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EXPLORING CULTURAL AND INTERCULTURAL DIMENSIONS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF TEACHER AND LEARNER PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract
The integration of culture and intercultural communicative competence (ICC) into English language teaching (ELT) is increasingly prioritized in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, yet how teachers perceive and implement ICC remains insufficiently understood. This review investigates the question: *How do English language teachers perceive and implement ICC in EFL/ESL classrooms across different cultural contexts? A systematic review of 23 empirical studies was conducted, with inclusion criteria focusing on teachers' perceptions and practices of ICC. Findings indicate that while teachers generally hold positive attitudes toward ICC, classroom practices are shaped by institutional support, training, and cultural familiarity. Key barriers include limited pedagogical guidance, scarce resources, and weak assessment frameworks, whereas culturally relevant materials, narratives, and experiential learning provide promising pathways for ICC integration. The review concludes that strengthening teacher preparation and developing context-sensitive pedagogies are essential, with future research needed on longitudinal impacts and student perspectives.*
Keywords: *intercultural communicative competence, cultural awareness, English language teaching, intercultural sensitivity, systematic review.*

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INTRODUCTION

Background

Importance of culture in English Language Teaching (ELT)

In the context of globalization and increasing cultural interconnectedness, the role of culture in English Language Teaching (ELT) has garnered growing attention among educators and researchers alike. As English continues to serve as a global lingua franca, it functions not only as a medium of communication but also as a vehicle for cultural exchange. Therefore, the teaching of English is inextricably linked to the teaching of culture an idea that has reshaped pedagogical practices in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms around the world.

Many scholars argue that language cannot be effectively learned or taught in isolation from its cultural context, hence teachers should incorporate cultural knowledge into teaching methods and addressing linguistic differences in culturally sensitive ways (Shemshadsara, 2012), because to prioritize authentic language use and intercultural experiences in English education is needed (Young & Sachdev, 2011). Language embodies the values, norms, and communicative styles of its speakers. Accordingly, raising intercultural awareness in language learning not only promotes

linguistic proficiency but also fosters learners' ability to navigate cross-cultural interactions with sensitivity and competence. However, there was a gap between the curriculum's aspirations for cultural awareness and the actual implementation in classrooms. While the curriculum emphasizes intercultural understanding, the textbook fails to provide authentic cultural content, limiting the realization of these goals (Gashi, 2021).

In various studies, the integration of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) has been seen as essential for preparing learners to engage in meaningful communication beyond their native cultural boundaries (Ahmed Osman & Ahmed, 2015; Hasanah & Gunawan, 2020). Teachers across contexts acknowledge that incorporating cultural content can make language learning more relevant and relatable for students, enhancing both engagement and comprehension, (Yeşil & Demiröz, 2017).

However, the inclusion of cultural components in language teaching is not without challenges. Teachers often struggle with conceptual ambiguity around what constitutes "culture" and how best to teach it (Can et al., 2011). Additionally, a lack of training, resources, and institutional support can hinder the effective integration of culture into EFL curricula (Rohmani & Andriyanti, 2022) .

Despite these obstacles, many educators view the cultural dimension of ELT as an opportunity to promote more holistic, empathetic, and globally competent learners (Hossain, 2024). This growing consensus reflects a paradigm shift in language education from a purely linguistic focus to one that embraces intercultural competence as a core learning outcome.

As such, a comprehensive understanding of how teachers perceive and implement cultural and intercultural elements in language instruction is essential. Equally important is examining how these practices impact learners' motivation, autonomy, and intercultural sensitivity an endeavor this systematic review undertakes through an analysis of recent empirical studies across various global EFL settings.

The rise of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)

The emergence of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) as a central concept in English language teaching reflects a significant shift in educational priorities within globalized learning environments. As English continues to function as an international language connecting speakers from diverse cultural backgrounds, the traditional focus on grammatical accuracy and native-speaker norms has given way to a broader emphasis on learners' ability to navigate cross-cultural communication effectively (Baker, 2009; Gashi, 2021).

ICC extends beyond mere linguistic proficiency; it encompasses attitudes, knowledge, and skills that enable learners to engage appropriately and effectively with people from other (Young & Sachdev, 2011). This includes openness to cultural difference, awareness of one's own cultural identity, empathy, and the ability to interpret and relate to cultural phenomena. As such, ICC

aligns with broader educational goals, such as preparing learners for global citizenship and intercultural collaboration (Shemshadsara, 2012).

