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Research Paper

Intercultural competence, Intercultural sensitivity, and Language Pedagogy: Perspectives of Iranian Novice and Experienced EFL Teachers

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Abstract

Intercultural competence and intercultural sensitivity have drawn the attention of a myriad of scholars in the fields of language teaching, communication, culture, gender, and ethnicity. This is the rationale behind the current research aiming at investigating EFL teachers' beliefs concerning the concepts of intercultural communication competence (ICC) and intercultural sensitivity (IS) and how such concepts are promoted in their real practices in English classes. To this end, utilizing a qualitative design, a sample of 20 EFL teachers (11 experienced and 9 novice teachers) from different language institutes in West Azerbaijan province were selected. A semi-structured interview and a three-session observation were conducted as data gathering tools. The results of the data analysis indicated that even though Iranian EFL teachers were familiar with the concepts of IS and ICC and they knew that language and culture are not isolated terms, they ignored culture in the classes due to some regularities imposed on them by society. As a matter of fact, for teachers, the concept of language is the top priority while culture plays a second fiddle. The study has some pedagogical implications for EFL teachers and learners in overcoming cultural differences to improve the level of language proficiency.

Keywords: *Cultural Awareness; EFL Teachers' Beliefs, Intercultural Communicative Competence; Intercultural Sensitivity*

شایستگی بین فرهنگی، حساسیت بین فرهنگی، و آموزش زبان: دیدگاه معلمان انگلیسی تازه کار و با تجربه ایرانی
شایستگی بین فرهنگی و حساسیت بین فرهنگی توجه هزاران محقق را در زمینه های آموزش زبان، ارتباطات، فرهنگ، جنسیت و قومیت به خود جلب کرده است. این منطق پشت تحقیق فعلی است که با هدف بررسی باورهای معلمان زبان انگلیسی در مورد مفاهیم شایستگی ارتباط بین فرهنگی (ICC) و حساسیت بین فرهنگی (IS) و چگونگی ترویج چنین مفاهیمی در شیوه های واقعی آنها در کلاس های انگلیسی انجام می شود. بدین منظور با استفاده از یک طرح کیفی، نمونه ای متشکل از ۲۰ مدرس زبان انگلیسی (۱۱ مدرس مجرب و ۹ معلم مبتدی) از موسسات زبان مختلف استان آذربایجان غربی انتخاب شدند. یک مصاحبه نیمه ساختاریافته و یک مشاهده سه جلسه ای به عنوان ابزار جمع آوری داده ها انجام شد. نتایج تجزیه و تحلیل داده ها حاکی از آن است که معلمان زبان انگلیسی با وجود اینکه با مفاهیم IS و ICC آشنایی داشتند و می دانستند زبان و فرهنگ اصطلاحات مجزا نیستند، اما به دلیل قوانینی که جامعه بر آنها تحمیل می کند، فرهنگ را در کلاس ها نادیده گرفتند. در واقع، برای معلمان، مفهوم زبان اولویت اصلی است در حالی که فرهنگ در کمانچه دوم نقش دارد. این مطالعه پیامدهای آموزشی برای معلمان و زبان آموزان زبان انگلیسی در غلبه بر تفاوت های فرهنگی برای بهبود سطح مهارت زبان دارد.

واژگان کلیدی: آگاهی فرهنگی؛ باورهای معلمان زبان انگلیسی، صلاحیت ارتباطی بین فرهنگی؛ حساسیت بین فرهنگی

Introduction

Foreign culture is intrinsically linked to learning and teaching a foreign language. Differently put, language and culture are intertwined (Ayu, 2020). Language refers to the embodiment of cultural reality, the expression of cultural reality, and the symbol of cultural reality (Li et al., 2020). The significance of teaching culture in a second- or foreign-language class cannot be understated. Learners should be equipped with cross-cultural competence. Language teachers need skills beyond their subject-matter expertise in order to help learners improve their intercultural competence. Nevertheless, as Jedynak (2011) pointed out, some foreign language teachers neglect intercultural competency in their teaching because they fail to incorporate it in effective communication. Recently, intercultural competency has drawn significant academic attention from experts in fields like language teaching education, cultural research, ethnic surveys, gender, and communication (Byram, 2013; Soodmand et al. 2018).

