

# **Impact of Critical Cultural Awareness on Intercultural Communicative Competence for Iranian EFL Learners: Practical Techniques for Implementation**

Leila Amiri Kordestani, Massood Yazdanimoghaddam, Parviz Maftoon

## **Abstract**

The study aimed to investigate the significant impact of enhancing critical cultural awareness (CCA) on developing intercultural communicative competence (ICC) among Iranian EFL learners in an advanced online communication course. The participants of this explanatory mixed methods study included 154 Iranian EFL learners at Islamic Azad University's Shahr-e-Qods and Islamshahr branches. The research employed pre-and post-tests to measure the effectiveness of three distinct techniques, culture capsule, culture narrative, and culture training activities, in enhancing CCA and ICC. The quantitative strand of the study revealed statistically significant impacts of CCA on Iranian EFL learners' ICC in an online setting, as well as the differential impacts of using different techniques to raise CCA on ICC. Moreover, culture narratives had the most significant impact, followed by culture training activities and culture capsules. The qualitative strand provided valuable insights into how learners perceive the improvement of CCA and ICC in meeting participants' needs and objectives in the language learning process. The study concluded that enhancing CCA significantly contributes to the development of ICC among Iranian EFL learners and holds implications for language educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers in fostering effective cross-cultural communication in online language learning environments.

**Keywords:** Critical Cultural Awareness, Culture Capsule, Culture Narrative, Culture Training Activities, Intercultural Communicative Competence

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The intertwining of critical cultural awareness (CCA) and intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is crucial in the language learning journey, especially for Iranian EFL learners participating in online advanced communication courses. This article aims to explore the significant impact of enhancing CCA on the development of ICC and to highlight three distinct techniques, culture capsule, culture narrative, and culture training activities, that can be used to achieve this goal. As the global landscape continues to emphasize the importance of effective cross-cultural communication, it becomes increasingly vital for language educators to cultivate these indispensable skills among learners. This study integrates findings from Almarza et al. (2015), (Bastos & Araújo e Sá, 2015), (Hang & Zhang, 2023), and other scholars to provide a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between CCA and ICC, as well as the practical techniques for their implementation. The increasing interconnectedness in the global landscape has made effective CCA and ICC essential for English as Foreign Language learners. However, there

is a lack of comprehensive strategies and pedagogical approaches dedicated to fostering CCA and ICC among Iranian EFL learners in the context of online education. This raises the question of effectively equipping Iranian EFL learners with the necessary skills to navigate cross-cultural interactions and develop a nuanced understanding of cultural diversity within the online learning environment. The significance of this study lies in its potential to offer valuable guidance to educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers in English language education, especially for Iranian EFL learners. By emphasizing the crucial link between CCA and ICC, this study aims to underscore the practical relevance of these concepts in fostering effective cross-cultural communication. Furthermore, exploring specific techniques for enhancing CCA and developing ICC holds the promise of equipping language educators with actionable strategies to empower learners in navigating diverse cultural interactions with confidence and proficiency. Ultimately, the findings of this study may contribute to the advancement of language teaching methodologies and help to meet the evolving needs of Iranian EFL students striving to master not only the English language but also the intricate cultural subtleties intertwined with its application in various settings. The present research employed an explanatory mixed methods approach, which began with a quantitative strand and then continued with a qualitative strand to explicate quantitative results. This study investigates the following research questions: two quantitative and two qualitative questions.

***RQ1.** Does developing CCA have any statistically significant impact on Iranian EFL learners' ICC in an online setting?*

***RQ2.** Does using different techniques (culture narratives, culture capsules, and culture training) to develop CCA have any statistically significant differential impacts on raising the ICC of Iranian EFL learners in an online setting?*

***RQ3.** How do Iranian EFL learners perceive that improving CCA and ICC can meet their needs and objectives in online language learning?*

***RQ4.** How does the online CCA course change the attitude and perception of Iranian EFL learners toward CCA and ICC?*

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The concept of CCA involves the crucial ability to critically evaluate perspectives, practices, and products within one's culture and other cultures and countries (Lou & Noels, 2020). This goes beyond mere cultural awareness, as it encompasses a deep understanding and sensitivity to the nature of language as knowledge (Choi & Nunan, 2018). Improving CCA enhances critical thinking skills and the ability to integrate into different societies (Byram, 1997; Sun, 2023). This development leads to a comparative understanding of cultural aspects, ultimately promoting increased critical thinking (Zhu et al., 2019; Zyngier & Fialho, 2010). Nugent and Catalano (2015) stress the importance of CCA connecting classroom learning with real-world issues and developing students' critical thinking skills.

In this study, CCA is operationally defined as the participants' capacity to reflect, practice, and assess cultural issues related to learning their own and other languages through the use of three techniques: culture capsule, culture narratives, and culture training activities. The researcher employs these techniques to enhance and cultivate CCA in the participants, and its effectiveness is measured through pre- and post-tests using a questionnaire provided by Atai et al. (2017).

Similarly, ICC is crucial for establishing a shared understanding among people with diverse social identities and effectively interacting with individuals as multifaceted human beings with multiple identities and individuality (Bastos & Araújo e Sá, 2015; Byram & Grundy, 2002). Operationally defined in this investigation, ICC is measured using a questionnaire constructed based on the Deardorff framework by Mirzaei and Forouzandeh (2013).

The relationship between language and culture has been a significant area of study within applied and sociolinguistics. Lado (1977) defined culture as the systematic and shared patterns of behavior that have a specific meaning, with culture in language teaching and learning defined pragmatically as the culture associated with a language being learned. Moreover, culture learning involves cognitive, behavioral, and affective dimensions and is influenced by various variables such as gender, age, ethnicity, and religion. Cultures are multifaceted, dynamic, and often conflictual, as noted by Nunan and Choi (2010). Culture involves socially acquired knowledge organized in culture-specific ways, framing our perceptions of reality. The importance of culture in second language acquisition has been highlighted by Atkinson (1999), emphasizing that it is implicit or explicit in everything ESL teachers do.