The rise of ICC in ELT has been partly driven by the recognition that language classrooms are no longer neutral spaces but dynamic arenas where identities, values, and worldviews intersect. Teachers in various contexts—including Thailand, Indonesia, Iran, and Saudi Arabia—have expressed an increased awareness of their responsibility to develop students' intercultural skills alongside their language abilities (Hasanah & Gunawan, 2020; Ahmed Osman & Ahmed, 2015; Edalati Kian, 2018). The inclusion of ICC is also seen as a means of fostering more inclusive and culturally sensitive classroom environments.

Furthermore, ICC has gained momentum in teacher education and professional development programs, where intercultural sensitivity is now viewed as a core teaching competency. For example, (Susilo, 2019) based on the his research findings, teachers should be provided more opportunities for practical L2 exposure, such as partnerships with native speakers, cultural exchange programs, or immersive learning environments in order to shape teachers' attitudes and pedagogical choices.

However, while the theoretical value of ICC is widely accepted, its practical implementation remains uneven. Teachers often lack clear models or frameworks for embedding ICC into lesson plans and assessments (Vo, 2017 ; Can et al., 2011). This has led to growing calls for clearer guidelines, more context-sensitive approaches, and increased institutional support.

In summary, the rise of ICC in ELT represents an evolution in how language education is conceptualized, placing intercultural understanding at the heart of communicative competence. As learners increasingly engage in multilingual and multicultural interactions, ICC provides the critical framework through which English teaching can respond to the demands of a globally connected world.

Rationale for the Review

Why this review is necessary

Despite the widespread acknowledgment of the value of culture in English language teaching, the practical integration of cultural and intercultural elements in EFL contexts remains fragmented and inconsistent. Numerous studies reveal a disconnection between teachers' theoretical understanding of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) and their classroom practices (Vo, 2017; Young & Sachdev, 2011). While many educators support the notion of embedding cultural content into English instruction, some of them do not explicitly include cultural elements in their syllabi, which could lead to inconsistencies in cultural teaching practices. (Rohmani & Andriyanti, 2022).

Moreover, the global diversity of educational contexts further complicates the situation. Teachers' perceptions and practices surrounding ICC differ significantly across regions due to

sociocultural influences, educational policies, and training systems (Hasanah & Gunawan, 2020; Ahmed Osman & Ahmed, 2015). These variations highlight the need for a synthesized understanding of how ICC is conceptualized and enacted in diverse EFL settings.

In addition, while some studies have explored individual aspects of ICC, few have provided a comprehensive analysis that connects teacher perspectives, classroom challenges, and learner outcomes within a unified framework. Existing research tends to be localized, examining specific national or institutional contexts, which limits broader generalizability (Yılmaz & Özkan, 2016; Edalati Kian, 2018) As a result, there is a need for a systematic review that bridges these fragmented insights and reveals global patterns and gaps in ICC-related teaching practices.

Furthermore, the impact of culture teaching on students particularly in terms of motivation, learner autonomy, and intercultural sensitivity remains underexplored in systematic fashion. Although studies such as (Salehi Hadi & Farajnezhad Zahra, 2020 ; *Wu, 2016)* have begun to address these dimensions, findings are scattered and not always linked to broader pedagogical strategies.

Given these gaps, a systematic review that synthesizes empirical evidence from multiple cultural and national contexts is both timely and necessary. This review contributes to the field by offering a consolidated understanding of how teachers conceptualize and deliver ICC, the challenges and opportunities they face, and the observed outcomes for learners. By identifying common themes, contextual nuances, and areas for further inquiry, this review aims to inform policy, curriculum design, and teacher development initiatives in ELT worldwide.

Gaps in the current literature

Despite growing interest in the integration of cultural content and intercultural communicative competence (ICC) within English language teaching (ELT), the current body of literature reveals several persistent gaps. While numerous studies emphasize the importance of culture in EFL education, there is a lack of comprehensive, cross-contextual syntheses that unify teacher perspectives, classroom practices, and learner outcomes. Much of the existing research is localized and exploratory, focusing on specific countries or institutions without offering generalizable insights into global trends (Smakova & Paulsrud, 2020 ; Gashi, 2021).

