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Exploring inner voice in the EFL classroom: From materials development perspective

Article info

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Abstract

Several investigations in the psychology domain, educational psychology, and other related subjects have examined the inner voice. However, it has not been used as much in teaching foreign languages, particularly in developing learning materials. This study aimed to develop new English learning materials based on Tomlinson's text-driven approach to enhance learners' inner voice through instruction using the newly developed materials. The participants in this study were 40 intermediate female EFL learners, aged 20-35. All participants were selected through convenience sampling and were native speakers of Persian. The researchers then assigned the participants randomly into two experimental and control groups, each including 20 participants. Data were collected through an inner voice questionnaire and semi-structured interviews, utilizing both quantitative and qualitative methods to align with the study's objectives, participant characteristics, and research questions. The quantitative data were statistically analyzed using SPSS (version 22), revealing that learners demonstrated a moderately high engagement with their inner voice after instruction with the newly developed materials. Qualitative insights emphasized key themes, including the natural use of English in internal thought processes, more frequent internal dialogues, and deeper mental engagement with the language. The study suggests that textbook developers and curriculum designers should consider new approaches to meet EFL learners' psychological and cognitive needs, particularly in fostering inner voice processing for deeper engagement.

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1. Introduction

The main concept explored in this study is the inner voice. Learning a new language involves more than just learning how to speak, write, listen, and read; it also means learning how to think and communicate with oneself, which is the most obvious reason for assisting L2 learners in using their inner voice. Tomlinson (2020) asserted that it is highly beneficial to discuss the presence and importance of the inner voice with learners and to advise them to use the L2 inner voice as frequently as feasible. Providing thinking assignments for learners to complete in their L2 is helpful in this regard. While applying the text-driven approach (TDA) (Tomlinson, 2003; Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2017), for instance, it is advised to provide the learners with a mental preparation task to complete before they meet the main text.

According to Tomlinson (2009), developing materials using the text-driven approach involves learners using kinesthetic, inner voice, and imagery exercises. To achieve this aim, textbooks may be constructed by removing non-humanistic components and increasing the amount of content in portions that encourage learners to reflect, think, feel, and act to learn (Tomlinson, 2003).

The new perspective on language teaching suggests that instruction should shift away from focusing solely on linguistic structures—such as notions, functions, and lexical items—in favour of a task-based approach. Recent studies by Pisharady and JG (2021) and Ellis and Shintani (2014) underscored the effectiveness of language learning when learners participate in meaningful tasks that encourage active language use in real contexts. Thus, rather than structuring language requirements and instruction around discrete elements, a task-based methodology encourages learners to develop language skills that apply to practical situations, fostering a more holistic and interactive learning environment. This strategy not only aids in internalizing language use, but also enhances learners' ability to transfer skills across various linguistic contexts.

The logic behind this study was to narrow the gap between theory and practice in developing language learning materials based on the text-driven approach suggested by several researchers (Park, 2014; Gilmore,2007) as an effective method of developing language learning materials. Therefore, the researchers designed a textbook based on the text-driven method to raise textbook developers' and curriculum

designers' awareness of this method and provide learners with various opportunities to use their L2 inner voice. In this regard, the following research questions were posited:

- Does the newly developed materials have a significant impact on enhancing the inner voice among Iranian EFL learners compared to the current materials?
- How do Iranian EFL learners perceive the impact of the newly developed materials on the enhancement of their inner voice?

2. Review of Related Literature

The terms "private speech" and "inner voice" are frequently used interchangeably in the literature. "Private speech" refers to a form of self-directed language use, while "inner voice" refers to the silent conversation individuals hold within themselves (Gabryś-Barker, 2015; Lantolf, 2000). According to Lantolf (2000), private speech acts as a form of language play, where learners synthesize new input to restore cognitive balance. This inner voice plays a crucial role in self-regulation, allowing learners to rehearse, plan, and monitor their language use before engaging in external communication.

Lantolf's (2000) conceptualization of private speech can be combined with Anderson's (2005) three-stage model of language processing, providing insight into how language production and fluency are developed. Anderson described language processing in three stages: perceptual processing, where input is stored in short-term memory (STM) for interpretation; parsing, where the input is transformed into meaning-based representations; and usage, where declarative knowledge stored in long-term memory (LTM) is applied to mental representations. The interplay between private speech and this processing model suggests that learners use their inner voice to mentally rehearse and consolidate new information, facilitating fluency.

Resnik (2022) explored how multilinguals utilized their L1 and L2 inner speech, finding that context and task demands heavily influenced which language was used. For complex or emotionally charged tasks, individuals tend to revert to their L1 for precision and comfort. On the other hand, L2 inner speech emerges more frequently in immersive L2 environments or during active language learning. The use of L2 inner

speech is crucial for learners to practice linguistic structures internally, which aids in refining language skills before they are employed in external communication. This supports the dynamic and fluid nature of inner speech in multilingual individuals, reflecting differences in fluency, emotional connection, and context.

In the context of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners, researchers have noted that learners often begin by using private speech to facilitate language acquisition before transitioning to more sophisticated L2 inner voice (De Guerrero, 2018). For instance, Lee (2006, 2008) found that Korean EFL learners used private speech for a range of functions, including establishing meanings, memorization, and self-motivation. Similarly, studies by Wang and Hyun (2009) on Taiwanese learners, and Scott and Fuente (2008) on English learners of French and Spanish, identified the use of private speech to recall vocabulary, practice pronunciation, and solve tasks. These findings highlight that learners often combine L1 and L2 in their private speech, even when instructed to use only L2. This reflects the transitional nature of private speech in moving towards full internalization of the L2.

Tomlinson (2020) added that although private speech is often observed at the beginner levels, many learners focus more on micro-processing and micro-production than on using an inner voice. He notes that as learners grow in confidence and competence, they begin using their inner voice more frequently, especially when engaged in tasks individually or while listening to a teacher. In contrast, private speech occurs during group tasks or collaborative work. Tomlinson (2020) suggested that with proper encouragement and training, learners can be taught to use their L2 inner voice more consistently, regardless of prior reliance on private speech.

Transitioning from cognitive processes like inner voice, the text-driven approach (TDA) offers a structured methodology for developing language learning materials that promote both cognitive and emotional engagement. The text-driven approach emphasizes the use of authentic texts that engage learners on an emotional level, providing them with opportunities for meaningful language use and reflection (Tomlinson, 2003, 2016). TDA places equal importance on affective engagement—creating tasks that not only challenge learners intellectually but also resonate with them emotionally (Richards & Renandya, 2022; Mackey et al., 2016).

Tomlinson (2016, 2018) argued that texts should connect with learners' lives, experiences, and emotions, making learning a more holistic process. Appropriate texts, therefore, should captivate learners' attention and stimulate both cognitive and emotional responses. Through experiential tasks and input-response activities, TDA encourages learners to critically engage with the text, explore language structures, and connect these elements with their own experiences.

This method enhances language learning by using interpretation tasks (e.g., discussions, critical thinking activities) and awareness tasks (e.g., focusing on discourse or communication strategies). These activities help learners process language more deeply, drawing connections between language input and real-world application. Furthermore, TDA integrates personal reflection, where learners relate texts to their own lives, making learning more meaningful.

The integration of inner voice into a text-driven approach is a crucial component of Tomlinson's pedagogy (2011). He emphasized that by engaging with texts, learners are encouraged to use their inner voice and private speech to rehearse, reflect, and process language. This engagement, coupled with inner speech exercises, allows learners to internalize the language more deeply. As learners gain confidence, they begin to use their inner voice for tasks such as reflecting on class material, imagining conversations, and practicing language structures. This transition from private speech to inner voice aligns with the TDA's goal of fostering deeper cognitive and emotional engagement with the language.

The literature on inner voice, private speech, and the text-driven approach to materials development provides a comprehensive understanding of how cognitive processes interact with language learning materials. Private speech plays a foundational role in early language learning stages, helping learners scaffold new knowledge. As learners progress, their inner voice becomes a critical tool for practicing and refining language use. The text-driven approach, with its emphasis on authentic texts and emotional engagement, provides an effective framework for incorporating these cognitive processes into language learning. By fostering both cognitive and emotional connections to the material, TDA enhances learners' overall engagement and language development.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

Forty intermediate female English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, aged 20 to 35, participated in the study. Native Persian speakers were selected through convenience sampling, and the selection of female participants was incidental, based on their availability and willingness to take part. A non-probability sampling method called convenience sampling depends on gathering data from learners in the target group who are willing and able to participate in the research. To ensure the homogeneity of the learners, before the start of the courses, a Preliminary English Test (PET) was administered among the 40 learners. The researchers then randomly assigned the participants into two experimental and control groups, each including 20 participants.

3.2. Instruments

Interview

As it is crucial to obtain a private, individualized understanding of L2 learners' experiences since the inner voice is a subjective phenomenon that happens privately in consciousness, following the completion of the tenth week of the treatment, a semi-structured interview was conducted. Interview questions were taken from the literature on inner voice in EFL and SLA contexts. In a semi-structured interview, the interviewer is eager to follow up on interesting progress and allow the interviewee to expand on certain topics. Dornyei (2007) stated that there is a pre-prepared set of guiding questions and suggestions.

The semi-structured interview comprised four initial open-ended questions designed to explore the participants' experiences with their inner voice in English (L2) and its relationship to the newly developed learning materials. The questions focused on understanding if and when participants experienced an L2 inner voice, under what circumstances it emerged, and whether they used this inner voice while performing different tasks. Participants were asked to reflect on the frequency and contexts of their inner voice use, such as when engaged in specific learning activities or problem-solving situations. The semi-structured interview questions related to the inner voice in this study were as follows:

1. Have you ever experienced an inner voice in a second language (L2)?

2. If so, when, where, and under what circumstances has this L2 inner voice occur?

3. Do you use your L2 inner voice while performing different tasks?

4. If so, when, where, and for what tasks do you use it?

Test

To ascertain the general English proficiency level of the EFL learners and ensure their homogeneity, the researchers applied the PET (Quintana, 2003) as the standard test for language competency at the start of the study. The test consisted of 35 reading and 7 writing questions (90 minutes), 25 listening questions (30 minutes), and 4 speaking questions (10 minutes), all at an intermediate level. Reliability indices were estimated using KR-21 and Inter-Rater Reliability methods. Pretest reliability was .70, while posttest reliability for listening and reading was .85 and .91, respectively, deemed appropriate per Fulcher and Davidson (2007). Significant inter-rater agreement was found for both the pretest and posttest of speaking and writing, with strong correlations in all cases (p < .05)."

Inner Voice Questionnaire

The Internal Representation Questionnaire (IRQ), developed by Roebuck and Lupyan (2020), is designed to measure individuals' subjective experiences of internal representations and to quantify variations in "modes of thinking" across different dimensions within a single comprehensive tool. This questionnaire aims to capture how people mentally process information, particularly how they think, visualize, and verbalize internally.

The IRQ includes a specific factor focused on internal verbalization, consisting of 12 statements that assess the extent to which individuals think using an internal "inner voice." These questions explore the experience of hearing words or having conversations within one's mind. For instance, participants might respond to statements such as, "I think about problems in my mind in the form of a conversation with myself," or "I hear words in my 'mind's ear' when I think." To adapt these questions for use in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, minor adjustments were

made to the phrasing to ensure clarity and relevance for non-native English speakers while maintaining the integrity of the original content. These modifications were intended to make the statements more comprehensible and relatable for individuals who think and process language in a second language. Each statement is indicated on a five-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to agree strongly. Cronbach's α was calculated as .914 for the pretest and .956 for the posttest of inner voice. A factor analysis was conducted to evaluate the construct validity of the 12-item questionnaire.

The results showed that all items loaded strongly onto distinct factors, validating their effectiveness in measuring constructs related to inner voice in English. Most items had high loadings on the primary factor, reflecting a general construct of inner voice, while a few also loaded on a secondary factor, possibly indicating a specific aspect of internal verbal experiences. Factor loadings ranged from 0.74 to 0.92 on Factor 1 and from 0.25 to 0.85 on Factor 2, confirming good construct validity.

3.3. Procedure

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to investigate the impact of a text-driven approach on enhancing EFL learners' inner voice experiences. The research was conducted in several stages, integrating both quantitative and qualitative data to provide a comprehensive assessment of the intervention's effectiveness.

Initially, the researchers developed a new textbook based on Tomlinson and Masuhara's (2017) materials development principles. The textbook was designed to engage learners in meaningful language use that promotes inner voice in English. To ensure the effectiveness of the newly developed materials, the content was carefully aligned with the cognitive processes involved in inner voice.

Participants were divided into two groups: an experimental group, which used the newly developed materials, and a control group, which followed the current curriculum. Prior to the intervention, all participants completed the Preliminary English Test (PET) to assess their language proficiency and ensure homogeneity between the groups.

The experimental group received instruction using the new textbook over a period of 10 weeks, with classes held three times a week, each lasting two hours. During this time, the control group continued with their regular curriculum. The new

textbook was implemented in a way that encouraged learners to engage in internal verbalization and reflection in English through various tasks and activities designed to stimulate their inner voice.

Quantitative data were gathered using the Internal Representations Questionnaire, which included 12 items specifically related to internal verbalization experiences. The statements in the questionnaire, such as "I think about problems I face in class in my mind in English conversations with myself," were rated on a 5-point Likert scale, allowing for the measurement of learners' engagement with their inner voice. The questionnaire was administered as a pretest and posttest for both the experimental and control groups to measure changes over time.

In addition to the questionnaire, qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with five participants from the experimental group. These interviews were conducted after the intervention and focused on learners' personal experiences and perceptions regarding their inner voice while using the new textbook. Questions were designed to explore how the textbook influenced their inner voice and cognitive processes in English.

To ensure comprehensive data triangulation, the quantitative data from the questionnaire were complemented by qualitative insights from the interviews. While the quantitative data provided a broad view of the learners' inner voice experiences, the qualitative data offered deeper, contextualized understandings of these experiences. This combination allowed for a more robust and nuanced analysis, enabling the researchers to validate and interpret the findings with greater confidence.

The quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS (22) to identify any statistically significant changes in learners' inner voice experiences between the pre-test and post-test. Descriptive statistics, as well as paired-sample t-tests, were used to compare the two groups. For the qualitative data, a descriptive content analysis was conducted. Key codes and themes were identified from the interview transcripts, revealing patterns and insights that enriched the quantitative findings.

The combined use of quantitative and qualitative data allowed the researchers to triangulate the findings effectively. The results demonstrated that the experimental group showed a significant improvement in their inner voice experiences compared to the control group, indicating the positive impact of the text-driven approach. The

qualitative data further supported these findings by providing detailed narratives and examples of how learners engaged in inner voice in English.

In conclusion, this mixed-methods approach provided a comprehensive understanding of the impact of the newly developed materials on EFL learners' inner voice. By integrating quantitative measures with qualitative insights, the study offered a well-rounded assessment of the effectiveness of the text-driven approach in fostering learners' inner voice in English.

4. Results

This study attempted to investigate the impact of newly developed materials on EFL learners' inner voice. In doing so, a series of analyses were conducted. Before testing the null hypothesis, the assumption for the normality of scores in both groups was checked. The skewness and kurtosis indices for the pretest and posttest of inner voice were within the ranges of ±2; hence normality of the data. It should be noted that the criteria of ±2 were proposed by Bae & Bachman, 2010; and George & Mallery, 2020. The non-significant results of Levene's tests ($p > .05$) of inner voice indicated that the assumption of homogeneity of variances was retained.

4.1. First Research Question

Homogeneity Test

Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics for the proficiency pre-tests of both groups, indicating similar means in all four language skills. This suggests that the groups were homogenous in terms of language proficiency before the intervention.

Table 1.

Descriptive Statistics for the Pretests of Proficiency by Group

Dependent Variable	Group	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Listening	Experimental	11.550	.991	9.544	13.556
	Control	11.500	.991	9.494	13.506
Reading	Experimental	15.800	1.157	13.457	18.143
	Control	15.400	1.157	13.057	17.743
Speaking	Experimental	14.450	1.090	12.243	16.657
	Control	13.850	1.090	11.643	16.057
Writing	Experimental	11.650	.917	9.793	13.507
	Control	12.200	.917	10.343	14.057

Table 2 shows the results of the MANOVA test, confirming no significant difference between the groups' proficiency levels (F (4, 35) = .288, p > .05). This ensures that any observed changes in the study are attributable to the intervention and not pre-existing proficiency differences.

Table 2.

Multivariate Tests for Pretests of Proficiency by Group

Effect		Value	F	Hypothesis df	Error df	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Intercept	Pillai's Trace	.918	97.655	4	35	.000	.918
	Wilks' Lambda	.082	97.655	4	35	.000	.918
	Hotelling's Trace	11.161	97.655	4	35	.000	.918
	Roy's Largest Root	11.161	97.655	4	35	.000	.918
Group	Pillai's Trace	.032	.288	4	35	.884	.032
	Wilks' Lambda	.968	.288	4	35	.884	.032
	Hotelling's Trace	.033	.288	4	35	.884	.032
	Roy's Largest Root	.033	.288	4	35	.884	.032

Testing the Null Hypothesis

To investigate the research question, the efficacy of newly developed materials during 30 instructional sessions on learners' inner voice was explored. Therefore, the following null hypothesis was formulated:

"Newly developed materials did not have any significant impact on enhancing the inner voice among Iranian EFL learners."

