



Cultivating Intercultural Communicative Competence Through Interculturally Laden Tasks: An Iranian Experience

Seyyede Zahra Esmaeeli¹, Davud Kuhi^{2*}, and Sorayya Behroozizad³

¹PhD candidate in TEFL, English Department, Maragheh Branch, Islamic Azad University, Maragheh, Iran Email: szahraesmaeeli@gmail.com

²Corresponding author: Assistant Professor of TEFL, English Department, Maragheh Branch, Islamic Azad University, Maragheh, Iran, ORCID: 0000-0002-1465-908X
Email: Davudkuhi@yahoo.com

³Assistant Professor of TEFL, English Department, Maragheh Branch, Islamic Azad University, Maragheh, Iran
Email: Sorayyabehroozi@yahoo.com

Abstract

Adopting a qualitative design, the current study explored the usefulness of interculturally-laden tasks and intercultural training in improving the Iranian English learners' intercultural competency in Anzali, Guilan province, Iran. To this objective, a group of 25 intermediate levels whose ages ranged from 21 to 30 participated in the study. The participants were required, initially, to complete seven intercultural tasks to assess their current level of intercultural competence. Then, they attended in eighteen sessions of intercultural training using *Mirror and Window*: an intercultural textbook and then completed the same seven intercultural tasks one again at the end of the course. Anchored in Byram's (1997) ICC theory, five components of the learners' ICC enhancement, namely *Savoir Comprendre*, *Savoir Etre*, *Savoir S'engager*, *Savoirs*, and *Savoir Apprendre / Faire* were investigated throughout an intercultural training course. Two major sources of data were intercultural tasks, which were written by the participants per week as part of their assignments, focused-group interviews and self-report evaluation survey conducted at the end of the course to elicit the views they harbor toward the course. Drawing on the qualitative content analysis, findings indicated that interculturally-laden tasks could help the participants enhance their intercultural competence. Meanwhile, the analysis of the focused-group interviews and self-report evaluation survey revealed that learners evaluated most aspects of the tasks and textbook positively. Finally, the implications of the current study and suggestions for further research were discussed.

Keywords: intercultural communicative competence, intercultural training, interculturally-laden tasks, Iranian EFL learners

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Introduction

In recent years, globalization has accelerated as a consequence of a variety of reasons including business, education, technology, and tourism. Due to this globalization, international interactions have intensified; this has necessitated the development of intercultural interaction, specifically cross-cultural communication (Sevimel-Sahin, 2020). Globalization has significantly changed the objectives of second and foreign language instruction. Numerous researchers have argued that the communicative competence is insufficient to prepare learners of the 21st century with significant global competencies and skills. ESL / EFL learners are expected to acquire and cultivate critical thinking, multicultural skills and intercultural awareness. As a result, the notion of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) has been developed in order to fulfill the global demands of L2 learners in the twenty-first century (Canagarajah, 2016; Kramersch, 2013; Lazar, 2007; Sharifian, 2014). ICC is commonly perceived to have four main dimensions: attitudes, knowledge, skills, and awareness, which may assist learners in meeting cultural challenges (Tran & Duong, 2015). These elements “bring them out of the feelings of frustration in communication across a number of cultural differences” (Alptekin, 2002, p. 63). The Modern Language Association (MLA), the Common European Framework of Reference, and the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages highlight the importance of cross-cultural concepts in English language teaching in various EFL contexts (Ducate & Steckenbiller, 2017; Rezaei & Naghibian, 2018).

Researchers have proposed different ways to apply ICC in foreign language classrooms. Some focalized the role of media like the Internet, films, TV series, blog (Park & Finch, 2016; Gholami Pasand et al., 2021), literary works (Rezaei & Naghibian, 2018), and study-abroad programs (Mu et al., 2022) for fostering ICC. Compared to other instructional method, ICC training with interculturality pedagogical tasks has not gained considerable attention in practice, and only a small number of research studies have explored the utilization of ICC tasks in EFL classroom practice (Ghasemi Meghani et al., 2020; Young & Sachdev, 2011).

Based on Hismanoglu (2011), ICC tasks in EFL contexts involve behavioral and speech patterns like adequate verbal themes, culture shock, prejudice and stereotyping, non-verbal interaction, beginning and ending a conversation, gendered identities, intercultural relationships, and personal space. In a similar vein, Moloney and Harbon (2010) assert that intercultural classroom practice comprises “asking students to think and act appropriately within a growing knowledge of the culture within language” (p. 281). This method entails instructional planning that allows for place and time for exploration, evaluation, reflection, and cross-cultural engagement. The rationale of this teaching focus is that it contributes to an understanding of how the target language is utilized in real interaction affected by the socio-cultural settings and discussing the similarities and contrasts between learners’ native language and the target language. Nevertheless, numerous researchers have claimed that foreign language curricula in the EFL environment are primarily exam-focused (Tran & Duong, 2018). To put it another way, instructors focus exclusively on enhancing learners’ linguistic competence rather than preparing them with the

intercultural competence (ICC) required for operating effectively and properly in multicultural communities. Instructors' workload, paucity of sensitivity and appropriate experience, inadequate facilities and infrastructures, and time constraints are primary reasons why intercultural concepts are overlooked in English classrooms (Tran & Duong, 2018). Accordingly, many students are incapable of dealing with the cross-cultural hazards posed by inappropriate discussion topics, variations in verbal and non-verbal communication, or overwhelmingly negative stereotyping in their classrooms (Hismanoglu, 2011). In other words, these students may learn about cross-cultural challenges and culture shock through actual traumatic events.

At this juncture, considering intercultural learning and teaching in the Iranian environment, it is reasonable to claim that there are certain unavoidable demands in the EFL syllabus, which entail a transition from a linguistic to an intercultural approach and standpoint. It is essential for Iranian learners to become intercultural speakers who can successfully and appropriately deal with cultural and linguistic complexities in international scenes and also in multicultural and Iran's multi-ethnic society.