A recurring issue in the literature is the disconnect between teachers' positive attitudes toward teaching culture and their actual classroom practices. Studies such as (Rohmani & Andriyanti, 2022 ; *Vo, 2017)* highlight this divide, attributing it to insufficient training, vague curriculum guidelines, and a lack of practical teaching resources. Although teachers strongly believe culture plays an important role in English classes and they also agree that cultural integration helps students achieve both linguistic and communicative competence, they often face the barriers including teachers' limited cultural experience and understanding, time and salary constraints, policy restrictions and lack of student interest (T. M. Pham, 2019).

Moreover, few studies have explored the long-term impact of ICC-focused instruction on students. While there is scattered evidence suggesting that cultural instruction enhances learner motivation and intercultural sensitivity, as shown in (Yeşil & Demiröz, 2017 ; *Wu, 2016)* these outcomes are not consistently assessed or measured across studies. There is a notable absence of longitudinal research that examines how sustained cultural exposure influences learner autonomy and intercultural competence over time (Salehi Hadi & Farajnezhad Zahra, 2020)

Additionally, learner voices are often underrepresented in ICC research. Although several articles consider both teacher and student perspectives e.g., (Yılmaz & Özkan, 2016) most focus predominantly on the educator's role, leaving the learner experience underexplored.

Given these limitations, this systematic review seeks to fill existing knowledge gaps by synthesizing findings from a diverse range of studies that span multiple educational, cultural, and national contexts. By organizing evidence around teacher perceptions, instructional challenges, and learner outcomes, the review aims to provide a holistic understanding of how ICC is conceptualized and operationalized in ELT, while identifying areas where further research and policy development are needed.

Research Questions

How do English language teachers perceive and implement intercultural communicative competence (ICC) in EFL/ESL classrooms across different cultural contexts?

METHOD

This study employed a systematic literature review to examine teachers' perceptions and practices of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) in English language teaching (ELT). Searches were conducted in Google Scholar, Web of Science, and ERIC using Boolean operators with the keywords *"intercultural communicative competence" OR "ICC"*, *"English language teaching" OR "ELT"*, *"English as a Foreign Language" OR "EFL"*, and *"English as a Second Language" OR "ESL"*. The review was limited to studies published in English between 2004 and 2025 to capture contemporary developments. An initial pool of 30 articles was identified, which then underwent a four-stage screening process: first, non-empirical documents such as editorials, book reviews, and conference abstracts were excluded; second, only English-language publications were retained for consistency; third, topical relevance was assessed to ensure alignment with cultural integration, intercultural communication, or ICC in ELT/ESL contexts; and fourth, studies were evaluated against inclusion and exclusion criteria, resulting in 23 empirical articles selected for final analysis. Data from these studies were systematically coded according to research context, methodological approach, teachers' perceptions, classroom practices, and identified challenges or opportunities. A descriptive analysis was then applied to

summarize and compare findings across the studies, ensuring transparency, replicability, and a clear understanding of ICC integration in ELT.

To ensure the rigor of the synthesis, all included studies (n = 23) underwent a quality appraisal adapted from established critical review checklists for qualitative and quantitative research. Each study was assessed across five criteria: (1) clarity of research objectives, (2) appropriateness of study design, (3) transparency of sampling and participant recruitment, (4) rigor and credibility of data collection and analysis, and (5) validity of conclusions in relation to the evidence presented. Studies that did not meet minimum thresholds for methodological clarity or analytical depth were excluded during the screening stage. Only studies rated as moderate to high quality were retained, ensuring that the review synthesized robust and credible evidence. This process enhanced both the transparency and replicability of the review while justifying the inclusion of the final 23 studies.

This study employed a systematic literature review (SLR) to examine teachers' perceptions and practices of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) in English language teaching (ELT). Systematic reviews were chosen because they provide a transparent, rigorous, and replicable approach to synthesizing existing evidence across diverse contexts (Siddaway et al., 2025). Searches were conducted in Google Scholar, Web of Science, and ERIC using Boolean operators with the keywords *"intercultural communicative competence" OR "ICC"*, *"English language teaching" OR "ELT"*, *"English as a Foreign Language" OR "EFL"*, and *"English as a Second Language" OR "ESL"*. The review was limited to studies published in English between 2004 and 2025 to capture contemporary developments, consistent with recommendations that reviews include both recent and seminal works to ensure comprehensiveness.