Furthermore, the study conducted by Meshkat and Birjandi (2003) emphasized the need for innovative techniques to teach culture effectively, showing that more than books alone is needed to internalize the target culture. As a result, the development of cultural awareness using innovative techniques has been explored in the context of EFL education in Iran to enhance ICC (Estaji & Tabrizi, 2022; Fathi et al., 2023; Sabet & Chapman, 2023). The complex relationship between language and culture, as indicated by the theories of Linguistic Relativity and the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, has been investigated. Language reflects and is influenced by culture, making it inseparable from teaching its culture, as highlighted by Zhao (2010) and Cakır (2006). The crucial role of cultural awareness in promoting critical thinking has been emphasized, as well as the complementary nature of language and culture education, bringing an international and intercultural perspective, as discussed by Byram (2012). The interest in the role of culture in language teaching has been attributed to political, educational, and ideological factors, as well as the growing interaction with people from other cultures. Educators have recognized the need to address social and economic issues, as the mere acquisition of linguistic systems is insufficient for promoting international peace and understanding (Rose & Galloway, 2017). Overall, the literature review underlines the importance of culture in language teaching and the need for innovative approaches to integrate culture into language learning effectively.

This article underscored the increasing significance of integrating diverse techniques to foster cultural and intercultural understanding in classrooms. It explored the role of cultural narratives in various fields, such as linguistics, language education, and second language acquisition (McIntosh et al., 2017). Furthermore, it highlighted the practical value of culture capsules, as defined by Taylor and Sorensen (1961), in providing tangible learning experiences and, importantly, preventing culture shock. Additionally, the text discussed the focus of cultural training activities on promoting intercultural learning and the acquisition of competencies for effective cross-cultural interactions, as Skidmore (2023) emphasized.

Considering these techniques, cultural narratives involve using stories and personal experiences to make sense of one's life. Clark and Rossiter (2008) held the view that using narratives is developing. They have gained importance in various fields, such as linguistics, anthropology, and language education. Narrative activities like plays, poems, and stories are

employed in language learning, serving as a knowledge-building tool. Narratives are not merely individual productions: they are strongly formed by “social, cultural, and historical conventions as well as by the relationship between the storyteller and the interlocutor (Ranieri & Fabbro, 2016). Culture capsules are short activities presenting specific aspects of a culture, aiming to highlight minimal variations between learners' native culture and the second culture. For example, a culture capsule might involve presenting information about meals, wedding customs, or greetings and comparing them with the learners' culture (Safa & Tofghi, 2022). Culture training activities are focused on promoting intercultural learning by acquiring behavioral, cognitive, and affective competencies required for effective interactions across diverse cultures (Skidmore, 2023). These activities aim to develop deep relationships and promote intercultural education by focusing on knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Sokolova et al., 2015).

In today's interconnected world, ICC has become vital, particularly in online communication. With the Internet connecting people from distinct cultural backgrounds instantaneously, the ability to navigate and effectively communicate across cultures has become essential (Guerra et al., 2022; Kambutu & Nganga, 2008; Moore, 2018). ICC encompasses linguistic proficiency, cultural sensitivity, empathy, and adaptability and is particularly crucial in online environments where physical barriers are transcended (Hsieh et al., 2022; Lou & Noels, 2020; Mu & Yu, 2023; Puspita Dewi, 2023). The four components of ICC consist of linguistic proficiency, cultural sensitivity, empathy and open-mindedness, and adaptability (Liao & Li, 2023; Olcoñ et al., 2021; Quinones et al., 2023; Rubegni et al., 2022; Rutten et al., 2013); Solano-Ruiz et al., 2021). These components are crucial for successful communication and collaboration across diverse cultural contexts, particularly online interactions. Furthermore, the literature emphasizes the importance of ICC in various domains such as education, international transactions, negotiations, partnerships, online work settings, and online communities. It has been noted that possessing ICC is essential for expanding global reach, fostering relationships with stakeholders worldwide, promoting creativity and innovation in multicultural teams, and bridging cultural divides in online communities (El Boubekri, 2024; Fathi et al., 2023; Houghton, 2014; Liao & Li, 2023; Nadeem et al., 2024). In EFL education, fostering CCA and enhancing intercultural communication skills have been identified as important areas of focus for educators (McIntosh et al., 2017; Nelson, 2011). Overall, the literature underscores the significance of CCA and ICC in today's interconnected world, particularly in online environments, and highlights their multifaceted impact across various domains.

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

The current study investigates the impact of increasing CCA on ICC among 154 EFL students at Islamic Azad University's Shahr-e-Qods and Islamshahr branches. The participants, pursuing a Bachelor's degree in English Translation, were enrolled in online Advanced Communication courses using the VADANA platform. The research methodology involved selecting seven intact classes from the university's above branches. Upon analyzing the participants' demographic information, it was found that 55 (35.72%) were male and 99 (64.28%) were female. In terms of age distribution, 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 demographic data suggests a higher proportion of female participants and a predominantly youthful 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

## INSTRUMENTS

Employing reliable and valid instruments to measure individuals' proficiency and competence accurately is crucial. In a recent study investigating CCA and ICC, a series of standardized tools were utilized to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings. First, the Oxford Placement Test (OPT) was chosen as the primary instrument to assess the overall English proficiency of the study's participants. Known for its efficiency in evaluating English proficiency, the OPT covers various language skills, including reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Its widespread use in language learning settings globally attests to its reliability and effectiveness in determining students' English levels. The OPT's automated scoring and detailed feedback mechanism provide a dependable method for evaluating English language proficiency. Second, in addition to assessing English proficiency, the study incorporated the Critical Cultural Awareness Questionnaire and the Intercultural Communicative Competence Questionnaire. These questionnaires were developed and validated through a thorough process, and they provide valuable insights into individuals' cultural awareness, linguistic knowledge, communication skills across cultures, and attitudes toward cultural diversity. The Critical Cultural Awareness Questionnaire, consisting of three components and 37 items, underwent extensive validation and testing to ensure its reliability and validity. Developed by Atai et al. (2017) and piloted with 370 Iranian participants, the questionnaire has been rigorously examined by specialists in applied linguistics and experienced EFL teachers, affirming its psychometric qualities and dependability.

