

In Pursuit of Intercultural Communicative Competence in EFL Context: Exploring Iranian English Teachers' Perceptions

Mosa Reza Banafsheh¹, Mohadese Khosravi², Mavadat Saidi^{*3}

¹*Department of English, Karaj, Science and Research Branch, Islamic Azad University, Karaj, Iran*

^{2,3}*Kharazmi University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran*

**corresponding author: msttut@gmail.com*

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Abstract

The current study attempted to cast light on the status quo of Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of ICC. It further attempted to see if their experience would influence their conceptualizations of ICC. To this end, a total of 100 EFL teachers were asked to complete a questionnaire survey adapted from Han & Song's (2011) study. The results of both quantitative and qualitative analysis revealed a number of commonalities and discrepancies among the participants' conceptualizations of International Communication Competence (ICC) and its relevance to ELT considering their teaching experience. The findings point to the prominence of intercultural teacher education in the Iranian context.

Keywords: English Language Teachers' Perceptions, Foreign Language Education, Globalization, Intercultural Communicative Competence, Teaching Experience

Introduction

Globalization as "the multidimensional social processes that intensify worldwide social interdependencies" (Stager, 2003, cited in Kheng&Baldauf, 2011, p. 952) has established a strong link between distant localities (Giddens, 1990, cited in McKay, 2011) and communication among people with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds has been developing (Byram, 2008). As a result, recognition has been increasing of the significance role of cultural dimension in foreign language education (Phipps & Gonzalez, 2004) and intercultural communicative competence (ICC) came under the spotlight as a crucial component in language learning and teaching (Byram&Zarate, 1997). Researchers and educators have increasingly pointed to the notoriety of including intercultural dimension in foreign language teaching (Lázár, et al., 2007; Sercu, Bandura, & Castro, 2005). Nevertheless, ICC is not an "automatic" consequence of foreign language teaching (Meyer, 1991) and English teachers play a pivotal role in orienting foreign language teaching toward the intercultural education particularly in non-English speaking countries (Han & Song, 2011). Indeed, (inter)cultural theories conceive of foreign language teachers as cultural mediators (Byram. 2008; Sercu et al., 2005; Zarate et al., 2004) who are ascribed new roles (Byram&Zarate, 1997).

Despite the recent growing interest in culture teaching (Corbett, 2003), ICC is still given a marginal part in foreign language education (Lange & Paige, 2003). Bearing this in mind, the current study attempted to cast further light on Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of ICC in general and in light of their teaching experience in particular.

Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) as the "knowledge, motivation, and skills needed to interact effectively and appropriately with members of different cultures" (Wiseman, 2002, p. 208) has recently come to the fore. It is believed that empowering the learners to communicate with people requires familiarity with the culture of the target community (Corbett, 2003; Fenner, 2006; Guilherme, 2000; Lange & Paige, 2003).

However, in spite of its paramount significance, ICC is "still at an embryonic stage" (Zarate et al., 2004, p. 183) and "is assigned a marginal role in foreign language education" (Lang & Paige, 2003, p. xi) despite the fact that English/foreign language teaching is inevitably moving toward

intercultural education esp. in non-speaking countries as a result of the growing development of globalization (Han & Song, 2011). To this end, English teachers' ICC as an indicator of their professional identities should not be ignored (Sercu et al., 2005).

In this regard, Sercu et al. (2005) conducted a research project to investigate foreign language teachers' perceptions of ICC in foreign language education and found no clear relationship between their beliefs and actual teaching practices. In a similar vein, Risager (1998) also drew this conclusion that no clear relationship existed between teachers' perceptions of ICC and their real-life teaching practice. Aleksandrowicz-pedich et al. (2003) also found that teachers lacked a clear perception considering the way they can integrate the ICC into foreign language teaching. Liddicoat, Papademetre, Scarino, and Kohler (2003) also obtained the same findings and attributed this to teachers' lack of clear perceptions of ICC and intercultural education. In another study, Valdes (1986) stated that ESL teachers predominantly conceived of the integration of culture teaching as interfering with the teaching of the other language-based skills. Göbel and Helmke (2010) also pointed to the vital role of intercultural topics in the context of English as a foreign language and demonstrated the influence of teachers' intercultural experience on the quality of their intercultural instruction. Karabinar and Guler (2013) found out that injecting culture in foreign language classes is of paramount significance but it received a marginal role in foreign language education.