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Data from these studies were systematically coded according to research context, methodological approach, teachers' perceptions, classroom practices, and identified challenges or opportunities**.** A descriptive analysis was then applied to summarize and compare findings across the studies. Descriptive synthesis is particularly valuable in reviews of educational and social science research where diverse qualitative and quantitative methods are employed, allowing for coherent integration of findings (Bearman et al., 2012).

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Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
1. Focus on Culture or Intercultural Competence in ELT 2. Context: EFL/ESL Settings 3. Participants: Teachers and/or Students 4. Empirical Research 5. Published in English 6. Higher Education or Institutional Contexts 7. Publication Type	1. Not Focused on Cultural or ICC Themes 2. Non-Empirical or Theoretical Papers 3. Non-ELT Contexts 4. Language Learning Without Intercultural Dimension 5. Duplicate or Redundant Publications

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

a. Number of Articles Published by Year

The temporal distribution of the 23 selected articles is illustrated in the figure titled *"Article Distributions."* From 2004 to 2015, the number of publications was relatively limited, with only one article appearing sporadically in years such as 2004, 2009, 2011, and 2015. This period may be regarded as the emerging stage of scholarship, when the integration of culture and intercultural communicative competence (ICC) into English language teaching (ELT) had not yet attracted substantial attention from the academic community. The sporadic

nature of publications during these years suggests that intercultural dimensions of language education were often overshadowed by more traditional concerns such as grammar, vocabulary acquisition, and communicative competence narrowly defined (Chlopek Zofia, 2008; Shemshadsara, 2012). Consequently, ICC-related studies existed but were fragmented and peripheral to the dominant research agenda.

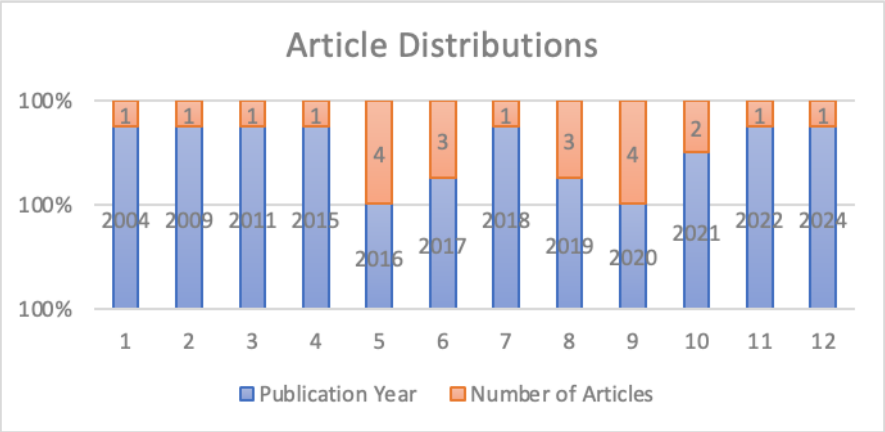
Beginning in 2016, however, there was a clear turning point marked by a significant increase in scholarly activity. That year recorded the highest number of publications in the dataset, with four articles appearing, indicating an intensified recognition of the need to incorporate cultural responsiveness into ELT practices. The momentum carried forward into the subsequent years, with strong outputs recorded in 2017 (three articles), 2019 (three articles), and 2020 (four articles). These peak years reflect broader global conversations surrounding the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy, multicultural education, and the growing recognition that effective language teaching must extend beyond structural and functional aspects of language to include intercultural awareness and communicative competence (Baker, 2009; R'boul, 2021). Such an upsurge also coincided with increased academic interest in preparing learners for participation in globalized societies, where intercultural interaction has become an indispensable skill (Hasanah & Gunawan, 2020; Hossain, 2024).

In the later years, from 2021 to 2024, the annual number of publications experienced a modest decline but nonetheless remained steady, with at least one article published each year. This indicates that although the peak intensity of research was observed in the years immediately preceding 2021, scholarly engagement with the theme has not dissipated. Instead, the steady pattern suggests that the integration of culture and ICC has become a recognized and sustained research strand within the broader field of ELT. The persistence of studies during this period may also reflect a shift from exploratory or advocacy-oriented research toward more applied and context-specific investigations that aim to refine pedagogical approaches and respond to practical classroom realities (Alzighaibi, 2024; Rohmani & Andriyanti, 2022).