First; One-Way ANCOVA requires that there should be a linear relationship between pretest and posttest of inner voice. The significant results of the linearity test (F (1, 39) = 27.08, p < .05, eta squared = .605 representing a large effect size) (Table 3) rejected the statistical null-hypothesis that the relationship between posttest of inner voice and pretest was not linear. In other words; there was a linear relationship between the two variables.

Table 3.

Testing Assumption of Linearity of Relationship between Pretest and Posttest of Inner Voice

			Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Posttest of Inner Voice * Pretest of Inner Voice	Between Groups	(Combined)	12.580	16	.786	2.206	.041
		Linearity	9.654	1	9.654	27.086	.000
		Deviation from Linearity	2.926	15	.195	.547	.885
	Within Groups		8.197	23	.356		
	Total		20.777	39	Eta-Squared		.605

Second; One-Way ANCOVA requires that there should be linear relationships between pretest and posttest of inner voice across the two groups; i.e. homogeneity of regression slopes (Table 4). The non-significant interaction between covariate (pretest), and the independent variable ($F_{(1, 36)}$ = .185, $p > .05$, Partial eta squared = .005 representing a weak effect size) indicated that that the statistical assumption that the relationships between pretest and posttest of inner voice were linear across the two groups was supported. In other words; there were linear relationships between pretest and posttest of inner voice across the experimental and control groups.

Table 4.

Testing Homogeneity of Regression Slopes Posttest of Inner Voice by Groups Pretest

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Group	.340	1	.340	1.479	.232	.039
Pretest	7.082	1	7.082	30.815	.000	.461
Group * Pretest	.042	1	.042	.185	.670	.005
Error	8.273	36	.230			
Total	245.611	40				

One-Way ANCOVA assumes homogeneity of variances of the groups. The non-significant results of the Levene's tests ($F_{(1, 38)}$ = .435, $p > .05$) (Table 5) indicated that the assumption of homogeneity of variances was retained on posttest of inner voice after controlling for the effect of pretest.

Table 5.

Levene's Test of Homogeneity of Variances for Posttest of Inner Voice by Groups with Pretest

F	df1	df2	Sig.
.435	1	38	.514

Tests the null hypothesis that the error variance of the dependent variable is equal across groups.

Table 6 shows the experimental and control groups' means on the posttest of inner voice after controlling for the effect of the pretest. The results showed that the experimental group (M = 2.64, SE =.107) had a higher mean than the control group (M = 2.10, SE =.107) on the posttest of inner voice after controlling for the effect of the pretest.

Table 6.

Descriptive Statistics for Posttest of Inner Voice by Group with Pretest

Group	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Experimental	2.641[a]	.107	2.424	2.858
Control	2.101[a]	.107	1.884	2.318

a. Covariates appearing in the model are evaluated at the following values: Pretest = 1.77.

Table 7 shows the main results of one-way ANCOVA. The results ($F_{(1, 37)}$ = 12.49, p <.05, partial η2 =.252, representing a large effect size) indicated that the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group on the post-test of inner voice after controlling for the effect of the pretest. Thus, the null hypothesis, "newly developed materials did not have any significant impact on enhancing the inner voice among Iranian EFL learners," was rejected. Rejecting the null hypothesis indicates that the instructional intervention had a significant effect on the learners' cognitive engagement with the English language. The experimental group's enhanced inner voice suggests that they were not only processing the language more fluently but were also integrating English into their internal thought processes more effectively. This finding is critical because developing an inner voice in the target language is closely linked to increased language proficiency, particularly in areas like speaking, comprehension, and spontaneous communication.

Table 7.

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects for Posttest of Inner Voice by Groups with Pretest

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Pretest	7.444	1	7.444	33.124	.000	.472
Group	2.808	1	2.808	12.495	.001	.252
Error	8.315	37	.225			
Total	245.611	40				

4.2. Second Research Question

In addition to the inner voice questionnaire, a semi-structured interview was conducted to answer the research question. Creswell (2018) states that to limit the impact of the interview on the participants' responses and ensure that the descriptions accurately reflected the participants' real-life experiences, the researcher initially attempted to conduct interviews in a semi-structured manner to ensure the quality of the study.

Second, to communicate the significance of the oral presentation during the interview, the researchers precisely wrote five participant's descriptions of the experience. Participants were asked a series of questions related to their experiences with the newly developed materials and their L2 inner voice. For instance, they were asked, 'Have you ever experienced an inner voice in a second language (L2)?' and 'If so, when, where, and under what circumstances did it occur?' Additionally, participants were asked, 'Do you use your L2 inner voice while doing different tasks?' and 'If so, when, where, and for what tasks?' Their responses provided valuable insights into how the instructional interventions influenced the development and use of their L2 inner voice during various tasks. Third, the primary phase contained paraphrases of the meaning units. Finally, the researchers explained each before integrating it into the summary statement, or general summary. As a result, five themes were used to represent the replies' extracted codes:

Theme 1: Spontaneous L2 use

Theme 2: Thinking in L2

Theme 3: Stimuli for L2 utterances

Theme 4: Exposure to L2

Theme 5: Conscious imitation of L2 pronunciation

Theme 6: Mental assessment of L2 use

Theme 1: Spontaneous L2 use

According to the interviewees of the study, they started thinking naturally in the target language during this treatment. The quotes from the interview along with an explanation of them are included below. One of the learners thought in L2 spontaneously while watching television shows:

When I play a movie in English, I think in English without making decision to do that. Honestly When I watch Persian television programs, I think in the Persian language. I used to think in Persian when I watched an English-language television show, but these days I think in English most of the time.

Another student observed that, while reading the materials, she was mentally implementing the L2 language:

You know I don't translate L2 text in Persian and … I understand it and explain it for myself in English

This learner highlights two points: (1) She utilizes her L2 inner voice, or spontaneous thought, in the language when she is in an L2 environment; and (2) Her increased L2 competency allows her L2 inner voice to work naturally and subconsciously. If not, she would have solely used her L2 inner voice to mentally translate her L1 and L2 into understandable meanings.

Theme 2: Thinking in the L2

One of the interviewees noted that when given assignments from newly developed textbooks, such as songs and talks for listening exercises and reading textbook contents, she thought in the L2. Furthermore, she was stimulated to think in the L2 when she attempted to respond to the preparedness exercises.

Yeah… I try to repeat some words of audio tracks… I mean within the (l2) inner voice I do that. I pay attention to audios and interesting text and… and I like to do the task at home… I'm trying to talk in English in my mind by thinking, for example I say these things to myself and in my mind of course "Oh, I know this word, I understand the context, good I got it, I've heard this before," etc.

After the course, one of the learners shared her thoughts in the L2:

When I was doing my homework at home I was thinking in English… but before … doing homework was boring for me and… and I became tired… because I tried to translate sentences but now I just think about them in English…

Another learner's comment demonstrates that she was aware of the L2 inner voice:

I think my English improved a lot…because I learn the new things and tried a lot… and also there was ...there was something new, I mean experiencing inner voice… altogether I feel I was successful…

Theme 3: Stimuli for L2 Utterances

The learners' descriptions indicate that utilizing L2 in all the resources increased their awareness of the L2 necessity in the classroom, which in turn helped them enhance their L2 competency. Moreover, the answers that follow demonstrate: (1) the learner's spontaneous L2 speech in L2 contexts; (2) their inability to reflect in their L2 because of time limitations before responding in front of the class seems to have contributed to the development of their inner voice in L2.

Um… thinking… yeah… I used to talk without first thinking in my mind in English… there were some tasks encouraged us to prepare our talks in our minds before … talk about them.

I want to find words to say... Looking back, I don't believe I did this while I was conversing in Persian and translating what I hear English. I mean… I did not translate.

As I remember the questions and answers in the class, I think I responded in English without thinking in Persian after my teacher ask question in English…

The last response demonstrates the L2 stimulus, or target language settings, which prompted the learner to quickly think and speak in the same language. Additionally, this learner's apparent improvement in L2 proficiency allowed her to do so intellectually. If not, she could have mentally translated between the L1 and L2 using the L2 inner voice. It's interesting that this learner recognized this type of L2

stimulus:

> *Uh, I understand, I could speak in English more easily and faster than before. Yeah, several words come back in my head . . . for example when… when I watch the movie. Well I remembered many things I learned in past. If I hear them again, I quickly remember.*

Theme 4: Exposure to L2

The answer of the question, "What is the practical application of inner voice?" can be based on examining every learner. It appears that the L2 inner voice aids or directs students toward speaking and thinking naturally in the target language. In particular, while thinking and speaking in the target language on their own, learners may use the L2 inner voice rather than the L2 inner speech because of their L2 improvement in exposure to interactive exercises provided in the newly developed textbook. Therefore, the response to the question, "How does the L2 inner voice improve?" seems to be that the L2 inner voice develops spontaneously and is further developed by L2 stimuli as target language proficiency rises.

These learners' replies illustrate how exposure to a second language facilitated the use of their inner voice:

> *Yeah, uh, when I listen to English songs and music and tracks and even when my teacher speaks mostly I understand meaning, I guess … uh…I better understand when I try to repeat what I listened in my mind.*

> *Well, I tried to prepare whatever I wanted to say at the class in my mind and … Uh… and of course in L2, because some tasks began with think about that or this …*

> *I think the audio visual exercises are better because when I do them I think in English in my mind more.*

Theme 5: Conscious Imitation of L2 Pronunciation

A few of the students stated that they thought in their second language while imitating what they heard in English audio recordings. One of the students explained his L2 thinking during the interview:

(While listening to the audio activities), I tried to imitate terms that I knew before but you know it was hard to repeat difficult new words.

This response demonstrates the learners' conscious efforts to evaluate her L2 vocabulary knowledge by identifying the words she was familiar with from audio recordings. In particular, the learner seemed to use both the L2 inner speech, which helped her assess her L2 words, and the L2 inner voice, which helped her mentally flash back the words she knew, when she listened to engaging audios in the target language. This suggests that the authentic L2 words on audio resonated in the learner's mind as the L2 inner voice in the manner of the authentic L2 word pronunciation.

Knowing how important it was to develop their L2 proficiency, or at least what they had acquired in this course, the learners made an effort to identify L2 sounds throughout this time to assist in their memory of the target language expressions or phrases whenever they were subjected to the new textbook's activities. Other comments that supported these assertions include the following:

Well I repeated … the words and… and terms I learnt before in English again and again in my head.

I just repeating this to myself, even in... I attempted to listen for the words I remembered as I was doing activities.

Yeah, I do attempt to memorize phrases and, you know, I'm trying to continue this by doing exercise and practice a lot.

Theme 6: Mental Assessment of L2 Use

In addition, learners stated during the interview that they were using their L2 inner voice to recall what they felt in the L2 to assess their responses and utterances to the tasks. More specifically, the learners believed what they felt resonated in their minds as the L2 inner voice, or the authentic, right L2 phrases, when they recalled the L2 from the interactive tasks. Additionally, one of the learner's responses to the spontaneous interview questions such as "Do you use the inner voice while doing different tasks?" and the following questions such "Do you repeat L2 words phrases in your head?" was:

Yeah, I tried to keep vocabularies in my head], right and… you know I try to this in the classroom and out of classroom and yes while doing tasks… Uh… I try to do things in our book… I mean think about things in English and I guess now I improve a lot.

When repeating the L2 words in her mind, which she views as the helpful manner and which she feels helps her contrast, assess, and modify her L2 usage, this learner emphasizes how she actively employs her L2 inner voice for self-regulating. Additionally, when speaking in the target language, a different learner showed active involvement in her L2 inner voice:

Well… I think about something I want to say in my head… and … correct it … prepare it… before I start to speak in class. You I want to become sure I say something that is true…

These data analysis results indicate that the answer to the question, "What is the main application of the L2 inner voice?" is an innate cognitive direction to its proper L2 usage for self-assessing and modification when thinking and speaking the target language.

The qualitative findings, which revealed themes such as spontaneous L2 use, thinking in L2, stimuli for L2 utterances, exposure to L2, conscious imitation of L2 pronunciation, and mental assessment of L2 use, closely align with the quantitative results from the inner voice questionnaire. For example, participants in the experimental group reported an increase in spontaneous thinking in English, particularly while engaging with media or completing tasks—this echoes the significant improvements observed in their post-test scores. Similarly, the theme of exposure to L2, where learners described internalizing language structures through repeated interaction with the new materials, correlates with the enhanced inner voice scores in the experimental group. These findings suggest that the instructional intervention not only improved measurable outcomes, but also promoted deeper cognitive engagement with English, allowing learners to more naturally integrate the language into their thought processes. The connection between both sets of data highlights the effectiveness of the new materials in fostering both quantitative improvements and qualitative shifts in how learners engage with their L2 inner voice.

5. Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the impact of newly developed materials on enhancing the inner voice of Iranian EFL learners. The key research questions guiding this study were as follows:

1. Does the newly developed materials have a significant impact on enhancing the inner voice among Iranian EFL learners compared to the current materials?

2. How do Iranian EFL learners perceive the impact of the newly developed materials on the enhancement of their inner voice?

These questions sought to explore the relationship between the learning materials and inner voice, which previous research has identified as an essential cognitive process in language learning (De Guerrero, 2018; Tomlinson, Burns, & Richards, 2001).

The results demonstrated a significant impact of the newly developed materials on the inner voice of the experimental group of learners. The textbook incorporated activities that were specifically designed to engage learners' inner voice, such as silent mental rehearsals, reflective tasks, and self-talk exercises. These types of exercises are rooted in the text-driven approach (Tomlinson, 2003), which emphasizes interaction with language at a cognitive level through internal verbalization.

Overall, these findings indicate that the new materials not only improve learners' inner voice, but also promote a deeper cognitive and emotional engagement with the language. This aligns with the growing recognition that inner speech is integral to internalizing and processing language efficiently (Tomlinson, 2020). The materials facilitated cognitive immersion in the target language, allowing learners to engage in more meaningful language use.

The enhancement of the inner voice can be explained through several techniques embedded within the newly developed materials. These materials actively encouraged learners to engage in silent verbal reflection, which is crucial for cognitive processing in language acquisition. Tasks like visualizing conversations, internally rehearsing responses, and reflecting on emotions linked to language use helped learners strengthen their ability to think in English. These activities, designed in line with Tomlinson's (2003) theory of language learning, created opportunities for learners to develop mental representations of the language through inner voice, which is

essential for understanding and applying new linguistic structures.

Moreover, the textbook promoted multimodal engagement by incorporating visual, auditory, and emotional elements into the learning process. This approach helped learners to rehearse and verbalize English in their minds during complex tasks, leading to improved use of their inner voice. By addressing different learning modalities, the materials provided learners with multiple ways to internalize language, fostering inner voice engagement.

The statistical findings from the Internal Representations Questionnaire (Roebuck & Lupyan, 2020) provided strong quantitative evidence that the experimental group demonstrated significantly greater improvements in inner voice compared to the control group. The clear linear relationship between pre-test and post-test scores in both groups confirmed that the newly developed materials had a substantial impact on enhancing the inner voice of the learners.

The qualitative data collected from interviews with learners further supported the quantitative findings. Learners in the experimental group reported a noticeable increase in their use of the inner voice, particularly during challenging tasks or when they were reflecting on complex language structures. Several participants described using silent self-talk to prepare for class discussions or mentally rehearsing language during listening activities, which directly contributed to the higher post-test scores observed in the experimental group.

The qualitative findings provided additional insight into how the newly developed materials helped learners develop their inner voice. Some learners explained that they became more aware of their inner voice after completing tasks that prompted them to reflect silently before responding. This heightened awareness was a critical factor in their ability to use English more confidently and fluently in both classroom and real context.

The practical implications of these findings are particularly relevant for EFL instructors and curriculum designers. The results show that structured tasks designed to foster inner voice can have a profound impact on learners' cognitive engagement with the target language. Instructors can incorporate mental rehearsal activities where students silently rehearse language responses before speaking aloud, which can be particularly useful during speaking exercises, allowing learners to mentally practice

constructing sentences before participating in class discussions. Including reflective tasks where students silently think about language use in real-life contexts can further stimulate their inner voice.

Additionally, the use of visual and auditory stimuli, such as videos or audio clips, can prompt learners to internalize what they hear and engage in inner voice. Instructors can ask learners to mentally summarize or paraphrase these materials before producing written or spoken responses. Personalization of tasks also plays a vital role, as encouraging students to connect personal experiences with language tasks fosters deeper emotional and cognitive engagement, thereby enhancing their inner voice.

6. Conclusion

There have been large bodies of research involved with English materials development, evaluation, and implementation; however, very few were concerned with language learners' inner voice. The significance of the study lay in drawing the attention of practitioners to the psychological needs of EFL learners such as inner voice which are essential components of learning.

The findings of the present study revealed significant differences between the control and experimental groups' inner voice. The results of this study can assist ELT practitioners and instructors in better understanding the requirements of EFL learners as well as the potential impacts of the content on learners' inner voice. Researchers with an interest in the subject matter might also investigate whether more internal and external research could corroborate the findings and determine whether teachers' performance and motivation could be improved via the use of newly developed materials.

It may also be necessary to do more research to determine the effects of developing online resources for EFL students. Data on the effects of material development on EFL learners' inner voice underwent investigation in this study; more research may be conducted to examine how the text-driven approach to material development may promote various psychological factors in EFL learners. Finally, it is advised to do more research on the impact of using materials developed by a text-driven method in EFL classrooms in light of the study's findings. Further researches

are required to determine the impact of this method of material development on the abilities of EFL learners at various levels (primary, intermediate, high school, etc.) and on their language competency.