Bearing this in mind, the study tried to cast further light on the status quo of Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of ICC. Hence, the following research questions were addressed in the study:

1. How do Iranian EFL teachers perceive ICC and its relevance to ELT?
2. Does Iranian EFL teachers' experience influence their perceptions of ICC and its relevance to ELT?

Method

Participants

The participants of this study were 100 Iranian EFL teachers who hold BA (57), MA (34), and PhD (9) majoring in Translation Studies (21), Literature (36), and TEFL (43). Their age range was between 22 and 42 years old ($M = 28.5$) and their experience ranged from 1 to 16 years ($M = 6.5$). They were all teaching in several language institutes. In this way, the possible influence of teaching context on their perceptions was somehow controlled.

Instrumentation

The instrument of this study was a questionnaire survey excepted from the one used in Han and Song (2011) (See Appendix). They used a questionnaire survey with seven sections including personal information, perception of English teaching, perception of English and teachers' familiarity with the target culture(s) associated with English, culture in English/foreign language teaching, English language teaching materials, contact opportunities with other cultures or peoples at their university, and Intercultural English/foreign language teaching. However, a number of sections including English language teaching materials and contact opportunities with other cultures or peoples at their context of teaching were omitted in this study since they enjoy less variation in Iranian EFL context. It is worth mentioning that Han and Song adapted the survey questionnaire from the one used by Sercu et al. (2005), Liddicoat et al. (2003) and Aleksandrowicz-Pedich et al. (2003). As it included both closed- and open-ended questions, it lent itself to both quantitative and qualitative analysis in order to elicit the teachers' perceptions of intercultural dimension of English language teaching in Iranian EFL context in general and in terms of their teaching experience in particular.

Procedure

The participants were given the questionnaire survey and they were informed that they could take almost a week to complete the questionnaire. The respondents mostly reported that completing the questionnaire took about 40 to 60 minutes. The completed questionnaires were collected and

analyzed by the researchers. The researchers divided the respondents into two groups according to their years of teaching experience. Those respondents with less than 5 years were grouped as less experienced teachers (50 respondents) while those with more than 5 years of teaching experience were considered as more experienced ones (50 respondents).

Results

Perception of English Teaching

The first section of the questionnaire elicited EFL teachers' perceptions of the objectives of English language teaching, culture teaching objectives, and distribution of time over language and culture teaching.

1.1. How do you perceive the objectives of English/foreign language teaching?

Promoting the acquisition of an open mind and a positive disposition towards unfamiliar cultures was ranked as the most important objective of English teaching from the viewpoint of less experienced teachers ($M= 4.8$) while assisting students to acquire communicative skills that will be useful for them to communicate with English speakers in their future career or education was ranked as the most important objective by more experienced ones ($M= 4.5$). This might indicate that less experienced teachers are trying to modify the learners' perceptions and attitudes whereas more experienced teachers strive to prepare the learners more for the practical side of the learning.

The participants' perceptions were similar in the second and third most important objective of ELT, promoting the acquisition of a level of proficiency for practical purposes such as overseas travelling ($M= 4.18$, and 4 for less and more experienced teachers, respectively), and promoting the students' familiarity with the culture(s), the civilization of all foreign countries ($M= 3.93$, and 3.87 for less and more experienced teachers, respectively). As the results indicate, the second most important objective which targets the practical purposes was ranked as the second one by the teachers regardless of the amount of experience they had. This might suggest that they are all concerned about the actual preparation of the

learners for real-life situations. This concern starts from the perceptions and attitudes and is followed by the practical purposes from the less experienced teachers' viewpoints while it immediately begins from the practical aspects in more experienced teachers' opinion.