Language learning, according to Derenowski (2011), is not separate from its cultural context; rather, culture and language are intertwined. According to Cunningsworth (1995), teaching language solely as an abstract system would not prepare students to apply it in everyday situations. Therefore, foreign language teaching materials that contain aspects of the target language culture are typically chosen by language teachers. Additionally, they must be aware of the influence of culture and be sufficiently sensitive to apply cultural differences in a useful way in actual classroom activities. Along with the ICC, IS of EFL teachers appears to be important in terms of teaching methodology.

Moreover, it is believed that with more years of teaching experience, teachers' IS beliefs and practices can change. As it was highlighted by Bhawuk and Brislin (1992), in order to be successful in a different culture, a person must be interested in his own culture, sensitive to cultural variances, and respectful of others from other cultures. Hammer, Bennett, and Wiseman (2003) argued that intercultural sensitivity is a requirement for intercultural competence, meaning that in order to be interculturally competent, one must first acquire this ability. Even though ICC and IS have received a lot of research attention (Pourakbari & Chalak, 2015), this area of inquiry is underresearched. This is because language learners and teachers frequently struggle with intercultural competence issues, which may arise from the differences between their own culture and the culture of the target language (Mostafaei Alaei & Nosrati, 2018). Consequently, students may form unfavorable opinions about or separate themselves from the culture of the second or foreign language, which results in a lack of desire and effort.

Both language teachers and students seem to benefit from promoting their intercultural sensitivity and competence (Guilhereme, 2002). Due to the importance of ICC and IS and the dearth of studies, the current study aimed to conduct a context-specific sort of research in ICC and intercultural sensitivity with the contribution of EFL teachers with short- and long-term experiences in an EFL context like Iran. In other words, this study was intended to investigate EFL teachers' perceptions of ICC and intercultural sensitivity and how they promote ICC and intercultural sensitivity in their real practices in English classes. The results of this study may enhance cultural awareness of Iranian students and encourage them to more easily share and exchange certain cultural values with students from other countries. Consequently, cultural differences and stereotypes can be lessened.

Review of Literature

Intercultural Competence (ICC)

ICC is a framework for intercultural learning that equips students of foreign languages with the attitudes, information, and abilities necessary for successful cross-cultural communication (Byram, 2013; Sinicrope et al., 2007). The idea of teaching students to engage responsibly and

effectively with persons from diverse linguistic systems, backgrounds, and worldviews is highly emphasized in the literature on ICC (Fantini, 2007). Instructors are encouraged to design foreign language lessons that require students to reflect on their own beliefs about the target culture as well as create opportunities for students to take part in active inquiry about the goods, strategies, and viewpoints of another culture in order to prepare students for intercultural interactions (Moore, 2006; Deardorff, 2009).

Learners should be engaged in activities that foster the intercultural competencies required for being involved in mutual interaction with cultural diversity after attitudes and knowledge have been addressed (Byram, 1997). By giving students the chance to exercise their skills in analysis, interpretation, communication, and interaction with regard to the goods and practices of the target culture, instructors are enabled to integrate an intercultural attitude into the curriculum (Byram, 1997). Teachers should be aware of the cultural differences and components between source and target cultures when teaching and emphasizing culture.

Intercultural Sensitivity (IS)

The other variable of the current study is IS. It is seen as a necessary condition for ICC (Hammer et al., 2003), meaning that a larger IS increases the likelihood of ICC (Dong, Day, & Collaço, 2008; Peng, 2006). Bhawuk and Brislin (1992) emphasized the importance of IS for educators in the modern classroom and claimed that IS can anticipate how well people would get along with people from various cultural backgrounds. Chen and Starosta (1997) considered IS as the individual's "ability to develop emotion towards understanding and appreciating cultural differences that promote appropriate and effective behavior in intercultural communication" (p. 1). It is considered as examining an individual's capacity for discrimination and exposure to cultural diversity using IS measurement (Hammer et al., 2003).