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Curriculum Research

Exploring ways of assessing intercultural competence: Introducing the bimodal assessment model

Article info

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Abstract

Discovering the best solution for assessing intercultural communication is a big challenge all over the world. Thus, the current paper tried to find various ways of intercultural assessment in Iran by introducing a bimodal assessment model. Therefore, the researchers selected thirty Iranian teachers through convenience sampling as the participants of the study. By using a qualitative design, the required data were collected and by using inductive content analysis, the results were analyzed. The data collected and analyzed from interviews and observation sessions revealed that Iranian teachers used a blend of traditional and communicative methods to assess intercultural issues in their classes. Portfolio assessment, performance assessment, dynamic assessment, self/peer assessment, written quizzes, dialogues, and discussion, interview, and presentation are among the methods of assessing intercultural communication in Iran's context. This study is of high importance for language teachers because they can use the findings as tools for assessing intercultural content in their classes and for intercultural experts to introduce these assessment tools to teachers in their training courses. The bimodal assessment model as the final product of this paper could pave the way for Iranian teachers as an assessment model.

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1. Introduction

Intercultural communication and ways of assessing intercultural competence is a hot topic in today's world. Different scholars including Fantini, (2009) and Lussier et al. (2007) examined various ways and tools of intercultural assessment. For example, Lussier et al. (2007) revealed that intercultural assessment could be holistic and analytic or direct and indirect. In intercultural assessment, the teacher has the role of observer and he or she is not the end or product of the assessment process. Thus, the teachers prefers to use self-report and observation checklists, and portfolios, to assess intercultural issues (Skopinskaja,2009). Also, Alkharusi, (2008) asserted that formative assessment worked best compared to traditional assessment methods as they are more motivating and cover all aspects of intercultural communications. Fantini, (2009) expressed that various testing formats such as open-ended and closed-ended questions, role-plays, matching items, interviews, multiple-choice, oral and written tasks, gap-filling, and true-false questions or a combination of these formats could also be used test intercultural issues.

Only a few Iranian scholars have focused on intercultural assessment in their research studies. For example, vajak (2021) believed that there were limitations in intercultural assessments such as lack of empirical evidence, limited focus on practical aspects, insufficient attention to various levels of education, narrow scope of assessment, and limited integration in teacher education. In their studies, Aslanabadi (2016), and Sarkhani et al.(2022) examined the innovative approaches, ranging from technology-based assessments to portfolio evaluations, that offer a more comprehensive way to measure and enhance intercultural skills. The current paper tried to examine and discover various techniques for assessing and testing intercultural communication and introducing a bimodal assessment model as the final solution for intercultural assessment. In fact, by introducing a bimodal assessment model and various test types in this paper, the researchers sought to fill the current gap in Iran and therefore, this paper can be of high significance since the findings will hopefully enlighten the language teachers on how to assess intercultural and cultural content of their books and also guide intercultural experts on what to teach to their trainees in their training courses. In other words, the current paper introduces tools of intercultural assessment based on the Iranian context to help Iranian language teachers have sufficient tools to test cultural and intercultural issues in

their classes.

2. Review of the Related Literature

Spitsberg (2003) described intercultural communication as interaction seen as effective in meeting certain rewarding goals in a context-appropriate manner. He argued that knowledge, motivation, and skills are key elements of intercultural competence. The concept of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) appears to be clear, widely accepted, and used. However, it has been defined in many ways and lacks comprehensive assessment both within and outside academic settings. In recent years, the assessment of intercultural competence has become a topic of significant interest in Iran, particularly in the context of language learning. The country's rich cultural diversity has highlighted the need for effective tools to measure and enhance intercultural skills across various sectors.

ICC is an ongoing process (Blair, 2017), not a "one-off act of achievement or acquisition" (Blaire, 2017), it needs an organized teaching process allowing people to intermediate between cultures (Byram, 2008). Thus, as a needed result of language instruction, intercultural communication with the broad, three-part focus presents a hurdle for the classroom, and teachers need to know how to break it down into specific results. When it comes to assessment, it is vital to create valid and reliable measures of intercultural communication (Griffith et al., 2016), and different methods will fit different educational contexts (Timpe, 2013), different considerations and tools, with different challenges for instructors.

The history of intercultural assessment has shown different methods of assessment including self-reports, surveys, portfolios, and interactive role-plays (Worawong et al., 2017). Lee et al., (2012) viewed intercultural communication as the communication among dissimilar people with dissimilar racial or cultural backgrounds. Sinicrope et al., (2007) found that qualitative methods of assessment are more appropriate and accurate for expression of intercultural issues for assessing and testing intercultural competence compared to quantitative methods such as questionnaires and surveys. Contreras-McGavin and Kezar (2007) also emphasized using qualitative

methods for interpersonal relationships and skills and intercultural communication to understand the complex nature of these phenomena. Huang (2021) explained that there exist various forms of intercultural assessments such as analytic, reflective, expressive, creative, task-based, and observation-based assessments. In fact, in these forms of assessments, students reflect, express, or create their understanding of intercultural issues or try to complete tasks or observe intercultural interactions (Houghton, 2013; Lobb, 2012; Villalobos-Buehner, 2020).

Many scholars believe that the process of intercultural assessment is interactive, dynamic, interpersonal, formative, and cyclical which needs a lot of transpiration over time (Toyoda, 2016; Harsch & Poehner, 2016). Other studies revealed that the nature of intercultural assessment is performative, multimodal, and task-based which needs the combination of various qualitative methods (Chan & Chen, 2021). Intercultural communication is the conscious experience of effective performance in different cultures and intercultural assessment is the missing link in language and culture testing in today's world. (Bennett, 2020; Borghetti, 2017; Scarino, 2017).

Gu (2016) studied intercultural assessment in China and the results revealed that foreign language teachers showed a willingness to assess and test intercultural issues in classes but a lack of knowledge prevented them from doing this. In another study in Taiwan, Huang (2021) revealed that explicit instruction could be conducive to acquiring intercultural knowledge and ways of assessing it. Zheng (2014) maintained that college students should be assessed both formatively and summatively in intercultural communication, especially through performance evaluation and portfolio assessment. Lussier et al., (2007) believed that teachers should use various tools such as observation checklists, surveys, attitudes inventories, journals, portfolios, and so on to assess the intercultural contents. Alkharusi, (2008) asserted that formative assessment worked best compared to traditional assessment methods as they are more motivating and cover all aspects of intercultural communications. Fantini, (2009) expressed that various testing formats such as open-ended and closed-ended questions, role-plays, matching items, interviews, multiple-choice, oral and written tasks, gap-filling, and true-false questions or a combination of these formats could also be used to test intercultural issues.

Performance-based assessment and project-based assessments are among the methods used mostly for assessing intercultural communication as they focus on implementing authentic tasks, problem-solving, discussion, and data collection and presentations (Chu et al. 2011). Assessment is an integral part of the educational system and intercultural assessment focuses on assessing intercultural communication among people with different languages and cultural backgrounds (Mazeikiene & Virgailaite-Meckauskaite, 2007).

Rezaei and Naghibian (2018) and Kazemian et al. (2021) worked on intercultural communication via reading and writing skills. The results revealed that these skills assisted both intercultural instruction and assessment respectively. Clouet (2013) believed that intercultural assessment should be based on behavioral observation and performance. Since intercultural communication focuses on both linguistic and cultural aspects of communication, its assessment also should be based on cultural and linguistic aspects (Lauring, 2011, Allen, 2021).

Griffith et al., (2016) believed that a single method can't be used for assessing intercultural issues and we need a combination of authentic, context-sensitive, and ethnographic methods of assessment for this target (Allen, 2021, Kulich, 2015). Lussier et al. (2007) stated that as intercultural communication is a cognitive, affective, and behavioral process, and its assessment should be formative rather than summative. Also, intercultural assessment is a continuous and lifelong process that is done by teachers or students themselves in different phases of testing such as pre-test or post-test. In the same vein, intercultural assessment could be subjective or objective, and it can be based on evaluative judgment or personal taste. Subjective testing is more applicable rather than objective testing nowadays. Also, Lussier et al. (2007) revealed that intercultural assessment could be holistic and analytic or direct and indirect. In intercultural assessment, the teacher has the role of observer and he or she is not the end or product of the assessment process. Thus, the teachers prefer to use self-report and observation checklists, and portfolios, to assess intercultural issues (Skopinskaja, 2009).

In the Iranian context, it is revealed that the focus is on language teaching rather than intercultural teaching and the missing link is intercultural teaching and assessment

in the Iranian high schools (Vajak, 2021). Vajak (2021) believed that there were limitations in intercultural assessments such as lack of empirical evidence, limited focus on practical aspects, insufficient attention to various levels of education, narrow scope of assessment, and limited integration in teacher education. However, because of globalization, we need new innovative assessment techniques for intercultural assessment and they should be compatible with Iran's educational syllabi and system. In the context of higher education, improved assessment can provide valuable insights into the significance of intercultural competence in foreign language teaching and learning. This can make foreign language education at the tertiary level both intellectually worthwhile and economically viable.

Vajak (2021) also believed that innovative assessment techniques could be used in the form of technology-based assessment, scenario-based assessment, virtual simulations, case studies, and role-plays. Thus, using innovative methods could have different benefits for Iran's education including enhanced cultural awareness, better presentation for global interactions, and promotion of intercultural competence. Implementing innovative assessment techniques, such as domestic intercultural interviews and reflective ethnography approaches, can provide both quantitative and qualitative evidence for improved intercultural competence. These methods can contribute to developing teachers' interest in cultural issues and intercultural communication, potentially leading to their inclusion in syllabi and lesson plans.

Improved assessment techniques for intercultural competence in Iran can yield significant benefits. From enhancing cultural awareness to better-preparing individuals for global interactions, these advancements can contribute to a more culturally competent and globally engaged society. As Iran continues to interact with the international community, the importance of effective intercultural competence assessment cannot be ignored. In other words, the exploration of new assessment techniques for intercultural competence in Iran has a significant impact on educational and professional sectors. These innovative approaches, ranging from technology-based assessments to portfolio evaluations, offer a more comprehensive way to measure and enhance intercultural skills. The challenges in implementing these techniques, such as cultural sensitivity and resource constraints, highlight the need for a tailored approach that respects Iran's unique cultural context while preparing individuals for global interactions. (Aslanabadi, 2016:

Sarkhani et al., 2022).

According to the issues stated above, the researchers tried to answer to the following research questions:

1. Are traditional assessing methods suitable for assessing intercultural communication?
2. Are communicative assessing methods suitable for assessing intercultural communication?
3. What types of assessments do Iranian English teachers use to assess intercultural issues in language classes?
4. What challenges and problems do Iranian English teachers face in assessing intercultural issues?

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The current study used an interpretivism paradigm (Nickerson, 2022), accompanied by a qualitative approach to disclose the hidden meaning and new concepts. The interpretivist paradigm is based on the assumption that reality is subjective, multiple and socially constructed. The researchers utilized exploratory qualitative research to probe and discover the answers of the research questions. In other words, Given the nature of both the phenomenon being studied and the research questions, a qualitative approach was adopted, which allowed for a more direct method of gauging the research problem.

3.2. Participants and Sampling

The current study included 30 female and male language English teachers in Iran (F=15, M=15). The ages of the participants ranged from 25 to 50 years old. All the participants had BA or MA in English language teaching and their teaching experience was between 5 to 30 years. The participants taught English at private English institutes in all English levels of proficiency. The researchers used a convenience sampling procedure given the purpose of the study.

3.3. Instruments

The current research utilized two instruments to collect data: structured interview and participant observation. A structured interview was selected to simplify a thorough comprehension of the participants' beliefs, performance, and experiences related to the research topic. Participant observation was used to produce rich and exact qualitative information, allowing for a deeper understanding of the social context and experiences under investigation. Through immersing themselves in the group, the researchers gained valuable insider perspectives on the beliefs, values, and practices of the participants. The interview questions were formulated by the researchers according to the purpose of the study as follows:

1. Do you think we can use traditional assessing methods for assessing intercultural issues in English classes?

2. What communicative assessment methods do you use or suggest for assessing intercultural issues in your English classes?

3. What type of assessments do you use in your classroom to assess cultural and intercultural matters?

4. What challenges do you face while testing cultural and intercultural parts of English books in your classes?

3.4. Data Collection Procedure

The current research consisted of two cycles of data collection, that is, the researchers collected data from interview sessions and observation sessions respectively. Interview sessions lasted for 20 minutes for each participant and then the interviews were recorded and transcribed for subsequent analysis. It should be noted that the interview questions were formulated by the researchers and the participants could answer the interview questions in English or their mother tongue, Persian. To ensure content validity, all questions in the interview were discussed until agreement was reached. It should be noted that all the interview sessions were audio-recorded and the researchers assured the participants to be remained anonymous and obtained their consent for taking part in interview sessions. The researchers themselves did the interview sessions with the

participants face to face and recorded the interview sessions. Moreover, the researchers were actively involved in participant observation by allocating a total of 30 hours to observe the participant's assessment procedures in their classrooms. The researchers dedicated one-hour observation for each participant. The researchers themselves took part in classroom sessions and observe the assessment procedure of the teachers. Researcher-made checklist were used to record the observation issues and points. It should be noted that all the teachers were familiar with cultural and intercultural content because of their several years of teaching experience.

3.5. Data Analysis Procedure

The researchers used inductive content analysis and thematic analysis to analyze the collected data. A detailed qualitative content analysis of the transcripts and observation field notes was carried out by the researchers. After reading and rereading the transcripts of the interview and observation reports thoroughly, key categories were identified in the corpus of data that reflected teachers' attitudes and practices toward intercultural testing and assessment. The researchers used initial and secondary coding processes (Invivo and descriptive) to extract the required codes and categories and then based on Braun and Clark's (2006) model of thematic analysis, all the categories and themes were extracted. The focus of the study was on finding the following themes:

a) Teachers' attitudes towards using communicative methods such as performance-based assessment for intercultural testing

b) Teachers' attitudes towards using traditional methods such as multiple-choice tests for intercultural testing

c) Test types and challenges that Iranian teachers face in their assessment process

Concerning the observation sessions, the researchers attended the teachers' classes with the permission of the teachers to observe their assessment procedures. All the observation points were written by the researchers without intruding the assessment procedures. The researchers only wrote what they observed. After completing the observation sessions which lasted for 30 hours; that is, one hour for each teacher, the

researchers analyzed the reports to extract the main focus of assessing procedure and compared their practice with what they said in interview sessions to understand whether there existed any consistencies or inconsistencies between their attitudes and practices.

4. Results

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

4.1. Interview Results

RQ1: Are traditional assessing methods suitable for assessing intercultural communication?

To address this research question, we asked the participants "*Do you think that we can use traditional assessing methods for assessing intercultural issues in English classes*"? The following table (Table 1) shows the codes and themes for the above-mentioned research question and interview question. All codes and themes were extracted through initial and secondary coding analysis and a careful thematic analysis process. The codes are written in the form of Invivo and descriptive codes.

Table 1.

Codes and Themes for the First Interview Question

Codes	Number of participants	Themes
Not Applicable	15	
Applicable to Some Extent	15	Traditional methods
Applicable If Combined With Innovative Methods	25	

The first interview and research questions focused on whether traditional testing methods could be used for assessing intercultural issues. Table 1 results and codes

revealed that all 30 participants had various viewpoints in interview sessions. 15 participants believed that traditional methods were not applicable and they should not be used. For example, they believed that multiple-choice tests or standardized tests had no application and use in intercultural assessment and they should be disregarded. 15 participants believed that traditional methods could be used partly for some sections of intercultural issues and 25 participants believed that traditional methods could be used for assessing intercultural issues if they were combined with more interactive and innovative methods. These participants believed that if traditional methods were combined with real-life tasks, reflective essays, role-plays, and simulation scenarios, they could be used more effectively for assessing intercultural communication. If they were combined, they would become more authentic and interactive and they would bear more contextual understanding and feedback.

The following table shows the results of the second research question and the interview question:

RQ2: Are communicative assessment methods suitable for assessing intercultural communication? We used "What communicative assessment methods do you use or suggest for assessing intercultural issues in your English classes?" prompt to find the answer to this question. Hence, the following codes and themes were emerged:

Table 2.

Codes and Themes for the Second Interview Question

Codes	Number of participants	Themes
Oral proficiency interview	20	
Role-play and simulation	20	
group discussion	15	
Reflective essays	15	
Intercultural surveys	15	
Intercultural projects	20	Communicative Tests
Observation	25	
Self-and peer assessment	10	
Portfolio assessment	25	
Performance assessment	25	

Table 2 reveals the data about the suitability and use of communicative and

innovative assessment methods for intercultural assessment. The participants suggested a wide range of innovative methods to assess intercultural communication. 20 participants believed that oral interviews, role-play simulations, and intercultural projects were suitable for assessing intercultural issues in English classes. 25 participants believed that observation, portfolio, and performance-based assessment served that purpose. 15 participants maintained that group discussion, reflective essays, and surveys were the suitable methods of assessment. Finally, 10 participants believed that self-assessment and peer assessment could be done to assess intercultural communication. In other words, the participants asserted that teachers could observe students inside and outside the classrooms sporadically to assess their intercultural competence. Or they could give various projects, role-plays, and simulations to check and evaluate their intercultural skill and performances. Also, by using reflective essays, portfolios, etc., teachers could focus on understanding, awareness, and sensitivity to intercultural issues of the students.

