

Research Article

Integrating Intercultural Awareness and Competence into the English Syllabus: A Curricular Program for Omar Al-Mukhtar University Students



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Abstract: This research study is aimed at developing an English curriculum and materials for university students based on the Intercultural Language Learning model (ICLL) to enhance students' cultural awareness and Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). This study, therefore, aims to discover the level of students' intercultural competence and awareness before and after integrating ICC into the curriculum of an English-speaking course designed for English department students. The quantitative data was collected from pre- and post-ICC questionnaires, while the qualitative data was obtained from students' focus-group interviews which address students' attitudes and perceptions of learning about their own culture and diverse cultures in this increasingly globalized world. The findings of this study showed significant changes in students' levels of ICC after the implementation of the intercultural curricular program.

Keywords: Cultural awareness, Intercultural Communicative Competence (IC), Intercultural Language Learning, Internationalization.

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دمج الوعي والكفاءة الثقافية في مناهج اللغة الإنجليزية: برنامج دراسي لطلاب جامعة عمر المختار

المستخلص: هدف هذه الدراسة إلى تطوير منهج ومواد تعليمية باللغة الإنجليزية لطلبة الجامعة باستخدام نموذج تعلم اللغة بين الثقافات (ICLL) لتعزيز الوعي والكفاءة التواصلية بين الثقافات (ICC) لدى الطلاب. بناء على ذلك، تسعى هذه الدراسة لإستكشاف مستوى الكفاءة والوعي الثقافي لدى الطلاب قبل وبعد دمج الكفاءة التواصلية بين الثقافات في منهج مقرر المحادثة المصمم لطلبة اللغة الإنجليزية. وقد تم الحصول على البيانات الكمية باستخدام استبيانات ما قبل وما بعد تطبيق الكفاءة التواصلية بين الثقافات (ICC)، بينما تم جمع البيانات النوعية عن طريق مقابلات جماعية تتناول مواقف وتصورات الطلبة تجاه التعلم حول ثقافتهم وثقافات أخرى في عصر العولمة. وأشارت نتائج هذه الدراسة إلى تغييرات ملحوظة في مستوى كفاءة الطلبة التواصلية بعد تطبيق البرنامج الدراسي التوعوي الثقافي

الكلمات المفتاحية: الوعي الثقافي، كفاءة التواصل بين الثقافات، تعلم اللغات بين الثقافات، العولمة.

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1. Introduction

Nowadays people of diverse cultures communicate and work together in an increasingly multicultural world. Cultural awareness which is the understanding of languages and cultures other than one's own became of critical importance. Accordingly, considerable effort has been made to internationalize education by integrating intercultural training and communication into various educational contexts which has a significant impact on the development of the EFL/ESL curriculum and teaching materials. Although internationalizing second language learning is rare, but if successfully applied, it enables learners to meet the demand of today's global society (Garrett-Rucks, 2016).

Throughout the history of foreign language learning and teaching, less emphasis was placed on the cultural-intercultural component of the curriculum. The goal has been exclusively the accurate use of vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar along with the practice of the four receptive and productive skills while leaving out anything approaching real-world, meaningful content, dealing with the target culture as something additional to the classroom or the environment of learning. Traditional and modern approaches to language teaching and learning significantly affected how culture is viewed and its relationship to language. However, the priority given to the importance of culture as a vital component in language has not been equally the same in different approaches to foreign language teaching and diverse ELT curricula (Heidari, et al., 2014; Gil, et al., 2017).

However, modern approaches incorporated culture, for instance, the communicative approach involves learners in various real-world, socio-cultural situations in which features of language and culture are chosen and graded according to their priority in real communication. The term Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) builds upon the concept of "communicative competence" (CC), which recognizes that all individuals possess a native communicative competence (CC1). When individuals intentionally develop a second communicative competence (such as that of their interlocutors), they cultivate ICC. This new competence acknowledges their abilities in both CC1 and the newly acquired CC2. Importantly, possessing both CCs provides a unique vantage point that monolingual, monocultural individuals cannot access. ICC is particularly relevant for bilingual-bicultural individuals (Fantini, 2009).

Owing to this, the majority of ELT curricula and programs emphasize the syntactic-pragmatic features of language while placing little emphasis on the learners' understanding of the social and cultural features of the target language. Negligence of L2 cultural awareness results in what Bennett (1997) calls "fluent fools" who are competent language users yet lack the understanding of its social-philosophical content. Bennett (1997) argues that in order to avoid becoming fluent fools, language learners need to understand more completely

the cultural dimension of language because language serves not only as tool for communication but also a system of representation for perception and thinking. Thus, ICC is to a large extent the ability to cope with one's own cultural background in interaction with others. This underlines the fact that in the absence of sociopragmatic competence, the grammatical expressive competence (pragmalinguistic competence) alone is insufficient for effective communication.