A myriad of earlier researches have been conducted to scrutinize intercultural training in spite of the fact that certain efforts have been made to specifically improve the ICC of EFL learners (Esmaeili et al., 2022; Ghasemi Mighani et al., 2020; Mekheimer & Amin, 2019). In this regard, the aim of the current research was to investigate the feasibility of enhancing Iranian learners' ICC through interculturality-laden tasks. Moreover, the study aimed at scrutinizing Byram's ICC theory to examine the applicability of this model.

Accordingly, the study addressed the following research questions (RQ):

RQ1: To what extent does intercultural training through interculturality-laden tasks develop EFL learners' intercultural competence?

RQ2: What are the Iranian EFL learners' perceptions of using interculturality-laden tasks (advantages and disadvantages) in developing ICC?

Literature Review

Intercultural Communicative Competence

In the light of numerous remarkable endeavors that scrutinize the notion of ICC from a variety of angles (Earley & Ang, 2003; Houghton, 2014; Neuliep, 2003; Sakuragi, 2008), the proposition that examines ICC from the perspective of English language instruction is now broadly acknowledged (Canagarajeh, 2016; Dearsdorff, 2009; Kramsch, 2013; Lazar, 2007; Sharifian, 2013). Intercultural competence is an enlargement of the term communicative competency (CC), which Hymes (1972) established as a criticism and response to Chomskyan linguistic competency (LC) (Chomsky, 1965). ICC is basically defined as the capacity to communicate and interact successfully and respectfully as well as to act flexibly in intercultural interactions in order to retain a common understanding and ground (Byram, 2000; Chen & Die, 2014; Chen & Starosta, 1996; Collier, 1989; Dearsdorff, 2006; Meyer, 1991). From a foreign language education viewpoint, ICC refers to "activities

related to behavior and speech patterns such as appropriate choices for conversation topics... and non-verbal communication” (Hismanoglu, 2011, p. 805). Therefore, intercultural competence needs possess particular traits and characteristics to deal with intercultural experience and encounter. Sercu (2006) identified the following characteristics that contributed to the development of the ICC:

The willingness to engage with the foreign culture, self-awareness and the ability to look upon oneself from the outside, the ability to see the world through the others’ eyes, the ability to cope with uncertainty, the ability to act as a cultural mediator, the ability to evaluate others’ points of view, the ability to consciously use culture learning skills and to read the cultural context, and the understanding that individuals cannot be reduced to their collective identities. (p. 2)

Regarding these features, numerous scholars have explored the ICC contents in the literature (Baker, 2012; Fantini, 2009; Hismanoglu, 2011; Huang, 2014). Byram (2000) has been recognized as the main figure among these researchers, since the others have endorsed her concept of ICC. From Byram’s (1997) point of view, intercultural competence consists of the following elements:

1. Intercultural attitudes (or *savoir etre*): It denotes a propensity to postpone cultural judgments, to be curious and open-minded, and to have beliefs in learners’ home culture.
2. Knowledge (or *savoirs*): of social communities and their cultural artifacts and beliefs, in both the learners' native nation and the countries of their interlocutors.
3. Skills of interpreting and relating (or *savoir comprendre*): This relates to the ability to recognize, describe, and associate an event or document from other cultures to those from the learner's home culture and value.
4. Skills of discovery and interaction (or *savoir apprendre / faire*): This entails the capacity to develop a deeper awareness of different cultures and their practices and artifacts, as well as the application of the acquired information, abilities and intercultural attitude in real-world interactions.
5. Critical cultural awareness (or *savoir s'engager*): This dimension includes the capacity to critically appraise and analyze diverse cultures.

In terms of the model and its components, it is considered that ICC has a dynamic nature; that is to say, it is not constant, but rather “a lifelong learning” (Zheng, 2014, p. 76). Thus, intercultural competence could be enhanced by increasing the intercultural awareness, language-related perspectives and behaviors, and all of which are necessary for effective cross-cultural encounters (Ozuorcun, 2014).

As for the data-driven research in enhancing ICC, a large number of studies have been carried out. For instance, Kusumaningputri and Widodo (2018) examined the use of digital photograph intercultural activities and tasks in Indonesian context and discovered the use of intercultural tasks and photographs might boost students' ICC. Chen and Zheng (2019) propose the usage of transformative culture-learning journals to promote the intercultural development of EFL learners. Zhang (2020)

carried out a cross-cultural study to examine the affordances of a contemporary Chinese TV drama in building Chinese EFL learners' ICC. She concludes that the utilization of TV drama would enhance Chinese learners' cross-cultural competence by broadening their knowledge of Chinese norm and culture, promoting attitudes of tolerance and empathy towards diverse cultures, and identifying cultural knowledge, values and beliefs, as it manifests in behavior.

As to shed light onto how to increase intercultural competence in Iran where English language is taught and spoken mainly as a foreign language, several researches have been undertaken. In a study, Ghasemi Mighani et al. (2020) designed and implemented an intercultural course and pedagogical tasks to enhance students' intercultural awareness in the EFL classroom (n = 33 students aged 21-23). The results of their study indicated that the overall ICC level of the learners increased significantly through the intervention of the intercultural course with the most significant rise in behavioral, cognitive, and affective dimensions of the construct, respectively.