Next, the following table shows the codes and themes for the third research question and interview question:

RQ3. What types of assessments do Iranian teachers use to assess intercultural issues in language classes? To elicit the participants' responses, the following prompt was proposed, "What type of assessments do you use in your classroom to assess cultural and intercultural matters?" Table 3 displays the results:

Table 3.

Codes and Themes for the Third Interview Question

Codes	Number of participants	Themes
Written Tests	15	
Dialogue and Presentation	20	
Cultural Quizzes	20	
Role-Play	20	Test Types
Projects	15	
Reflective Journals	15	
Real-Life Tasks	10	

Table 3 shows various types of assessments used for assessing intercultural issues in Iranian English classes. The codes revealed that 20 participants used dialogues

and presentations, cultural quizzes, and role–plays as testing tools in their classes. They believed that by using these instruments they could focus on various topics to raise sensitivity and awareness of tests in different aspects via quizzes and create cross-cultural interaction through dialogues and role-plays. 15 participants used written tests, projects, and journals as testing instruments in their classes because they believed that they could focus on test specific topics and skills regarding cultural skills and knowledge and improve the collaborative skills and critical thinking of their students. 10 participants used real-life tasks to assess and test intercultural issues because they maintained that they could assess intercultural interaction more easily via these tasks such as email writing and intercultural discussions in real-life situations.

Finally, the following research question and interview prompt focused on the challenges that Iranian language teachers faced while testing intercultural issues in their classes:

RQ4. What challenges and problems do Iranian teachers face in assessing intercultural issues? To explore the interviewees' responses, we asked them," What challenges do you face while assessing cultural and intercultural parts of English books in your classes?" Table 4 summarizes the results.

Table 4.

Codes and Themes for the Fourth Interview Questions

Codes	Number of participants	Themes
Cultural Diversity	20	
Topic Sensitivity	25	Challenges
Language Barrier	20	and
Cultural Stereotypes	15	problems
Limited Resources	25	

Table 4 reveals that Iranian teachers faced various problems while designing tests for assessing intercultural issues. 20 participants maintained that cultural diversity and language barriers could be challenges they encountered while testing intercultural issues. 25 participants believed that limited resources and topic sensitivity created challenges and problems while testing intercultural issues. And finally, 15 participants expressed that

cultural stereotypes caused challenges for them.

4.2. Observation Results

The researchers actively took part in 30 hours of teachers' English classes conducted in Iran, Tehran city. Before reporting the findings of observations from these classes, it is important to provide an overview of the classrooms. Each class consisted of 25 students and lasted one hour. The teachers talked both in English and Persian languages. The reports are presented as follows:

The results of the observation revealed that most of the teachers preferred to use teacher-made tests for different reasons and more importantly they tried to use the teacher-made tests in the form of formative, summative, and dynamic assessment cycles. They tried to use the teacher-made tests in a way to reflect the cultural context of Iran and specific intercultural skills and issues.

While designing and writing teacher-made tests, the Iranian teachers took into consideration various factors such as cultural sensitivity, cultural relevance, language sensitivity, and feedback and reflection. In other words, they designed their tests to focus on culturally relevant, sensitive, and linguistically relevant content, and the students received enormous reflection and feedback via teacher-made tests. More importantly, the teachers used their teacher-made tests as ongoing formative tests during the educational semesters and as summative tests at the end of the semesters. In some cases, teachers resorted to using dynamic assessment to mix cultural and language learning together. When teacher-made tests were used as summative tests, the purpose was to check and assess the overall intercultural skill and understanding of intercultural competence among language learners. When they were used as formative tests, the purpose was to assess the ongoing development of students in intercultural communication and to discover the weaknesses and strengths of the students in intercultural skills learning.

Also, giving ongoing feedback and reflection to enhance students' intercultural competence over time was another consequence of formative assessment. When teacher-made tests were used as dynamic assessments, the purpose was to create more interactive and responsive intercultural learning in language classes to help students adapt to new intercultural settings easily, and show more flexibility and adjustment in

intercultural skills. It should be noted that Iranian language teachers tried to use a combination of formative, summative, and dynamic assessments during a semester based on their knowledge and skills.

Another point that researchers frequently noticed from observation sessions was that teacher-made tests appeared in various forms including written essays, interviews, discussions and dialogues, journals and diaries, observations, portfolios, and role-plays. Most of the assessments were in the form of performance-based and observation-based assessments in which dynamic assessment happened in both of them. Based on the interview results and observation results, the researchers devised the following model of assessment for intercultural assessment in Iran's English classes which can work best: bimodal assessment model of intercultural communication.

Figure 1.

Bimodal Assessment Model of Intercultural Competence (Ghorbani & Kiani Fard, 2024)
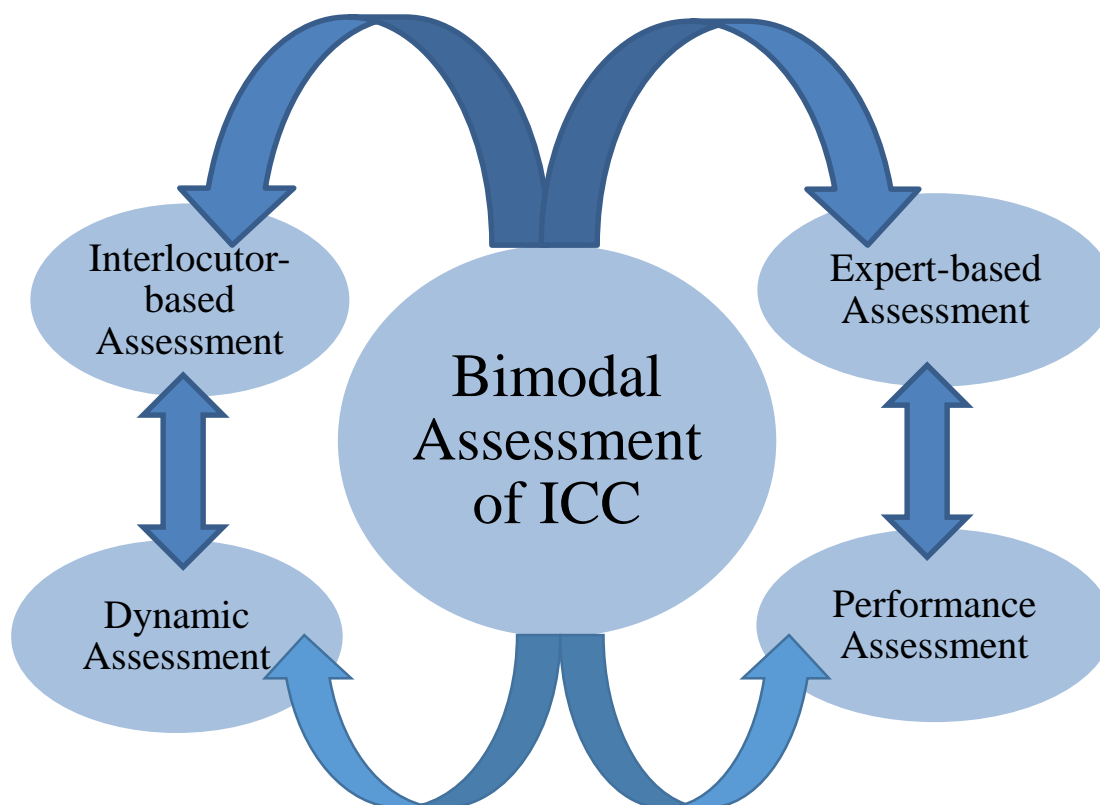
The bimodal assessment model of intercultural competence is an Iranian assessment model specific to the Iranian cultural context. Based on the results of the

current study, the bimodal assessment model is a two-way assessment model that consists of dynamic assessment and performance assessment. Insider assessors can do this assessment process; that is, language teachers and students as interlocutors of intercultural interaction in the form of self-assessment and peer/teacher assessment in dynamic assessment circle or by outsider assessors; that is, intercultural experts as observers of intercultural communication in performance assessment circle. In other words, language teachers and students themselves can assess and evaluate their intercultural skills and understanding in the classroom by giving feedback and reflection in the form of dynamic assessment or asking intercultural experts in the field of intercultural communication as observers to observe their intercultural competence and assess and evaluate their intercultural skills, understanding, and achievement. This model is a mutual model in which dynamic and performance circles are interrelated and there should be cooperation between insider assessors and outsider assessors to bear a fruitful assessment.

In fact, in Iran's English language classrooms, we need not only English teachers but also intercultural experts to have an accurate intercultural testing and assessment. At least our language teachers should be trained by intercultural experts on how to test and assess intercultural content of their English textbooks. It should be noted that all test types from traditional tests to innovative tests discovered in this study such as journals, written tests, interviews, portfolios, quizzes, and so on could be utilized by both insider assessors (dynamic assessment circle) and outsider assessors (performance assessment circle) to assess the level of intercultural competence and skills.

The other point is that the bimodal assessment model can be implemented in all assessment phases, that is, in the pre-assessment phase, while-assessment phase, and post-assessment phase. In the pre-assessment phase, the focus is on pinpointing the strengths and weaknesses of students and motivating them via performance assessment. In the assessment phase, the focus is on reinforcing the intercultural skills and competence of the students to improve their intercultural learning and acquisition via dynamic assessment, and in the post-assessment phase, the focus is on the evaluation of what has been learned through the dynamic assessment phase.

The result of the bimodal assessment model could be presented both quantitatively through marks and grades and qualitatively through descriptions and explanations. The bimodal assessment model could be marked both subjectively and objectively since various test types could be used via this model. However, based on the purpose of the intercultural assessment the assessor determines which assessment type should be used and the result assessed subjectively, objectively, or both. Given the nature of intercultural communication, the bimodal assessment model serves the purpose if it is used subjectively. More precisely , subjective assessment is more applicable by using the bimodal assessment model. It should be noted that the bimodal assessment model is language-based but it could be also used in other fields for assessment purposes such as management and psychology.

5.Discussion

Iran is culturally a diverse country, which can be a big challenge for teachers. Also, some cultural topics are taboo or sensitive in Iran or there are no sufficient resources for assessment. Also, some cultural issues may be stereotypes in some parts of Iran which could cause challenges for Iranian teachers.

Thus, The current paper tried to find new methods for assessing intercultural communication in Iran. Through in-depth qualitative research, the researchers found that intercultural assessment in Iran is a complex procedure that consists of traditional and innovative methods. In other words, the results disclosed that Iranian English language teachers used formative, summative, and dynamic assessment procedures to assess intercultural competence. Also, it was shown that various types of assessment including written essays, group discussions, dialogues and presentations, portfolio and observation tests were utilized to test intercultural issues. Accordingly, the researchers designed a new assessment model based on the findings of the current study called the "*bimodal assessment model of intercultural competence*" which consisted of dynamic and performance phases.

The current study findings are in line with Sinicrope et al., (2007) and Contreras-McGavin and Kezar (2007) since all these studies focused on the use of qualitative

methods such as interviews to assess intercultural communication. Also, this study substantiated that intercultural assessment is a dynamic and formative process that is in harmony with other scholar's findings such as Huang (2021), Houghton (2013), Lobb (2012), Villalobos-Buehner (2020) and Toyoda (2016).

Consistent with Chan and Chen (2021), the current study substantiated that intercultural assessment is a performance-based and task-based process. Besides, the bimodal assessment model showed that intercultural assessment is a dynamic and performance-based process. Zheng (2014) asserted that intercultural assessment could be done formatively and summatively which is compatible with the findings of the current study.

Lussier et al., (2007) and Fantini, (2009) described a list of various test types such as portfolio, observation, and written tasks which match with the current study findings as this study also elaborated on different test types such as written tasks, journals, interview and so on. Our findings also showed that intercultural assessment should be authentic and context-sensitive which supported the results of Griffith et al., (2016), Allen (2021), and Kulich, (2015).

Further, the current study focused on challenges of testing intercultural competence and lack of resources. Aslanabadi (2016), Vajak (2021), and Sarkhani et al.(2022) found that innovative methods such as portfolios and technologies could be used in intercultural assessment. They also stated some limitations such as lack of resources and lack of integration of intercultural assessment in educational courses. Hence, it is suggested that intercultural experts should train teachers in assessment courses.

Finally, Lussier et al. (2007) and Skopinskaja (2009) stated that intercultural assessment is more subjective process than objective and teachers could have the role of the observer which is in harmony with the bimodal model developed in this study as it is also a more subjective model as it suggests that teachers and experts can take the role of observers.

6. Conclusion

This paper tried to develop a collection of new techniques and ways of assessing intercultural competence in Iran's context. The results could be useful for language teachers, intercultural experts, and institute managers. The current study findings state that language teachers should try to use various test types in assessing the intercultural content of their books and try to implement a bimodal assessment model in their language classes. Also, intercultural experts could teach the bimodal assessment model in their training sessions to language teachers and other intercultural trainees. Institute managers could improve the intercultural skills of language teachers by holding intercultural teacher training courses and helping their teachers to become familiar with intercultural assessment and bimodal assessment models.

Also, teachers should keep in mind that one method or test type does not fit all the intercultural situations and various assessment methods should be tried to gain mastery over the intercultural assessment process. In other words, language teachers should first learn the basics of dynamic assessment and performance assessment and then try to use them mutually in the form of a bimodal assessment model. It should be stated that the current study was done in Iran and it may yield different results in other contexts. Another suggestion is that the number of participants in this study was limited and a similar study should be conducted with larger groups of participants. Finally, the design of the current study was qualitative, other researchers can replicate this study by employing a quantitative or a mixed-methods design to compare the results.

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Iranian teachers' perceptions towards the implementation of the ranking system

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Abstract

The teacher ranking system in Iran is intended to enhance performance and motivation but encounters several challenges. This study aims to investigate Iranian teachers' experiences and perceptions of this ranking system using a qualitative, interpretative phenomenological approach. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with 15 teachers from various Iranian cities. Findings revealed that the ranking system impacted four main areas: psychological effects, professional development, transparency and fairness, and educational quality. It supports professional growth, transparency, and improved teaching methods, but can also cause stress, psychological pressure, and reduced focus on teaching, potentially lowering teaching quality. Strengths of the system include professional development, increased transparency, skill updates, and fostering healthy competition. Conversely, its weaknesses involve heightened stress, diminished teaching focus, and reduced quality. Recommendations for improvement include revising evaluation criteria, establishing supportive measures for teachers, involving them in the evaluation process, and increasing educational programs and workshops for professional development. These adjustments aim to mitigate the system's negative effects, boost teacher motivation and job satisfaction, and ultimately enhance the overall quality of education in schools.

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, the evaluation and ranking of teachers' performance have been regarded as one of the strategies for improving educational quality in many countries. The teacher ranking system is employed as a tool to enhance teaching quality and increase teachers' motivation. However, the varied and sometimes contradictory impacts of this system on teachers and educational quality require more comprehensive studies. While extensive research has been conducted on teacher evaluation systems in various countries (DarlingT 2013), significant gaps exist in understanding the specific impacts of these systems on Iranian teachers. Existing research often focuses on general outcomes, overlooking the detailed experiences and perceptions of teachers. For instance, studies indicate that evaluation systems can lead to stress and psychological pressure, but the precise impacts and experiences of teachers in this context have not been thoroughly examined (Jafarnajad, Zeynabadi, & Abedi Koushki, 2016; Pressley, Ha, & Learn, 2021).

Understanding teachers' experiences and perceptions of the ranking system is crucial because this system directly affects their performance and motivation, ultimately influencing educational quality. Precise knowledge of these impacts can lead to improvements in evaluation systems and teaching quality. For example, research shows that evaluation systems can help improve teaching methods, but this improvement requires an accurate understanding of teachers' needs and experiences (Ford, Urick, & Wilson, 2021). This study can serve as a valuable guide for future research on teacher evaluation and ranking systems. It seems that the Iranian educational community needs research that focuses on its priority issues to transform its education system. Therefore, by accurately understanding the positive and negative impacts of the ranking system on teachers, researchers can develop more effective evaluation models. Moreover, this study can assist educational policymakers in making necessary changes to human resource evaluation systems based on the obtained results.

The approach presented in this research is based on ethical principles, emphasizing respect for teachers' experiences and opinions and considering their psychological and occupational well-being. This ethical approach ensures that the research results benefit all educational stakeholders and contribute to the overall improvement of the educational system. Examining the teacher ranking system from the

teachers' perspective is crucial due to the direct impact of this system on their motivation, job satisfaction, and teaching quality. A deeper understanding of these impacts can help mitigate the negative effects and enhance the positive aspects of the ranking system. For instance, research indicates that unfair evaluations can reduce motivation and increase job burnout (Pressley, Ha, & Learn, 2021).

Accordingly, this study aimed to explore the experiences and perceptions of Iranian teachers regarding the ranking system, identifying the strengths and weaknesses of its implementation. The research seeks to answer the question:

- What are Iranian teachers' perceptions of the ranking system, and how do they evaluate its implementation?

2. Literature Review

Ranking teachers is one of the most important goals in educational systems, emphasizing the comprehensive growth of individuals' potential and talents. This process helps improve the quality of the educational system and encourages efficient and effective teachers to pursue professional development. Recognizing the importance of ranking teachers in Iran can have positive impacts on motivation, efficiency, and the overall level of education in schools. According to research, focusing on enhancing the status of teachers can lead to improved student performance and overall education quality (Bagheri et al., 2021).