The implementation of the intercultural language learning approach by designing special curriculum to further foster cultural awareness and to develop students' intercultural communicative competence has not been widely reported in Libyan contexts. The main purpose of this thesis is to explore the effectiveness of intercultural-communicative language teaching with the use of interculturality in the EFL classrooms for purposes of enhancing learners' cultural awareness and intercultural communication. It effortfully endeavours to confirm the researcher's hypothesis that claims "students of English who are exposed to and engaged in culturally diverse topics in EFL settings are more likely to develop cultural awareness and achieve better intercultural competence for global understanding".

2. Literature Review

Integrating intercultural competence and cultural diversity into ELT materials enables learners to gain cultural awareness and relativity between the first and target language as learning foreign languages is strongly tied to culture. More recently the integration of intercultural competence in education to foster global understanding was approved by international agencies such as the UNESCO (2009), and the Council of Europe. They emphasized the significance of mutual understanding and collaboration among different nations, and the recognition of minority languages has led to the development of diverse strategies to make nations intercultural.

Several models of intercultural competence had been designed to guide curriculum development in incorporating ICC into its content and enhance language assessment. Overall, in all models of intercultural competence consists of three major components (knowledge, skills and attitudes) and is supplemented by other components in each model. These models are **Byram's Model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (1997)**, **Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (1986)**, **Fantini's Model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (1999)** and **Deardorff's Intercultural Competence Model (2006)**, to name only a few.

Integrating models of intercultural competence into ELT curricula can be done through direct and indirect contact with foreign cultures. Direct intercultural contact occurs through study abroad, sojourn programs, migration, and international travel, whereas indirect contact is facilitated through technological advances such as the internet, email, text messaging,

virtual exchanges and other forms of social media apps (Fantini, 2009). It can also be done by interculturalizing the curriculum by incorporating global, indigenous, and non-dominant cultural perspective into the curriculum, regardless of the students' direct contact with other cultures. Such a process involves consideration of course objectives, course content, learning activities, and ways of assessment. Interculturalization can happen at the level of individual courses, but may be more effective when conducted as a team or department (Page, 2021).

A significant amount of research related to intercultural competence has been linked to study abroad programs and international students as it has been found that student mobility positively affects ICC and building tolerance for others as well as promoting positive attitudes towards cultural diversity (Salisbury et al., 2013). Erickson et al. (2021) investigated the intercultural learning of students during a sojourn abroad that was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic and their abrupt return to the U.S by seeking to answer the research question to what degree did the pandemic affect intercultural learning among IEP (International Engineering Program) students who were double majoring in a foreign language and an engineering discipline at the University of Rhode Island. The researchers drew on Byram's Intercultural Communicative Competence model and its five *savoirs* as it suits the study's purpose well to measure students' intercultural development and to characterize students' comments about their experience abroad and at home. The results showed that despite the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, intercultural learning took place and students made gains in intercultural competence. Furthermore, the results show that the pandemic impacted different aspects of students' intercultural learning in different ways at different times, and also extended their learning beyond the intercultural.

Research has been done to modify existing curricula/programs so that they include intercultural competence in order to internationalize education. Bouslama & Benaissi (2019) investigated Algerian high school teachers' perceptions of culture, IC and the objectives of intercultural awareness in ELT. Qualitative data collected from the interviews sought to answer the research questions and was analyzed in parallel with the factors of Byram's ICC model. Results showed that although teachers recognize the importance of IC, their misunderstanding of concepts and perceptions disabled learners to develop IC effectively and hindered the implementation of ICC into their classes.

Reviewing the literature demonstrates that there has been little research conducted on ICC integration into ELT contexts in Libya. In order to address the gaps in research, this study seeks to design a curricular program for university students to foster cultural awareness and intercultural competence. Moreover, it explores students' knowledge, skills and attitudes towards cultural awareness and understanding by adopting and adapting an inter-

cultural communication curriculum and assessing their level of development through the use of the ICC questionnaire and reflective interviews before and after the program.

3. Methodology

This study is deemed to be research and development (R & D) in the field of curriculum and instruction which combines systematically both basic and applied research, and it is expected to produce instructional materials based on the intercultural language learning model (IcLL) for the English department students at Omar Al-Mukhtar University who are the target subject of this study. The study's methodology followed a mixed method approach utilizing methodological triangulation which collects and analyzes data from different sources as Creswell and Plano Clark (2017) claimed that gathering and combining data from various sources may confirm and cross-check conclusions. Risjord, Dunbar & Moloney (2002) also maintained that “triangulation with qualitative and quantitative methods can help confirm a theory to a greater degree than can either method alone” (p.269). In this study, data is retrieved from survey questionnaires, interviews and reflections to ensure validity and enhance the reliability of findings.