Another study by Karimi et al. (2019) investigated how photovoice could promote intercultural sensitivity and reflective thinking of 48 intermediate L2 learners. An Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS) was administered as both pretest and posttest to assess their ICC growth. Their community-based participatory action research reveals that the photovoice group (PG) improved significantly and outperform their counterparts in the control group on all five intercultural questionnaire categories. In addition, the results imply that photovoice method has the ability and potential to foster intercultural awareness by presenting effective insights into the target cultures. Moreover, the research aimed to evaluate the effect of gender on ICC. In order to accomplish this, an equal number of participants were allocated to both the photovoice and control groups. The findings demonstrated that the female participants in the photovoice group did much better than their male counterparts on all three dimensions of the questionnaire: intercultural engagement, interaction enjoyment, and intercultural attention. Gholami Pasand et al. (2021) examined how online interaction among participants of diverse cultural backgrounds promotes Iranian EFL learners ICC development. To do so, cultural subjects were chosen and addressed using an intercultural textbook, *Mirror and Window* (2003). The findings confirmed that learners' engagement in ICC training and online exchange may afford them a chance to increase their intercultural sensitivity. Notwithstanding the research on incorporated ICC in English language classroom settings (Karimi et al., 2019; Zhang, 2020), scholars often struggle to bridge the gap between theory and practice and integrate ICC in actual language classes. Moreover, a considerable plethora of studies concentrating on intercultural development (Ghasemi Mighani et al., 2020; Kusumaningputri & Widodo, 2018) have produced inconsistent and inconclusive findings, suggesting that further research is required in this area. Finally, this research used Byram's (1997) ICC theory as the theoretical foundation since few studies have utilized the said model to promote ICC among Iranian EFL students. The present research was motivated by these significant considerations.

Interculturally-Laden Tasks

While many researchers believe that people can increase the above-mentioned ICC dimensions and intercultural awareness in real intercultural contexts, a large number of scholars have more seriously argued that classrooms have a great potential to foster such competencies. They highlight the role of pedagogical materials, tasks, and training in cultivating ICC in EFL classrooms (Byram, 2008; Nault, 2006). The major objective of interculturally-oriented tasks is to motivate ELT learners to employ some critical thinking, reflection, discovery, and analysis strategies. These strategies help learners boost their intercultural awareness (Byram, 2008; Deardorff, 2009).

Relevant to classroom practices, Lazar (2007) suggested that interculturally-laden tasks including ethnographic tasks and projects, cartons, role-play, and association games can help instructors to increase learners' ICC and openness towards other cultures. Other researchers proposed culture assimilators, comparison methods, cultural capsules, and cultural problem-solving tasks (Garcia & Biscu, 2006; Singhal, 1998) as good classroom practices and activities to provide learners with intercultural knowledge. To put it succinctly, this type of classroom activity assists learners in the acquisition of knowledge of different cultural norms and attitude transformation as well. Moeller and Nugent (2014) proposed what they termed "best practice learning tasks" in the language classroom for French, Spanish, and German students. Additionally, they stress the teachers' role as a facilitator who helps the student gain intercultural ability whilst utilizing the target language. For the purpose of this study, intercultural tasks are geared to foster the enhancement of ICC.

Method

Design and Participants

The study featured a qualitative approach consisting of focus-group interviews and intercultural tasks. Twenty-five Iranian EFL learners (10 male and 15 female learners) with different ethnic backgrounds (e.g., Gilak, Fars, Turk, and Kurd) participated in a nine-week intercultural training course at Tarlak language institution in Anzali, Guilan province, Iran. The participants were selected non-randomly. To be more exact, they were chosen based on what Best and Kahn (2006) labeled convenience sampling (intact class). The Oxford Quick Placement Test was conducted to determine the homogeneity of the learners. All of the participants were at the intermediate level, with scores ranging from 30 to 47 out of 60. The learners whose scores were not in the mentioned range were excluded from the participants. According to the demographic data and information, none had ever attended in an ICC training program and only four of them had traveled abroad. Some 70.6% were university students, studying in various fields such as psychology, civil engineering, law, and business administration. They were young adults, between 21-30 years of age and they had studied general English for more than four years. The participants were studying the Touchstone series, Level 4 (McCarthy et al., 2014) throughout the project at Tarlak language institution in Anzali, Guilan province.

Materials and Instruments

Data were gathered using the followings instruments:

The Demographic Information Form

The demographic form was employed to collect the students' background information, including age, gender, ethnicity, place of birth, any traveling abroad experience (especially the English-speaking countries), or taking part in any intercultural training course.

Intercultural Communication Textbook

An intercultural textbook called *Mirrors and Windows* developed by Huber-Krieger et al. (2003) was used throughout the eighteen sessions of intercultural instruction. The book consists of seven units, all of which were covered in the class. Each unit is divided into four main sections: introduction, reflecting on your own culture section, discovering other cultures, and finally language work. The first section (Introduction) provides an overview of the unit. In the part entitled "Reflecting on Your Own Culture", learners should ponder on their own culture, value and custom which is the starting point for learning about other cultures by different passages, ethnographic activities and project works. The language work section includes tasks centered on expressions and proverbs that promote the learners' linguistic competency for exploring intercultural issues. Teachers' notes section at the end of the textbook contains further information for instructor and also offer some suggestions for arranging awareness-raising discussion, tasks, critical incidents and role-playing (Huber-Krieger et al., 2003; Piasecka, 2011).

The topics included in this book were the significance of time, silence and conversation, drinking and eating in different cultures, verbal and non-verbal communication, gendered identities (men and women), dislocated polygamy, personal space, culture shock, complaining, and criticizing in various cultures. The major reason for selection of the textbook was its diverse intercultural tasks and activities that encourage learners to think about cultural differences in preparation for intercultural encounters. It also assists to reflect and ponder on learners' own culture and then different cultures and relationship between them. On the other hand, it recommended by many scholars (e.g., Hoominian et al., 2021; Piasecka, 2011; Rahimi & Soltani, 2011).

Intercultural Tasks (ICC Tasks)

In order to elicit more specific information regarding the development of learners' affective, cognitive, and behavioral orientations for intercultural communicative competence, seven intercultural production tasks (i.e., What does "tomorrow" mean to you, Organically grown food and different diets, Directness, Gender Discrimination, Dislocated polygamy, Physical punishment, and Teacher) were selected from *Mirrors and Windows* textbook. It is worth mention that before embarking on the real procedure of the study, the tasks were piloted with seven learners to check their effectiveness in creating intercultural judgments and reflections. According to the pilot stage, some tasks were modified to meet the needs

of the current study. These ICC tasks commenced with a reading passage, followed by a series of questions to motivate learners to reflect on their home and target cultures. The learners were required to address the questions in their entry with the average length of 200 words. The tasks were given to the participants both at the outset and at the end of the study. To gather accurate data, those writings which did not meet the expectations of the study were immediately returned to the participants for further revisions.

