

## Effective Strategies for Teaching Intercultural Communicative Competence among Iranian Late Beginner Language Learners: A Case Study

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### Abstract

This study explores the realm of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) within the context of Iranian beginner language learners. As our world becomes increasingly interconnected, the ability to navigate cultural differences and engage in effective cross-cultural communication has grown in significance. The study adopts a qualitative approach, drawing upon a comprehensive case study that delves into the practical implementation and outcomes of selected pedagogical methods. Through a literature review, key theories in intercultural competence and second language acquisition are synthesized to guide the selection of pedagogical strategies. To address the research question, the researcher employed diverse student evaluation materials, which were then juxtaposed against the benchmark for intercultural communication proficiency at the beginner level. In order to delve into the perceptions of cultural identity held by three novice language learners, their perspectives on various cultures, and their comprehension of language's role, an analysis of interview responses was conducted by the researcher. Results indicated that the used strategies significantly enhance intercultural skills in late beginner language students, enabling better understanding and connection with diverse cultures. Another finding was that students exhibit diverse thoughts and feelings when encountering various cultures, highlighting the need for sensitive intercultural education. Finally, by fostering culturally sensitive and effective communicators, the researchers could contribute to a more inclusive and harmonious global community, one where diverse perspective are celebrated and understood. This case study serves as a stepping stone towards achieving that vision, providing a roadmap for effective ICC instruction and inspiring further research into this critical domain of language education.

**Keywords:** Case study, Culture, Cultural identity, Intercultural communicative competence (ICC), Language

## Introduction

The current study contributed to the theoretical knowledge base of ICC. The research into ICC is a relatively recent field of study that has evolved over the past decade (Wagner, Cardetti, & Byram, 2016). Consequently, there was scant research existing in the field of ICC as relates to Iranian instructional practices. The same situation existed when viewing the research on ICC at the international level. Additional studies would expand the current knowledge base and increase educators' understanding of ICC and its development in students. Furthermore, the present study focused on the development of ICC in beginning language students. Conversely, most studies concentrated on adult teachers, undergraduate university students, or high school students (Eulalia Guerrero Moya, Muñoz Ortiz, & Niño Díaz, 2015; Ghanem, 2017; Kazykhankyzy & Alagözlü, 2019; Masterson, 2015; Quyen Vo, 2018; Wagner, Cardetti, & Byram, 2016). Limited research concentrated on Iranian students who were just beginning their language studies.

The researcher is a foreign language teacher and also student who is interested in the learning of culture and how culture could clarify and define the understanding of self. The researcher wants to know that if learning culture only happens by traveling and living abroad and if it is the case, a number of foreign students lack the ability to travel and live abroad; thus, the researcher was interested in learning how students in a classroom understood a different cultural perspective, how that new perspective affected the student's own concept of culture and self, and how the perception influenced his or her interactions with others.

In an increasingly interconnected and globalized world, the importance of intercultural competence has become a focal point in education. As individuals interact with people from diverse cultural backgrounds, the ability to understand and navigate different cultural perspectives becomes essential. However, the question arises regarding how individuals can develop intercultural competence if they are unable to travel and experience different cultures firsthand. This concern is particularly relevant for foreign language students who may lack the opportunity to live and study abroad. Learning culture in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes holds significant importance for several reasons (Ghavamnia, 2020; Civelek et al., 2021).

Therefore, this research aims to evaluate the understanding of intercultural competence development of late beginner learners to provide valuable insights into language education practices in diverse settings.

## Method

The present qualitative case study involved a selected group of Iranian individuals who were at the late beginner level of language proficiency. These participants played a pivotal role in providing insights into the effectiveness of strategies aimed at enhancing their intercultural communicative competence (ICC). The research included three students, aged between 12 and 13, encompassing both male and female individuals. They were studying Family and Friends books in Miad Language Institute in Urmia, Iran. Learners were admitted to this level by passing basic levels. All the participants spoke Turkish as their first language. For all the students, Persian was the formal language. Since the medium of instruction in this institute is English, thus, teachers were not allowed to use languages other than English to clarify the instructions during the research. The decision to include three participants in this research was based on several considerations.

Having three participants allowed for a small but representative sample of Iranian individuals at the late beginner level of language proficiency. This ensured that the insights gained from this research would be applicable to a broader population of learners at a similar language proficiency stage. The inclusion of both male and female participants ensured gender diversity, which is important for comprehensively assessing the effectiveness of strategies in intercultural communication. It acknowledged potential gender-related differences in learning and communication styles.