Moreover, the questionnaire demonstrated a reliability index of Cronbach  $\alpha = .75$ , further supporting its suitability for evaluating participants' CCA. Similarly, the Intercultural Communicative Competence Questionnaire, constructed based on the Deardorff framework by Mirzaei and Forouzandeh (2013), was thoroughly examined to verify its psychometric qualities and dependability. Multiple investigations concentrated on validating and testing the questionnaire, affirming its psychometric qualities and dependability. It possessed a satisfactory reliability estimate of Cronbach's  $\alpha = .71$ , further supporting its suitability for evaluating participants' ICC. By employing these standardized instruments, the study obtained reliable and valid data to assess participants' English proficiency, CCA, and ICC. Using such instruments is vital for research purposes, educators, and institutions aiming to make informed decisions regarding language learning programs and intercultural training initiatives.

The rigorous validation and reliability testing of standardized instruments such as the Oxford Placement Test, Critical Cultural Awareness Questionnaire, and Intercultural Communicative Competence Questionnaire are essential. Their utilization in research and educational settings contributes to the advancement of language education and intercultural communication by ensuring that assessments are consistent, dependable, and reflect individuals' abilities.

Third, semi-structured interviews were used to gather information about participants' skills, opinions, and demographic data for qualitative data collection. To ensure the reliability and validity of the interview questions, the researcher used a semi-structured format, conducted pilot tests, gathered expert feedback, and continuously refined the questions. Sixty students were interviewed in groups, and key strategies such as expert reviews and standardized question structure were employed to maintain the reliability and fairness of the interview process.

Fourth, the researcher developed PowerPoint presentations called "culture capsules" to promote cultural awareness in the first experimental group. These presentations aimed to encapsulate critical aspects of various cultures, serving as educational tools to foster understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity. The researcher ensured the validity of the presentations through research findings, expert assessment, piloting, and user feedback.

Finally, narratives were used with the second experimental group to compare their effectiveness in enhancing cultural understanding. The narratives underwent validation by experts and user feedback to ensure their reliability and suitability for the study's objectives.

## **Design**

The study utilized an explanatory mixed-method approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methodologies for data collection, triangulation of findings, and analysis. This approach was chosen to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the research topic by leveraging the strengths of both data types. This methodological choice allowed for a more in-depth exploration of the research questions, providing insights from different perspectives and validating the findings through multiple lenses. This collaborative approach enabled the researchers to uncover nuanced patterns, relationships, and meanings within the data, leading to a more insightful analysis. Additionally, integrating both qualitative and quantitative data enhanced the accuracy and dependability of the findings (Riazi & Candlin, 2014).

## **Procedure**

In a recent study spanning two and a half months, researchers delved into the impact of CCA development on learners' ICC within the educational framework of Islamic Azad University. The study employed the VADANA platform, a MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) explicitly designed for the university, to facilitate various courses to provide students with quality education. To ensure a comprehensive understanding of the impact of raising CCA on learning outcomes, the researchers utilized both quantitative and qualitative research methods. These methods were applied to examine the influence of CCA on the learners' ICC, analyze techniques for improving CCA among learners, and explore how learners perceive the enhancement of CCA and ICC in the language learning process. In other words, the study sought to understand the effects of the CCA course on learners' attitudes and perceptions towards CCA, ICC, and different cultures. The study involved convenient sampling, with seven intact classes selected from the Shahr-e-Qods and

Islamshahr branches of the Islamic Azad University. Before participating, informed consent procedures were carried out, ensuring that participants were well-informed about the study's objectives, procedures, risks, benefits, and their rights as participants. Participants provided voluntary consent and were assured that their data would be handled confidentially and anonymously. Homogeneity across the seven classes was confirmed through the OPT test, following which the classes were randomly assigned to three experimental groups. The first group delved into culture capsules, the second focused on culture narratives, and the third engaged in culture training activities. Throughout the ten sessions, the researcher, serving as the teacher for all seven classes, delved into various cultural aspects. The first session of each group served as a sample, allowing researchers to observe initial responses and behaviors within each group. This approach provided valuable insights into the characteristics and dynamics of the participants early in the study, laying the groundwork for further analysis and comparison throughout the research process.

A carefully curated set of procedures has been designed for all experimental groups to ensure the comprehensive and effective implementation of the group sessions. For the first group, the culture capsule sessions are structured to include ten culture capsule topics, including "Americans and their pets," "Fast food," "The changing American family," "Parenting culture," "Clothing culture," "Superstitions," "Taboo," "Body language," "Norms," and "Ceremonies." The culture capsule content is presented through an online PowerPoint, followed by discussions on posing questions related to the material covered. Participants are encouraged to engage in group discussions, allowing in-depth analysis and reflection on the culture capsules. The comparative analysis enables students to compare cultural insights from the capsule with their cultural heritage and experiences, fostering critical reflection on their cultural viewpoints.

Culture narrative group sessions center on the design of sessions focused on cultural narratives, providing insight into specific cultural aspects. Incorporating PowerPoint presentations and storytelling facilitates the conveyance of cultural narratives, capturing the richness and diversity of cultural experiences. Discussions are initiated to encourage participants to share, analyze, and reflect on the cultural narratives presented. Comparative analysis and critical reflection are encouraged to deepen participants' understanding of the significance of cultural narratives in shaping intercultural understanding.