Taken together, the temporal distribution demonstrates a trajectory of gradual emergence, rapid growth, and subsequent stabilization. While the early years highlight the marginal position of ICC-related studies in ELT, the mid-period surge underscores the consolidation of this research area as a central concern within applied linguistics and language pedagogy. The steady output in recent years, though slightly reduced, reflects the maturity of the field, where the integration of intercultural dimensions is no longer viewed as optional but as an essential component of effective language teaching. The distribution of the analysed articles is therefore not only a reflection of changing publication patterns but also a representation of how intercultural competence has moved from the periphery to the

mainstream of English language education research (Kahraman, 2016; Young & Sachdev, 2011). The distribution of the analysed articles can be seen in the figure 1

Figure 1. Number of Articles



The analysis of 23 selected articles examining the integration of culture and intercultural communicative competence (ICC) into English language teaching (ELT) reveals a diverse yet uneven distribution of research methodologies. As shown in the pie chart titled *"Research Method Distribution"*, the qualitative approach is the most frequently employed, representing 48% of the studies. This prevalence highlights the interpretive and exploratory character of intercultural research in language education, where context, meaning, and classroom realities are central. Qualitative studies often rely on interviews, observations, or document analysis to provide thick descriptions of teaching practices and learner experiences, enabling researchers to capture the nuanced sociocultural insights that are essential in understanding how intercultural dimensions operate in real classrooms. This dominance resonates with earlier studies, where researchers emphasized the importance of narrative, ethnographic, and interpretive methods for uncovering cultural dynamics in ELT contexts (Baker, 2009; Hidayad Ferri & Marleni, 2021).It also reflects a broader recognition that the intercultural aspects of language education cannot be reduced to numerical data alone, but instead require approaches capable of addressing identity, values, and meaning-making processes in specific cultural environments (Chlopek Zofia, 2008; Rappel, 2011).

Following qualitative research, mixed-methods designs account for 35% of the total, representing a significant trend toward methodological integration. This orientation suggests that scholars in the field increasingly value the combination of qualitative depth with the

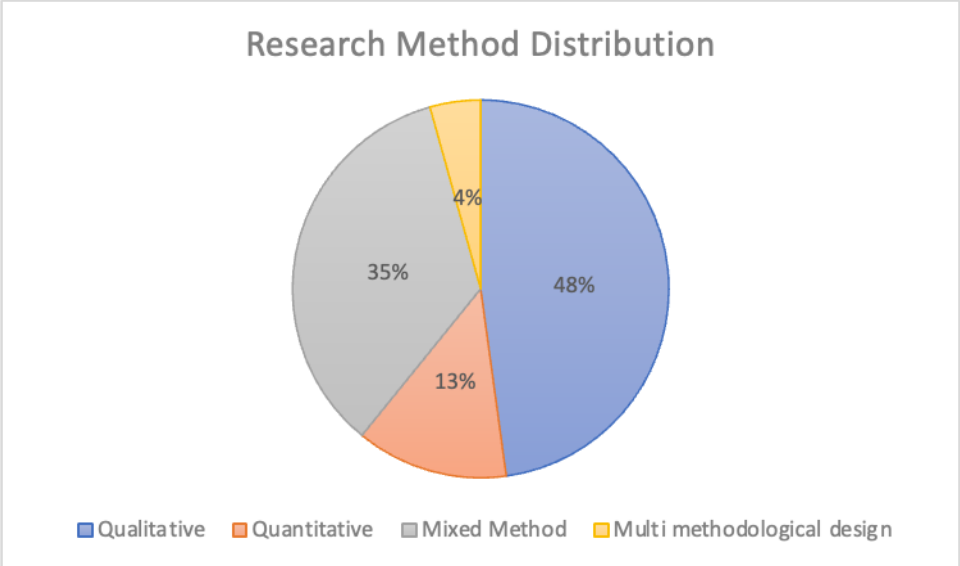
empirical rigor of quantitative approaches. By integrating classroom observations, teacher or learner interviews, and narrative data with survey results, scales, or statistical measures, mixed-methods studies provide a more holistic view of intercultural learning and teaching. This trend is consistent with calls in the literature for methodological pluralism in ICC research, where both subjective experiences and measurable outcomes are necessary to capture the complexity of intercultural learning (Hasanah & Gunawan, 2020; Wu, 2016). For instance, research in Southeast Asia and the Middle East has shown how combining perception surveys with in-depth interviews can reveal both the measurable gaps in intercultural competence and the contextual factors—such as institutional support, curricular priorities, or sociocultural norms that shape those outcomes (Alzighaibi, 2024; Vo, 2017). Thus, mixed-methods designs are not only a methodological choice but also a response to the multidimensional nature of ICC as a construct.