Teaching English as a foreign language involves more than merely teaching grammar and vocabulary; it also involves assisting learners in developing an understanding of the language's culture, values, and way of life. EFL teachers can do this by integrating cultural variations into the materials and providing a consistent source. It is expected of EFL teachers to have an open mind, which can result in a high IS level, which in turn leads to the students' engagement in a multicultural setting. Atay et al. (2009, p. 124) asserted that "the intercultural dimension in the teaching of foreign languages has become one of the most special concerns for teachers and researchers in the field," because it may lead to communication with people of different cultures (Boudouaia et al., 2022; Young & Schartner, 2014). Undoubtedly, the value of IS resides in its capacity to combat inequality, conduct relevant cultural distinctions, and foster intercultural communication skills (Alaei & Nosrati, 2018).

Pertinent Empirical Studies

According to some earlier studies, IS and the intricacy of ICC in EFL learning processes have drawn the attention of academics and experts in the field (e.g., Lou & Noels, 2017; Mostafaei Alaei & Nosrati, 2018). Teaching culture to L2 students is a necessity (Deardorff, 2009). This is due to the fact that English is now a language that speakers share in order to communicate across linguistic and cultural realms (Su et al. 2016). A significant number of studies have been undertaken in the areas of ICC and IS. For example, 108 international postgraduate candidates from 17 various countries were investigated by Sarwari and Abdul Wahab (2017) using a mixed-method design to examine the association between IS and ICC. The study's findings showed that the two variables were closely related and had an impact on one another. They came to the conclusion that the students' strong intercultural sensitivity helped them perform effective interactions, and their intercultural communication competency helped them initiate intercultural conversation.

Iranian EFL teachers' IS was examined by Alaei and Nosrati (2018). To choose volunteers, the researchers used the LinkedIn professional network. The sample consisted of 167 private language institution instructors who worked in various American cities. High amounts of IS were detected among the subjects, according to the data. More importantly, the viewpoints of the participants demonstrated that they were better at appreciating various cultures and enjoying interactions than at being attentive, engaged, and confident during those interactions.

Level and demographic disparities among EFL teachers were examined by Boudouaia et al. in 2022. A sample of 182 Algerian EFL instructors from universities, high schools, and middle schools were selected to gather quantitative data. The findings showed that interaction confidence, interaction delight, and interaction attentiveness were relatively the lowest among the IS components, with interaction engagement having the highest mean value and respect for other cultures having the second-highest rank. The results indicated that there were significant variations between male and female teachers in the interaction enjoyment dimension, with female EFL teachers reporting higher levels of interaction pleasure. The study did not find any appreciable variations in the educational backgrounds, teaching backgrounds, or teaching levels of EFL teachers in IS. The literature review on the topic revealed that very scant research has been done on ICC and IS. In Iran, the literature on ICC development in FL teaching as well as in intercultural sensitivity and studying two variables of ICC and IS in EFL teachers' classrooms with short- and long-term experiences in terms of practices and beliefs is scarce. Thus, it is hoped that the current study would help bridge the gap in this regard. In short, based on the objectives of the study, the following research questions were formulated:

RQ1: *What are experienced and novice EFL teachers' beliefs about IS and ICC?*

RQ2: *How do experienced and novice EFL teachers perform interculturally when it comes to actual teaching practice in EFL classes?*

Method

Participants

Utilizing a qualitative design, the current study was conducted to investigate experienced and novice EFL teachers' beliefs about IS and ICC as well as the application of the intercultural activities in their teaching methodology. To this end, a sample of 20 (12 male and 8 female) EFL teachers with short- and long-term experiences from different language institutes in West Azerbaijan province were selected. In accordance with this sub-category, from the total of 12 male EFL teachers, 7 of them were experienced teachers and 5 of them were novice teachers. Also, of 8 female teachers, 4 of them were experienced teachers and the rest were novice teachers. They were selected conveniently and based on their willingness to participate in the study.