For the third group, the culture training activities sessions are developed to incorporate interactive cultural training activities and exercises for experiential learning. Role-plays, simulations, and immersive activities are utilized to enable participants to experience and understand cultural dynamics. Active participation and reflection are encouraged during and after each training activity to promote deeper cultural insight and awareness. Facilitated discussions explore the impact of the training activities on participants' intercultural competencies, with opportunities provided for participants to apply newly acquired cultural skills in real-life scenarios, fostering practical intercultural communication abilities. Regular assessments are conducted to evaluate the impact of the sessions on participants' cultural awareness and intercultural communication skills for all experimental groups. All three experimental groups followed the same themes and topics.

In the qualitative phase of the research, the investigator held semi-structured interviews to answer the research questions and gain insights into cultural matters, CCA, and ICC in the context of university online classes. The semi-structured interviews allowed for flexibility in questioning

and the collection of comprehensive views. Following the qualitative data collection, the researcher used content analysis to organize and interpret the data, identifying patterns and tendencies. To do so, the researcher used MAXQDA. MAXQDA is comprehensive qualitative data analysis software designed to assist the systematic analysis of textual data. This method facilitated an in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives and experiences, leading to meaningful conclusions about the influence of the online learning environment on cultural issues and intercultural competence.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study investigates how learners' CCA can be improved and to what extent the development of CCA affects learners' degree of ICC using different techniques. The data collected in this study were analyzed through Repeated Measures ANOVA and Simple Effect Analysis, ensuring the validity and reliability of the results.

The statistical technique of Repeated Measures ANOVA, besides its own specific assumptions that were discussed when reporting the main results, assumes the normality of the data. Table 2 shows the skewness and kurtosis indices of normality. Since all values were within the ranges of  $\pm 2$ , it was concluded that the normality assumption was retained. It should be noted that the criteria of  $\pm 2$  were proposed by Bachman 2005, Bae and Bachman, 2010 and George and Mallery, 2020. It should also be noted that Zhu et al., 2019; suggested the criteria of  $\pm 3$ .

**Table 2**

*Skewness and Kurtosis Indices of Normality*

Group		N	Skewness		Kurtosis	
		Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
Capsules	OPT	50	-.200	.337	.653	.662
	PreSP	50	.449	.337	.291	.662
	PostSP	50	.200	.337	-.601	.662
	PreICC	50	.363	.337	-.858	.662
	PostICC	50	.018	.337	-.333	.662
Narrative	OPT	49	-.579	.340	.537	.668
	PreSP	49	.068	.340	-.005	.668
	PostSP	49	-.234	.340	-.297	.668
	PreICC	49	.297	.340	-.834	.668
	PostICC	49	.050	.340	-.626	.668
Activities	OPT	55	-.238	.322	-.258	.634
	PreSP	55	.677	.322	.581	.634
	PostSP	55	.259	.322	.095	.634
	PreICC	55	.207	.322	-.803	.634
	PostICC	55	-.096	.322	-.251	.634

Note. OPT = Oxford Placement Test, Pre = Pretest, Post = Posttest, SP = Speaking, and ICC = Intercultural Communicative Competence.

### Reliability Estimates



Table 3 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 Fowler and Blohm (2004); 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”.

**Table 3**

*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 4.3 shows Cronbach’s alpha reliability indices for the pre-test and post-test of ICC. The pre-test and post-test of ICC enjoyed reliability indices of .949 and .950. The reliability indices for the pre-test and post-test of ICC can be considered appropriate, as noted by Taniguchi (2010); Dooly and Vallejo Rubinstein (2018); Fowler and Blohm (2004); and Hakelind et al. (2022); who believed that Cronbach’s alpha value of .70 is the adequate reliability index for an instrument. However, Guerra et al. (2022) 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 pre-test and post-test of ICC enjoyed excellent, i.e.  $\geq$  .90 reliability indices.

**Table 4**

*Reliability Statistics*

	Cronbach’s Alpha	N of Items
Pretest	.949	22
Posttest	.950	22

### **Homogenizing Groups on Oxford Placement Test**

A One-Way ANOVA was run to compare the cultural narratives, culture capsules, and cultural training activities groups’ means on the OPT test in order to show that the three groups were homogenous in terms of their general language proficiency prior to the main study. Before discussing the results, it should be noted that the assumption of homogeneity of variances, as explored through the Levene’s test, was retained on the OPT test. The non-significant results of the Levene’s test ( $F(2, 151) = 1.01, p > .05$ ) (Table 5) indicated that the groups were homogenous in terms of their variances on the OPT test.

**Table 5**

*Test of Homogeneity of Variances of Oxford Placement Test by Groups*

	Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
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OPT	Based on Mean	1.099	2	151	.336
	Based on Median	1.013	2	151	.366
	Based on Median and with adjusted df	1.013	2	147.862	.366
	Based on trimmed mean	1.074	2	151	.344

Table 6 shows the three groups' means on the OPT test. The results showed that the culture capsules ( $M = 26.86$ ,  $SD = 8.05$ ), culture narratives ( $M = 29.88$ ,  $SD = 9.71$ ), and culture training activities ( $M = 30.28$ ,  $SD = 9.34$ ) groups had almost the same means on the OPT test.

**Table 6**

*Descriptive Statistics of Oxford Placement Test by Groups*

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Capsules	50	26.86	8.053	1.139	24.57	29.15
Narratives	49	29.88	9.712	1.387	27.09	32.67
Activities	55	30.28	9.340	1.259	27.75	32.80
Total	154	29.04	9.137	.736	27.59	30.50

Finally, Table 7 shows the results of the one-way ANOVA. The results ( $F(2, 151) = 2.16$ ,  $p > .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .028$  representing a weak effect size<sup>1</sup>) indicated that there were not any significant differences between the three groups' means on the OPT test. That is to say; the three groups were homogenous in terms of their general language proficiency prior to the administration of the treatments. Figure 4.1 shows the three groups' means on OPT test.