3.1 Sampling and Participants

This study followed a nonprobability sampling technique in which the researcher used total-population purposive sampling to examine all subjects from the population who were enrolled in the third academic year Speaking class at Omar Al-Mukhtar University. The participants of the study were a total sample of 30 students majoring in Applied Linguistics and English Translation at Omar Al-Mukhtar University in Albayda/ Libya. A number of these students participated in different phases of the questionnaire development, five students were pilot tested to ensure the validity and the reliability of the items included. Following the pilot study, the researcher added Arabic translation to each item in the questionnaire as some items seemed to be ambiguous to the participants. The total number of participants was 30; 4 males and 26 females. In recent years, more Libyan women have entered universities than men. In many instances, the repercussion of sampling for research has been the unavoidable choice to proceed with a disproportionate number of males and females.

3.2 Research Instruments

This research study employed multiple instruments to collect data. First, Intercultural Competence Questionnaire (ICCQ) prior to the program and as a follow-up. The questionnaire used is adopted from Mirzaei and Forouzandeh's study (2013) and deemed to be very applicable to L2-learning contexts. However, the purpose of using the questionnaire was for students to self-assess their ICC before and after implementing the curriculum following IcLL approach. The ICCQ collects the participants' necessary demographic, for instance, gender, age or any prior experience of traveling or studying in any English-speaking coun-

try. It also included 22 items for assessing knowledge, skills, and attitude through a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Knowledge items assessed cultural self-awareness, cultural-linguistic knowledge, and sociolinguistic awareness. Skill items evaluated the participants' ability to communicate across cultures (skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction). Finally, attitude items were intended to assess the respondents' curiosity, respect and openness to different cultures and their ambiguity tolerance (Deardorff, 2006).

Secondly, the curricular program and reflections on tasks as part of the designed syllabus. The curricular program utilized consisted of a total number of five sessions/cycles during which participants completed some tasks that are meant to be performed collaboratively. The researcher designed the lessons and activities in each cycle by selecting topics and integrating activities from the book "Doing Interculturality in the English Classroom" (Gil, et.al., 2017). Cultural topics included were about political campaigns and elections, black history, food around the world, family structures and stereotypes. Throughout the five sessions, students were observed by the teacher to report on their actual experiences in the class. Students were asked to report on their engagement experience by providing comments on the engaging tasks that they performed collaboratively after each session online on the students' study platform created on WhatsApp.

The last instrument to be utilized was the focus group interview which is a powerful tool for understanding human perspectives, group dynamics, and collective insights (Katz-Buonincontro, 2022). The interview questions were designed by the researcher and included a set of reflective questions that were used to identify students' attitudes or beliefs about their own culture and other diverse cultures and how to handle cultural differences. Using this type of interview alongside other methods permitted the researcher to triangulate data and gain a more holistic understanding of participants' responses. In this study, three focus groups were included for discussing the topic "Language and Culture". Each group consisted of ten students, to ensure that all participants have sufficient time to share their thoughts and insights. Furthermore, responses were recorded for detailed analysis when the program ended.

3.3 Data Collection Procedures

In collecting the data, all the necessary ethical procedures were followed. All the participants were emailed a consent form, to make the participants aware that their participation in this research is voluntary with no cost and the information obtained will remain confidential. This study employed a mixed-methods approach which is outlined as follows:

Quantitative data: Participants in this study filled out Intercultural communicative competence questionnaires (ICCQ) online on Google Forms and signed an informed consent statement. Participants were requested to be genuine but remain anonymous.

Qualitative data: Recorded focused group interviews were conducted in-person to facilitate students' convenience and to allow participants to communicate freely as part of a discussion group and not to feel overwhelmed as in individual person to person interviews. The researcher provided and double-checked the transcriptions which were used later for analysis. Moreover, participants also worked on collaborative tasks that raised cultural awareness. They provided reflections on each task in the form of audio notes sent online not within the lecture time to enable students to communicate more in English outside of the classroom and increase their autonomy.

3.4 Data Analysis

Because the data was collected from various sources, two separate methods were used to analyze the data. The quantitative data obtained from the questionnaire was analyzed based on the frequency of each response using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences, version 29); the data was interpreted and displayed in tables and charts. A paired samples t-test (repeated measures test) was also employed to compare the means of the students' responses before and after the intercultural sessions and to determine whether these sessions had a positive or negative effect on the participants.