One of the key theories behind the teacher ranking system is the motivation theory. According to this theory, evaluations and financial and non-financial rewards can increase teachers' motivation to improve performance and enhance teaching quality. Research has shown that external incentives, such as financial rewards, can positively impact teachers' performance, but intrinsic motivations, such as job satisfaction and a passion for teaching, also play a significant role (Ryan & Deci,2000). For instance, the study by Pressley, Ha, and Learn (2021) found that teachers under psychological pressure and stress due to evaluations tend to perform poorly, negatively affecting teaching quality.

Another relevant theory is performance evaluation, which focuses on how teacher

performance is assessed and measured. This theory emphasizes the importance of using valid and reliable metrics for evaluation (Schmidt, 2014). Research by Grissom and Bartanen (2019) demonstrated that the use of multiple evaluation tools, including observational assessments, helps increase the accuracy and reliability of teacher evaluations. These tools can help teachers identify their strengths and weaknesses and work towards improving their performance.

Organizational justice theory is another critical perspective in this area. This theory examines teachers' perceptions of fairness and equity in the evaluation and ranking processes. It posits that if teachers perceive evaluation processes as fair and just, they are more likely to accept and trust these processes (Hoy& Tarter, 2004). A study by Ford, Urick, and Wilson (2021) showed that organizational justice can help reduce teachers' stress and psychological pressure, thereby increasing their motivation to improve performance. Additionally, professional development theories focus on the growth and development of teachers' skills and knowledge over time (Creemers, Kyriakides & Antoniou, 2019). These theories highlight that regular evaluation and feedback can help teachers identify their weaknesses and strive for improvement. Professional development programs tailored to individual teachers' needs can positively impact their performance and motivation (Kouseh, 2023). Research by Abdollahi and Safari (2016) indicated that providing opportunities for professional and educational development can enhance teachers' performance and increase their motivation to learn and develop new skills.

Job stress theory, from a psychological perspective, examines factors that can lead to stress and psychological pressure among teachers. Studies have shown that evaluation systems can increase teachers' job stress, particularly if these systems are perceived as unfair or opaque (Akbari et al., 2022). Job stress can negatively impact teachers' performance and job satisfaction. Maslach (2021) found that job stress can reduce teaching quality and increase teacher burnout rates. This study also aimed to thoroughly examine both domestic and international research related to teacher evaluation systems. Numerous studies in Iran have explored the impacts of teacher ranking systems on performance and job satisfaction. Jafarnajad, Zeynabadi, and Abedi Koushki (2016) investigated a novel method for evaluating and ranking teachers using decision trees. Their findings indicated that employing innovative evaluation methods can

improve the accuracy and fairness of evaluation processes, thereby increasing teachers' job satisfaction. Their research emphasized that transparency and the use of reliable criteria in evaluations are key factors in enhancing job satisfaction among teachers.

Abdollahi and Safari (2016) examined major barriers to teachers' professional growth. Their study found that one of the most significant barriers is the lack of transparency and fairness in evaluation systems. Teachers feel that evaluation processes are unfair, leading to reduced motivation and increased job stress. Gharooneh (2019) explored teachers' and school administrators' attitudes towards the professional ranking scheme for teachers. The study revealed that many teachers and administrators were dissatisfied with the transparency and fairness of the scheme, negatively affecting teachers' performance and motivation.

Internationally, several studies have investigated the impact of teacher ranking systems on performance and job satisfaction. Pressley, Ha, and Learn (2021) examined teacher stress and anxiety during COVID-19, finding that evaluation pressures could increase teacher stress and anxiety, adversely affecting teaching quality. Ford, Urick, and Wilson (2021) explored the effects of supportive evaluation experiences on job satisfaction among U.S. teachers. Their study showed that supportive evaluations and constructive feedback could improve job satisfaction and reduce stress from unfair evaluations. Grissom and Bartanen (2019) also examined the impact of principal effectiveness on teacher turnover in multi-measure evaluation systems, finding that effective principals could reduce teacher turnover and improve teaching quality through efficient evaluations.

Reviewing both domestic and international literature reveals that teacher evaluation and ranking systems significantly impact teacher performance, job satisfaction, and stress. In Iran, the lack of transparency and fairness in evaluation systems appears to be a major barrier to teachers' professional growth. In contrast, international studies suggest that supportive evaluations and constructive feedback can help reduce stress and improve job satisfaction. Given these points, the present study aimed to examine Iranian teachers' experiences and perceptions of the ranking system, identifying its strengths and weaknesses. Accurate knowledge of these impacts can

improve evaluation processes and enhance teaching quality, providing effective solutions for reducing stress and increasing teacher job satisfaction.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Design

This study employed a qualitative approach using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) with a focus on understanding the lived experiences and perceptions of teachers on the implementation of the ranking system. IPA is a method in qualitative research that focuses on interpreting individuals' lived experiences to gain a deeper understanding of the meanings embedded in these experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). More precisely, this method allows researchers to provide a detailed interpretation of participants' experiences and perceptions, considering their cultural and social contexts.

3.2. Participants

Participants were selected using purposive sampling. The main criteria for selecting the teachers included their experience with the ranking system and their willingness to share their thoughts and experiences on the subject. The sampling process continued until data saturation was reached, ultimately involving 15 teachers (8 men and 7 women) from various cities in Iran. All participating teachers had more than 15 years of teaching experience. The demographic information of the participating teachers is presented in table 1, reflecting the diversity of the participants. Teachers were selected to maximize the diversity of experiences and viewpoints, ranging from Bachelor's to PhD degrees.

3.3. Instruments

Data were collected through semi-structured in-person interviews, designed to gather detailed and comprehensive information about teachers' experiences and perceptions of the ranking system's implementation. The interview prompts were developed based on the research objectives and by reviewing the literature to ensure relevance. The interview questions were open-ended to allow participants to fully express their experiences and opinions. All interviews were conducted in Persian and were recorded and fully

transcribed. The transcripts remained in Persian and were used for analysis.

Table 1.

Demographic Characteristics of Research Participants

City	Education	Years of Experience	Age	Gender	Number
Tehran	PhD	25	48	Male	**1**
Mashhad	Bachelor	27	50	Female	**2**
Isfahan	Master	22	45	Male	**3**
Tabriz	Bachelor	24	47	Female	**4**
Shiraz	Master	26	49	Male	**5**
Ahvaz	Master	21	46	Female	**6**
Kerman	Bachelor	28	51	Male	**7**
Rasht	Bachelor	19	44	Female	**8**
Hamedan	Bachelor	25	48	Male	**9**
Karaj	PhD	26	49	Female	**10**
Qom	Master	23	47	Male	**11**
Zanjan	Master	27	50	Female	**12**
Yazd	PhD	21	46	Male	**13**
Urmia	Bachelor	25	48	Female	**14**
Qazvin	Bachelor	29	52	Male	**15**

3.4. Data Collection and Analysis

Interview requests were officially sent via formal emails, and arrangements with the participants were made accordingly. Consent for recording their responses was obtained before the interviews began. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes, and all interviews were recorded and transcribed. The data analysis was based on Strobert and Carpenter's (2006) method. The analysis process included the following steps:

Transcription: The interviews were transcribed in detail.

Reading and Re-reading: Transcriptions were read multiple times to identify key statements related to teachers' experiences and perceptions.

Coding: Key statements were translated into key phrases representing the main

concepts.

Categorization: These key phrases were grouped into codes, which then formed subcategories. Similar and related subcategories were combined into larger, comprehensive categories.

Dimensional Analysis: In this phase, the data were divided into two main dimensions: strengths and weaknesses regarding the implementation of the ranking system.

Strengths: Within this dimension, five main themes were identified that reflect the positive aspects and advantages of the ranking system.

Weaknesses: In this dimension, four main themes were identified that highlight the problems and challenges associated with the implementation of the ranking system.

To ensure inter-coder reliability, data analysis was not conducted by a single individual. After the initial coding and categorization by the primary researcher, the data were shared with an independent colleague with expertise in qualitative analysis to check for consistency in the coding process. This collaborative approach aimed to reduce bias and enhance the reliability of the findings. The two coders reviewed the transcriptions independently, and discrepancies in coding were discussed and resolved through consensus.

To ensure the validity and accuracy of the data, several measures were implemented throughout the research process:

Preservation of Documents: All documents obtained during the research were preserved for future reference and verification.

Collection of Participants' Feedback: The findings were presented to the participants, and their feedback on the results was collected, further ensuring the accuracy of the interpretations.

Continuous Feedback: Participants' feedback was continuously received and documented throughout the research process.

These measures ensured that the data were not only valid but also reliable and replicable. The names of the participants were kept confidential, and codes were used

instead of names. The demographic information of the participating teachers is presented in the table below:

4. Findings

This research aimed to examine the experiences and perceptions of Iranian teachers regarding the implementation of the teacher ranking system. The ranking system, as an evaluation tool, strives to improve teachers' performance and increase their motivation for professional advancement. However, the impacts of this system on teachers can vary and require closer examination. To better understand these impacts, the present study used a qualitative approach and an interpretative phenomenological analysis method to explore the experiences of 15 Iranian teachers from various cities. The participants included 8 men and 7 women with work experience ranging from 21 to 29 years, selected purposefully. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using the content analysis method of Streubert and Carpenter (2006).

4.1. Weaknesses

The research findings are discussed in four main dimensions: psychological issues, professional development, transparency and justice, and educational quality. Each of these dimensions includes subcategories supported by direct quotes from the participating teachers. These quotes help provide a deeper understanding of the teachers' experiences and perceptions, clearly showing the strengths and weaknesses of the ranking system. The findings of this study indicate that, in addition to having some advantages, the ranking system can also lead to problems that need to be reviewed and improved. In the following sections, each of these dimensions is analyzed in detail, presenting the results obtained from the teachers' experiences.

Category 1: Psychological Issues

Implementing the teacher ranking system in Iran has caused various psychological issues. These issues include stress and psychological pressure, anxiety and worry, unhealthy competition, job insecurity, and inequality.

Stress and Psychological Pressure: Interviews indicated that implementing the ranking system has led to increased stress and psychological pressure on teachers. This pressure stems from the effort to maintain and improve their rank, which may negatively affect their mental health. Informant 1: A male teacher with a Ph.D. and 25 years of service from Tehran, along with informant 11, stated that, "The ranking system causes stress and psychological pressure on teachers." This indicates that the psychological pressure from ranking can become a serious problem for teachers, negatively affecting their mental health. In modern educational systems, stress and psychological pressure among teachers are increasingly recognized as significant issues. According to a study by Johnson et al. (2020), workplace stress is often associated with performance evaluation systems, leading to burnout and reduced job satisfaction (Johnson, 2020). The implementation of the ranking system in Iranian schools appears to exacerbate this issue. Teachers report experiencing higher levels of stress due to the effort to maintain or improve their rank and fear the consequences of failing to do so. This stress can manifest in various forms, such as anxiety, reduced job performance, and overall dissatisfaction with their profession.

Anxiety and Worry: Anxiety and worry are other problems teachers face in dealing with the ranking system. This anxiety stems from constant concerns about rank reduction and its consequences. Informant 7: A male teacher with a bachelor's degree and 28 years of service from Kerman expressed that, "The ranking system increases teachers' anxiety and worry." Teachers may constantly suffer from anxiety due to concerns about rank reduction and its consequences, which can lead to reduced teaching quality and increased job fatigue. The impacts of anxiety and worry on teachers' performance are well-documented. For example, a study by Smith and Jones (2021) showed that anxiety related to job security and performance evaluation can significantly affect teachers' mental health and their ability to provide quality education (Smith & Jones, 2021).

Unhealthy Competition: Unhealthy competition among teachers is another negative outcome of the ranking system. This competition, instead of increasing cooperation, leads to tension and conflict among teachers. Informants 4 and 11 stressed that "The ranking system can cause unhealthy competition among teachers." This unhealthy competition may lead to tension and conflict among teachers instead of increasing cooperation and

knowledge exchange. Moreover, this unhealthy competition can damage professional relationships among teachers and reduce team cohesion. Studies in organizational behavior show that competitive environments, especially those lacking supportive frameworks, can lead to adverse outcomes such as decreased job satisfaction and teamwork (Parker, 2018).

Job Insecurity: Job insecurity is another problem teachers experience in the ranking system. This job insecurity stems from the fear of rank drop and its consequences on teachers' profession and financial status. Informants 7 and 15 stressed that "The ranking system gives teachers a sense of job insecurity." This job insecurity may be due to the fear of rank drop and its financial and professional consequences. Job insecurity might lead to reduced motivation and productivity among teachers, negatively impacting their teaching quality. Job insecurity is associated with various negative outcomes, such as reduced performance and job satisfaction, increased stress, and a higher likelihood of job turnover (Sverke et al., 2002).

Inequality: The ranking system can lead to inequality among teachers. This inequality may be based on unfair criteria and differences among teachers. Informant 5 believed that "The ranking system can create inequality among teachers in terms of psychological and mental aspects." These inequalities can reduce teachers' trust in the educational system. Informant 13 added that, "The ranking system can create inequality among teachers." This inequality can reduce teachers' motivation and increase job dissatisfaction. This finding is supported by other studies. Studies have shown that inequality in the workplace, especially in educational environments, can undermine morale and lead to a divided workforce. Perceived inequality can negatively impact employee engagement and productivity (Adams, 1965). Overall, from the perspective of some participating teachers, implementing the teacher ranking system in Iran can lead to serious psychological problems that negatively impact their mental health, motivation, and teaching quality. To improve this situation, educational policymakers need to pay attention to these problems and make necessary changes to create better conditions for teachers.

Category 2: Executive Problems

Executive problems in implementing teacher ranking systems are often related to

bureaucracy and administrative complexities, which can reduce the productivity and efficiency of the educational system. Studies in this field indicate that increased bureaucracy can seriously lead to reduced educational quality and increased teacher dissatisfaction (Kumar, 2020).

Increased Bureaucracy: Implementing the ranking system in schools has led to increased bureaucracy and administrative complexities. This increase in bureaucracy can negatively impact the efficiency of the educational system and divert teachers' time and energy to administrative issues. Informants 13 and 5 mentioned that, "The ranking system increases bureaucracy." This issue can lead to reduced focus on teaching and increased dissatisfaction among teachers. Research has shown that increased bureaucracy can lead to reduced teaching quality and increased workload pressure (Park & Park, 2019).

Feeling of Unfairness: Despite the benefits of the ranking system, some teachers feel that this system is unfair. This feeling of unfairness may be due to individual differences and the specific conditions of teachers that are not adequately considered in the evaluations. Informants 9, 13, and 5 stated that, "The ranking system gives some teachers a feeling of unfairness." These opinions suggest that to address this problem, evaluation criteria need to be reviewed to provide more justice for all teachers. Other studies also indicate that the feeling of unfairness in evaluation systems can lead to reduced job satisfaction and increased dissatisfaction (Adams, 1965).

Category 3: Lack of Motivation

Motivation, as an internal and external force, plays a very important role in individuals' professional performance. In education, teacher motivation is considered one of the key factors in improving teaching quality and student learning. According to motivational theories such as Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory, intrinsic motivation, which includes factors like interest and enjoyment in the activity, can have a direct impact on productivity and performance quality (Deci & Ryan, 2000). However, the existence of evaluation and ranking systems that are implemented unfairly or without considering teachers' individual circumstances can lead to decreased motivation. Studies have shown that ineffective evaluation systems can create a sense of demotivation and inadequacy in teachers (Ford, Urick, & Wilson, 2021). Indeed, the mismatch between system

expectations and teachers' real abilities and conditions can lead to reduced motivation and increased job dissatisfaction. Insufficient motivation in teachers not only leads to decreased teaching quality and but also can have negative effects on their mental health and job satisfaction. According to a study by Green et al. (2019), evaluation systems that are poorly designed and implemented can lead to decreased motivation and increased teacher stress. Therefore, reviewing and revising evaluation systems considering teachers' real needs and conditions seem necessary.

Insufficient Motivation: The ranking system has not been able to provide the necessary motivation for some teachers. Many teachers feel that this system is not motivating and does not significantly impact their performance. Informant 4 acknowledged that, "The ranking system does not give some teachers motivation." Informants 9, 11, 7, and 15 also emphasized that, "The ranking system does not provide some teachers with the necessary motivation." These opinions suggest that the ranking system has not been effective for all teachers and, in some cases, may even negatively impact their motivation. Studies have shown that insufficient motivation can lead to reduced teacher productivity and efficiency (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Insufficient motivation results from the mismatch between the evaluation system and teachers' needs and expectations, which can lead to decreased commitment and motivation to improve performance.

Category 4. Workload

Increased Workload and Teacher Fatigue: One of the significant issues that have arisen with the implementation of the ranking system is the increased workload for teachers. Studies indicate that increased workload can lead to job burnout and reduced teaching quality (Green, 2020).

Increased Volume of Work: The ranking system has led to an increased volume of work for teachers. Teachers are compelled to spend more time and energy on preparing and submitting documentation related to the ranking system, in addition to their teaching duties. Informant 4, along with Informant 11, admitted that, "The ranking system increases the workload for teachers." This increased workload can lead to teacher fatigue and burnout and seems to reduce the quality of teaching and increase job dissatisfaction. According to workload theories, the increase in administrative tasks can divert teachers'

time and energy from teaching to non-teaching duties, which results in reduced education quality (Smith & Allen, 2019).