Instruments

To collect the required data, a semi-structured interview was used, whose questions revolved around teachers' real practices and beliefs about interculturality and intercultural sensitivity. There were 5 questions in the semi-structured interview that revolved around IS and ICC. The questions were as follows:

What is the definition of intercultural competence, in your idea?

What are the elements of intercultural competence?

What are the mostly addressed aspects of intercultural competence in ELT textbooks, based on your idea? In other words, textbooks are sensitive to which aspects of culture?

What are the less touched aspects of intercultural competence in ELT textbooks, based on your idea?

What tasks and activities do you use in your real practices to increase students' levels of IS and ICC?

The other research instrument was a three-session observation phase, with the purpose of observing the classrooms of EFL experienced and novice teachers. Out of the three teachers, two of them were experienced teachers out of whom, one was female and the other was male. Also, one male teacher was considered a novice one and was observed during 3 sessions. The researcher was responsible for the observation and taking notes from the classes in terms of teachers' real practices of ICC and IS.

Procedure

At the onset of the study, volunteer EFL teachers were required to take part in the interview sessions in order to deeply investigate their ICC and IS beliefs. The teachers were categorized into experienced and novice based on their self-reports. It is worth mentioning that a teacher less than 5 years of experience was counted as a novice one, while the one with more than 5 years of experience was counted as an experienced one. Each interview took between thirty and forty minutes and it was held in the teachers' native language for the ease of discussions. Later, the recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim and translated. Both transcriptions and translation files were emailed to the participants for verification purposes. They were informed that they could modify the files in case of any confusion or contrast. Finally, the transcriptions were content-analyzed in a cyclical manner, and the emerged themes in the final cycle were elaborated on by subsuming minor ones under more inclusive themes. Participant anonymity was ensured by keeping their names, identities, and schools confidential. The participants were also informed about the purposes of the study. They were ensured that there were no value judgments in the study, and merely their opinions on the questions mattered. As the next step, the results of the interviews with the teachers were discussed and presented in the form of extracts in the qualitative data analysis section. Furthermore, the observation phase was run with 3 EFL teachers during three sessions in order to investigate teachers' practices of ICC and for this reason, content analysis was conducted to identify, code, and classify the frequent themes and episodes in both the interview section and observation section to validate and enrich the quantitative findings.

Results

Investigating the First Research Question

The attitudes of EFL teachers towards IS and ICC was the focus of the first question that was explored via a semi-structured interview. The first question of the interview was about the definition of intercultural competence. One of the interviewees (an experienced female teacher), considered culture awareness as the central skill for intercultural competence and believed that:

Extract 1: *Cultural awareness is the central skill for intercultural competence. By ICC, learners can show their understanding and critical stance toward practices and products from both domestic and foreign cultures.*

Moreover, another interviewee (a novice male teacher) saw ICC as the integration of language and cultural awareness and stated that ICC is the use of language in society, self-analysis, and analysis of the significance of language and culture for the self.

Extract 2: *In my idea, the integration of language and cultural awareness can be defined as ICC. Furthermore, ICC is the use of language in society, self-analysis, and analysis of the significance of language and culture for the self.*

The other definition of ICC by the other interviewee (novice female teacher) was as follows:

Extract 3: *In my opinion, an ability to evaluate critically the cultural differences between target and source culture is the definition of ICC.*

One of the interviewees (an experienced male teacher) defined the concept of ICC as follows:

Extract 4: *The notion of critical engagement with culture can be defined as ICC. It is worth noting that, in my opinion, ICC by critical engagement refers to a purely intellectual awareness and is not passive.*

Moreover, an EFL teacher with 16 years of teaching experience believed that ICC implies as:

Extract 5: *ICC is defined as critique, both political and social that leads to active engagement with the world. Foreign language education which includes criticality could and should lead a stage further, to critique, engagement, and social action, beyond our own state and society.*

Another teacher (novice teacher) looked at ICC from the lenses of the internal and external world and believed that:

Extract 6: *The definition of ICC can be concerned with both the internal world and external world. The internal world, that is oneself, is a form of critical thought that is demonstrated in critical self-reflection; and the external world, a form of critical thought that is demonstrated in critical action.*