**Table 7**

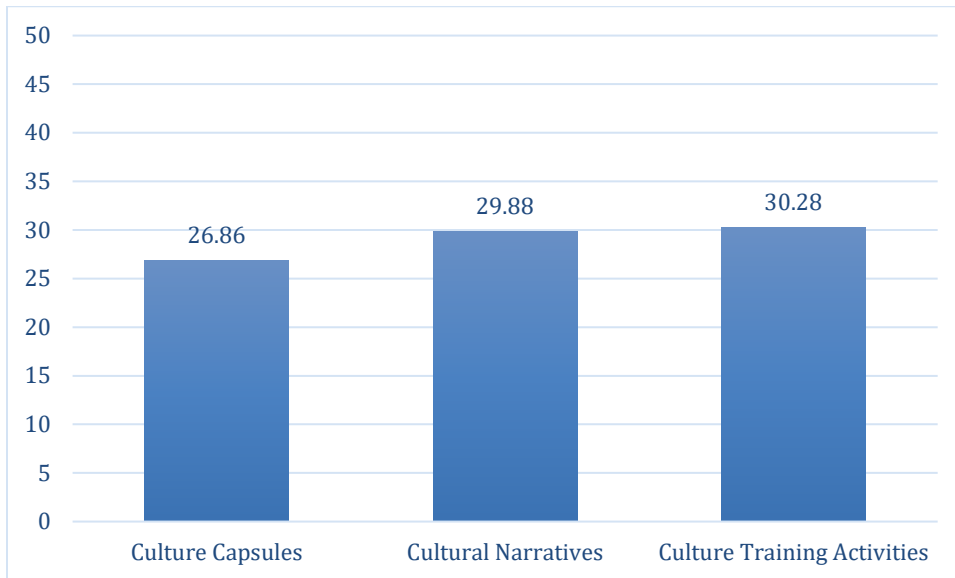
*One-Way ANOVA of Oxford Placement Test by Groups*

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	356.477	2	178.238	2.168	.118
Within Groups	12415.556	151	82.222		
Total	12772.033	153			

<sup>1</sup> Eta Squared was computed as Sum of Squares Between Groups / Sum of Squares Total; and should be interpreted using these criteria, .01 = Weak, .06 = Moderate, and .14 = Large (Gray and Kinnear 2012, p 244; Field 2018, p 737).

**Figure 1**

*Means on Oxford Placement Test by Groups*



**Exploring First and Second Research Questions**

Before discussing the results, the assumptions related to Repeated Measures ANOVA were reported. Repeated measures ANOVA, besides the assumption of normality, which was explored in Table 4.1, has three more assumptions: homogeneity of variances of groups, sphericity, and homogeneity of covariance matrices. Table 8 displays the results of Levene’s tests of homogeneity of variances. The non-significant results of the test indicated that the assumption of homogeneity of variances was retained on the pre-test ( $F(2, 151) = .342, p > .05$ ), and post-test ( $F(2, 151) = 2.17, p > .05$ ) of ICC.

**Table 8**

*Levene’s Test of Homogeneity of Variances for Pre-test and Post-test of Intercultural Communicative Competence*

		Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
Pre-test	Based on Mean	.330	2	151	.719
	Based on Median	.342	2	151	.711
	Based on Median and with adjusted df	.342	2	149.985	.711
	Based on trimmed mean	.340	2	151	.712
Post-test	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

Repeated Measures ANOVA also requires that the correlation between the pre-test and the post-test of ICC be roughly equal across the three groups; i.e., homogeneity of covariance matrices.

This assumption is explored through the Box's test. The non-significant results of the Box's test (Box's M = 6.64,  $p > .001$ ) (Table 9) indicated that the assumption of sphericity was retained. It should be noted that the results of the Box's test should be reported at .001 levels; Tabachnick et al. (2013); Pallant (2020); and Field (2018).

**Table. 9**

*Box's Test of Equality of Covariance Matrices for Intercultural Communicative Competence*

Box's M	6.644
F	1.086
df1	6
df2	533352.603
Sig.	.368

Finally, repeated measures ANOVA assumes that the differences between pairs of dependent variables should have equal variances across the groups; i.e., the Mauchly's test of sphericity. To test this assumption, at least three dependent variables are required. Since this study included one dependent variable only; the pre-test and the post-test of ICC, the degree of freedom was zero; and consequently, the sphericity test could not compute the p-value (Table 10).

**Table 10**

*Mauchly's Test of Sphericity for Intercultural Communicative Competence*

Within Effect	Subjects	Mauchly's W	Approx. Chi-Square	df	Sig.	Epsilon		
						Greenhouse-Geisser	Huynh-Feldt	Lower-bound
Tests		1.000	.000	0	.	1.000	1.000	1.000

The main results of Repeated Measures ANOVA are discussed below. Table 11 and Table 11 show the results of the Between-Subjects, and Within-Subjects Effects. These two tables should be reported despite the fact that their results cannot answer any of the research questions. The first and second research questions were answered through simple effect analysis. Based on the results shown in Table 4.10 ( $F(1, 151) = 7.00, p < .05, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .085$  representing a moderate effect size<sup>2</sup>) it can be concluded that there were significant differences between three groups' overall means on the pre-test and the post-test. In other words, if one computes the sum of the pre-test of posttest of ICC, there were significant differences between the three groups' means the total score.

**Table 11**

*Tests of Between-Subjects Effects for Overall Pre-test and Post-test of ICC by Groups*

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
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<sup>2</sup> Partial Eta Squared should be interpreted using the following criteria; .01 = Weak, .06 = Moderate, and .14 = Large (Gray and Kinnear 2012, p 323; and Pallant 2016, p 285).