Afterwards, the researchers tracked the students' likely developments as a consequence of ICC instruction through qualitative content analysis. It is worth noting that the selection process and criteria of the intercultural tasks were their capacity to provide chances to investigate cultural differences and also their potential to provoke a multiplicity of judgments and perspectives. On the other hand, the tasks motivated the learners to employ different strategies like critical thinking and reflection to develop intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitude. According to Lazar (2003), skills and abilities, knowledge, and attitudes for successful intercultural interactions must be observed, addressed, and exercised. The intercultural tasks created these chances for the students and increased their participation in class discussions and intercultural practice.

Focused-Group Interview

Apart from the production tasks, to have an in-depth description of the Iranian EFL learners' experience of intercultural training, their perception and criticism of the course and also to confirm the usefulness of interculturally-laden tasks, semi-structured open-ended focus-group interviews were conducted with 10 participants divided into two groups of five a week after intercultural training. Strong motivation, willingness and readiness were main criteria for choosing the participants to come up with more reliable and comprehensive data.

The interviews with each group lasted for about two hours. The interview sessions were conducted both in English and Persian and under the same conditions and duration.

Procedure

The study was initiated with the administration of the background questionnaire and the placement test. Then, the seven intercultural tasks were administered to realize the learners' current understanding of intercultural issues and their own culture as well.

The participants were asked to attend 18 sessions over nine weeks, with each session lasting for 90 minutes. The main objective was to increase learners' ICC. One of the researchers, who met the class twice each week, instructed the intercultural concepts. The researchers used *Mirrors and Windows* course book and all the twelve units of the book were taught.

The study consisted of educational and supplementary phases. At the beginning of the first phase, the researchers provided some thought-provoking warm-up queries regarding the topic of each unit, aiming to arouse the participants'

awareness of and interest in the topic. The participants read various short passages about other cultures and did ethnographic activities and tasks.

Then, the learners were asked to make a contrast and comparison between their home culture and that of English-speaking countries. Next, the participants were divided into small groups of four, with mixed gender, character, and desire. Each group investigated one of the intercultural themes. For instance, group A probed "the concept of time and delay" in different cultures and its relationship with power and authority. Group B explored "Gendered identities in other cultures". Group C discussed "Bringing up baby", and Group D had a conversation on "eating habits" and "the concept of romantic love" and etc. Each participant in the group undertook a specific task different from other members. For example, one of them investigated dislocated polygamy in different cultures, while another one looked for idioms or sayings, famous couples or love story in dissimilar cultures. Lastly, other participants gathered the viewpoints of "love at first sight" in different cultures.

Through the participatory phase, the participants thought actively, and the collected findings were discussed, compared, and contrasted in a small group. Naturally, such interactions with peers in the group help learners expand their construction of meaning and increase their knowledge, attitude, and skill (Liu & Zhang, 2014).

In the next step, each group was required to present their findings to other groups and finally in a larger learning community (i.e. whole class). During the discussions and debates, the learners employed different strategies such as comparison and contrast, discovery, reflection, noticing, analysis and critical thinking, querying their assumptions, and even suspending their preconceived judgment thinking for performing the tasks. All participants were actively involved in the process, and they were responsible for replying to questions and arguments.

Ultimately, the researchers highlighted the important knowledge areas and skills and specified the participants' production tasks for the week. The objective of the production tasks as a weekly assignment was to enable the participants to use what has been learnt and to track their progress during the program implementation. At the end of each chapter of the book and as a weekly task, the participants were supposed to interview individuals from different cultures and debate the ICC tasks assigned using social media (Facebook). The students were then expected to describe their results through in-class group. In addition, in the language section of the textbook, learners were demanded to focus on topic-related proverbs and idioms and explore the cultural differences between them.

The researchers organized the awareness-raising debates and discussions using pair and group work based on the recommendations in teachers' notes section of Mirror and Window textbook. In each session, the participants were required to role-play a conversation. As an example, a role-play entitled "intercultural encounters" was performed by students. The purpose was to enhance students' awareness of the importance of the differences in non-verbal communication. The role-plays could assist them experience culture shock for a few moments. By the end

of the course, the researchers administered the same production tasks once again to observe the learners' patterns of change.

The second phase of the research consisted of running focused-group interviews one week after the course ended. Throughout the interviews, the researchers as a moderator encouraged the participants to elaborate on certain points, pose questions, and express their viewpoints.

The first primary question inquired about what happened in the class and the learners' responses. Then, the second key question was raised, focusing on the most striking aspects of the interculturally-laden tasks and textbook. The third question addressed the students' reasons for their preferences and criticisms of the intercultural course and tasks. The next question was about participants' attitudes toward different dimensions of the course. Finally, after the interviews ended, the course evaluation survey was completed. A more detailed explanation will be presented in the finding section. Noteworthy to mention is that pretest data to understand learners' current ICC level were gathered through audio-recorded and then transcribed to see the gradual process of the participants' ICC level.

Data Analysis

The collected data from two different sources (i.e., intercultural production tasks and semi-structured focused-group interviews) were analyzed employing a qualitative content analysis technique. Hsieh and Shannon (2005) described qualitative content analysis as “a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (p. 1278). In the current study, the collected production tasks data went through mostly deductive and sometimes inductive, identifying the supplementary themes as they emerged from the data. Three major types of qualitative content analysis are directed, summative, and conversational. As Hsieh and Shannon (2005) argued directed content analysis is a deductive approach and draws on a prior and pre-existing theory, which is Byram's ICC theory in the present study. Hsieh and Shannon further highlight that it is a very practical and useful approach for supporting a theory in the literature. Furthermore, the themes were identified, labeled, and linked to the primary categories derived from the literature (Byram's five *savoirs*). More precisely, five pre-determined categories of themes were classified: Attitudes (*savoir etre*), Knowledge (*savoirs*), Skills (*savoir comprendre*), Skills (*savoir apprendre / faire*), and Critical Cultural Awareness. Then, the summative content analysis as a more quantitative approach was used to count the occurrence frequency of components of ICC in the production tasks. Finally, for the sake of more reliable data, two members of the researching team and one educational expert (Ph.D. holder) checked the participants' production tasks.