The qualitative data from reflections on tasks and the focus-group interviews was interpreted using a thematic analysis of data, which included the following steps: The data was checked in detail, coded, and categorized based on the themes identified by the researcher from the participants' responses to the questions. The data was also organized based on the themes mentioned. Some extracts of the data were included and labeled under certain categories. Some other data may be neglected as they may not relate to the research. These steps helped to make the research process more transparent to the reader.

4. Results and Discussions

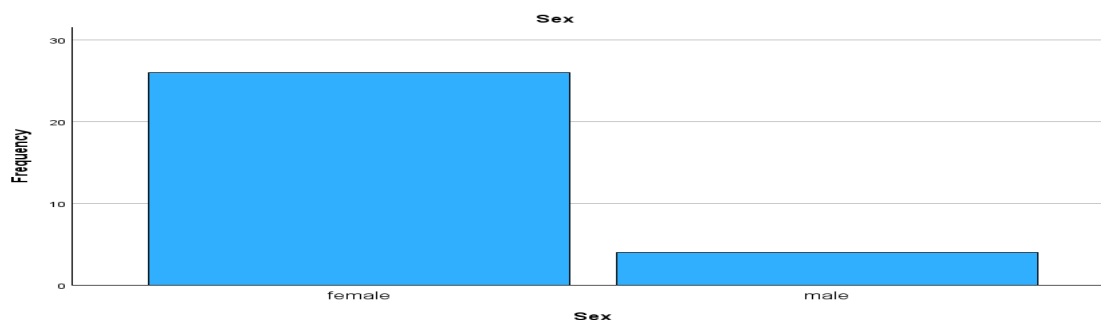
The analysis and interpretation of data is carried out using three tools. The first tool, which is based on the results of the ICCQ questionnaire, deals with a quantitative analysis of data in the form of repeated measures t-test before and after the curricular program. The second, students' reflections which discuss students' work on intercultural tasks and the last tool includes the results of focus group interviews, is a qualitative interpretation as well as the former tool.

4.1 Quantitative Data

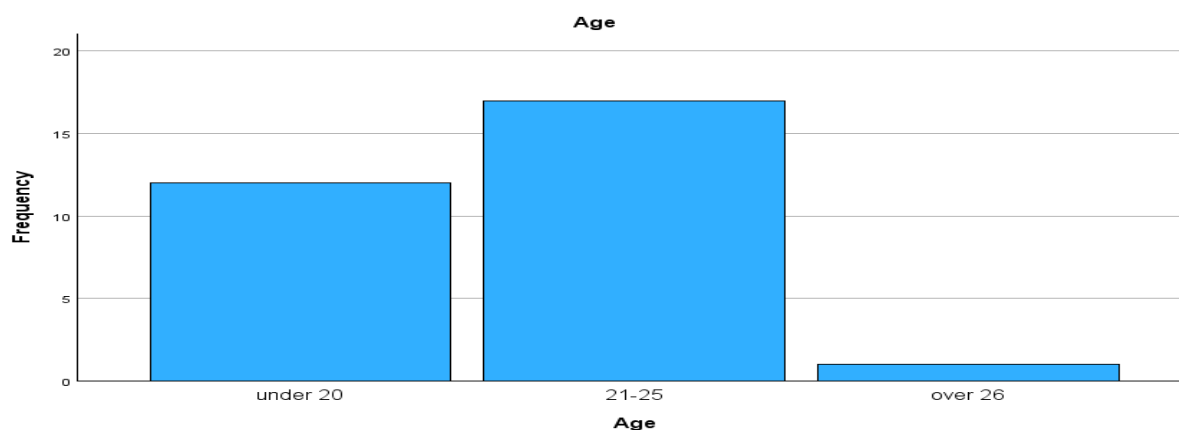
4.1.1 Questionnaire Analysis

Since the study's main purpose is to determine if there was a significant change in students' intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes before and after the curricular program, the exact questionnaire was distributed twice in two different time frames to perceive students' development before and after implementing the curricular program. Such technique assesses the consistency of results when the same questionnaire is given to the same sample at different time intervals. It helps to determine whether the test produces similar outcomes when administered on different occasions. To statistically confirm the researcher's hypothesis, a paired samples t-test (also known as repeated measures t-test) was run to assess whether the mean scores from two conditions are statistically different from each other. In this study the independent variable or the solution is the intercultural curricular program whereas the dependent variable is the time frame which affects students' level of competence.

The questionnaire items were used by students to self-assess their knowledge, skills and attitudes. Each set of items was analyzed individually to see whether one or more of the main components of intercultural competence were affected by raising awareness and intercultural curriculum.



First, descriptive statistics were computed for the gender, age, and intercultural experience i.e. if participants had some experience in communicating with foreigners in their LC2 environment. These demographics are reported in the figures over leaf.