Intercept	732067.194	1	732067.194	3183.527	.000	.955
Group	3222.073	2	1611.037	7.006	.001	.085
Error	34723.173	151	229.955			

Table 12 shows the results of the Within-Subjects Effects which include two F-values. First, the significant results of the F-value for the effect of Tests ( $F(1, 151) = 70.28, p < .05$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .318$  representing a large effect size) indicated that if one compares the total sample's means on pre-test and post-test of ICC, disregarding the three groups, there was a significant difference between the two overall means.

Finally, the results indicated that there was a significant interaction between Group and Tests ( $F(2, 151) = 6.93, p < .05$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .084$  representing a moderate effect size). It should be reiterated again that these results cannot be used to answer any of the research questions.

It should be noted that Table 4.11 has produced four F-values for each of variable. All these F-values are the same due to the fact that the assumption of sphericity was retained. As shown in Table 4.10 the epsilon values of one indicated that no correction would be applied to Table 12.

**Table 12**

*Tests of Within-Subjects Effects for Pre-test and Post-test of Intercultural Communicative Competence by Group*

Source		Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Tests	Sphericity Assumed	16943.693	1	16943.693	70.289	.000	.318
	Greenhouse-Geisser	16943.693	1.000	16943.693	70.289	.000	.318
	Huynh-Feldt	16943.693	1.000	16943.693	70.289	.000	.318
	Lower-bound	16943.693	1.000	16943.693	70.289	.000	.318
Group	Sphericity Assumed	3344.419	2	1672.209	6.937	.001	.084
	* Greenhouse-Geisser	3344.419	2.000	1672.209	6.937	.001	.084
	Huynh-Feldt	3344.419	2.000	1672.209	6.937	.001	.084
	Lower-bound	3344.419	2.000	1672.209	6.937	.001	.084
Error (Tests)	Sphericity Assumed	36399.529	151	241.056			
	Greenhouse-Geisser	36399.529	151.000	241.056			
	Huynh-Feldt	36399.529	151.000	241.056			
	Lower-bound	36399.529	151.000	241.056			

Table 13 shows the three groups' means on the pre-test and post-test of ICC. The three groups had roughly equal means on the pre-test of ICC. However, culture narratives group ( $M = 64.08$ ) had the highest mean on post-test of ICC. This was followed by culture training activities ( $M = 56.38$ ), and culture capsules ( $M = 48.26$ ) groups).

**Table 13***Descriptive Statistics for Pre-test and Post-test of ICC by Groups*

Group	Time	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Capsules	Pre-test	42.500	2.092	38.366	46.634
	Post-test	48.260	2.245	43.824	52.696
Narratives	Pre-test	42.429	2.114	38.252	46.605
	Post-test	64.082	2.268	59.600	68.563
Activities	Pre-test	39.236	1.995	35.295	43.178
	Post-test	56.382	2.141	52.152	60.612

After discussing the results of the Between-Subjects and Within-Subjects Effects, the results of simple effect analysis are reported. Simple effect analysis, as defined by Field (2018), enables researchers to investigate the levels of one variable within another variable. The Repeated Measure ANOVA includes two variables; a Time variable which represents the pre-test and the post-test of ICC; and a Group variable which shows the three groups; i.e., culture narratives, culture capsules, and cultural training activities. Using a simple effect analysis, one can investigate the levels of Time variable across the Group variable and vice versa. Thus, we can make the following comparisons:

A: Three groups were compared on the pre-test of ICC in order to prove that they were homogenous in terms of their ICC prior to the administration of treatments (Table 14).

B: Three groups were compared on the post-test of ICC in order to probe the first research question (Table 14).

C: finally, each group's mean improvement from the --test to post-test is examined to probe the second research question (Table 4.15). All these results are discussed based on the means shown in Table 4.13. The groups' means on the pre-test of ICC are compared below.

Table 4.13 shows the results of the Simple-Effect Analysis, which compares the three groups' means on the pre-test of ICC. The results indicated that there was not any significant difference between culture capsules ( $M^3 = 42.50$ ) and culture narratives ( $M = 42.42$ ) on the pre-test of ICC ( $MD = .071$ ,  $p > .05$ ). There was not any significant difference between culture capsules ( $M = 42.50$ ) and culture training activities ( $M = 39.23$ ) on the pre-test of ICC ( $MD = 3.26$ ,  $p > .05$ ). There was not any significant difference between culture narratives ( $M = 42.42$ ) and culture training activities ( $M = 39.23$ ) on the pre-test of ICC ( $MD = 3.19$ ,  $p > .05$ ).

Based on these results it can be concluded that the three groups were homogenous in terms of their ability in ICC prior to the administration of the treatments. Figure 4.2 shows the groups' means on the pre-test of ICC.

<sup>3</sup> M and MD stand for Mean and Mean Difference.

**Table 14***Simple Effect Analysis for Comparing Groups on Pre-test of ICC*

Time	(I) Group	(J) Group	Mean	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval for Difference	
			Difference (I- J)			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Pre-test	Capsules	Narratives	.071	2.974	.981	-5.805	5.948
		Activities	3.264	2.891	.261	-2.449	8.976
	Narratives	Activities	3.192	2.907	.274	-2.551	8.935