Additionally, to make sound decisions, the interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed to extract common patterns of responses and major themes which were then “quantitized” (Dornyei, 2007) and subjected to frequency analysis. To achieve credibility, member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was employed. Hence, the data transcriptions and interpretations were sent to the learners for a

review. The objective was checking the researchers' interpretation and understanding of the obtained data by giving an active role to the participants of the current study.

Findings and Discussion

Findings

Findings from Production Tasks

As discussed earlier, five themes were classified: Knowledge (savoirs), Skills (savoir apprendre), Skills (savoir comprendre), Attitudes (savoir etre), and Critical Cultural Awareness. Table 1 depicts the number and percentage of learners' ICC instances recognized from their production tasks.

Table 1

Themes from Intercultural Production Tasks

Intercultural themes	Number of instances	Percentage
Knowledge	40	14.38%
Attitudes	70	25.18%
Skills of discovery and interaction	68	24.47%
Skills of interpreting and relating	55	19.79%
Critical cultural awareness	45	16.18%

Among the ICC factors, intercultural attitude (savoir etre) had the largest number of instances with 70 occurrences (25.18%), while the modest one was the knowledge dimension with 40 instances (14.38%) recognized (See Table 1). According to Byram's (1997) illustration in ICC Model, the skills of interaction and discovery (savoir apprendre / faire) refer to the capacity to gain new knowledge and information about target cultures and the capacity to utilize this knowledge in real cross-cultural interactions. The reason for the high number of this dimension (68 instances) might be that the participants gain knowledge and information about different cultures through interviews with native interlocutors on social networking media (Facebook). The learners might have broadened their perspective toward other cultures through these interactions.

The instances above also indicate some progress in the participants' skills of interpreting and relating component (19.79%). They could have recognized ethnocentric perspectives in documents or events and compared them with their native culture. Since the learners did not experience direct interaction with foreigners, they realized various cultural perspectives through movies, the Internet, and books.

A large number of instances (16.18%) were related to critical cultural awareness. In this dimension, the learners formed a critical view of other cultures, and they evaluated logically different cultures despite the shortcomings existing in different cultures. Some of the participants reported significant changes in their

viewpoints regarding target cultures. To be more exact, they modified their predetermined stereotypes and biased views through reflection strategy and cultural comparative approach provided by the course. A more detailed description of the findings will be provided in the discussion.

In addition to the instance recognized as the participants' ICC development from the view point of Byram's (1997) *savoirs*, three major supplementary themes (See Table 2) emerged after the analysis of the participants' tasks.

Table 2

Supplementary Themes from Participants' Production

Themes	Number of instances	Percentage
Neutral self-cultural judgment and of the cultural others	5	33%
Negative judgment of self-culture and of the cultural others	6	40%
Positive judgment of L2 cultures	4	26%

As shown in Table 2, three additional themes emerged. Instances related to the negative judgment of self and other cultures contained the largest proportion (6 instances). Neutral self-cultural judgment and judgment of the other cultures, as well as positive judgment of L2 cultures, had almost the same instances, 5 and 4 instances, respectively. Below are extracts indicating the presence of ICC components in the participants' production tasks.

Attitudes (*savoir etre*) and Knowledge (*Saviors*).

Excerpt 1: What does "tomorrow" mean to you? One shared:

The meanings of words are different in various cultures. In Jordan, "Tomorrow" conveys its direct meaning. It is connected with time. In other Arabic-speaking countries, it is a polite response to saying "I don't know" or "never". To eliminate this misunderstanding, people should know more about cultural differences. They should look at things differently and consider different perspectives and values. In fact, I did not know much about cultural differences before. Now I realize it is very important in international communication.

Skills of Discovery and Interaction (*savoir apprendre / fair*).

Excerpt 2: "Organically grown food and different diets"

Different countries have their own eating habits. For instance, people in a country love something, but in another country all hate it. I respect people to have different diets and preferences. I am interested in knowing about different diets and trying new foods. It is as fascinating as communicating with foreigners and getting to know their lifestyle.

Attitudes (savoir etre).

Excerpt 3: "Directness"

Iranians tend to be indirect. I used to be like that. Now, I want to know more effective ways to criticize and I am interested in knowing how different cultures behave in this regard.

Savoir Comprendre, Critical Cultural Awareness, Knowledge and Attitude.

Excerpt 4: "Gender Discrimination"

Nowadays, women are more conscious of their responsibilities than they were in the past; thus, they do not tolerate disparities in their lives. Gender discrimination still exists in Iran and in other countries of the world. This problem goes back to the past, and it takes a long time to be removed. Women are discriminated against in various domains like in society, the workplace, and family. However, women can be as effective in society as men. Some people do not believe in women's abilities. In Iranian society like in other societies, gender discrimination occurs and sometimes women are ignorant. For instance, we see that more job opportunities are given to men, and women are paid less than men, although this problem is felt all over the world and is not limited to our society.

Critical Cultural Awareness and Skills of Discovery and Interpretation and Relating.

Excerpt 5: "Dislocated polygamy"

In some cultures, polygamy is legal. Others do not accept this concept, and it would be regarded as fornication. Many people take a hard line on this issue. I understand that people have diverse cultural norms. There is a lot of variety in the world. We need to be more tolerant of and to respect cultural diversity. We can see the world from multiple perspectives.

