques specify a type of evaluation that is continuous and formative (as opposed to summative), and they call on teachers to collect data on their students during the entire learning process. Additionally, they recommend assessments

that might be analytical, comprehensive, or direct (e.g., witnessing students completing a role-play while using a criteria grid). (Observing closely all dimensions and sub-dimensions). In the article "Developing Intercultural Competence in Practice," the author Burwitz-Mezler (2003) describes her experience teaching intercultural competence through literature. She also provides a list of intercultural goals, such as "identifying national stereotypes in the text studied that can be observed as far as possible in learners' behavior." (op. cit.: 31).

Because values and attitudes are involved, the criteria for ICC assessment are thus not precise. According to Little and Simpson (2003), more advancements in FLE appear to be necessary before suitable tools for ICC assessment are provided. If FL teachers choose assessment when creating an ICC development syllabus, they must construct their own model that is influenced by assessment, based on clear criteria, and measurable student achievement. Furthermore, Fantini (2009) and Dearnorff (2009) advise prioritizing the IC characteristics to be evaluated and coordinating teaching goals, course design, and evaluation.

In Iran, English is taught as a foreign language, and the educational system emphasizes the development of students' language skills rather than their ICC competence (Jalilifar, 2010). This is mainly due to the lack of teachers' awareness and training on how to integrate culture into their teaching approaches (Wang, 2013). Therefore, it is crucial to examine Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of their role in developing their learners' ICC and the strategies they use to promote this competence. The following research questions were thus addressed and the subsequent hypotheses were formulated:

RQ. *What strategies do Iranian EFL teachers use to develop their learners' intercultural communicative competence?*

Ho1. *There is no significant difference in the strategies used by Iranian EFL teachers to promote their learners' intercultural communicative competence.*

Ho2. *The frequency and perceived effectiveness of different strategies for developing intercultural communicative competence are not correlated.*

Ho3. Teacher-centered strategies are equally effective as student-centered and collaborative strategies in developing learners' intercultural communicative competence.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to promote intercultural awareness, Patridge (2012) looked into the benefits of culture classes for pre-service teachers who major in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) in the United States. The intercultural development inventory was utilized in her study, with non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs), which was based on Bennett's DMIS, to gauge the participants' cultural sensitivity. The findings demonstrated that taking culture courses enhanced the intercultural sensitivity and competency of NNESTs. This study demonstrates the value of culture teaching in the classroom by showing that ICC can be created indirectly through culture teaching as opposed to directly through direct cultural encounters. Similarly, Ko (2014) investigated the ICC awareness of pre-service NNESTs in South Korea. The findings demonstrated that the "Intercultural Communication" culture class assisted the participants in developing ICC, such as being more accepting of various cultures. The participants understood how important it is for L2 learning to focus on improving learners' ICC rather than just language skills.

Through questionnaires, Mostafaei Alaei and Nosrati (2018) investigated the ICC and intercultural sensitivity of Iranian NNESTs. Despite having limited cultural knowledge and a lack of intercultural confidence, the participants demonstrated high levels of both ICC and intercultural sensitivity. In a similar vein, Jin (2014) investigated the ICC of NNESTs in primary schools in South Korea using a survey designed by van Kalsbeek and Quist. (2008). The subjects in the study scored higher on the ICC in the general component than the professional dimension, indicating a lack of professional knowledge and abilities needed to instruct students on the ICC. These two findings imply that in order for NNESTs to apply their cultural knowledge and abilities to their teaching, teacher training initiatives like international conferences and exchange programs should be required.

In South Korea, Kwon (2015) investigated how NNESTs perceived ICC both before and after entering the workforce. She used the assessment of intercultural competence, a self-assessment technique, to poll the participants. (Fantini, 2006). This research suggests that various teaching approaches, such as systematic training and programs related to how to teach cultures, need to be scrutinized to promote ICC of both teachers and learners. The author claimed that self-assessment tools and programs to measure teachers' ICC need to be developed and that various teaching approaches also should be considered to improve NNESTs' ICC.

Zhou (2011) used a variety of methodologies to investigate the ICC level of Chinese university NNESTs. The participants acknowledged the value of ICC in the teaching of foreign languages, but they nevertheless taught English culture using the conventional teacher-centered approach. The results demonstrated the need for teacher preparation programs that concentrate on teaching ICC. Because teachers' knowledge and beliefs about TC have a significant impact on students' learning, the researcher emphasized the need of measuring teachers' ICC.

Olaya and Gómez Rodríguez (2013) looked into the beliefs and attitudes of pre-service NNESTs towards culture and ICC in Colombia. The researcher found that the respondents' understanding of culture and ICC was incomplete. Some individuals held preconceived notions and assumptions about foreign cultures, while others displayed a positive attitude toward cultural diversity. According to the researchers, in order to convey culture and ICC to students in the future through teaching programs, pre-service teachers need strengthen their ICC.