Quantitative studies, however, make up only 13% of the sample, suggesting that purely numerical or experimental approaches remain relatively underutilized in this area of research. Most of these studies rely on surveys, attitudinal scales, or experimental classroom interventions designed to measure students' intercultural awareness or sensitivity. While such studies provide valuable generalizations and the potential for comparability across different contexts, their scarcity highlights a gap in the literature. Scholars have noted that the dominance of descriptive and qualitative inquiry often leaves unanswered questions regarding the measurable impact of intercultural interventions, the validity of ICC assessment tools, and the longitudinal development of intercultural skills (Yeşil & Demiröz, 2017; Yılmaz & Özkan, 2016). This imbalance limits the field's ability to establish causal inferences or to systematically validate ICC frameworks across diverse cultural and educational settings (Smakova & Paulsrud, 2020; Young & Sachdev, 2011). The underrepresentation of quantitative designs underscores the need for more research that develops and tests reliable ICC measurement instruments, as well as studies that can evaluate the effectiveness of intercultural pedagogies at scale.

Finally, a small minority of studies (4%) employed multi-methodological designs, highlighting a flexible and adaptive research orientation that goes beyond traditional categorizations of qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods. Such studies combine multiple paradigms sometimes ethnography with action research, or classroom-based case studies with survey validation to address the complex, layered nature of cultural and intercultural phenomena in language education. While few in number, these studies illustrate an emerging methodological creativity that is particularly well-suited to tackling the tensions between global English discourses and local cultural (Hossain, 2024; R'boul, 2021). Their scarcity, however, suggests that the field has only begun to explore the potential of methodological innovation to bridge gaps between description, measurement, and pedagogical application.

Overall, the methodological distribution of the analysed articles indicates a strong leaning toward qualitative and integrative approaches, aligning with the inherently complex and context-dependent character of culture and ICC in ELT. The predominance of interpretive inquiry demonstrates the value of deep, situated analyses of teacher practices, student perceptions, and classroom dynamics, while the growth of mixed-methods reflects an increasing commitment to methodological rigor and triangulation. At the same time, the relatively limited presence of purely quantitative and multi-method designs reveals gaps that, if addressed, could enrich the field with stronger evidence of impact, validated assessment frameworks, and broader comparability across contexts. Future studies would benefit from adopting longitudinal or experimental components alongside qualitative depth, thereby moving the field from description toward explanation and evaluation. In this sense, the methodological profile of ICC in ELT research reflects both the strengths of cultural sensitivity and the challenges of building robust, generalizable knowledge in a field that must balance global trends with local realities (Kahraman, 2016; Rohmani & Andriyanti, 2022).

Figure 2. Research Method Distribution



Discussion

Teachers' perceptions of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) in EFL classrooms consistently reflect strong recognition of its importance, particularly in preparing learners for real-world professional and intercultural communication (Liton, 2016). Yet, as research repeatedly shows, the move from recognition to practice is far from straightforward.

The findings underscore that while teachers widely endorse ICC as a theoretical goal, its successful implementation is heavily dependent on institutional support, adequate resources, and cultural contextualization (Gu, 2005; Liton, 2016). This tension echoes (Byram, 1997) seminal model of ICC, which emphasizes not only the knowledge and skills required for intercultural encounters but also the attitudinal dispositions and critical cultural awareness that demand systemic scaffolding. Without institutional structures that allow teachers to address these dimensions, teacher perceptions of ICC remain aspirational rather than transformative.