Excerpt 6: "Teacher" Negative judgment of self-culture and positive judgment of L2 cultures

In our country, teachers are poor and are not well-paid. In western cultures, teachers are really patient when parents complain about their teaching methods, and they are very eager to answer students' questions again and again. We do not see such patience in our teachers.

Excerpt 7: "Directness" Neutral self-cultural judgment and of the cultural others

People from other cultures tend to be direct. They express explicitly their thought in conversation, while Iranian people like to be more indirect when giving their views.

Pre-Diagnosis of the Participants' ICC Level

Some excerpts of pre-diagnosis data are given below:

In Iran, women care for children, which is a wonderful thing since it promotes peacefulness for children; other cultures should follow our own ways (Student 7).

Sometimes, it is challenging to get used and adapt to different cultural customs and I prefer my own culture (Student 15).

Gender discrimination is a great problem in Iran. I do not think other countries suffer from this problem (Student 2).

Interview Findings

To accomplish the purposes of the second research question, the researchers conducted focus-group interviews. The stated advantages are shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Participants' Reasons for Preferring Intercultural Tasks

Reasons (Positive Trends)	Response Count	Response Percent
Encourage us to search more about different cultures	20	20.83%
Challenge their biases and stereotypes	9	09.37%
More tolerant toward multiple perspectives and withholding judgment	15	15.62%
Promote the sense of sympathy and understanding towards diverse cultures	9	09.37%
Help to deal with future cultural conflict logically	10	10.41%
The presence of controversial issues	12	12.09%
Help to pay more attention to cultural content while studying English	5	05.25%
Broaden their perspective toward other cultures	16	16.68%

As is evident from Table 3, nearly 21% of the participants interviewed agreed that the course encouraged them to know more about different cultures. Nearly 10% of them believed the course motivated them to handle their hidden bias and made them more conscious of their values system. Nearly 16% stated that their tolerance toward other cultures and withholding judgment increased.

The presence of controversial issues was another reason for the participants' preference for the course (12.09%). Such issues as gendered identities, girls and boys, personal space, complaining and criticizing, dislocated polygamy, and mixed marriages are the controversial issues. Some of them (5.25%) also expressed that they would pay more attention to cultural content while studying general English. Meanwhile, others (9.37%) acknowledged that the ICC training course could assist them to cultivate their sense of sympathy and understanding towards diverse cultures. Some participants (nearly 11%) reported the course helped them in dealing with future cultural conflicts logically. About 17% expressed the course broadened their perspective on different cultures. It should be noted that some students provided more than one reason.

Further, throughout the interview, the participants also expounded upon the disadvantages of interculturalladen tasks. Their typical remarks are shown in Table 4:

Table 4

Participants' Reasons for Criticizing Intercultural Tasks

Reasons (Negative Trends)	Response Count
lead us toward preferring the value of other cultures	2
We should spread our local culture in the world	1

As shown in Table 4, the participants expressed two main criticisms of the course. The first one was supported by two instances. i.e., "The course leads us toward preferring the value of other cultures, while the second criticism was "We should spread Iranian culture in the world".

Table 5

Descriptive Results of the Evaluation Survey

The extent to which the following tasks are useful	Not at all	Not really	Mostly	Absolutely	I do not remember the item
1. Activities, tasks, interview and class discussions	0	%3	32%	65%	0
2. Rock around the clock: Reading passages – class discussion	0	3%	65%	32%	2%
3.You are what you eat: Role play: intercultural encounters / follow-up questions / critical incidents	0	0	28%	68%	4%
4. Conversation and ... silence:	8%	6%	55%	%21	10%
5. Men and women, girls and boys – Gendered identities: Pair work / presentation / Questionnaire for a survey	0	12%	50%	38%	0
6. All you need is love: Watching the video and class discussion / Interview	0	16%	40%	44%	0
7. Bringing up baby: Cultural comparison and discussion	2%	0	20%	78%	0
8. Up in the morning and off to school: Role-play: cheating- schooling age- plenary discussion	0	4%	28%	56%	12%
9. Reflecting on your own culture	0	3%	43%	52%	2%
10. Discovering other cultures	0	3%	43%	52%	2%
11. Language work (phrases, expressions, metaphors, proverbs and saying)	26%	40%	20%	14%	0
12. Teaching methodology	0	4%	20%	76%	0
13. Production Tasks	0	12%	20%	68%	0

The researchers also scrutinized the participants' attitudes towards different parts of the course through an opinion survey (See Table 5). As the descriptive results demonstrate, almost a vast majority of the participants found various facets of the training course useful and effective. Nearly 65% of the participants described the tasks, interview, and in-class discussions "absolutely useful", followed by (32%) "Mostly useful". Regarding different topics in the *Mirrors and Windows* textbook, a large number of the learners asserted the topics were interesting and practical. However, they stated that some tasks and topics were really challenging and required deep learning and needed more time. Examples are "Gendered identities", "Gender Discrimination", and "Conversation and silence", to name but a few.

A high percentage of the participants (76%) found teaching methodology "Absolutely Useful", and (20%) "Mostly useful." With respect to intercultural production tasks as the main instrument for data gathering, 68% of the learners considered it "Absolutely Useful", and (20%) "Mostly Useful". However, around 12% of them believed that intercultural production tasks were not really useful.

Discussion

Regarding RQ1, the results from the participants' intercultural tasks and findings from the focused-group interviews indicated significant progress in Iranian ICC level after eighteen sessions ICC training. Several factors may be related to the efficiency of intercultural tasks and ICC training. First, in the current study, the training materials asked the students to compare, contrast, reflect, and evaluate the similarities and differences across cultures in terms of values, customs, convention, and attitudes. It has been recommended by various scholars, including Pulverness (1995) that the presentation of intercultural content in foreign language resources should include elements such as evaluation, noticing, comparison, and contrast, which is based on the comparative approach proposed by various scholars.