1.2. What do you think of "culture teaching" objectives in an English or foreign language teaching context?

With regard to the participants' responses to the second question, less experienced teachers ranked providing information about daily life and customs in the target culture(s) as the first important objective of culture teaching ($M = 4.3$) which was ranked as the second most important one by more experienced teachers ($M = 3.87$). The second most important objective for less experienced teachers was to promote the ability to handle intercultural contact situations ($M = 4.18$). On the other hand, more experienced teachers referred to developing attitudes of openness and tolerance towards other people and culture(s) as the first most important objective of culture teaching ($M = 3.93$). The results highlight less experienced teachers' concerns about transmission of a bulk of knowledge about the target culture(s) while it refers to more experienced teachers' attention to more consciousness-raising aspects of culture teaching established and supplemented by providing information for the learners.

While less experienced teachers chose providing information about shared values and beliefs in the target culture(s) as the third objective of culture teaching ($M = 4.1$), their more experienced counterparts identified promoting the ability to handle intercultural contact situations as the third most important objective ($M = 3.75$).

1.3. How do you distribute the time over "language teaching" and culture teaching" and would you like to devote more time to "culture teaching"?

The average amount of time which less experienced teachers claimed to devote to language teaching was %68.43 while they admitted that they allocate % 31.57 of the class time to teaching culture. The average amount of time that more experienced teachers claimed to devote to teaching language was %70.43 while they said that they allocate % 29.57 to teaching culture.

This might indicate the higher amount of willingness to elaborate on cultural aspects of the target language among less experienced teachers.

Surprisingly, among less experienced teachers, 18 teachers were eager to allocate more time to teaching culture whereas among their more experienced counterparts, 37 instructors were willing to devote more time to teaching culture. This might be due to the fact that teaching cultural dimensions is more demanding on the part of the language teachers and mere willingness to allocate more time to teach cultural aspects does, by no means, suffice i.e. experience seems to play a complementary role.

Perception of English Language and Familiarity with the Target Culture(s) Associated with English

The second section of the questionnaire aimed at eliciting the EFL teachers' perceptions regarding the kind of today's English and the kind of English which should be taught in Iranian EFL context, and the aspects of culture they are (or are not) familiar with.

2.1. What kind of language is today's English to you and what kind of English do you think should be taught in Iranian EFL context?

With respect to the kind of today's English, all respondents viewed it as an international language used for communication with people from both English-speaking and non-English speaking countries. As regards the kind of English which should be taught in Iranian EFL context, the results were the same. A total of 100 respondents claimed that English as an international language should be taught in Iranian EFL context. This might suggest that experience would make no impact on the way today's English is viewed. Moreover, teachers' views toward today's English dominate on their perception of the English kind which should be taught.

2.2. Which aspect of the culture(s) associated with English are you most or least familiar with?

Considering the participants' familiarity with the English cultures regarding their years of experience, daily life and routines, living conditions, food and drink, etc. were the most familiar objectives for the participants

regardless of their experience ($M= 3.5$, and 3.68 for less and more experienced teachers, respectively). The second and third most familiar objectives were values and beliefs ($M= 3.43$, and 3.18 for less and more experienced teachers, respectively) followed by education and professional life ($M= 3.40$, and 3.12 for less and more experienced teachers, respectively). This might indicate that teachers' experience would make no significant impact on their familiarity with the English culture(s). The results might suggest that teachers are able to enhance their knowledge of and familiarity with the intercultural dimensions individually regardless of their experience. Accordingly, their personal interest may play an important role. However, their willingness to allocate more time to the cultural dimension is, by no means, guaranteed by this interest and familiarity per se.

Culture in English Teaching

The third section of the questionnaire tried to touch upon the EFL teachers' use of culture teaching activities, aspects of culture they teach, and what can be done to enhance cultural dimensions in Iranian EFL context.