Category 5. Decline in Educational Quality

One of the main concerns among teachers is the decline in educational quality as a result of the ranking system's implementation. The reduction in focus on teaching and the stress caused by continuous evaluations can seriously affect teaching quality (Johnson, 2021). This category includes two subcategories: reduced focus on teaching and diminished quality of education, which will be explained further below.

Reduced Focus on Teaching: The implementation of the ranking system has reduced teachers' focus on teaching. The pressures related to evaluation and ranking have caused teachers to spend a significant amount of time and energy on administrative and bureaucratic issues instead of focusing on teaching and improving educational quality. Informant 5, along with Informants 9 and 13, explained that, "The ranking system reduces teachers' focus on teaching." These opinions suggest that the pressures resulting from the ranking system can make teachers spend time on administrative issues rather than improving teaching methods and student education. Studies have shown that reduced focus on teaching can directly lead to a decline in the quality of teaching and student learning (Anderson & Brown, 2020).

Reduced Teaching Quality: The implementation of the ranking system has led to a decline in the quality of education in classrooms. The stress and pressures resulting from evaluation and ranking can lead to reduced teaching effectiveness and classroom learning. Informant 7, a male teacher with a bachelor's degree and 28 years of service from Kerman, along with Informant 15, stressed that, "The ranking system reduces the quality of education in classrooms." These opinions also indicate that the pressures from the ranking system can negatively impact the quality of teaching and learning in classrooms, leading to reduced educational effectiveness. Research shows that stress and workload pressure can lead to reduced teaching quality and increased job dissatisfaction (Williams & Clark, 2018).

Summary: Despite its positive goals, the teacher ranking system can lead to a decline in educational quality. The reduction in teachers' focus on education and the decline in

classroom teaching quality are the two main factors contributing to this quality decline. To improve this situation, educational policymakers need to design and implement the ranking system in a way that reduces additional pressures and helps enhance the quality of education and increase teachers' focus on teaching.

4.2. Strengths

The teacher ranking system has been regarded as one of the fundamental instruments for improving performance and enhancing educational quality. This system is significant due to its positive impacts on educational and professional processes for teachers. Examining the strengths of this system leads to a better understanding of its positive effects on teachers and educational processes. Based on the research findings, teachers' perceptions of the strengths of the ranking system can be categorized into aspects such as "transparency and justice, educational quality, professional development, motivation, and productivity." This examination can guide the improvement and strengthening of this system to achieve educational goals and enhance teaching quality.

Category 1: Professional Development

Implementing the ranking system can contribute to the professional development of teachers. This development includes improving teaching methods, utilizing others' experiences, career advancement, adopting new techniques, and developing skills. The philosophy of professional development in education is based on the principle that continuous learning and improvement of methods and skills can lead to enhanced educational quality and increased job satisfaction (Green, 2020). The ranking system helps teachers progress and develop their careers by providing more opportunities to improve teaching methods and utilize others' experiences.

Improving Teaching Methods: The ranking system helps teachers improve their teaching methods. This improvement can occur through continuous evaluation and receiving constructive feedback. Informant 6, along with Informant 14, stated that, "The ranking system helps teachers improve their teaching methods." This improvement can help teachers become familiar with modern teaching methods and enhance educational quality. Reviews indicate that constructive feedback can lead to improved teaching quality and the enhancement of teachers' educational abilities (Johnson, 2021).

Utilizing Experiences: One of the benefits of the ranking system is that it enables teachers to benefit from the experiences of others. This can help increase teachers' knowledge and abilities. Informant 10 said that, "The ranking system helps teachers benefit from the experiences of others." Utilizing these experiences can help teachers choose better teaching methods and benefit from the knowledge and experiences of their colleagues. Studies show that the exchange of knowledge and experiences among teachers can help improve educational processes and enhance teaching quality (Smith & Allen, 2019).

Career Advancement: The ranking system provides teachers with more opportunities for career advancement. These opportunities can include rank promotions, increased salaries and benefits, and attaining higher job positions. Informant 2, along with Informant 12, expressed that, "The ranking system provides teachers with more opportunities for career advancement." Thus, it can be concluded that the ranking system can be used as an effective tool to encourage teachers to improve and develop their careers. Research has shown that career advancement opportunities can increase teachers' motivation and job satisfaction (Williams & Clark, 2018).

New Techniques: From the perspective of participating teachers, the ranking system allows them to improve their teaching using new techniques. These techniques can include modern teaching methods, using new technologies, and employing various educational strategies. Informant 8, declared that, "The ranking system allows teachers to improve their teaching using new techniques." These techniques can help teachers provide more effective education and engage students more in the learning process. Using new technologies in teaching can help increase student interaction and participation (Smith & Jones, 2022).

Skill Development: The findings indicate that implementing the ranking system helps teachers develop their skills. This skill development can include improving teaching skills, classroom management, using educational technologies, and enhancing communication skills. Informant 10, emphasized that, "The ranking system helps teachers develop their skills." This skill development can help teachers adapt to new educational changes and challenges and employ the best teaching methods. Studies show that developing

teaching and classroom management skills can lead to improved educational quality and increased job satisfaction among teachers (Williams & Clark, 2018).

Category 2: Motivation and Productivity

Implementing the ranking system from the perspective of the interviewed teachers can have positive effects on their motivation and productivity. These effects include skill updating, achieving educational goals, creating healthy competition, increasing participation, enhancing collaboration, and boosting motivation. Motivation and productivity are two fundamental components in the philosophy of education that are directly related to the quality of teaching and learning. The philosophy of professional development and continuous learning emphasizes that teachers, as the backbone of the educational system, need a motivational environment where their abilities and skills are updated and improved (Dewey, 1938; Bandura, 1997). Motivation theories such as Self-Determination Theory and Herzberg's Motivation-Hygiene Theory highlight that work environments that help professional development and increase teacher motivation lead to improved teaching quality and job satisfaction (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Herzberg, 1966).

Professional Development: Teachers believe that the ranking system helps them update and improve their skills. This skill development can include using new teaching methods and new technologies. Informant 1, noted that, "The ranking system helps teachers update their skills." Informant 3, also emphasized that, "The ranking system strengthens teachers' teaching skills." This skill updating can help teachers keep pace with educational changes and innovations and improve their teaching quality. According to Smith & Allen (2019), continuous professional development programs play a significant role in improving teacher performance and teaching quality.

Achieving Educational Goals: Another advantage of the ranking system is that it helps teachers achieve their educational goals. This system can help teachers focus more on their educational goals and achieve better results. Informant 1, along with Informant 10, argued that, "The ranking system helps teachers achieve their educational goals." This indicates that the ranking system can assist teachers in better planning and management to achieve their educational goals. Johnson (2021) shows that setting specific goals and receiving continuous feedback helps teachers improve their performance and achieve

their educational goals.

Healthy Competition: Informants believe that the ranking system can lead to healthy competition among teachers. This competition can improve teaching quality and increase teachers' motivation to enhance educational standards. Informant 2, along with Informant 12, claimed that, "The ranking system increases healthy competition among teachers." Healthy competition can help teachers perform their best and improve educational quality. Williams & Clark (2018) suggest that healthy competition can enhance teachers' motivation and productivity and positively impact teaching quality.

Increased Participation: Another positive effect of the ranking system from the perspective of participating teachers is increasing teacher participation in the educational process. This participation can include involvement in educational decision-making and exchanging views with colleagues. Informant 6, along with Informant 14, mentioned that, "The ranking system increases teachers' participation in the educational process." This increased participation can strengthen professional relationships among teachers and improve educational quality. Research indicates that active teacher participation in decision-making can increase their sense of belonging and motivation (Smith & Jones, 2022).

Enhanced Collaboration: The ranking system can enhance collaboration among teachers. This collaboration can include exchanging knowledge and experiences and cooperating on educational projects. Informant 8, admitted that, "The ranking system enhances collaboration among teachers." This collaboration can help teachers benefit from their colleagues' experiences and improve their teaching methods. According to Brown et al. (2022), collaboration among teachers improves educational processes and increases teaching quality. This point was also expressed by Participant 3.

Increased Motivation: The ranking system can increase teachers' motivation for improvement and advancement. This motivation can be achieved through better job opportunities and increased financial rewards. Informant 1, believed that, "The ranking system increases teachers' motivation." Informant 3, also added that, "The ranking system motivates teachers to work to their best." Informant 10, expressed that, "The ranking system increases teachers' motivation for self-improvement." These opinions

show that the ranking system can be an effective tool for increasing teachers' motivation and improving educational quality.

Category 3: Transparency and Justice

Implementing the ranking system can increase transparency and justice in teacher evaluation and performance. These effects include transparency in evaluation, transparency in performance, recognizing strengths and weaknesses, a sense of justice, and performance evaluation. Transparency and justice in teacher evaluations are fundamental principles of advanced educational systems. According to theories of moral philosophy and social justice, evaluation systems should be designed to reflect performance accurately and enhance a sense of justice and trust (Rawls, 1971; Sen, 2009). In fact, evaluation systems that are implemented transparently and fairly can increase the sense of justice among teachers and improve educational quality.

Evaluation Transparency: The ranking system helps increase transparency in teacher evaluations. This transparency can provide teachers with a better and more precise understanding of evaluation criteria and their performance. Informant 6 and 14, acknowledged that, "The ranking system increases transparency in teacher evaluations." This transparency can help teachers better understand evaluation criteria, recognize their strengths and weaknesses, and improve their performance. According to Brown, Smith, & Johnson (2022), transparency in teacher evaluations can lead to reduced stress and increased job satisfaction.

Performance Transparency: Teachers believe that the ranking system can increase transparency in teachers' performance. This transparency allows teachers and administrators to evaluate teachers' performance more accurately, thereby improving educational quality. Informants 1 and 8 stressed that, "The ranking system increases transparency in teachers' performance." This performance transparency can help teachers improve their performance based on received feedback. Grissom & Bartanen (2019) found that performance evaluation transparency can increase efficiency and improve educational processes.

Recognizing Strengths and Weaknesses: Another advantage of the ranking system is helping teachers recognize their strengths and weaknesses. This recognition can help

teachers focus on their weaknesses to improve them and strengthen their strengths to achieve better performance. Informants 12 and 3 stressed that, "The ranking system helps teachers recognize and improve their weaknesses." Recognizing strengths and weaknesses can help teachers improve their performance based on feedback and evaluations received. Ford, Urick, & Wilson (2021) show that recognizing strengths and weaknesses helps teachers make significant improvements in their performance.

Performance Evaluation: The ranking system allows teachers to evaluate their performance. This evaluation can help teachers improve their performance with more precise and comprehensive feedback. Informant 2, a female teacher with a bachelor's degree and 27 years of service from Mashhad, along with Informants 2 and 12 stressed that, "The ranking system allows teachers to evaluate their performance." Performance evaluation can help teachers improve their performance with constructive feedback and achieve their educational goals.

Category 4: Educational Quality

From the perspective of participating teachers, implementing the ranking system also has various positive impacts on "educational quality." These impacts can include constructive feedback, improved communications, better educational programs, and enhanced teaching quality. Educational quality is one of the most important components of educational systems worldwide. In the philosophy of education, improving educational quality depends not only on increasing students' knowledge and skills but also on the professional and psychological development of teachers. According to philosophers like John Dewey, education should be dynamic, interactive, and based on practical experiences (Dewey, 1916). In this context, ranking systems can improve teaching and learning quality by providing constructive feedback and creating professional development opportunities (Danielson, 2007).

Constructive Feedback: One of the advantages of the ranking system is the possibility of receiving constructive feedback for teachers. This feedback can help teachers improve their performance and identify their weaknesses. Informants 6, and 14, noted that, "The ranking system allows teachers to improve their performance using constructive feedback." This feedback can help teachers improve their teaching methods

and enhance educational quality. Studies show that constructive feedback plays an important role in teachers' professional development (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

Improved Communications: The ranking system can improve communications between teachers and administrators. These communications can include exchanging views, providing feedback, and collaborating on educational planning. Informant 3, expressed that, "The ranking system helps improve communications between teachers and administrators." Improved communications can strengthen professional relationships and increase collaboration between teachers and administrators. Research indicates that effective communication between teachers and administrators can help improve educational quality (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

Improved Educational Programs: The ranking system can help teachers improve their educational programs. This improvement can include revising content, teaching methods, and educational assessments. Informant 8 believed that, "The ranking system helps teachers improve their educational programs." This improvement can increase the effectiveness of educational programs and enhance teaching quality. Research shows that coherent and revised educational programs can help improve student performance (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

Improved Teaching Quality: The ranking system can improve teaching quality. This improvement can be achieved through providing constructive feedback, creating motivation for improvement, and enhancing teaching skills. Informant 2, acknowledged that "The ranking system improves teaching quality." This shows that the ranking system can be an effective tool for enhancing teaching quality. Studies indicate that teaching quality improves with appropriate evaluation systems (Stronge, 2018).

Summary: Considering the perspectives of participating teachers, it can be concluded that implementing the ranking system can have various positive impacts on educational quality.

Based on the research findings, the categories and subcategories of teachers' perceptions of the ranking system's implementation in the Iranian education system are presented in the table below (Table 2), followed by the conceptual model of the research (Figure 1).

Table 2.

Main Categories and Subcategories Extracted from Research Findings

Dimensions	Categories	Subcategories	Key Phrase	Frequency	Informant Code
Weaknesses	Psychological Issues	Stress and psychological pressure	"The ranking system causes stress and psychological pressure on teachers."	5	4, 11, 7, 9, 15
		Anxiety and worry	"The ranking system increases teachers' anxiety and worry."	1	7
		Unhealthy competition	"The ranking system can create unhealthy competition among teachers."	2	4, 11
		Job insecurity	"The ranking system makes teachers feel job insecurity."	2	7, 15
		Inequality	"The ranking system can cause inequality among teachers."	2	5, 13
	Lack of Motivation	Insufficient motivation	"The ranking system does not motivate some teachers."	4	5, 13, 4, 11
	Operational Issues	Increased bureaucracy	"The ranking system increases bureaucracy."	2	7, 9
		Feeling of unfairness	"The ranking system makes some teachers feel unfairly treated."	4	11, 15, 6, 14
	Workload	Increased workload	"The ranking system increases teachers' workload."	2	10, 2
	Decline in Educational Quality	Reduced focus on teaching	"The ranking system reduces teachers' focus on teaching."	3	12, 8, 10
		Reduced teaching quality	"The ranking system reduces the quality of classroom teaching."	2	1, 3
Strengths	Professional Development	Improvement in teaching methods	"The ranking system helps teachers improve their teaching methods."	2	1, 10
		Benefiting from experiences	"The ranking system helps teachers benefit	1	2

			from others' experiences."		
		Career advancement	"The ranking system gives teachers more opportunities for career advancement."	2	12, 6
		New techniques	"The ranking system allows teachers to improve their teaching using new techniques."	1	14
		Skill development	"The ranking system helps teachers develop their skills."	1	8
	Motivation and Productivity	Skill update	"The ranking system helps teachers update their skills."	2	1, 3
		Achieving educational goals	"The ranking system helps teachers achieve their educational goals."	2	10, 6
		Healthy competition	"The ranking system increases healthy competition among teachers."	2	14, 1
		Increased participation	"The ranking system increases teachers' participation in the educational process."	2	8, 12
		Increased collaboration	"The ranking system increases collaboration among teachers."	1	3
		Increased motivation	"The ranking system increases teachers' motivation."	3	5, 9, 13
	Transparency and Fairness	Evaluation transparency	"The ranking system increases transparency in teacher evaluations."	2	2, 12
		Performance transparency	"The ranking system increases transparency in teachers' performance."	2	5, 9
		Recognizing weaknesses	"The ranking system helps teachers recognize their	2	13, 7

			weaknesses and improve."		
		Performance evaluation	"The ranking system allows teachers to evaluate their performance."	2	8, 2
	Educational Quality	Reduced focus on teaching	"The ranking system reduces teachers' focus on teaching."	3	5, 9, 13
		Reduced teaching quality	"The ranking system reduces the quality of classroom teaching."	2	7, 15
		Constructive feedback	"The ranking system allows teachers to improve their performance using constructive feedback."	2	6, 14
		Improved communication	"The ranking system helps improve communication between teachers and administrators."	1	3
		Improved educational programs	"The ranking system helps teachers improve their educational programs."	1	8
		Improved teaching quality	"The ranking system improves teaching quality."	1	2

Figure 1.
Teachers' Perceptions of the Implementation of the Ranking System

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the experiences and perceptions of Iranian teachers regarding the implementation of the teacher ranking system. The findings indicate that the ranking system has multiple impacts on teachers, categorized into four main dimensions: psychological issues, professional development, transparency and fairness, and educational quality. Each of these dimensions was interpreted in detail and compared with the results of other studies. The findings revealed that the ranking system can lead to increased stress, psychological pressure, anxiety, and feelings of unfairness among teachers. These results are consistent with studies conducted in Iran, such as Abbaspoor et al. (2021), which showed that teacher evaluation systems can lead to increased stress and psychological pressure. Additionally, international studies, like Smith and Jones (2022) in the United States, have confirmed that teacher ranking systems can lead to psychological problems and decreased job satisfaction.