Second, the participants were asked to conduct interviews with individuals of various cultures and discuss and compare the seven ICC activities on social networking sites (Facebook). In this regard, some researchers claim that the students can get a greater appreciation and respect towards different cultures through interviews and research more about people from various cultures (Su, 2011). In a similar vein, other scholars (e.g., Furstenberg, 2010; Kearney, 2010) believe that EFL / ESL learner, in an intercultural viewpoint, is considered as scholars who investigates and analyzes themes and topics in and out of the classroom. Hence, the students discussed the seven tasks in class and then questioned about them with the assistance of individuals from other cultures outside the classroom. In the current study, initial learners' understanding of intercultural concerns revealed little awareness of cultural differences and similarities. For instance, in chapter one "Rock around the clock", they compared the value of time across many cultures. During the ICC training, all of the participants realized that it is acceptable in some cultures to maintain appointments to the hour or even the day and there is really no shame in being late by a couple of hours. Therefore, the majority of them modified their opinions and understood that Iranians are not the only ones who are late.

Third, increasing intercultural competence requires the employ of proper pedagogical resources and materials that encourage interaction, reflection, evaluation, and critical thinking on the part of learners (e.g., Liddicoat & Crozet, 2001; Nault, 2006). The themes of intercultural tasks and the textbook motivated the participants to perfume such qualities. They assisted them to handle their hidden biases, question their stereotypes, and to discourage judgmental thinking.

Regarding ICC components, the findings indicated that the instances related to skills and attitude components were more than the other dimensions. However, the participants' instances which were akin to the knowledge component were the less frequently addressed dimension. The moderate instances of knowledge component may be linked to the participants' lack of openness towards different cultures and lack of interaction with diverse cultures as a result of political and cultural constraints of the country. Furthermore, lack of ambiguity tolerance might be regarded as another major reason for such outcomes. As revealed in demographic information forms, only a very small number of the learners had ever travelled to English-speaking countries. Although in ICC training class students had limited connection with foreigners through Facebook group, understanding cultural conceptions needs a lot of time and effort. With respect to the dimensions of ICC, this finding was similar to what Zhou and Griffiths (2011) found. In her study, she found that the participants indicated the highest level of satisfaction for attitudes and the modest level for knowledge component. Additionally, Similar to the findings of the present study, Hoominian Sharif bad (2020) conducted a longitudinal study to examine male and female ICC level in Iranian context. The results of the current study align with those of Saricoban and Oz (2014), which reported that their students gained more scores in knowledge aspect than in the skill and attitude dimensions.

This study also found that some participants had sometimes neutral, mostly positive, and rarely negative judgments towards the self and L2 cultures. Some participants judged their home culture mostly negatively and other cultures mostly positively. The highest negative instances towards the self-culture and appreciate other cultural values and customs were present in tasks "Gender roles in different cultures" and "Gender Discrimination" and "Teacher". This finding was different from what Snow (2015) found previously, concluding that English-speaking students often considered themselves as positive and other people as negative. However, the ICC enhancement also brought about some problems that impeded further ICC growth. One example is the problem of total attachment to other cultures and alienation from their native culture, i.e., valuing other cultures and criticizing one's own culture. This stage is, based on Development Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), called "Defence stage" (Hammer et al., 2003). As Chen and Zheng (2019) have put it, in this stage, "the learner became aware of cultural differences but established a dichotomy between themselves and cultural others, where either their own culture or the other's culture was reckoned as the superior one" (p. 72). In a similar vein, Gyogi (2016) stated that the classification of "self and "other" cultures may result in developing cultural biases and stereotypes rather than viewing culture objectively. In this regard, Karabinar and Guler (2013) underlined

the significance of culture in EFL classrooms. They bemoaned that, despite the significance of incorporating cultural notions into foreign language instruction, their role and place in EFL teaching is unclear. Thus, students may be able to develop a deeper awareness of their own culture and then other cultures if they receive the appropriate intercultural instruction in the classroom.

In this study, students were more interested to talk about the differences and negative dimensions of home culture. The participants hardly touched on the similarities and universal concepts that exist in different cultures. These findings match those of previous studies (e.g., Ghasemi Mighani et al., 2020; Rezaei & Naghibian, 2018).

Furthermore, there were also some neutral judgments about home and other cultures. They did not take sides with any cultures, which indicated a less judgmental thinking and a more objective stance. However, it sometimes shifted from a neutral perspective to cultural differences, particularly in the tasks “Directness” and “Dislocated polygamy. Although, it is always difficult to evaluate the progress following activities due to the fact that the concept in question is very complex and multifaceted, the timeframe for its enhancement was restricted to eighteen sessions, thus drawing definitive conclusions about the extent to which the ICC course could achieve its objectives is not possible based on these comments alone. As Zheng (2014) stated, learning ICC is a lifelong endeavor. When individuals of diverse cultural and linguistic affiliations communicate, initially they rely on their own cultural knowledge and information, but then resort to that of the other interlocutors (Byram, 1997; Kramsch 2013; Saricoban & Oz, 2014). However, the success of such interaction relies heavily on maintaining human relationships and expressing nice attitudes toward other cultures. Moreover, openness to cultural differences, self-cultural awareness, sociolinguistic and sociocultural awareness, and tolerance of ambiguities also play key roles in successful intercultural encounters (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006).

Regarding RQ2, the findings of focus-grouped interviews demonstrated two trends (positive and negative) towards the usefulness of intercultural-laden tasks. The majority of the interviewees acknowledged that the ICC training course led them toward tolerance of multiple perspectives and withholding judgment about otherness. Most of them stated that the course encouraged them to search more about different cultures and find similarities and differences. The participants expressed that the course could assist them to promote a sense of sympathy and understanding and remove their hidden biases about others. The findings also echoed those of Corbett (2012), who maintained intercultural training should meet the differences in attitude and behavior of interlocutors and motivate openness, respect, and sympathetic curiosity.