3.1. What kinds of culture teaching activities do you practice during classroom teaching time?

Taking advantage of culture-loaded materials, e.g., reading passages, proverb and idiom pamphlets, etc. and raising EFL learners' consciousness through making comparisons and providing explanations are among the most frequently practiced activities claimed by the teachers irrespective of their experience. These activities present the learners with a bulk of knowledge about the target cultures. In addition, they also assign the learners a number of mini-lectures and e-tasks to enhance their skill of interpreting and relating in the context of classroom. Both less and more experienced teachers further employ the audio-visual equipment to reinforce the cultural aspects of the target language. Regardless of their experience, the participants of the current study also claimed that they draw on a wide range of literary sources including novels, short stories, folk tales, etc. to provide the learners with a somewhat clear picture of the target cultures.

3.2. What particular aspects do you teach?

The top most frequently taught aspect is daily life, routines, living conditions, food, drink, etc. by all the teachers. The second most frequently touched upon aspect encompasses traditions, folklore, tourist attractions. Irrespective of their experience, the teachers deemed that the third frequently practiced aspect of culture in their classrooms includes values and beliefs.

It is worth noting that among different aspects of culture, none of the teachers claimed to touch upon different ethnic and social groups. For the rest of the aspects, the experience was not found to be a determining factor and the respondents stated that they somehow touch upon three aspects including education and professional life, youth culture, and international relations quite similarly.

3.3. What do you think the foreign language education can do to increase chances of including intercultural dimensions in Iranian EFL context?

Regardless of their teaching experience, the teachers shared the same opinion considering what FLE can do to increase chances of including cultural dimensions in Iranian EFL context. From their viewpoint, there should be some teacher ICC development programs to enhance the teachers' ICC on the one hand. On the other hand, the material developers and syllabus designers should try their best to incorporate cultural dimensions of the target culture into the textbooks and courses to grow a deep understanding of both the native and target culture(s). They also believe that some audio-visual resources should be prepared to make intercultural dimensions more vivid. In addition, they referred to the role of applying CALL (Computer-assisted Language Learning) in EFL courses.

Intercultural English Language Teaching

This section of the questionnaire includes twenty-three statements eliciting the teachers' perceptions of intercultural dimension of English/foreign language teaching. They were supposed to score on a five-point scale (1 disagree completely and 5 agree completely).

4.1. What are your opinions regarding the (inter)cultural dimension of English teaching?

With regard to this question, both less experienced and more experienced teachers mostly agreed that providing additional cultural information would make students more tolerant towards other cultures and people ($M=4.12$, and 4.43 for less and more experienced teachers, respectively)..

In addition, more experienced teachers argued that the more students know about the foreign culture, the more tolerant they are ($M=3.93$), and an English/foreign language teacher should present a realistic image of a foreign culture and therefore should also touch upon negative sides of the foreign culture and society ($M=3.87$). On the other hand, almost all less experienced teachers agreed to some extent that English/foreign language teaching should enhance students' understanding of their own cultural identities ($M=3.56$). They also explained that they would like to teach intercultural competence though through their English language teaching ($M=3.84$).

On the other hand, less experienced teachers strongly disagreed that one should use texts written in the mother tongue and discuss these texts in the mother tongue in the foreign language classrooms ($M=1.93$). On the other hand, the statement which caused the highest amount of disagreement on the part of the more experienced teachers was considering language and culture as two separate entities which cannot be integrated in foreign language classroom ($M=2.06$).

Discussion

The results of the current study shed light on Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of intercultural dimensions in FLE. It further revealed the possible influence of their experience on their conceptualization of teaching culture in FLE. A number of commonalities and discrepancies were found among teachers' perceptions of English/foreign teaching objectives, culture teaching objectives, time distribution over language and culture teaching, willingness to allocate more time to culture teaching and familiarity with different aspects of culture concerning their experience. Moreover, they mostly shared the same idea regarding the kind of today's English and the kind which should be taught in language classrooms. They also referred to

the same set of activities for reinforcing cultural dimensions, particular aspects to teach, and the techniques to be employed for increasing chances of including culture-related dimensions in Iranian EFL context. On the other hand, their opinions regarding the intercultural dimension of English teaching were dissimilar to some extent taking their experience into account.