### **Assessments and Measures**

The researcher selected two evaluations regardless of their alignment with the study's focus on culture learning and the acquisition of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) abilities. These assessments consisted of an English Artist Project, and an English Biography Project. Apart from concentrating on Iranian culture, these evaluations incorporated teaching methodologies that prior research has indicated as effective for instructing ICC. These strategies encompassed active engagement and exploration by students, interdisciplinary exploration, sharing and deliberation of cultural encounters, leveraging technology to foster a sense of community, and employing tele-collaboration and other computer-based tools (Ali, 2015; Byram & Wagner, 2018; Çiftçi, 2016; Deardorff, 2011; Euler, 2017; Koutlak & Eslami, 2018; Lee & Song, 2019; López-Rocha, 2016; Masterson, 2015; Rauschert & Byram, 2018; Serna Dimas, 2016; Snodin, 2015; Taskiran, 2019; Wagner, Cardetti, & Byram, 2016). Through the examination of student assignments, encompassing their answers and viewpoints, the researcher gained an in-depth comprehension that couldn't be attained or ascertained through alternative means (Glesne, 2016). These tools, represented by the student documents, offered content that corroborated, extended, or posed questions to the interview data. They contributed to a more comprehensive portrayal of the students' perspectives, granting them a stronger presence and influence in the research (Glesne, 2016).

Following a thorough review of the assessment materials and the subsequent data analysis, an additional method, namely interviews, was employed by the researcher. These interviews involved the three student participants and were conducted during the Spring term, 2023 in Miad Language Institute. These sub-questions aimed to uncover the perspectives of novice language learners concerning their cultural identity, perceptions of diverse cultures, and comprehension of the role of language. The students' answers to the sub-questions also contributed to addressing the main inquiry of the study, which centered around examining the impact of ICC teaching strategies on novice language learners. In the interview phase, the researcher opted for a set of twenty questions that were adapted from a survey tool originally developed by Kazykhankyzy and Alagözlü in 2019. The purpose behind selecting these twenty questions was to gather information pertaining to each of the ICC (Intercultural Communicative Competence) skill sets defined by Byram in 1997, which include intercultural skills, intercultural attitudes, intercultural awareness, and intercultural knowledge.

## Results

Both the English Artist Project and the English Biography Project exemplified the integration of interdisciplinary study. The projects merged artistic and historical exploration, encouraging students to delve into various domains like art, history, music, sports, and literature. This strategy enhanced students' grasp of cultural complexities.

In English Artist Project, students volunteered beyond the limitations of language learning alone. As students investigated the lives and works of artists, they navigated the intricate interplay between art and history. This dynamic engagement expanded their cognitive horizons, enabling them to appreciate how cultural expressions are entwined with the socio-political currents of their times. The integration of artistic and historical dimensions prompted students to adopt a holistic approach, considering not only the visual aesthetics but also the cultural narratives that these works encapsulated.

Similarly, the English Biography Project underscored the potential of interdisciplinary exploration. Through this endeavor, students were encouraged to select figures from diverse domains such as music, literature, sports, and culinary arts. This process ignited an exploration of these individuals' contributions and their impact on both the English-speaking world and the global cultural conception.

By embracing different disciplines, students not only deepened their understanding of the selected figures' accomplishments but also encountered the various threads that interconnect cultures across domains. The integration of disciplines propelled students beyond a confined silo of knowledge, encouraging them to embrace a holistic perspective. As they pass through diverse domains, they began to perceive cultural complexities through multifaceted lenses. This interplay between disciplines nurtured their ability to approach intercultural encounters with a richer, more informed viewpoint. Within the research journey, the interview phase assumed a pivotal role in enriching the study's depth and breadth. Through skillfully conducted semi-structured interviews, students were provided with a platform to articulate their intricate perspectives on crucial themes, including cultural identity, perceptions of diverse cultures, and the intricate role of language. This strategic approach went beyond surface-level responses; it unveiled the very essence of intercultural attitudes, knowledge, and awareness residing within the participants. By engaging in these candid conversations, students contributed to a dynamic exchange of thoughts, experiences, and insights, fostering a valuable dialogue that echoed the essence of intercultural communicative competence.

In the meanwhile, the interview phase assumed another dimension – that of a reflective mirror. As students shared their experiences and perceptions, a process of personal introspection was catalyzed. This intimate journey of self-awareness transcended the classroom, guiding students to delve into their own intercultural encounters with a discerning eye. These moments of introspection added layers of depth to the study. They wove together the theoretical underpinnings with the practical tapestry of lived experiences. By exploring their own intercultural growth, students not only added authenticity but also contributed a layer of nuance that bridged the external dynamics with their own evolving understanding.

In essence, the interview phase harmoniously interwove discussion, dialogue, and introspection. By sharing their perspectives on intercultural matters, students added vibrant brushstrokes to the canvas of the study.