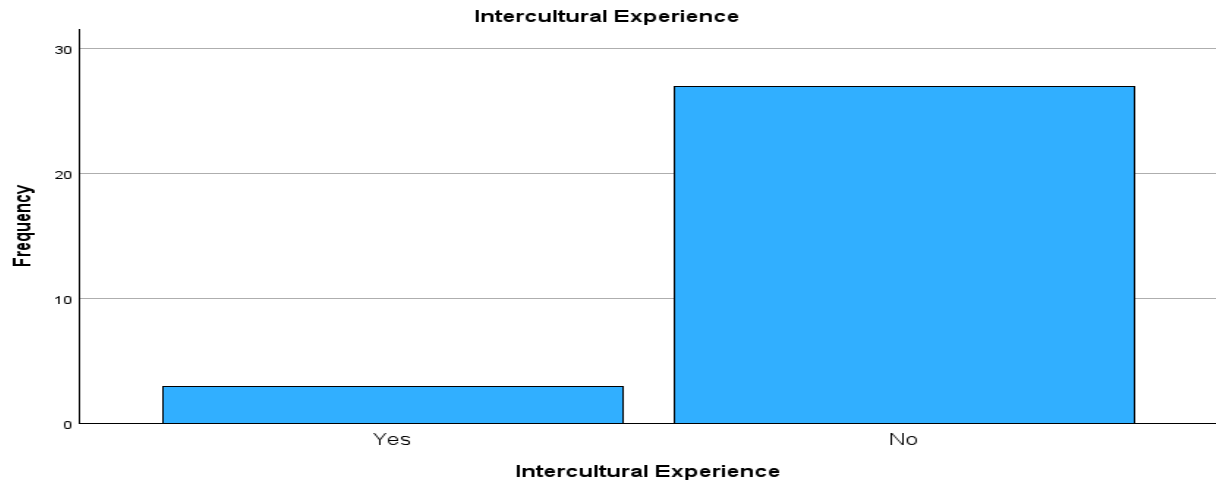


Figure 1. Participants demographics.

The rest of the questionnaire items self-assess participants knowledge, attitude and skills regarding ICC. See the table below that report on knowledge related items.

Paired Samples Test										
		Paired Differences					Significance			
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	One-Sided p	Two-Sided p
					Lower	Upper				
Pair 1	2. I believe that intercultural experience can add some information to my previous knowledge. - post program. I believe that intercultural experience can add some information to my previous knowledge.	-.36667	1.73172	.31617	-1.01330	.27997	-1.160	29	.128	.256
Pair 2	3. I'm eager to read articles on foreign cultures. - post program. I'm eager to read articles on foreign cultures.	-.13333	1.33218	.24322	-.63078	.36411	-.548	29	.294	.588
Pair 3	10. I can cope well with the spoken language and body language of people from different cultures. - post program. I can cope well with the spoken language and body language of people from different cultures.	-.46667	1.22428	.22352	-.92382	-.00951	-2.088	29	.023	.046
Pair 4	11. I can take part in any L2 conversation dealing with daily life issues. - post program. I can take part in any L2 conversation dealing with daily life issues.	-.50000	1.25258	.22869	-.96772	-.03228	-2.186	29	.019	.037
Pair 5	15. I watch more national news than international news on TV. - post program. I watch more national news than international news on TV.	-.10000	1.60495	.29302	-.69930	.49930	-.341	29	.368	.735
Pair 6	16. I'm not always aware of the cultural differences of the foreign cultures. - post program. I'm not always aware of the cultural differences of the foreign cultures.	-.73333	1.38796	.25341	-1.25161	-.21506	-2.894	29	.004	.007

Table.1 Results of paired samples t-test for knowledge-related items (inferential statistics).

A repeated-measures t-test found this difference to be significant in three of the knowledge-related items in table 1 numbered as 3, 4, and 6. participants demonstrated that they are able to take part in any L2 conversations dealing with daily life and this item found to be significant, $t(29) = -2.18$, $p < 0.01$. However, half of the items underwent minor changes in responses which indicates that there was no significant development of participants' ability to observe cultural differences and understand its references. Together, this may suggest that the null hypothesis cannot be completely rejected.