Cross-contextual comparisons illustrate the complex interplay between cultural values and pedagogical strategies. In some contexts, teachers highlight the inseparability of language and culture, recognizing that effective language acquisition necessitates understanding cultural nuances (Navarro Bacala & Howard, 2019). In others, teachers hold fragmented or incomplete understandings of ICC (Hasanah & Gunawan, 2020), reflecting the variability of teacher education programs and local interpretations of interculturality. For instance, while Saudi and Indonesian teachers acknowledge the importance of contextualizing global content within local realities (Alzighaibi, 2024; T. M. Pham, 2019), Iranian and Turkish teachers face challenges in moving beyond teacher-fronted, exam-driven models toward more participatory, intercultural practices (Kahraman, 2016; Zamanian & Saeidi, 2017). These divergences reveal that teacher adaptability and cultural awareness are critical in shaping how ICC is interpreted and enacted. They also affirm sociocultural theory's assertion that learning and teaching are mediated by cultural tools, institutional norms, and historical practices (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978)

Despite these contextual variations, a persistent gap remains between teacher beliefs and classroom practice. Teachers often prioritize linguistic proficiency, treating ICC as an ancillary objective. When culture is integrated, it tends to focus on "big C" representations literature, history, or traditions rather than "little c" practices such as everyday values, communication styles, or identity negotiations (Smakova & Paulsrud, 2020). This mirrors (Wu, 2016)'s findings that teachers often overlook the cultivation of intercultural sensitivity, thereby reinforcing an overemphasis on linguistic competence. Similarly, (Yılmaz & Özkan, 2016)highlight the lingering bias toward Anglophone cultural models, which narrows the scope of intercultural pedagogy and risks promoting cultural essentialism. Theoretical perspectives on critical intercultural pedagogy argue against such essentialist views, urging teachers to treat culture as fluid, contested, and relational, and to engage learners in processes of reflection, comparison, and negotiation (R'boul, 2021).

Practical implications for ELT are significant. First, teacher education must go beyond raising awareness of ICC and provide concrete frameworks, tools, and strategies for classroom practice. Training programs should integrate experiential learning, role-play,

cultural simulations, and reflective journaling, aligning with Moran's Cultural Knowing Framework and (Byram, 1997) model of intercultural speaker competence. Second, curriculum design should shift from additive approaches, where culture is treated as supplementary, to transformative approaches that embed culture throughout all aspects of language teaching. This requires policies that allocate time and resources for intercultural learning, reduce exam-driven constraints, and ensure textbook content reflects cultural plurality rather than static, Western-centric views (Hossain, 2024; Rohmani & Andriyanti, 2022). Third, institutional policies should recognize ICC as a "fifth skill" of language education, alongside listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Gu, 2005; Rohmani & Andriyanti, 2022). Positioning ICC in this way legitimizes its role in assessment frameworks, teacher professional standards, and curriculum guidelines.

From a policy perspective, systemic changes are needed to bridge the gap between teachers' positive perceptions and sustainable ICC practice. Governments and ministries of education must embed intercultural outcomes into national curricula, while accreditation bodies should integrate ICC competencies into teacher evaluation systems. Schools and universities should invest in professional development opportunities that expose teachers to diverse intercultural experiences, whether through exchange programs, international collaborations, or digital intercultural platforms. Such reforms would operationalize the principle that language learning is not only about linguistic accuracy but about enabling learners to navigate diversity, build tolerance, and engage ethically with others in an interconnected world (Ahmed Osman & Ahmed, 2015; Yeşil & Demiröz, 2017; Young & Sachdev, 2011).

In sum, while teachers across contexts recognize the intrinsic link between language and culture and endorse ICC as a vital pedagogical goal, implementation remains fragmented and uneven. By drawing on established theories of intercultural learning, situating practice within local realities, and pursuing systemic reforms in teacher education and curriculum policy, it becomes possible to transform ICC from an aspirational concept into a lived pedagogical practice. This transformation requires moving beyond surface-level cultural content toward critical, dynamic, and reflective approaches that equip learners not merely to "know about" cultures but to *engage with them meaningfully* in the complexity of global communication.

CONCLUSION

The findings highlight important implications for theory, practice, and policy in English language teaching. Theoretically, intercultural communicative competence (ICC) must be reconceptualized as a dynamic and developmental process rather than a static skill, requiring

frameworks that integrate cultural context, pedagogy, and assessment. In practice, teachers need professional development that equips them with practical strategies such as experiential activities, intercultural projects, and digital exchanges to embed ICC as a “fifth skill” alongside core language skills. At the policy level, systemic reforms are necessary to embed intercultural outcomes into curricula, assessments, and teacher education, while fostering international collaborations to ensure diverse and inclusive perspectives. Taken together, these directions emphasize that ICC integration demands a coordinated approach linking theory, classroom practice, and institutional policy to prepare learners for meaningful engagement in an interconnected world.

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