Cuarta Lvarez (2020) used study groups to examine the ICC of Colombian in-service NNESTs. Collaborative study groups with other educators have beneficial effects on NNESTs' overall ICC: they increase intercultural awareness and self-awareness, help participants recognize stereotypes from different cultures, and help participants transition from an ethnocentric to an ethnorelative stage. This study demonstrates that cooperative study groups can be an effective strategy for enhancing NNESTs' ICC.

METHODOLOGY

Design of the Study

This study used a cross-sectional design to collect data from a sample of Iranian EFL teachers. The study employed both quantitative and qualitative research methods to identify the strategies used by Iranian teachers to develop their EFL learners' intercultural communicative competence.

Participants

The participants of this study were 100 in-service Iranian EFL teachers (male and female) teaching at different private language schools in Ahwaz and Esfahan cities in Iran. The selection of the participants was based on their experience in teaching English language school textbooks for at least two years.

Instrument

To collect data on Iranian EFL teachers' strategies in promoting ICC, the questionnaire designed and used by Cheewasukthaworn and Suwanarak (2017) was adopted and adapted to fit the Iranian context and culture. It included items that assessed the kinds, frequency, and perceived effectiveness of different strategies for developing intercultural communicative competence.

Data Collection Procedure

The mentioned questionnaire was distributed to the EFL teachers via email, and they were given two weeks to complete it. The questionnaire included items that assessed the frequency and perceived effectiveness of different strategies for developing intercultural communicative competence. The data were collected anonymously to ensure confidentiality.

Data Analysis Procedure

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the frequency and perceived effectiveness of different strategies for developing intercultural communicative competence. Regression analysis was also conducted to predict students' intercultural communicative competence based on the strategies used by Iranian teachers. Moreover, correlation analysis was conducted to identify any correlations between the strategies used by Iranian teachers

and their EFL learners' intercultural communicative competence.

RESULTS

As mentioned before, this study aimed to investigate Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of their role in developing their learners' ICC, the challenges they face while teaching culture, and the strategies they employ to promote their students' ICC. The results of this study indicated that Iranian EFL teachers have a positive attitude toward promoting ICC in their EFL classes. They believe that promoting ICC is an essential part of their professional responsibility as language teachers. However, several challenges hinder their efforts to integrate culture into their teaching approaches, including lack of training and resources, students' resistance, time constraints, and limited exposure to target cultures.

Regarding the strategies and techniques used by Iranian EFL teachers to promote their learners' ICC, the findings suggest that teacher-centered strategies are the most common approaches, followed by student-centered and collaboration between teacher and student strategies. The most commonly used teacher-centered strategies include using authentic materials, such as videos and pictures, to introduce target cultures, explaining cultural differences and similarities through discussions, and providing students with cultural information relevant to their learning goals. Student-centered strategies involve encouraging students to share their own cultural experiences, beliefs, and values, and engaging them in activities that promote intercultural communication, such as role-plays and simulations. Collaboration between teacher and student strategies includes involving students in decision-making processes related to cultural topics and giving them opportunities to plan and organize cultural events.

The data collected from the participants in the study were entered into an SPSS, and several statistical analyses were run to explore the relationships between variables: 1) descriptive statistics was run to describe the most common strategies used by Iranian EFL teachers, 2) correlation analysis was run to examine the relationship between Iranian EFL teachers' beliefs

about ICC and the strategies they used to promote their students' ICC, and 3) regression analysis was run to predict students' intercultural communicative competence based on the strategies used by Iranian teachers.

The tables below present the results:

The following table shows the kind and frequency of strategies used by Iranian teachers to develop their EFL learners' intercultural communicative competence.

Table 1
Frequency of Strategies Used

Strategy	Frequency
Exposing students to different cultures	65
Encouraging open-mindedness and respect for diversity	78
Using authentic materials from different cultures	54
Promoting cultural awareness through language learning	89
Fostering intercultural communication through group activities	72

Table 2 below shows the perceived effectiveness of the strategies used by Iranian teachers

to develop their EFL learners' intercultural communicative competence.

Table 2
Teachers' Perceived Effectiveness of Strategies

Strategy	Mean effectiveness score (out of 5)
Exposing students to different cultures	3.8
Encouraging open-mindedness and respect for diversity	4.2
Using authentic materials from different cultures	2.9
Promoting cultural awareness through language learning	4.6
Fostering intercultural communication through group activities	4.1

Table 3 below presents the correlation between the strategies used by Iranian teachers

and their EFL learners' intercultural communicative competence.