Paired Samples Test										
		Paired Differences					Significance			
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	One-Sided p	Two-Sided p
					Lower	Upper				
Pair 1	4. I cannot easily deal with ambiguities during the communication in L2. - post program. I cannot easily deal with ambiguities during the communication in L2	.36667	1.47352	.26903	-.18356	.91689	1.363	29	.092	.183
Pair 2	5. I do not make an effort to discover the norms of the L2 culture that I am communicating with. - post program. I do not make an effort to discover the norms of the L2 culture that I am communicating with.	.30000	1.36836	.24983	-.21095	.81095	1.201	29	.120	.240
Pair 3	8. When I meet with foreign adolescents, I cannot open a conversation in a culturally appropriate manner. - post program. When I meet with foreign adolescents, I cannot open a conversation in a culturally appropriate manner.	-.46667	1.35782	.24790	-.97369	.04035	-1.882	29	.035	.070
Pair 4	12. Most of the time when I am communicating in L2, I try to learn through discovery during actual experience. - post program. Most of the time when I am communicating in L2, I try to learn through discovery during actual experience	-.10000	.84486	.15425	-.41548	.21548	-.648	29	.261	.522

Pair 5	14. I am often motivated by curiosity to develop my knowledge of my own culture as perceived by others. - post program. I am often motivated by curiosity to develop my knowledge of my own culture as perceived by others.	-.26667	.73968	.13505	-.54287	.00953	-1.975	29	.029	.058
Pair 6	18. I am able to deal tactfully with the ethical problems while communicating in L2. - post program. I am able to deal tactfully with the ethical problems while communicating in L2.	-.96667	1.27261	.23235	-1.44187	-.49147	-4.160	29	<.001	<.001
Pair 7	21. When I am reading a book written in L2, I always try to analyze, interpret and relate concepts to each other. - post program. When I am reading a book written in L2, I always try to analyze, interpret and relate concepts to each other.	-.33333	1.21296	.22145	-.78626	.11959	-1.505	29	.072	.143

Table.2 Results of paired samples t-test for skills items (inferential statistics).

Analysis of skills items in table 2 highlights that there is a statistically significant difference in each pair of responses. Participants' skills of discovery and interaction had showed a notable progress. Item 18 or pair 6 reporting on participants' interaction skill with $t(29)=-4.1$, $p<0.001$ and pair 3 showed similar progress $t(29)= -1.8$, <0.03 . However, half of the items being assessed showed a slight to no increase, for example, students' responses illustrate a minor progress was made in dealing with ambiguities during L2 communication regardless of their continuous effort to achieve it.

Paired Samples Test										
		Paired Differences					Significance			
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	One-Sided p	Two-Sided p
					Lower	Upper				
Pair 1	1. When I am uncertain about cultural differences, I take a tolerant attitude. - post program. When I am uncertain about cultural differences, I take a tolerant attitude	-.50000	1.52564	.27854	-1.06968	.06968	-1.795	29	.042	.083
Pair 2	6. The right of people from other cultures to have different values from my own is respectable. - post program. The right of people from other cultures to have different values from my own is respectable.	-.20000	1.06350	.19417	-.59712	.19712	-1.030	29	.156	.312
Pair 3	7. I try to encounter well with the different dress customs of people in other countries. - post program. I try to encounter well with the different dress customs of people in other countries.	-.96667	1.56433	.28561	-1.55080	-.38254	-3.385	29	.001	.002
Pair 4	9. I rarely accept the others' values and norms during communication in L2. - post program. I rarely accept the others' values and norms during communication in L2.	-.23333	1.59056	.29040	-.82726	.36059	-.804	29	.214	.428
Pair 5	13. I believe that marriage between different cultures is wrong. - post program. I believe that marriage between different cultures is wrong.	.30000	1.76459	.32217	-.35891	.95891	.931	29	.180	.359

Pair 6	17. I believe the social system of where the person is from has effect on the decision-making process. - post program. I believe the social system of where the person is from has effect on the decision-making process.	.20000	1.39951	.25551	-.32258	.72258	.783	29	.220	.440
Pair 7	19. I take pleasure in listening to music from another culture. - post program. I take pleasure in listening to music from another culture.	-.06667	1.57422	.28741	-.65449	.52116	-.232	29	.409	.818
Pair 8	20. Religious arrangements in different cultures are not fascinating for me. - post program. Religious arrangements in different cultures are not fascinating for me.	.40000	1.61031	.29400	-.20130	1.00130	1.361	29	.092	.184
Pair 9	22. I think we are responsible for people of other races as our people. - post program. I think we are responsible for people of other races as our people.	.93333	1.36289	.24883	.42442	1.44225	3.751	29	<.001	<.001

Table.3 Analysis of attitudes items (inferential statistics).

Regarding participants' attitudes, it can be inferred from table 3 that most items report positive attitudes except those dealing with interest in others' religions, dress customs and matrimony among different cultures. However, respondents showed a steady development in their attitude tolerance, openness and respect towards individuals from other cultures. The paired-samples t-test found pair 9, which is responsibility towards individuals from other cultures as their people, to be significant, $t(29) = 3.75$, $p < 0.001$. This may suggest that students' attitudes had been positively affected by the intercultural curricular program.