Generally, the results suggest that Iranian EFL teachers are aware of the necessity of integrating cultural dimensions in FLE. However, in line with Sercu et al. (2005), the findings revealed that Iranian EFL teachers, less experienced ones in particular, conceive of culture teaching as the transmission of a bulk of knowledge about the target cultures rather than a consciousness-raising mission. As Byram (1997) and Karabinar and Guler (2013) reiterated, incorporating cultural awareness is vital in setting the foreign language teaching objectives. Hence, there seems to be a need for holding some workshops to enhance teachers' perceptions of ICC and intercultural teaching and the way it should be realized in real-world classrooms (Göbel&Helmke, 2010).

Since teachers' perceptions and their willingness to interculturalize FLE seem to play a key role in putting intercultural education into practice (Byram, 2008; Byram&Zarate, 1997; Phipps &Guilherme, 2004), ICC development programs should concentrate on teachers' beliefs and practices (Byram, 2008; Sercu et al., 2005) and thereby, this would hopefully promote the efficiency of culture teaching in order to develop a more systematic multicultural view of education (Kramersch, 1993) in Iranian EFL context. To put in the nutshell, what seems to be of utmost significance is that culture as "the very core of language teaching" (Kramersch, 1993, p. 8) should not be ignored.

However, the results of the current study should be approached cautiously. Due to the small sample size, it seems to be impossible to generalize the findings as they were based on a specific sample of Iranian EFL teachers. Moreover, the results of the current study merely relied on self-report data which might not entirely represent the teachers' perceptions. However, nobody is more able to reveal the teachers' perceptions of the intercultural dimensions except themselves. Hence, further studies including a number of qualitative instrument e.g. interviews, observations, etc. are

recommended to complement the results obtained from the questionnaire survey in this study. In addition, the cluster of variables which might shadow the teachers' perceptions of culture teaching might be the focus of future studies. Moreover, further research might be conducted to see to what extent the teachers' perceptions of culture teaching and their real teaching practices converge.

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Appendix: Intercultural Communicative Competence Survey

Email address: **Gender:** Male ☐ Female ☐ **Age:**
Degree: **Teaching experience (in years):**
Major: English literature ☐ English Translation ☐ English Teaching ☐
Others:

*** How do you perceive the following objectives of English language teaching?**

1. Not important 2. Less important 3. Undecided 4. Important
 5. Very important

Objective	1	2	3	4	5
Assist students to acquire communicative skills that will be useful for them to communicate with English speakers in their future career or education					
Promote the acquisition of an open mind and a positive disposition towards unfamiliar cultures					
Promote the students' familiarity with the cultures(s), the civilization of all foreign countries					
Assist students to acquire a proficiency of English language which will allow them to read and write in the target language for their future career or education					
Promote the students' familiarity with the culture, civilization of the English speaking countries					
Assist students in developing a better understanding of their own identity and culture					
Promote acquisition of a level of proficiency for practical purposes such as overseas travelling					

*** What do you think of "culture teaching" objectives in an English or foreign language teaching context?**

1. Not important 2. Less important 3. Undecided 4. Important
5. Very important

Objectives	1	2	3	4	5
Promote the ability to handle intercultural contact situations.					
Provide information about shared values and beliefs in the target culture(s).					
Provide information about the history, geography, social and political conditions of the target cultures(s).					
Provide experiences with a rich variety of cultural expressions (literature, music, theater, film, etc.)					
Objectives	1	2	3	4	5
Develop attitudes of openness and tolerance towards other people and culture(s).					
Promote increased understanding of students' own culture.					
Promote the ability to empathize with people living in other cultures.					
Provide information about daily life and customs in the target culture(s).					