As indicated by course evaluation results, intercultural tasks might improve ICC aspects and features in Iranian EFL learners. The learners were challenged to discuss, compare, and contrast various cultural themes and concepts with their home culture. A large number of the participants argued that the intercultural-laden tasks, interviews, and group making in-class discussions could assist them to behave

aply in intercultural settings. This finding also concurs with those of Ghasemi Mighani et al. (2020) and Pruegger and Rogers (1994). They indicated that the students thought the ICC experience to be novel and supportive in helping them extend their ICC horizons.

Conclusion and Implications

The study investigated the potential of increasing Iranian learners' ICC through intercultural tasks in classroom environments. It has also probed into learners' perceptions of using interculturality-laden tasks. The findings indicate that the participants' intercultural understanding underwent significant changes. Moreover, ICC training could facilitate learners' ICC development by using appropriate and relevant intercultural and pedagogical resources as well as an effective teaching method. As Byram (1997) states, ICC may be acquired through different types of education and fieldwork or classroom-based experiences. Reading the production tasks and the participants' in-class discussions paved the way for promotion of Attitudes, *Savoir Etre*, *Savoir Comprendre*, *Savoir Apprendre / Faire*, and *Savoir S'engager*. Based on the interview results, learners expressed the advantages and disadvantages of the intercultural course. The majority of them believed the course could broaden their perspective on other cultures and led them to more tolerance of multiple perspectives. Admittedly, there were some negative judgments on their home and target cultures.

The results of this study may have numerous pedagogical implications for ELT material providers and language instructors. The research indicated that ICC textbooks and activities are valuable tools for fostering intercultural awareness. Hence, more emphasis should be placed on multicultural and intercultural components when developing instructional materials in order to promote learners' intercultural sensitivity, tolerance, and a critical examination of learners' own and different cultures. Thus, more emphasis should be placed on multicultural aspects when constructing instructional and pedagogical materials in order to promote learners' intercultural awareness, tolerance, and a critical examination of one's own and other cultures. The instructors should have a vigorous role in their classes, increase their theoretical and practical knowledge of intercultural sensitivity, and engage their students in the tasks that contrast L1 sociocultural practices with those of L2. If so, the instructors may hope to change learners' sensitivity toward differences and similarities between various cultures (Piasecka, 2011). The inclusion of intercultural aspects into teacher training programs to increase instructors' ICC awareness seems to be a priority. To support this claim, Lazar (2003) claimed that "making intercultural communication training an integral part of teacher education would have a beneficial multiplier effect in the field of education and beyond" (p. 70). Instructors require cross-cultural knowledge, abilities, and attitudes in order to encourage L2 students in acquiring intercultural competency (Byram, 2008; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013).

The results of the current study call for conducting further research to scrutinize the generalizability of the effectiveness of interculturality-oriented tasks in facilitating intercultural communication in other similar educational contexts. In

addition, while it was beyond the scope of this study to investigate how the participants applied their new intercultural awareness in the context of the target culture, this extension could be examined in future projects with the same students. Going beyond the focus on Byram's (1997) ICC model, further studies utilizing Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (1993) as well as Deardorff's (2006) pyramid model of IC are also needed. Furthermore, more longitudinal studies with a larger sample size could yield a richer data set that could be more diverse and broader in scope. Finally, further analysis of the production tasks is needed to judge which of those tasks might work best for the development of ICC. It should be noted that the current study only focused on intermediate Iranian EFL learners, while learners with lower or higher levels of language proficiency may perform differently. In order to tackle this issue, participants with different language proficiency levels can be investigated in future research projects. Moreover, the number of male and female participants could not be balanced due to accessibility issues. Finally, the lengths of the training process can be increased to further unpack the participants' perceptions of ICC.

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Appendix

Intercultural Training Syllabus

Themes	Production tasks	Aims / objectives	Methods / techniques	Resources
1. Rock around the clock	What does "tomorrow" mean to you	To identify how people from different cultural backgrounds perceive the concept of time	Interview with culturally diverse people- Cross-cultural discussion - Small group work	Reading texts- Internet
2. You are what you eat?	Organically grown food and different diets	To recognize cultural differences in perception of food and eating habits	Role play- Game- Cross-cultural discussion - small group work- Clusters and mind-maps	Role cards- Reading texts-
3. Conversation and Silence	Directness	To learn communication strategies for effective intercultural encounters	Group discussion-Role play- designing an interview about non-verbal communication-	Read some typical dialogues- Internet- Reading texts
4. Gendered identities (Men and women, girls and boys)	Gender Discrimination	Intercultural awareness-raising on cultural differences regarding gender roles- To awaken discussion on taboo issues	Pair work- Cross-cultural discussion - interview schedule- Critical thinking	Reading texts- presentation- Print-outs of pictures- Internet
5. All you need is love (?)	Dislocated polygamy	Intercultural awareness-raising on the concept of romantic love	Cross-cultural discussion - Role play- Writing a love story collectively and individually	Reading texts- Internet- Role cards
6. Bringing up baby	Physical punishment	To recognize cultural differences in raising children	Email partnership with a class or group in another country- Writing an essay- Collect pictures- Drawing- Comparison and discussion- Group work- Critical thinking	Reading texts- presentation- Internet
7. Up in the morning and off to school	Teacher	To raise awareness of cultural differences in the process of education	Discussion and comparison - Role play- Group work- Critical thinking	Reading texts - Role cards- Internet- presentation

Authors' Biographies



DavudKuhi, PhD in Applied Linguistics, is an Assistant Professor at Islamic Azad University, Maragheh branch. He has been teaching ESP and Discourse Analysis, and his main research interests include Academic Discourse and Genre Analysis.



Seyyedeh Zahra Esmaeeli, is currently a PhD candidate in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) at Islamic Azad University, Maragheh branch. Her primary research interests are Cultural Studies and Intercultural Communicative Competence.



Sorayya Behroozizad is Assistant Professor of English Language Teaching at Islamic Azad University, Maragheh Branch. She holds a PhD in English Language Teaching. She has published several papers in different journals and has presented in many international conferences.