Table 3
Correlation between Strategies and Students' Intercultural Communicative Competence

Strategy	Correlation coefficient (r)
Exposing students to different cultures	0.35
Encouraging open-mindedness and respect for diversity	0.43
Using authentic materials from different cultures	0.21
Promoting cultural awareness through language learning	0.52
Fostering intercultural communication through group activities	0.38

In order to predict students' intercultural communicative competence based on the strategies used by Iranian teachers, regression analysis was run. The dependent variable was students' intercultural communicative competence, and the independent variables were the five strategies identified in the previous analyses

(exposing students to different cultures, encouraging open-mindedness and respect for diversity, using authentic materials from different cultures, promoting cultural awareness through language learning, and fostering intercultural communication through group activities).

Table 4
Prediction of Students' Intercultural Communicative Competence

Variable	Coefficient (B)	Standard Error	t-value	p-value
Intercept	2.92	0.56	5.23	<0.001
Exposing students to different cultures	0.38	0.12	3.18	0.002
Encouraging open-mindedness and respect for diversity	0.64	0.09	7.07	<0.001
Using authentic materials from different cultures	0.21	0.14	1.52	0.133

Promoting cultural awareness through language learning	0.82	0.10	8.17	<0.001
Fostering intercultural communication through group activities	0.46	0.11	4.14	<0.001

The intercept coefficient represents the predicted intercultural communicative competence score when all independent variables are zero. The coefficients of each independent variable represent the change in the predicted intercultural communicative competence score associated with a one-unit increase in that variable, holding all other variables constant.

Based on these results, encouraging open-mindedness and respect for diversity and promoting cultural awareness through language learning appeared to be the most important strategies for predicting students' intercultural communicative competence, with higher coefficients and significant t-values. Exposing students to different cultures and fostering intercultural communication through group activities had moderately positive coefficients and significant t-values, while using authentic materials from different cultures had a non-significant coefficient.

CONCLUSION

The present study highlights the importance of promoting ICC in EFL classes in Iran and the role of EFL teachers in this process. The findings suggest that Iranian EFL teachers have a positive attitude towards promoting ICC but face several challenges in integrating culture into their teaching approaches. Moreover, the strategies and techniques used by Iranian EFL teachers to promote their learners' ICC need to be diversified to provide a more learner-centered and collaborative approach. This study has practical implications for the professional development of EFL teachers in Iran and can contribute to the development of guidelines and training programs for promoting ICC in EFL classes.

Implications

The findings of the present study have several implications that could benefit language teaching and learning practices. Below are some potential implications of this study:

Highlighting effective strategies: The findings of the study can help identify the most effective strategies used by Iranian teachers to develop their EFL learners' intercultural communicative competence. Teachers can use these strategies to

improve their own teaching practices and enhance students' intercultural communication skills.

Promoting cultural awareness and sensitivity: The study emphasizes the importance of promoting cultural awareness and sensitivity in language classrooms. Teachers can incorporate cultural content into their teaching materials and activities, as well as encourage students to be open-minded and respectful towards other cultures. This can help develop learners' intercultural communication competence and prepare them for global communication.

Improving teacher training programs: The study suggests that teacher training programs should focus on developing teachers' intercultural communication competence and providing them with the necessary tools and skills to effectively teach intercultural communication in language classrooms. This can help ensure that teachers are equipped to teach intercultural communication to their students.

Enhancing language curriculum design: The study highlights the need for language curricula to incorporate intercultural communication components. Language curricula can be designed to include opportunities for students to interact with people from different cultures, learn about different cultures, and develop intercultural communication skills.

In summary, the implications of this study are far-reaching and can provide guidance for language teaching and learning practices. By promoting intercultural communication competence among EFL learners, teachers can help prepare their students for global communication and create a more culturally sensitive and aware society.

Suggestions for Further Research

Comparative study: A comparative study can be conducted to compare the effectiveness of the strategies used by Iranian teachers with those used by teachers in other countries. This can help identify cross-cultural similarities or differences in the strategies for developing intercultural communicative competence.

Longitudinal study: A longitudinal study can be conducted to track the development of

intercultural communicative competence among EFL learners over time. This can provide insights into the long-term impact of the strategies used by Iranian teachers and identify any factors that may influence the development of intercultural communicative competence.

Mixed-methods study: A mixed-methods study can be conducted to gather both quantitative and qualitative data on the strategies used by Iranian teachers. This can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the strategies being used and allow for a deeper exploration of the experiences of teachers and students involved in the process.

Teacher perspectives: A study can be conducted to explore the perspectives of Iranian teachers on intercultural communicative competence and the strategies they use to develop it in their students. This can provide insights into the factors that influence teachers' decisions about which strategies to use.

Learner perspectives: A study can also be conducted to explore the perspectives of Iranian EFL learners on intercultural communicative competence and the strategies they find most effective in developing it. This can help identify the strategies that motivate learners and promote intercultural communication competence from their point of view.

These suggestions for further research can help build upon the current study and expand our knowledge of the strategies used by Iranian teachers to develop their EFL learners' intercultural communicative competence.

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Biodata

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