Moreover, one male teacher who was considered an experienced teacher mentioned that:

Extract 7: *ICC extends the focus on language explicitly to other dimensions of culture. Furthermore, critical cultural awareness includes a critique of our own communities and societies as well as that of other countries. It does this because foreign language learning inevitably draws attention to other countries, where the language being learned is spoken, and to the communities and society of those other countries.*

The following three short definitions of ICC were reported by the other teachers who were considered experienced teachers:

Extract 8: *In my perception, ICC is an understanding of the differences between a person and people from other countries or other backgrounds, especially differences in attitudes and values.*

Extract 9: *I define ICC as an ability to evaluate the cultural differences on the basis of explicit criteria perspectives, practices, and products in one's own and other cultures and countries.*

Extract 10: *ICC is about understanding that our cultures impact and shape how we see the world; those differences are natural and that when we work with people from other cultures, we need to be aware of where, when, and how our cultures may either help or hinder us in terms of communication and collaboration.*

As it is clear, both experienced and novice teachers of different genders believed that awareness of cultural values and varieties goes back to the nature of ICC. The second question of the interview was a search about the elements of ICC. One of the interviewees (a novice teacher) listed the ICC elements as follows:

Extract 11: *Elements of ICC can be listed as personality factors, religious factors, micro-culture factors, cultural barriers, and cultural gaps, each of these plays a role in creating effective communication. Sometimes they can even be cultural conflicts. Common cultural background can also be considered as its dimensions. For example, we have a common cultural background with the Turks, but not with the British. Awareness of these can be effective. Of course, most of these topics go back to pragmatics. In fact, interlanguage pragmatics grows because of these cultural factors.*

One female teacher as an experienced instructor listed the following items:

Extract 12: *In my idea, ICC might include the following elements:*

The individual's knowledge of his/her own culture and how he/she is expected to behave according to the norms to be accepted as a member of the culture.

The individual's justified knowledge of the possible problems with existing cultural practices

Overall, the individual's confident, justified, and critically keen knowledge and ability to critically review the differences between cultures.

The other interviewee with 12 years of teaching experience with high self-confidence stated that:

Extract 13: *ICC can be regarded as being comprised of two distinct dimensions: social and psychological dimensions.*

The other teacher as a novice one listed extra ICC elements as follows:

Extract 14: *ICC is a multidimensional construct that includes various components including the following but not limited to:*

- *cultural orientation of the learners towards a phenomenon,*
- *equality of cultures*
- *development of multiple cultural perspectives in the course of education*
- *awareness of one's own culture and the target community's*
- *understanding of one's own cultural identity*
- *learners' awareness of local cultural experiences and norms*

Furthermore, an experienced teacher stated that:

Extract 15: *elements of ICC can be cultural Sensitivity and respect for others' cultures. Developing cultural competence results in an ability to understand, communicate with, and effectively interact with people across cultures.*

Based on the results of the interview, other elements were reported by the interviewees such as *religious element, awareness of one's own cultural worldview, attitude towards cultural differences, knowledge of different cultural practices and worldviews, and knowledge of power in cultural differences, and cross-cultural skills.*

The third question of the interview aimed to touch on the attitudes of the participants on the mostly addressed aspects of ICC in ELT textbooks. It is worth noting that all of the interviewees (100%) had a negative attitude to this question and the main key construct obtained from the teachers' attitudes (regardless of their teaching experience) was the fact that ELT textbooks published in Iran were not exposed to cultural issues due to the social power, hence it can be claimed that ICC is not observed in ELT books such as high school textbooks. Since the key constructs (such as attention to the relational issues and linguistic aspect of culture) and attitudes were the same, then some of the extracts were presented below:

Extract 16: *In my idea, most of the textbooks written in the area of ELT in Iran try to teach religious topics and Persian literature in English. In fact, they teach monocultural perspectives.*

Extract 17: *the answer to the question is crystal clear. Religion and Islam, and all of the proper names of Iranian people are the only mostly touched aspects in ELT textbooks.*