Moreover, the quantitative data concludes a moderate development in participants' ICC. Both knowledge-related items and skills items demonstrated some notable changes while attitude items showed a significant change comparing to the other components of ICC. However, such progress has a slow pace and as a result the null hypothesis cannot be completely rejected.

4.2 Qualitative Data

To supplement the results and address gaps in the questionnaire, a qualitative approach was employed. In this study, the researcher conducted this qualitative research through gathering audio-recorded students' reflections and focus-group interviews, involving ten participants in each group. The information collected was presented in the form of themes supplemented by participants' quotations.

4.2.1 Analysis of Students' Reflections on Tasks

Bloom (1956) portrays reflection as a complex and 'higher' form of learning by citing reflection as a definition for the sixth level (evaluation) of his taxonomy of learning. Oral reflective learning activities allowed participants to narrate their stories, express their point of views and share their experience to provide both the listener and speaker with a vivid understanding of the experience. However, there was a time gap between the actual event and the reflections. During this delay, participants had the opportunity to recall thoughts, emotions, values, and consider the language they used.

Participants sent digital voice recordings of individual spoken reflection as audio notes to the researcher. These audio notes were provided for each topic included in the program (5 sessions = 5 reflections). After each session in each week, all learners were given the same amount of preparation and speaking time to carry out their tasks. Following the thematic analysis of data, the oral-reflection data (monologues) gathered from participants were fully transcribed, coded and interpreted under certain categories. Analysis of student reflection data revealed that the program had positive impacts on students' intercultural language learning and their language proficiency.

For example, most students disliked political topics, but this program allowed them to see that political matters are relevant to their everyday life. Quoting the example comments: "This course has changed my attitude about knowing about politics by making it more interesting and easier to understand". On another occasion when students were introduced to situations from different cultures one participant wrote that "learning a real-world situation that I could understand before actually talk about immediately aided my learning significantly."

Students also discovered that there are incidents where they learned about other cultures and compared them to their own which increased their cultural knowledge. They also liked communicating inside and outside by showing appreciation to the reflections after each lecture as well to recognizing the positive effects of collaborating with their peers in class through group work and problem-solving activities.

4.2.2 Focus-Group Interview Analysis

The inductive approach with a latent-level focus of thematic analysis that was applied to the focus-group interview transcripts elicited key concepts. Data was coded, interpreted, iteratively compared, then themes that emerged from the interviews were categorized and labeled as: language-culture connection, culture effects on language, language-learning and interculturality, skills and attitudes of intercultural communicative competence.

4.2.2.1 Language-Culture Connection

All participants think that there is a strong connection between language and culture, that one cannot exist without the other. Knowing about others' cultures facilitate language learning as many words are culture-specific i.e. words used in language only to refer to a particular object or event that only exist in that specific culture. However, this involves both the big "C" culture and the small "c" culture. One participant quoted "Knowing about another culture helps you understand language references and proverbs. Culture is strongly connected to language because everything culture related has a special name".

4.2.2.2 Culture Effects on Language

Most participants believe that culture affects language in many ways. This effect could be passed by through a dominant belief or religion in a particular region, for example, the suitability of topics to be discussed and what is considered as sensitive issues might differ from one culture to another. Also, culture affects other human traits, for example, behavior, attitudes and tolerance.

"There are certain topics that are considered as taboos in our language. However, in English they are not. I think this has to do with our culture and system of beliefs or religion of what's socially acceptable and what is not".

4.2.2.3 Language-Learning and Interculturality

Participants said that throughout their journey in learning English, there have been some cultural references and themes that they were not completely aware of. They find it really crucial to know more about the culture of the language a person's learning, as not doing so will make them incompetent language users. They also reported that learning only about daily-life conversations and routines is insufficient for an effective language proficiency. "Learning any language will make you automatically know more information about the country and their culture without you being aware of it".

4.2.2.4 Skills of Intercultural -Communicative Competence

Participants were asked what they would do and how to behave in particular imaginative situations. The presented situations aim to undercover students' skills of intercultural communicative competence and to detect the gaps in their immediate actions. Participants showed a strong will to communicate with individuals from other cultures by saying that they are capable of overcoming breakdowns in communication and they can resolve misunderstanding by using certain techniques in communication.

However, students reported that they perceive some difficulties when talking about politics and world-wide issues due to the lack of input related to such matters. Some participants believed their lack of interest in watching the news or following up political matters had caused this problem. While other students reported their unwillingness to take part in any conflict resolution talk. "I remember being asked about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict from a foreign online friend. I didn't know what to say I know in Arabic some information, but even that few information I couldn't say in English because I'm not interested in politics and I rarely watch the news".