\*. The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

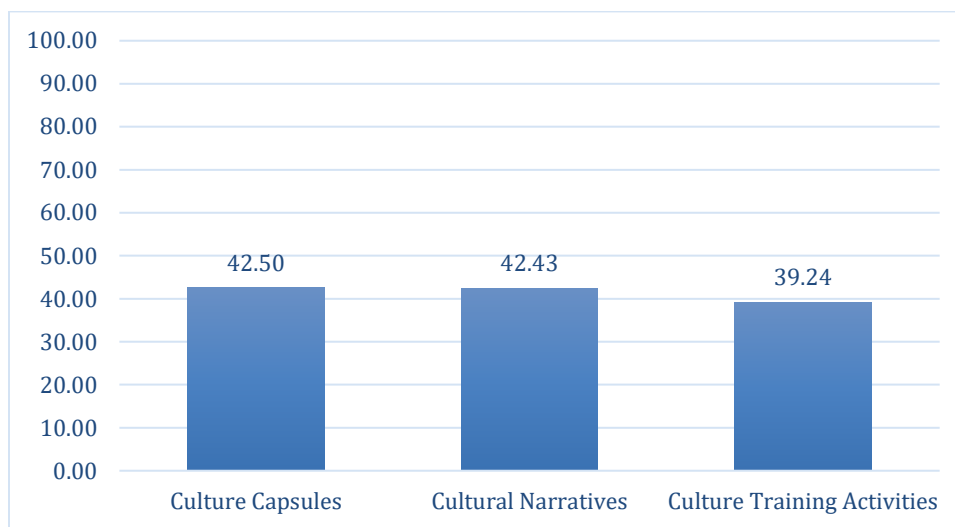
**Figure 2***Means on Pre-test of Intercultural Communicative Competence by Groups*

Table 4.14 shows the results of the Simple-Effect Analysis which compares the three groups' means on the post-test of ICC. These results probe the first research question. The results indicated that the culture narratives group ( $M = 64.08$ ) significantly outperformed the culture capsule group ( $M = 48.26$ ) on the post-test of ICC ( $MD = 15.82$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The culture narratives group ( $M = 64.08$ ) significantly outperformed the culture training activities group ( $M = 56.38$ ) on the post-test of ICC ( $MD = 7.70$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The culture training activities group ( $M = 56.38$ ) significantly outperformed the culture capsules group ( $M = 48.26$ ) on the post-test of ICC ( $MD = 8.12$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Figure 4.3 shows the groups' means on the post-test of ICC.

**Table 15***Simple Effect Analysis for Comparing Groups on Post-test of ICC*

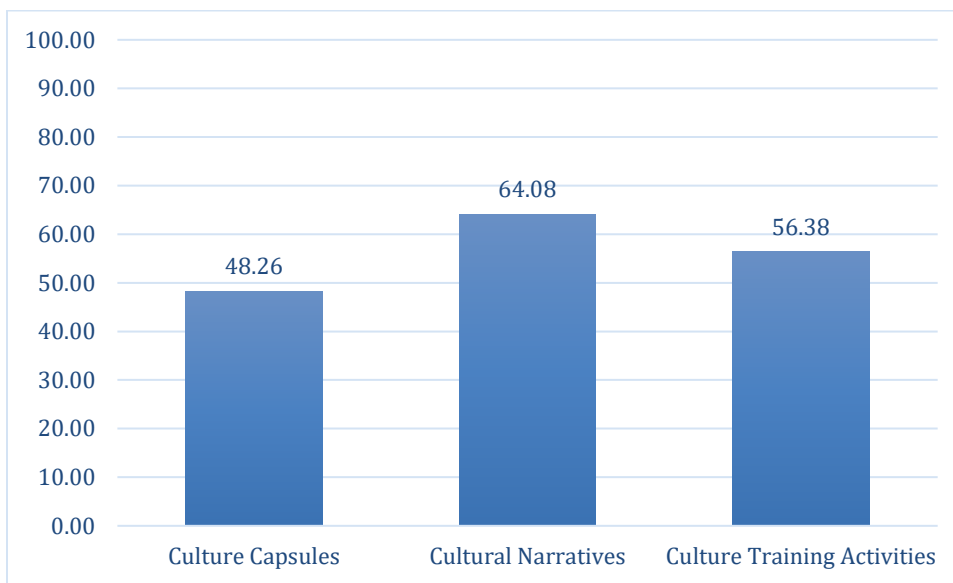
Time	(I) Group	(J) Group	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval for Difference	

		Mean Difference (I-J)		Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Post	Narratives	Capsules	15.822*	3.192	.000	9.516	22.128
		Activities	7.700*	3.119	.015	1.537	13.862
	Activities	Capsules	8.122*	3.102	.010	1.992	14.252

\*. The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

**Figure 3**

*Means on Post-test of Intercultural Communicative Competence by Groups*



Finally, Table 15 probes each group's mean improvement from the pre-test to the post-test. These results were employed to probe the second research question related to ICC. The results indicated that;

Considering the second research question, as it compares three different techniques, the results were classified in three parts:

1. The use of culture narratives as a technique for raising CCA did not have any statistically significant effect on the development of ICC of Iranian EFL learners.
2. The use of culture capsules as a technique for raising CCA did not have any statistically significant effect on the development of ICC of Iranian EFL learners.
3. The use of culture training activities as a technique for raising CCA did not have any statistically significant effect on the development of ICC of Iranian EFL learners.

Therefore, the culture narrative group had a significantly higher mean on the post-test of ICC ( $M = 64.08$ ) than the pre-test ( $M = 42.42$ )  $MD = 21.65$ ,  $p < .05$ ).