*** How do you distribute the time over "language teaching" and "culture teaching"? (Out of %100)**

.....% language teaching and% culture teaching

*** Would you like to devote more time to "culture teaching"?**

Yes ☐ No ☐

*** What kinds of culture teaching activities do you practice during classroom teaching time?**

*** What do you think the foreign language education can do to increase chances of including intercultural dimensions in Iranian EFL context?**

*** What kind of language is today's English to you?**

a) An international language used for communication with people from both English- speaking and non-English speaking countries

b) A language used for communication with and among people in the English-speaking countries/cultures

c) A language that has many localized varieties, e.g. Singaporean English, Japanese English.

*** Which of the above English kinds do you think should be taught in Iranian EFL context?**

*** Check a number from 1-5 based on your familiarity with the following aspects of the culture(s) associated with English.**

5 means "the most familiar" and 1 means "the least familiar".

Objectives	1	2	3	4	5
Daily life and routines, living conditions, food and drink etc.					
Youth culture					
Education, professional life					
Different ethnic and social groups					
Objectives	1	2	3	4	5
Values and beliefs					
International relations (political, economic, and cultural), with students' own country and other countries					
History, geography, political system.					
Traditions, folklore, tourist attractions					
Literature					

***Which of the above aspects do you teach?**

.....

*** Check the cell which best describes your opinions regarding (inter)cultural dimension of English teaching?**

1. Completely disagree 2. Disagree 3. Undecided 4. Agree
 5. Completely agree

Statements	1	2	3	4	5
In an English/foreign language classroom, teaching culture is as important as teaching the target language.					
All students should acquire intercultural competence.					
Intercultural skills cannot be acquired in Iranian EFL context.					
It is impossible to teach the foreign language and the foreign culture in an integrated way.					
The more students know about the foreign culture, the more tolerant they are.					
Providing additional cultural information makes students more tolerant towards other cultures and people.					
I would like to teach intercultural competence through my English language teaching.					
English/foreign language teaching should not only touch upon foreign cultures. It should also deepen students' understanding of their own culture.					
An English/foreign language teacher should present a realistic image of a foreign culture, and therefore should also touch upon negative sides of the foreign culture and society.					
Intercultural education is best undertaken cross-curricularly.					
An English/foreign language teacher should present a positive image of the target culture(s) and society.					
Intercultural education reinforces students' already existing stereotypes of other people and cultures.					
English/foreign language teaching should enhance students' understanding of their own cultural identities.					
Before you can teach culture or the intercultural dimension regarding the target language, students have to possess a sufficiently high level of proficiency in the					

target language.					
When you only have a limited number of teaching periods, culture teaching has to give way to language teaching.					
In international contacts, misunderstandings arise equally often from linguistic as from cultural differences.					
Every subject, not just English/foreign language teaching, should promote the acquisition of intercultural skills.					
Intercultural education has no effect whatsoever on students' attitudes.					
Only when there are ethnic minority community students in your classes, you have to teach intercultural competence. Language and culture cannot be taught in an integrated way. You have to separate the two.					
I would like to promote the acquisition of intercultural skills through my teaching.					
Language problems lie at the heart of misunderstandings in international contacts, not cultural differences.					
In the foreign language classroom students can only acquire additional cultural knowledge. They cannot acquire intercultural skills.					
If one wants to be able to achieve anything at all as regards intercultural understanding one should use texts written in the mother tongue and discuss these texts in the mother tongue, even when in a foreign language classroom.					

Biodata

Mosa-Al-Reza Banafshe is an MA student of TEFL at Islamic Azad University, Karaj, Science and Research branch. His areas of interest are EAP and teacher education.

Mohadese Khosravi got her MA in TEFL from Kharazmi University. Her areas of interest include discourse analysis and contrastive analysis.

Mavadat Saidi is a PhD student of TEFL at Kharazmi University of Tehran. Her areas of interest include research and discourse analysis.