Extract 18: *Highly-touched aspect of ICC in Iranian textbooks is just attention to the backgrounds and common values of Iranian members and cultures.*

The fourth research question aimed to discover the aspects of ICC (personality factors, religious factors, intercultural pragmatics, and so on) that the interviewees think are less attended in ELT textbooks. One of the teachers (novice teacher) believed that:

Extract 19: *In Iranian high school textbooks, the focus is on Iranian culture rather than different cultures such as America. In ELT textbooks published in Iran, the target culture of America, England, and Britain are less touched. The reason can go back to the political issues that we are aware of and as all of us know, the politicians oblige the syllabus designers to not focus on the cultural issues since the focus increases the level of ICC of the high school students that this can result in another revolution that the high-power is not interested in.*

Similar to extract 19, the other interviewee (an experienced teacher) believed that;

Extract 20: *Since pragmatic competence is difficult to be grabbed by high school students due to their low level of general English knowledge, just the general intercultural aspects and*

some of the native cultural topics that have been approved by the authors of high school and university textbooks have been used in the textbooks.

The other teacher (novice teacher) compared native English textbooks with non-native English textbooks like Visions and mentioned that:

Extract 21: *There are books on the market like connects that meet the needs of teens in cultural differences but Visions are more adapted to Iran's culture and even the proper names such as Mr. Tabesh and so on. In these cases, we cannot claim that the target culture is touched. I with 100 percent can say that just Iran's culture and tradition are used in high school textbooks.*

In general, based on the results obtained from the fourth question of the interview, EFL teachers (regardless of teaching experience length) believed that the target culture is ignored in Iranian ELT textbooks and attention was paid to the source culture and Iranian proper names.

Based on the results of the interview regarding teachers' activities in order to improve the levels of IS and ICC in their classes (the last question of the interview), teachers reported that various tasks which can be influential should be performed. For instance, one of the teachers with 8 years of teaching experience mentioned the term "motivation" and "encouragement of the learners" about cultural differences:

Extract 22: *I have always been trying to encourage my students to learn about the target culture as well as the language itself. In order to do so, I motivate the students by telling them the advantages of knowing these cultural differences and how they can help them interact with native speakers.*

In addition, one of the enthusiastic teachers (novice teacher) asserted that:

Extract 23: *my learners and I share our knowledge about cultural issues. We have some activities such as playing games, role-playing, debates, etc. I help them to correct their errors and they have to ask whatever they want to know about the English language, their lives, and culture.*

The other interesting activity was presented by one of the male teachers as a long-term experienced teacher:

Extract 24: *In order to increase the level of sensitivity of the students in terms of culture, I ask them to picture themselves as a person who was born in that society with those people, this way I can see that they stop defending their cultures and being offensive toward another culture.*

In sum, the teachers with differences in the level of teaching experience listed the following tasks for increasing IS and ICC. Teaching students to value other cultures, to respect each other's culture, making the learners aware of cultural differences, explaining that every society is unique in terms of its values and culture and encouraging them to study the books of prominent authors and watch some top movies to be able to compare that culture with their own were the other activities that teachers do to improve attitudes towards cultural issues and increase cultural sensitivity in their classes. As it is crystal clear, Iranian EFL teachers with differences in teaching experience, had similar attitudes towards the various questions of the interview that which can be a sign of the high intercultural awareness level of Iranian EFL teachers. However, to deeply investigate the teachers' real practices in culture, three of them were observed during a three-session observation phase and they were asked to devote a quarter of the class time to topics highlighting the cultural differences. The following section is a brief elaboration of the results gathered from this phase.

Investigating the Second Research Question

In order to answer the second research question which was concerned with the real practices of the culture in English classrooms, a three-session observation was run with three novice and

experienced teachers. The results of content analysis of the classrooms in terms of culture showed that in Iranian English classrooms, language is the priority and culture play the second fiddle. Furthermore, the reactions of both novice and experienced teachers in terms of culture were the same and all of them ignored culture in most of the cases.