Interpreting meanings and relating one's culture to others by means of comparing and looking for similarities and differences among cultures was detected among many participants. Students mentioned that when watching movies or shows in L2, they often compare cultural values and norms from smaller things like daily life routines to societal codes and attiquette. The music industry was also compared by means of what is acceptable and permissible to sing about and what is not in both LC1 and LC2.

4.2.2.5 Attitudes

Overall, participants reported positive attitudes towards interculturality. They seem to respect cultural differences despite their contradiction to theirs. They are open to learning new languages, having intercultural experiences and are curious about the other.

"Show respect towards different cultures by understanding their norms and values even if they don't match ours".

5. Discussion of Findings and Conclusions

The main goal of this study was to develop English curricular materials based on the Intercultural Language Learning model (IcLL) and to identify students' level of intercultural communicative competence prior to the implementation of the intercultural curricular program as compared to the results of the post questionnaire which determine students ICC level in relation to the utilized syllabus and activities. Hence, this study focused on the effectiveness of intercultural-communicative language teaching with the use of interculturality in the EFL classrooms for purposes of enhancing learners' cultural awareness and intercultural communication by investigating the level of the three components of ICC (knowledge, skills and attitudes) of target participants as described by scholars and interculturalists in the literature review section, with less emphasis on other factors of ICC such as internal and external outcomes.

The researcher hypothesized that immersing students into intercultural content that promotes critical thinking and discussion could increase their level of ICC for effective cross-cultural communication and better global understanding. Even though, statistical findings indicated a minor development, supplementary qualitative data in the form of reflections and interviews proved the validity of the hypothesis to some extent.

The review of previous studies relating to intercultural competence highlighted that intercultural research, particularly in relation to students' and teachers' perceptions regarding ICC was more common than figuring out these perceptions throughout the process of implementing intercultural curriculum. Only the research of Haerazi et al. (2018) and Güneş and Mede (2022) were similar to this study, where the focus was directed to students' development of ICC following an integration of an ICC syllabus rather than just studying respondents' perceptions. Therefore, there are not many prior works to which this study can be related and compared. The study found three significant factors affect the way students develop and perceive ICC. These factors are EFL context, lack of exposure and ethnocentrism.

The EFL context in Libya prioritize the use of language as a communication tool where learners are capable of understanding and producing basic comprehensible output and to enable them to survive in their educational journey. This kind of learning results in what Bennett (1997) calls a "fluent fool". A fluent fool is a fluent language user yet lacks the proper understanding of social references of that language and consequently cannot understand social events well enough to avoid giving or taking offence. Raising students' intercultural awareness and competence can help avoid turning students into fluent fools by using the "culture-contrast" approach as suggested by Bennett (1997) where learners are encouraged to compare native language-culture patterns to their LC2. An emphasis should be placed on

concepts and structures that are not present in the native language because it provides learners with keys to language shift which impact language experiences and play crucial roles in shaping how we acquire and use language.

This study was conducted within an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) intracultural context. In this context, L2 learners do not have consistent exposure or regular contact with English-speaking individuals. The data collection method employed self-assessment questionnaire. Consequently, it remains debatable whether participants would assess their intercultural competence (ICC) in the same manner if they were situated in an intercultural L2-learning environment since direct exposure to individuals from other cultures may have greater positive impact on the participants' development. However, Byram (1997) argued that intercultural competence can be developed by integrating the components of ICC into proper teaching practices and through curriculum development, not necessarily through direct exposure.

Another corresponding factor was ethnocentrism which was defined by Bennet (1997) as the assumption that one's own culture is central to all reality such view leads individuals to view their cultural norms as superior and judge other cultures based on their own. As opposed to ethnorelative stages, individuals at the ethnocentric stages (denial, defense and minimization) tend to be more unaware of cultural differences, perceive other cultures' norms and values as threatening. However, with proper training, participants at the stage of minimization begin to downplay cultural differences and acknowledge diversity. In this study, findings demonstrated that even though some of the participants had ethnocentric views, the majority of participants after the curricular program are shifting to the first stage of ethnorelativism, which is accepting and respecting cultural differences regardless of whether they match their own practices.

5.1 Recommendations and Further Study

The current study can be viewed as a first step towards interculturalization in Libyan contexts. However, the results of this study showed a slow pace of progress regarding students' ICC development due to lack of exposure, direct and indirect contact with individuals from diverse cultures. The researcher recommends designing and implementing virtual exchange programs that are in partnership with foreign universities to further foster cultural awareness and intercultural communication.

Future studies could further explore students' ICC development over an extended period by conducting a longitudinal study to observe changes in students' attitudes, knowledge and skills to gain a more comprehensive picture of factors affecting their ICC development.

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