The research findings showed that the ranking system helps in the professional development of teachers, including improving teaching methods, utilizing the experiences of others, career advancement, using new techniques, and skill development. These results align with both domestic and international studies. For instance, Rahimi (2020) demonstrated that ranking systems can help improve teaching methods and increase teacher motivation. Similarly, Smith et al. (2023) in the UK found that teacher evaluation systems can aid in professional development and enhance teaching skills. The results also indicated that the ranking system can increase transparency in teacher evaluation and performance, identify strengths and weaknesses, and assist in more accurate performance evaluation. These findings are consistent with domestic research, such as Karimi et al. (2021), which showed that ranking systems can increase transparency and fairness in teacher performance evaluations. Internationally, Brown et al. (2022) in Canada confirmed that transparent evaluation systems can improve performance and increase teacher satisfaction.

On the other hand, the findings showed that the ranking system can reduce teachers' focus on teaching and decrease the quality of education in classrooms. These results align with similar studies in Iran, such as Hoseini (2019), which indicated that

evaluation systems might lead to a decline in teaching quality. Additionally, Lee et al. (2021) in South Korea found that the pressures from ranking systems could decrease educational quality and increase psychological pressure on teachers. The results of this study suggest that the teacher ranking system in Iran has multiple impacts, both positive and negative. On the one hand, this system can help in the professional development of teachers, increase transparency and fairness in evaluations, and improve teaching methods. On the other hand, it may lead to increased stress and psychological pressure, reduced focus on teaching, and decreased teaching quality.

To improve the ranking system and reduce its negative effects, it is recommended that educational policymakers review the evaluation criteria and methods, and make necessary changes based on teacher feedback. Additionally, providing psychological and professional support for teachers can help reduce the pressures of ranking and improve the overall educational system. Based on the findings of this study and considering the strengths and weaknesses of the teacher ranking system in Iran, the following suggestions are made:

- Review evaluation criteria to reduce stress and psychological pressure caused by evaluations. Evaluation criteria should be designed to exert less pressure on teachers and focus more on improving the quality of teaching and learning.

- Establish support systems for teachers, including providing psychological and professional counseling, to help reduce anxiety and increase motivation.

- To increase transparency and fairness in evaluation, it is recommended that the evaluation process be conducted openly and with active teacher participation. Providing constructive and practical feedback to teachers can help them identify their weaknesses and strengths and improve their performance. These feedback sessions should be held regularly and in consultation sessions so that teachers can continuously improve their performance.

- For the professional development of teachers, it is recommended to hold more educational programs and specialized workshops so that teachers can update their skills and become familiar with new educational techniques. Encouraging participation in group projects and collaboration with other teachers can also lead to increased

motivation and productivity. These collaborations can include sharing experiences and knowledge, and implementing joint educational projects.

- To prevent a decline in the quality of education, it is recommended that sufficient time and resources be provided for teaching and class preparation. Teachers should be able to focus on their educational tasks without bureaucratic concerns. Revising the ranking system to focus more on educational quality and involving teachers in the decision-making process can lead to the overall improvement of the educational system and increase teacher job satisfaction.

These changes can reduce the negative effects of the ranking system, increase teacher motivation and job satisfaction, and ultimately improve the quality of education in schools.

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Introduction and cross-cultural adaptation of Teachers' Media Didactica Questionnaire

Article info

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Abstract

The current study aimed to measure the validity and reliability of the three-factor questionnaire of media didactica of Persian language teachers. Two groups participated in the study: specialists in the fields related to media Didactica and high school teachers in Tehran. The group of experts was recruited by convenience sampling method, and a Cluster method was used to select teachers. The participants included 17 experts and 185 teachers. First, the three-factor media didactica questionnaire of Simmons (2017) was translated into Farsi, and in the next step, it was given to a group of experts to assess its validity, and after confirming its validity, it was given to teachers to assess its reliability. The results of confirmatory factor analysis showed that the model was compatible with three factors including media, media understanding and social development. Using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, it was found that the coefficient value of subscales ranged between 0.71 and 0.79. The results showed that the Persian media questionnaire was a valid instrument with good reliability and validity for measuring the media didactica of Persian language teachers.

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1. Introduction

The rapid growth of information and communication technology in the last decade has urged the universal need for education and learning. It has also affected the field of education. The use of this technology has brought changes in educational approaches in the new era. The expansion of the content produced in virtual media and the necessity of using social media by users and being present in the media space has made using the media one of the requirements of the life of the people of the society (Khademnia et al., 2022) In other words, in the era of globalization and due to the expansion of communication and information technologies and the increase of media outputs, hot discussions have been raised regarding developing required skills and improving the level of awareness and education in regard of media (Amiri et al., 2019). Since all people in the society have access to their desired content due to the advancement of technology, it is better to have enough skills to be safe from the negative influence of new media and new vulnerabilities of cyber space and to participate as a person with skills in cyber space (Grizzle et al., 2014). Usually, when the consequences of inappropriate media, including moral and behavioral problems and social harms, are revealed, therapeutic ways are considered, while it is better to equip people with a more powerful tool called media competencies in the digital age (Foulger et al., 2021). In this case, when they are actively exposed to the media, they will correctly interpret the meaning of the messages they encounter and will have an adequate and comprehensive image of the media.

The progress and development of a society depends on its resources and successful human capital (Cortoni et al., 2015). In education, the role of human resources is important and the teacher is one of the most important factors in the growth and development of the quality and content of education, because human education is the result of a two-way interaction and the consequence of the teacher's action and the student's reaction (Tied, 2020). Considering the importance and place of education among the various institutions of the society, it can be acknowledged that it is the most effective institution in training and providing human resources, and the teacher as a trainer can play a sensitive and key role in this regard. A teacher can train efficient and creative human resources for the society, and as a result, provide the right context for the development of the society in all its dimensions (Amiri et al., 2019; Grizzel et al., 2014).

The Education Organization, plays an important role in increasing the general competencies of the country. Today, the concept of competencies has become much wider than the past, and in this field, education should not be left behind and cope with the media (Meeus et al., 2014). Teachers are the starting point of every educational transformation and they are able to change the face of the educational organization with the knowledge and skills they have acquired and turn the atmosphere of schools into an atmosphere of friendship, growth and development. By transferring cultural elements to the new generation and applying suitable methods for education, they provide the basis for the development of the personality of children and teenagers. Considering the importance and prominence and value of the role of teachers, training and providing this important element of education is the best and most beneficial type of investment (Amiri et al., 2019). In order to improve the media skills of people in the society based on Iranian-Islamic culture, programs should be developed so that the audience of these skills (teachers and trainers) can learn these skills and use them in their daily life. Hence, the audience of these types of competencies, who are teachers and instructors, can also learn them and benefit from them in their daily life. It is believed that it is possible to help the society to achieve its goals with predetermined plans and following the principles of media competence.

The concept of "educational-media" competences started to form and find its identity since 1981 and with the introduction of information and communication technology (Shamshirgaran et al., 2023). First, this concept was understood along with the use of computers and communication technology. With the increase of information technology applications in the social field, which was the real goal of media competencies, this concept took a new form (Tugtekin & Koc, 2020). "Media Didactica" is a term used to express the use of media tools in teaching-learning processes (Tiede & Grafe, 2019). In other words, the subject of "educational-media competences" is the educational competences that empower teachers in teaching students and promoting media competences in them, and enable teachers to use media competences in the education of their students in the following ways (Shamshirgaran et al., 2023):
First, combining media content with specific topics, such as art and music; second, using media in courses in promoting media skills, including research, analysis, and information presentation; and third, using the media in an interdisciplinary way, by implementing multi-thematic projects (Cortoni et al. ,2015; Meeus et al., 2014).

2. Review of the Related Literature

Extensive research has been conducted in the field of media training capabilities of teachers in the United States and Germany, and the result of some of them is the presentation of models that were explained by Tulodziecki and Grafe (2012) in five areas for teachers: (1) using the media in an appropriate and targeted way; (2) understanding the sensitivity of the concept of media for the socialization of children and adolescents; (3) analysis and evaluation of media content related to teaching-learning activities; (4) carrying out tasks, assignments and lesson projects through educational media; and (5) organizing and providing media tools and needs in schools. Tulodziecki and Grafe (2012) also gave examples of standards to explain each of the aspects of competence that a teacher can acquire in the field of media competences and proposed the basis of his criteria according to the model called Modeling and Measuring Pedagogical Media Competencies of Pre-Service Teachers (M$_3$K) in three areas: (a) use of media for supporting teaching-learning processes; (b), realization of educational tasks related to media, and (c) development of media educational concepts in school.

Also, Blömeke (2007) proposed five areas of educational-media competence with the following characteristics: (1) educational-media competency; the ability to use media and information technology in teaching-learning situations in a reflective way and its development. (2) Media training competency; ability to cover media-related issues based on educational principles prevailing in the school. (3) Socialization skills in the field of media; the ability to pay attention to the constructiveness of lateral learning in media educational practices. (4) Merit of reforming schools in the field of media; the ability to design innovative conditions for educational activities. (5) Media self-competence; appropriate ability and individual creative and responsible action in the field of media and information technology (Tied, 2020).

Several definitions and approaches of media competence have been presented. In all the described approaches, the term media competence means knowledge, skills, attitude or common individual patterns (Erdem & ERİŞTİ, 2018; Khademnia, et al., 2023, Meuse et al. 2014; Simons, et al., 2017; Siregar et al., 2020). Also, in all approaches, human beings are assumed to be potential and ready to act, in the sense that human beings have the ability and readiness to act in the field of media and can improve their individual competencies (Tied 2020; Tolodzicki & Grafe, 2012). Many investigations have been conducted on the media competence of

teachers, including the ones conducted by Ajam and Yagoubi (2019), Sharifi and Saraji (2020), Siregar et al. (2020), Simons et al. (2017), Meeus et al. (2014), and Grafe and Breiter (2014).

For example, Ajam and Yagoubi (2019), conducted a research investigating the relationship between the level of teachers' media competences and the development of critical thinking in them. The results of this research indicated that the high level of media competence of teachers associated with to the level of development of critical thinking in them and vice versa. Sharifi and Saraji (2020) also carried out a research on the dimensions of teaching media and information skills in the formal education system of Iran. The purpose of this research was to investigate the dimensions of media and information skills training in the official and general education system of the country in order to improve the level of media and information skills. The results showed that these dimensions included: (1) methods of education, (2) levels of education, (3) separation of media, (4) determination of the target community, and (5) content of education. In this research, the target community was the teachers and trainers of the education organization. Based on the findings, determining these dimensions played an important role in improving the level of media and information skills of the target community.

Moreover, Siregar et al. (2020) admitted the vital and effective role of the required and appropriate competencies of the 21st century of teachers in the education process. In their research, they presented five necessary characteristics for teachers' competencies: (1) regulating the process of learning growth and paying attention to outputs instead of focusing on content teaching, (2) facilitation and inspiration for learners, (3) promoting the habit of discussion and conversation in order to promote communicative learning, (4) creating and maintaining a good classroom atmosphere, and (5) grouping to develop communication skills. Further, Simons et al. (2017) compiled a questionnaire in five stages. In this research, they emphasized that effective and efficient media education requires that teachers have sufficient media skills. The results of their study showed that the questionnaire had high reliability and validity. Also, the results of factor revealed that media-educational competencies were significant on three factors: teachers' use of media, teachers' understanding of media, and teachers' media participation.

In addition, Meuse et al. (2014) conducted a research on reference framework for educational-media competencies of students, teachers and student teachers. The

results of this research indicated that for the target group of teachers, the levels of educational-media competencies included: (1) Teaching-learning level, (2) Professional development level, and (3) Social development level. Also, a total of 138 learning objectives were specified for all levels of educational-media competencies. Besides, Grafe and Breiter (2014) performed a research focusing on modeling and measuring media-educational competencies of student teachers. Using a semi-structured interview the resulting conceptual model emphasized on three dimensions: (1) using media for teaching-learning, (2) education in the field of media, (3) designing media technology to improve schools. The results showed that the educational-media competencies of the teachers could influence the students' ability to understand and evaluate the media as well as their critical thinking in analyzing the media.

As it can be seen from the above investigations, dimensions such as teachers' media competences, teachers' understanding of the role of educational competences, media competences and teachers' media-educational competences have been studied. However, no research has not been done to evaluate the reliability and validity of teachers' media-educational competences questionnaire in Persian language. This research attempted to fill this gap by addressing the following research question:

- Is the Persian translation of three-factor teachers' Media Didactica questionnaire valid and reliable?

3. Methodology

The current research adopted a correlational research approach. In the current research, the researcher translated, localized and examined the psychometric properties of the "Media-Educational Competencies" questionnaire. The population included both male and female Persian speaking experts (n=15) and secondary school teachers (n=185) who had more than 15 years of teaching experience and had Bachelor's and Master's degrees in various academic fields, including mathematics, history, literature, psychology, and physics in Tehran. The method of conducting the study included three steps: (1) Questionnaire translation, (2) Checking the validity of the questionnaire, and (3) Checking the reliability of the questionnaire. The "media-educational competencies" questionnaire of teachers was developed by Simmons (2017) and includes 12 items and three dimensions (media use, media understanding, and media participation). Subjects selected the statements in the questionnaire based

on a Likert scale from 1 (completely disagree) to 4 (completely agree). The original version of the questionnaire was received from the research group that had implemented a large project in the field of media competencies in education (Antwerp University of Social Sciences) through correspondence. The original English version of the questionnaire was translated into Persian according to the translation protocol after obtaining permission from the main author. For this purpose, two translators, whose mother tongue was Persian and had sufficient experience and mastery in translating English texts, translated the English version of the questionnaire. Also, these two translators were asked to prepare a list of possible alternative translations for some of the words, phrases and sentences in the questionnaire, if necessary (See Appendix).

At this stage, the conceptual equivalence of the words, phrases and sentences in the questionnaire was emphasized. Then each of the translators expressed their opinion about the words, phrases and sentences in the questionnaire. These translators commented on the quality of the translation for each word, phrase and sentence in the Persian version of the questionnaire. At this stage, the meaning of translation quality was such things as: the desirability of expressions and sentences in terms of clarity (use of simple and understandable words), the use of common language, (avoiding the use of technical, specialized and artificial words), conceptual uniformity (in understanding the conceptual content of the version) and the overall quality of the translation. After the first stage, in the second and third stages, the validation features of the measurement instruments were scrutinized, which are mentioned below. To check the psychometric properties of the research measurement instruments, the following two steps were taken:

Validity check

The validity check included determining the content validity and face validity of the questionnaire. Generally, content validity is carried out at the time of questionnaire design in order to determine how well the items are able to measure the desired characteristic. In this research, because the content validity was measured in the original language (using media 3 items a =>.708, understanding media 6 items a =>.789, contributing medially 3 items a =>.633) it was considered sufficient. In the case of formal validity, the items were measured in terms of their apparent similarity with the research subject, which was decided based on the consensus of the experts. Therefore, this was determined based on the judgment of experts in the fields of

communication and media sciences, curriculum planning, educational technology and psychology. The experts included: Experts included five professors in the field of media management and communication sciences, five professors in curriculum planning, one professors in educational technology, two people in psychology, and also four professors.

Reliability Check

The third step involved checking the reliability of the questionnaire. At this stage, in order to measure the reliability of the instrument, the link of the online version of the questionnaire was sent to 185 middle school teachers. Sampling method which was employed was convenience technique and the criteria for entering the study were teachers working in secondary courses in Tehran in 2019-2020, and the criteria for leaving the study was the failure of the participants to answer a significant number of questions in the questionnaire. The respondents were assured that their information would remain confidential.

4. Findings

Because no changes were made in the original content of the questionnaire, it was considered that the content validity of the original version was sufficient: using media 3 items a =>.708, understanding media 6 items a =>.789, contributing medially 3 items a =>.633) In order to measure face validity of the Persian questionnaire, each item underwent the following procedures: (1) transparency (the fluency and comprehensibility of the translated words and concepts), (2) suitability (the degree of ability to reflect the features of the desired content and appropriateness with the cultural conditions of the society), and (3) modification and amendment The procedures were performed by the experts. Experts included five professors in the field of media management and communication sciences, five professors in curriculum planning, one professors in educational technology, two people in psychology, and also four professors to decide whether the translated questionnaire could measure the media educational competencies or not. By examining the results of the expert opinion, it was found that only one comment was given regarding inappropriateness in questions 1, 9, 10, 11 and 12, and this showed that more than 90% of the comments confirmed that the items were appropriate and partially appropriate.

The next step was to carry out the modifications. After making corrections, the final version was sent back to five experts and received final approval. Finally, based

on the experts' opinion it was decided that the translated version was suitable for evaluating media-educational competence (See Appendices A and B).

In order to check the reliability of the questionnaire, the translated version was given to 30 teachers by using convenience sampling method. After collecting the data, Cronbach's alpha statistical method was used to determine the reliability of the instrument. Cronbach's alpha value was equal to 0.79 and this value was close to the reliability level expressed in the original version, which was 0.77. In order to perform factor analysis, it was first necessary to check the possibility of factor analysis by KMO (Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy) and Bartlett's tests. KMO and Bartlett's test were performed to check the adequacy of the sample, and the KMO index was calculated as 0.85 and the significance of Bartlett's test ($\chi2=762.310$, $P<0.01$) indicated the adequacy of the selected sample size in this study.