The development of language proficiency was given priority in the observed classes; culture was rarely specifically mentioned or discussed. During the classes, 80 percent of the questions the teachers asked were about the meaning of words, the difference between this word and that word, and asking to explain the phrase/sentence. The teachers had a keen interest in an exact understanding of every word, low tolerance of ambiguity, and a focus on discrete grammar points and specific syntactical constructions. As a result, about 80% of classroom time was spent on the elaboration of language points, with the students listening or taking notes. In addition, translation from either English to Persian or Persian to English was used about 30% of the time in the classroom and seen as a reliable way of testing and measuring the students' mastery of the language and understanding of the text. The data also suggest that cultural topics appeared at an average of five times in a 70-minute class period and were included as part of a class. When a cultural topic came up in the text, the teachers would seize the opportunity. Their comments were prompted by textual information in the textbook which usually took the form of a definition, a quick comparison, or a translation. Finally, the strategy of *silence* was observed in some cases when students asked for further explanations from the teachers (for example, dancing and gender equality) in order to elaborate on the cultural differences.

Discussion

The main objective of the current study was to explore the attitudes of EFL learners towards the concept of IS and ICC. Furthermore, their real classrooms' practices in reaction to the cultural differences were observed during three sessions. The results showed that even though Iranian EFL teachers were familiar with the concepts of IS and ICC and they knew that language and culture are not isolated terms, actually they ignored culture in the classes based on some stipulations that the society imposed on them. As it is clear, one of the major goals of teaching English as an international language is to make it easier for learners to communicate their ideas and promote cultural understandings through the medium of English. Intercultural competence and consequently intercultural sensitivity, the ultimate aims of acquiring a language cannot be attained if the teachers ignore the target culture and focus solely on the learners' native culture.

New languages teach people how to think and act differently, and it truly allows them to communicate across linguistic boundaries. It appears that sticking to one culture is ineffective. As a result, it is acknowledged that learning a language and understanding the target culture cannot be done separately (Valdes, 1986). To increase students' awareness of the target culture, the target culture should be taught alongside the source culture in course books and English classes.

As the results of the semi-structured interview with the teachers showed, they ignored the target culture and basically focused on the source culture. The reason for the focus on the target culture instead of the source culture, as the interviewees mentioned during the interview phase, can be the power of the society that obliges the authors and syllabus designers in the first place and teachers in the second place to focus mostly on source culture rather than target culture and attempted to censor the culture differences' elements. Sometimes, a society's prevalent norms forbid bringing something to light, which leads to censorship.

Freshwater (2004, p. 226) quoted Kuhn (1988), a scholar who views censorship as "a continuing process encapsulating complex and frequently contradictory relations of power" rather than "either fixed or monolithic." The content that is, in theory, intended to give the learners intercultural knowledge and develop their cultural competency may, unfortunately, be harmed by

an overemphasis on the source cultural content. ELT textbooks may not adequately reflect cultural ideas.

The findings of this study were in line with those of Saricoban and Oz (2014), Mostafaei Alaei and Nosrati (2018), and Alvarez's study in terms of cultural awareness and intercultural sensitivity (2020). Cross-cultural competence, intercultural awareness, intercultural stance, and comprehension of intercultural communicative skills were of utmost significance in all of the investigations.

The current study generally highlighted the beliefs of EFL teachers regarding IS and ICC. All of them were aware of the concept of culture and the impact that cultural awareness can have on the language proficiency of EFL learners, but they chose to ignore cultural differences and tried not to pay attention to the nuances of culture when developing their ELT textbooks because of the power of the society. Most of the teachers were aware of the nature of IS and ICC and they knew that language and culture are intertwined and cover each other and teachers and syllabus designers should practice culture and use it in designing textbooks and teaching. They even were aware of various elements of IS and ICC (as the following extracts show), however, some restrictions impede them from taking the concepts of IS and ICC into account in real practices:

Extract 25: *The ideological dimensions of IS and ICC need to be taught more. Unfortunately, such cultural ideas are not included in our textbooks. The clear presentation of the ideological background of the authors in the form of intercultural issues has been ignored in high school textbooks surely due to the power issues. For this reason, I can definitely claim that IS and ICC is not touched in high school textbooks. Furthermore, we teachers also try to ignore cultural terms in the classes since some rules do not allow us to disseminate culture.*