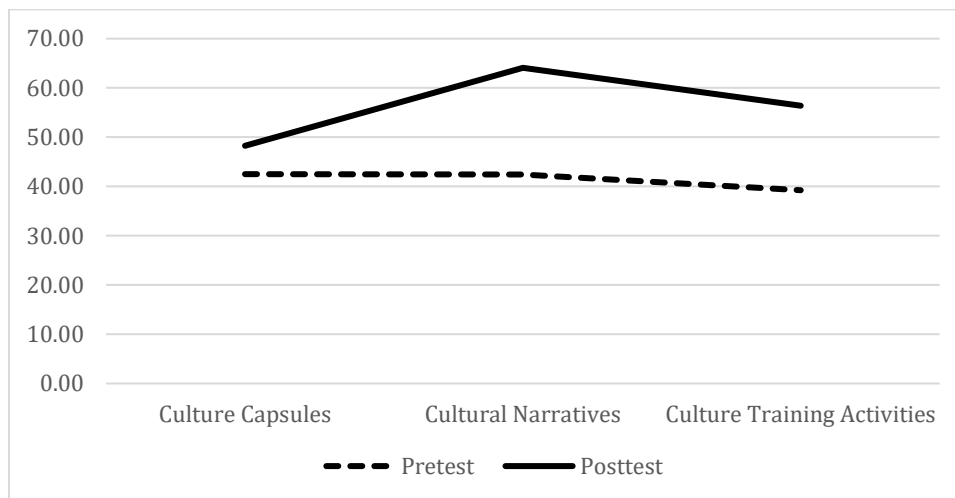
**Table 16***Simple Effect Analysis for Comparing Mean Improvement from Pre-test to Post-test of ICC*

Group	(I) Time	(J) Time	Mean Difference (I- J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval for Difference	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Capsules	Post-test	Pre-test	5.760	3.105	.066	-.375	11.895
Narratives	Post-test	Pre-test	21.653*	3.137	.000	15.456	27.851
Activities	Post-test	Pre-test	17.145*	2.961	.000	11.296	22.995

\*. The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

Although the culture capsules group had a higher mean on the post-test of ICC ( $M = 48.26$ ) than the pre-test ( $M = 42.50$ ), their improvement from the pre-test to the post-test was not statistically significant ( $MD = 5.76$ ,  $p > .05$ ).

Finally, the culture training activities group had a significantly higher mean on the post-test of ICC ( $M = 56.38$ ) than the pre-test ( $M = 39.26$ ) ( $MD = 17.14$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Figure 4.4 shows the three groups' mean improvement from the pre-test to the post-test.

**Figure 4***Mean Improvement from Pre-test to Posttest of ICC by Groups*

### Exploring the third and fourth Research Questions

Considering the third and fourth questions in the qualitative section, students emphasized the significance of CCA in language education, highlighting its role in developing ICC and fostering a deeper understanding of cultural nuances. This theme, “Understanding of Cultural Nuances,” revealed their recognition of the empowering nature of cross-cultural understanding and its integral role in effective global communication. Furthermore, the investigation into the learners’ attitudes towards the importance of their perceptions in CCA showed that students recognized the crucial role of their perceptions in shaping their attitudes towards ICC in language learning. This theme, “Recognition of Learners’ Perceptions Crucial Role in Fostering Intercultural Competence,”

underscored their awareness of the impact of personal attitudes and their growing recognition of their crucial role in fostering intercultural competence. Moreover, when discussing the practical aspects of integrating ICC into language learning, students highlighted challenges such as the absence of a universally accepted model for ICC and the potential inadequacy of EFL teachers in incorporating ICC into language classes. This theme, “Practical Aspects of Integrating ICC into Language Learning,” revealed their insights into the challenges and the need for better preparation and effective integration of intercultural communication skills into language education.

Students also expressed the importance of recognizing cultural nuances and understanding diversity in fostering effective communication. This “Impact of Cultural Nuances on Communication” theme highlighted their acknowledgement of the need for a deeper grasp of cultural subtleties for successful and respectful communication across different cultures. Overall, the themes from the students’ responses reveal a strong awareness of the importance of CCA and ICC in language learning and the need for effective integration of intercultural elements into education to meet learner needs and objectives.

## **CONCLUSION**

The study underscores the significant impact of integrating culture narratives, culture capsules, and culture training activities into language learning on the development of CCA and ICC among Iranian EFL learners, along with previous studies (Alptekin, 1993; Liu & Ding, 2009). Research has shown statistically significant results favouring incorporating cultural elements into language learning curriculum, emphasizing the importance of these techniques for raising ICC. Previous studies have also highlighted the positive influence of culture-specific activities and explicit cultural instruction on students’ intercultural sensitivity and communication skills. Furthermore, storytelling has been recognized as an effective means of developing ICC among language learners (El Boubekri, 2024; Liao & Li, 2023; Mu & Yu, 2023). The study’s findings, supported by both quantitative and qualitative data, provide empirical evidence for the effectiveness of incorporating culture narratives into language instruction to enhance learners’ intercultural competence.

Additionally, the impact of culture capsules as a technique for raising CCA on the development of ICC among Iranian EFL learners was also demonstrated (Skidmore, 2023; Zhu et al., 2019). The study aligns with the broader understanding of the importance of integrating cultural elements into language learning. It suggests that focused and condensed culture capsules can be a practical instructional approach. This research underscores the potential of culture narratives, culture capsules, and culture training activities as valuable tools for fostering CCA and ICC. It highlights the need for further research to corroborate these findings and explore potential variations across different cultural and educational contexts.

Considering the study’s implications, the article presents practical insights into incorporating CCA and ICC within EFL curricula. It suggests that educators can enhance course materials by integrating cultural contexts and interactive activities, aiming to improve students’ cultural sensitivity and communication skills. By adopting this approach, educators can not only enrich language learning but also promote a deeper understanding of cultural diversity among learners.

Our current study focused on three specific strategies to enhance CCA. However, future research could significantly benefit from exploring other strategies, such as making local connections or teaching students to think beyond race and ethnicity. Individual differences,

including age, personality, affective filters, and aptitude, could be crucial in shaping attitudes towards learning culture and tolerance towards cultural diversities. By focusing on these individual differences, future research could gain valuable insights and potentially revolutionize the field of language education and intercultural communication. Moreover, different domains of ICC, including knowledge, attitudes, skills, and awareness, were not considered in the present investigation; considering them can provide more accurate results. Finally, this study was conducted online due to the COVID lockdown. Administering the research in the conventional setting can be an excellent alternative to be considered. Utilizing strategies to improve the CCA in the conventional setting can be examined.

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