The descriptive statistics of the research variables of the sub-scales of educational-media competencies of teachers by gender (male and female) are presented in Table 1.

Table 1.

Descriptive characteristics of the subscales of media-educational competencies of teachers

standard deviation	Mean	maximum	minimal	Number	gender	subscales
1.51	4.59	10	3	100	Female	**Use of media**
1.74	5.24	11	3	85	male	
1.65	4.89	11	3	185	Total	
3.28	10.68	20	6	100	Female	**Media perception**
3.53	11.09	18	6	85	male	
3.39	10.87	20	6	185	Total	
2.15	6.34	12	3	100	Female	**Social Development**
2.22	6.62	11	3	85	male	
2.18	6.47	12	3	185	Total	
5.86	21.61	40	12	100	Female	**total score Educational-media competences**
6.36	22.96	36	12	85	male	
6.11	22.23	40	12	185	Total	

As the results of the above table show, the mean and standard deviation of the total score of educational-media competencies for women were 21.61, 5.86 and for men 22.96, 6.36 respectively.

Investigating the factor structure of teachers' educational-media competencies

The fitness of the model of the factor structure of teachers' media-educational competencies was investigated using research data with LISREL 8.7 software (Jorskak and Sorbonne, 2003). The model included a three-factor model with 12 questions loaded on the three factors of media use, media understanding, and social development. Descriptive indicators of the teachers' media-educational competencies scale by items are presented in Table 2.

Table 2.

Descriptive statistics of teachers' educational-media competence scale by items

Kurtosis	Skewness	Cronbach's alpha(in case of item deletion)	Variance (in case of item deletion)	Mean (in case of item deletion)	standard deviation	Mean	Question
.705	.834	.851	32.71	20.51	.712	1.71	Question 1
.600	.787	.850	32.83	20.60	.655	1.63	Question 2
1.276	1.200	.848	32.45	20.69	.691	1.54	Question 3
-.642	.478	.846	31.57	20.38	.786	1.84	Question 4
-.744	.347	.848	31.40	20.23	.837	1.99	Question 5
-.509	.421	.840	30.78	20.28	.798	1.94	Question 6
-.575	.667	.841	30.68	20.45	.827	1.77	Question 7
1.134	1.265	.859	33.73	20.70	.715	1.52	Question 8
-.359	.850	.859	32.31	20.45	.908	1.77	Question 9
-.786	.386	.846	30.40	20.10	.938	2.12	Question 10
-1.004	-.035	.856	31.45	19.82	.969	2.41	Question 11
-.590	.466	.851	31.85	20.29	.831	1.93	Question 12

As the results of Table 2 show, the mean of questions is between 1.52 and 2.44, and the skewness and elongation indices do not exceed 3 and -3, which show the normality of the data. Cronbach's alpha was obtained for the components of media use 0.73, perception 0.79, and social development 0.71. Also, Cronbach's alpha for the entire scale of educational-media competencies of teachers was estimated to be 0.86.

Table 3.

Factor load and critical ratio of the questions of educational-media competences of teachers

Critical ratio	standardized factor (β) loading	Unstandardized factor (b) loading	questions
8/71**	0/64	0/46	Question 1
10/43**	0/74	0/49	Question 2
9/61**	0/69	0/48	Question 3
10/07**	0/69	0/55	Question 4
9/25**	0/65	0/54	Question 5
11/42**	0/76	0/61	Question 6
10/61**	0/72	0/60	Question 7
4/81**	0/37	0/34	Question 8
5/30**	0/40	0/38	Question 9
11/02**	0/80	0/75	Question 10
8/40**	0/63	0/61	Question 11
8/8**	0/61	0/51	Question 12

In order to check the factorial structure of the questionnaire, the maximum likelihood method was used to estimate the model and the following indicators were used to fit the model:

Chi-square ratio index on the degree of freedom (df/χ2), goodness-of-fit index (GFI), Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index (AGFI), comparative fit index (CFI), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) and Root Mean Square Residual (RMR).

Table 4.

The result of the indicators calculated for the confirmatory factor analysis of the scale of educational-media competencies of teachers

| RMR	RMSEA	CFI	AGFI	GFI	χ2/df	df	Δ χ²	Model
0/038	0/074	0/96	0/87	0/91	2/02	51	103/04***	Before correction
0/027	0/045	0/98	0/91	0/94	1/33	50	68/79*	After correction

The examination of the fit of the investigated model indicated that the model of three independent factors with loading of 12 questions on three independent factors

under the headings: media use, media understanding and social development (media participation) was suitable. In other words, the research results supported the three-factor model.

Examining the fit indices of the model indicated that it enjoyed a relatively good fit with the data. If the chi-square is not statistically significant, it indicates that the fit is very appropriate. However, this index is often meaningful in samples larger than 100, and hence it is not a suitable index for measuring the fit of the model. If the ratio of chi-square to degrees of freedom is less than 3, it indicates a very good fit. If the CFI, AGFI, GFI indices are greater than 0.90 and the RMSEA and RMR indices are less than 0.05, it indicates a very good fit, and if it is less than 0.08, it means a good and suitable fit (West, et al.,1995). As a result, CFI, AGFI, and GFI indicated a very good fit. The RMSEA and RMR indices indicated a very favorable fit, and based on the chi-square ratio index on the degree of freedom, the fit was also satisfactory (Table 4 and Figure 1).

Figure 1.

The standard coefficients of the questions of teachers' educational-media competences on its subscales (after correction)
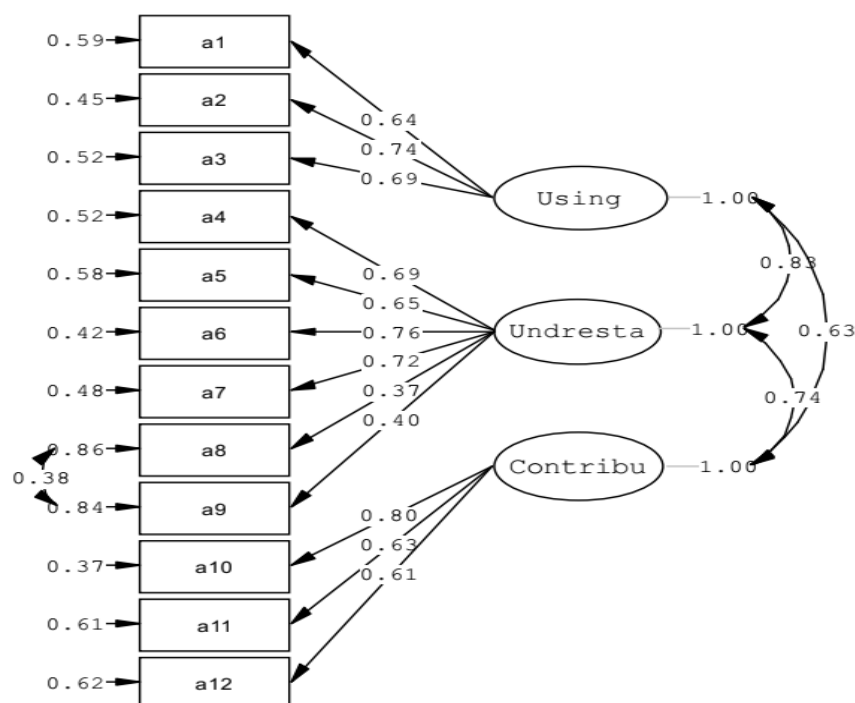
Chi-Square=68.79, df=50, P-value=0.04011, RMSEA=0.045

5. Discussion

One of the necessities of the information age is the need for a type of education that

prepares learners to face the challenges of life affected by the new media, which is unpredictable. Teaching media competencies is one of these important things. Indeed, teaching media competencies by introducing appropriate values and norms and models equips the audience to face the challenges of life that are being formed under the influence of new media. This will cause the automatic analysis mechanism to appear in the unconscious minds of the audience and protect them from media information invasion and they will take control of almost all messages. By being aware of how the media produces information, children and teenagers will be more protected against the media's onslaught. In addition, teachers who acquire media competence skills can become more effective information disseminators and bridge the gap between educational programs and social programs (Ajam & Yaqoubi, 2019; Saraji et al., 2018; Sharifi & Saraji, 2020).

Educational-media competencies of teachers include a set of teacher competencies that are a combination of knowledge, insight, skill and attitude. Special skills that enable teachers to use media in teaching-learning processes in the educational situation are illustrated in the three dimensions of media use, media understanding and media participation. Due to the fact that there was no standard questionnaire in Persian language to measure the media-educational competencies of teachers, the present questionnaire was translated and localized in order to collect the information needed for the research. By using the confirmatory factor analysis, it was found that the highest factor load belonged to question 10 (β=0.80) and the lowest factor load belonged to question 8 (β=0.37). Also, T values to check the significance of factor loadings indicated that the factor loading for all the questions of the media-educational competence questionnaire of teachers was meaningful and it can be claimed that all the questions had the necessary ability to measure the factors.

The way the questions of this research were placed on their factors is in line with the research of Simons (2017) which showed that media-educational competencies were significant on three factors: teachers' use of media, teachers' understanding of media, and teachers' media participation. The examination of the fit of the studied model also indicates that the model of three independent factors by loading 12 questions on three independent factors under the headings of media use, media understanding and social development (media participation) was suitable. In other words, the research results support the three-factor model. Considering the results of this research, it can be concluded that this questionnaire translated into

Persian had appropriate validity and reliability and the factors confirmed by factor analysis can measure the level of educational-media competencies of Persian language teachers.

6. Conclusion

The current study aimed to measure the validity and reliability of the three-factor questionnaire of media didactica of Persian language teachers. The results of confirmatory factor analysis showed that the model was compatible with three factors including media, media understanding and social development. According to the results of the present research, it can be said that the level of greater interest in using the media leads to a high level of media-educational competencies. The level of interest in using media can be influenced by beliefs, traditions and values that are built over time. Peterson and Dale (1998) call this type of media use by teachers to advance their work as "teacher culture". Therefore, the role of the teachers are emphasized because they are the main agent of education and training and the distinguished goals of education systems in different dimensions must finally be implemented by them. Hence, it can be concluded that even if teachers have enough knowledge and skills to use media-educational competencies, the level of interest or the positive attitude towards the use of media in accordance with the educational situation is the determining factor. Finally, some implications can be inferred: in order to raise the level of educational-media competences of teachers in the field of using media, it is desirable to provide more and up-to-date facilities to teachers and to provide the necessary training in this field. Besides, it is suggested to provide a dynamic platform such as holding scientific workshops or seminars with the aim of familiarizing and acquiring skills in order to improve the level of teachers' competences in terms of understanding the media. Also, opportunities to produce media content, write articles, produce videos and clips, or launch an educational channel on the subject of professional competencies should be provided, so that teachers can know the media capabilities in the field of job participation. Eventually, courses can be designed in the teacher training curriculum in Farhangian University so that the student teachers can acquire media-educational skills.

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Appendix A
Media-educational Competencies Questionnaire

1.	I can use media devices in a technical sense (e.g. computer, projector, tablets, smartphone, and interactive whiteboard).		
2.	I can consciously choose between different media devices, based on their function (e.g. computer, smartphone or tablet, navigate through hyperlinks).		
3.	I can purposefully use different sources of information and media devices (e.g. search for information using social network sites, the internet).		
4.	I know that media represent information in a selective way and know how to interpret media messages (e.g. implicit versus explicit media language, the structure of a text/article/film/video/…)		
5.	I know how media production and distribution works (e.g. from source to article, the filtering of news, the intersection between politics, media and democracy).		
6.	I know how media content is tailored to the target audience (e.g. selection possibilities, personalized online offer through cookies, newspapers/television channels/websites and their target audience).		
7.	I can evaluate media content taking into account various criteria (e.g. accuracy of information, comparison of information, appreciation of aesthetic aspects).		
8.	I am aware of the effects of media (e.g. influence on purchasing behavior, undesired effects such as hate or addiction).		
9.	I am aware of my own media behavior (e.g. copyright, illegal downloads, dangerous media behavior).		
10.	I can create media content (e.g. write an article, create a photo or video document, set up a blog).		
11.	I can communicate and present contents using media (e.g. structure and adapt a presentation, publish media content through an appropriate channel such as blogs, directories, YouTube).		
12.	I can participate in the public debate through media (e.g. show commitment using (social) media, contact organizations by email, reader reactions or social media).		

Appendix B
Media-educational Competencies Questionnaire (Persian Translation)

هرگز	به ندرت	اغلب	همیشه	سواد تربیتی- رسانه‌ای
				۱. میزان استفاده از وسایل و دستگاه‌های رسانه‌ای (مانند رایانه، پروژکتور، تبلت، گوشی‌های هوشمند، تخته‌های هوشمند) به صورت ماهرانه
				۲. .میزان گزینش آگاهانه از بین دستگاه‌های مختلف رسانه‌ای بر اساس عملکردشان ، (به عنوان مثال: رایانه، گوشی هوشمند یا تبلت، برقراری پیوند بین صفحات اینترنتی)
				۳. میزان بهره‌مندی به صورت کاملا هدفمند از منابع متفاوت اطلاعاتی (به عنوان مثال: جستجوی اطلاعات با استفاده از شبکه‌های اجتماعی و اینترنت)
				۴. میزان آگاهی از چگونگی تفسیر پیام‌های رسانه‌ای واین موضوع که رسانه‌ها اطلاعات را به صورت انتخابی ارائه می‌کنند (به عنوان مثال: زبان ضمنی و مستتر رسانه به جای زبان صریح، ساختار متن، مقاله، فیلم و ویدئو)
				۵. اطلاع وآگاهی از نحوه عمل وچگونگی توزیع رسانه‌ها (به عنوان مثال: رسانه‌ای کردن وفیلترکردن اخبار، آمیختگی بین سیاست‌و رسانه).
				۶. میزان دانش از چگونگی تنظیم محتوای رسانه متناسب با مخاطب (به عنوان مثال: انتخاب براساس امکانات مخاطب،شخصی سازی ازطریق کوکی‌ها، روزنامه‌ها، شبکه‌های تلویزیون، وبسایت‌ها).
				۷. میزان توانایی ارزیابی محتوای رسانه را با در نظرگرفتن معیارهای مختلف (به عنوان مثال: ارزیابی صحت اطلاعات، مقایسه اطلاعات، توجه به جنبه‌های زیبایی‌شناختی).
				۸ میزان آگاهی از تاثیرات رسانه (مانند: تاثیر بر رفتار خرید، اثرات نامطلوب مانند تنفر یا اعتیاد).
				۹. میزان آگاهی از رفتار رسانه‌ای خود (به عنوان مثال: حق چاپ، سرقت آثار، رفتاررسانه‌ای پرخطر).
				۱۰. میزان توانایی خلق محتوای رسانه‌ای (به عنوان مثال: نوشتن مقاله،خلق عکس ویا فیلم ویا راه‌اندازی وبلاگ).
				۱۱. میزان توانایی برقراری ارتباط و ارائه مطالب با استفاده از رسانه (به عنوان مثال: ساختاررسانه را به منظور ارائه تنظیم و متناسب سازم،از طریق یک مسیر مناسب مانند وبلاگ و یوتیوب رسانه را منتشر نمایم).
				۱۲. میزان مشارکت در بحث‌های عمومی از طریق رسانه (به عنوان مثال: استفاده از رسانه‌اجتماعی با رعایت تعهد،ارتباط با سازمان هااز طریق ایمیل، مشارکت از طریق رسانه‌های اجتماعی).

The Nexus of Intercultural Communicative Competence and Speaking Ability: A Critical Analysis

Abstract

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

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1. Introduction

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

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

2. Review of the Related Literature

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1. Is there any statistically significant relationship between ICC and the speaking ability of Iranian EFL learners?

2. How do Iranian EFL learners perceive the relationship between ICC and speaking ability and its impact on meeting their language learning needs and objectives?

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

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

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

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

Table 1.

Demographic Information

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

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

3.2. Instruments

Considering the instruments, the researchers used the following:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3.3. Procedure

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

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

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

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

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

1.   Do you have or have you ever had a pet?

2.   Are pets an essential part of your culture?

3.   What differences and similarities exist in how people treat their pets in English-speaking countries and your home country?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4. Results and Discussion

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

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

4.1. Quantitative Phase

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

Table 2.

Skewness and Kurtosis Indices of Normality

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

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

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

Table 3.

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

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

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

Table 4.

Descriptive Statistics and KR-21 Reliability for Oxford Placement Test

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

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

Table 5.

Reliability Statistics

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

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

Table 6.

Pearson Correlations for speaking tests

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

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

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

Table 7.

Pearson Correlation between Speaking and ICC

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

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

4.2. Qualitative Phase

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

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

and reliability of the qualitative analysis.

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

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

4.2.3. Interview Results

4.2.3.1. Understanding of Cultural Nuances

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

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

Or

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

Or

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

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

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

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

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

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

Or

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

Or

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

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

4.2.3.3. Practical Aspects of Integrating ICC into Language Learning

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

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

Or

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

Or

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

Or

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

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

4.2.3.4. Interdependence of Language and Culture

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

speaking ability.

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

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

4.2.3.5. Exposure to Diverse Cultures

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

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

Or

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

Or

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

Or

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

Or

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

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

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

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

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

Or

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

Or

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

4.2.3.7. Encouragement for Language Learner's Learning Opportunities

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

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

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

Or

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

4.2.3.8. ICC and Speaking Ability

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

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

Or

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

5. Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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