Extract 26: *when we teach English, most of the time we face idioms or vocabulary that are directly related to English culture, if we do not teach them, they will not understand that idiom or vocabulary. Other examples are about events in other countries like Charismas or Thanksgiving, if we do not tell them about them, they get confused, but unfortunately, the high power in society sometimes tries to censor them and changes the textbooks to one's loss of culture. So, considering the above-mentioned examples, I can claim that teaching CCA in Iran's context is essential since it increases the students' general English and it allows individuals to empathize with the people they work with.*

The current study's findings contradict Errington and Gewertz's (2004) assertion that instructors' ideas regarding cultural teaching were found to have an effect on their teaching practice, supporting the idea that teachers' beliefs influence how they behave in the classroom. Even while almost all of the study's participants acknowledged the value of cultural teaching in EFL instruction, they attempted to disregard it and engaged in censorship for a myriad of purposes. According to Errington and Gewertz (2004), teachers' perceptions of the value of cultural education typically align with the way they actually teach. Educators who agree that cultural education has value and is required for its own sake are more likely to promote their students' development of intercultural competency than are those who disagree.

In addition to the teachers' high awareness of the concept of intercultural competence and intercultural sensitivity, they all were aware of the details of culture. One instance can be their knowledge in reaction to the first question of the interview that aimed to define intercultural competence. Teachers defined intercultural competence with different phrases and terms such as central skill for intercultural competence, the integration of language and cultural awareness, the use of language in society, self-analysis, analysis of the significance of language and culture for the self, and so on. Furthermore, both novice and experienced teachers mentioned the highly and lowly touched categories of culture in the classes and ELT textbooks and stated that gender equality, the culture of English-speaking countries, and most English proper names were less



touched by the teachers and ELT textbooks, however, Iranian proper names and Islam as the prevalent religion in Iran was used in a high rate in the books published by the Ministry of Education. In sum, based on the attitudes of EFL teachers, regardless of their years of experience, it was indicated that culture is critical in language learning and policymakers should pay special attention to it in order to make a high connection between language and culture to improve L2 learning in a simple manner.

Conclusion and Implications

To answer the first research question which investigated the Iranian EFL teachers' attitudes toward intercultural competence and intercultural sensitivity, an interview was conducted with 20 novices and experienced EFL teachers. They each had similar views concerning each of 5 interview questions about IS and ICC in managing classes where cultural differences were discussed and in using cultural terms while designing ELT textbooks in Iran, and most of them believed in the holistic use of English and so placed emphasis on familiarity with the target culture. Most of them reported on the role of censorship in presenting cultural terms related to the target culture and claimed that the high power in society is responsible for the censorship in culture. However, they partly shared the view that it is necessary to learn about the source and target cultures as they may complement each other in certain aspects. The other aim of the study was related to the teachers' real classroom practices in reaction to the cultural differences. The results showed that even though Iranian EFL teachers were familiar with the concepts of IS and ICC and they knew that language and culture are not isolated terms, actually they ignored culture in the classes based on some stipulations that the higher education and curriculum designers imposed on them.

For 12 learners, the findings of the present study have implications. Culture has a significant impact on language learners' qualitative and quantitative performance, so raising ICC and enhancing students' awareness of cross-cultural differences may be helpful in preparing students to adapt to cultural differences. This is the responsibility of competent syllabus designers and teachers. Therefore, EFL students should look for chances to raise their ICC and IS levels. In order to raise the ICC and IS levels of their courses, syllabus designers should consider the interculturality of the students and teachers as well as the need for cultural sensitivity. To create a better program, suitable resources, and tasks that will encourage ICC, curriculum creators and material producers should collaborate with students and teachers.

Additionally, they could contribute to the development of more appropriate curricula for the educational system by providing both implicit and explicit guidance on how to foster intercultural competence. It is advised that future research compare the various situations in which English is taught as a foreign language, such as schools, private institutions, and universities, considering the various teaching and learning contexts.

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