As the interviews went on, the students didn't just talk about their thoughts, but they also thought deeply about their own experiences with different cultures. They looked at how these experiences had affected the way they think and what they know about other cultures. This self-reflection didn't stop in the classroom; it made the students think about how they were getting better at understanding and communicating with people from different backgrounds. For instance, one student shared her personal experiences of growing up in a multicultural neighborhood and how it shaped her understanding of cultural diversity. Another student discussed his encounters with a foreigner on vacation and how he learned to figure out cultural differences through language. These interviews allowed students to express their thoughts and experiences deeply, going beyond surface-level responses.

### Discussion

Previous research has demonstrated the significant impact of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) teaching strategies on learners' development of cultural understanding and effective intercultural communication skills. Several studies have explored the effectiveness of various ICC teaching approaches and methods, shedding light on their positive outcomes and benefits. These studies and many others highlight the positive impact of ICC teaching strategies on learners' development of intercultural competencies. The findings underscore the importance of experiential learning, technology-mediated exchanges, and the integration of ICC throughout the language curriculum. By implementing effective ICC teaching strategies, educators can equip learners with the necessary skills and attitudes to engage in meaningful and successful intercultural communication in our increasingly globalized world.

This case study aims to go into the Miad Language Center in Iran and investigate the impact of intercultural competence teaching strategies on beginning language students. Intercultural competence is understood as a combination of attitudes, knowledge, understanding, and skills that enable individuals to appreciate and respect others from different cultural backgrounds and communicate effectively with them. The theoretical frameworks of Byram's Five Characteristics and Fantini's Five Components of Intercultural Competence guided this research, exploring the relationship between intercultural competence competencies, effective teaching strategies, and the development of intercultural competence among beginning language students. The findings of this study contributed to the existing knowledge base, specifically addressing the needs of language and culture teachers and those involved in teacher training programs. By identifying effective strategies for teaching intercultural competence and assessing their impact, this research aims to enhance the understanding of intercultural competence development and provide valuable insights into language education practices in diverse settings.

The pursuit of effective strategies for teaching intercultural communicative competence (ICC) to late beginner language learners in Iran presents a complex and multifaceted challenge. While the integration of intercultural competence into language education is widely acknowledged

as essential in our increasingly interconnected world, there are several limitations that educators must address to ensure successful implementation. This section delves into some of the primary limitations that educators may encounter when teaching ICC to Iranian late beginner language learners, offering insights into the potential obstacles and considerations for overcoming them.

- **Generalizability:** Since the present research study is a case study focused on Iranian late beginner language learners, the findings may not be directly applicable to other cultural contexts or language proficiency levels. The limited scope of this study might affect the generalizability of the strategies the researcher identified. The strategies we discovered were tailored to the unique circumstances and experiences of Iranian late beginner language learners. These students have their own distinct cultural background, language proficiency level, and educational environment. Therefore, it's crucial to recognize that what works well for them might not necessarily yield the same results for learners from different cultural backgrounds or language proficiency stages.
- **Sample Size:** The case study nature of this research study involved a relatively small sample size of participants. This might restrict the extent to which the researcher could draw robust conclusions about the effectiveness of the strategies for a broader population of Iranian late beginner language learners.
- **Homogeneity of the Sample:** The participants in the present study are likely to share certain characteristics due to the nature of the case study. This homogeneity might limit the diversity of perspectives and experiences represented in the findings.
- **External Validity:** The specific conditions and context in which the research took place might limit the applicability of the findings to real-world classroom settings. Factors such as teacher expertise, class size, and available resources could impact the transferability of the strategies.
- **Time Constraints:** Conducting a thorough study on effective strategies for teaching intercultural communicative competence may require a longer time frame than is feasible for the present thesis. Researchers might need more time to observe the long-term impacts of these strategies on learners' language development and intercultural competence.
- **Researcher Bias:** The researcher's personal beliefs and attitudes about intercultural communication and teaching strategies might unintentionally influence the selection of participants, data interpretation, and the presentation of results.
- **Ethical Consideration:** Depending on the strategies employed and the nature of the interactions with participants, there might be ethical challenges to consider. These could include issues related to privacy, informed consent, and potential cultural sensitivities.
- **Limited Control Over Variables:** In a case study, there might be certain variables that are beyond the researcher's control, such as participants' prior language learning experiences, motivations, and exposure to intercultural interactions outside the classroom. These variables could affect the outcomes of the study.
- **Resource Constraints:** The researcher might encounter limitations in terms of time and access to appropriate teaching materials or technologies, which could impact the implementation and effectiveness of the teaching strategies.

- Long-Term Sustainability: The effectiveness of teaching strategies might vary over time, and what works well for late beginner learners might need to be adapted for more advanced stages of language learning. Addressing the sustainability of these strategies in the long run could be a challenge.

Addressing these limitations requires a multifaceted approach that integrates language learning with cultural awareness and effective communication strategies. Educators must be sensitive to the unique needs of Iranian late beginner language learners while fostering an environment that encourages open-mindedness, curiosity, and cross-cultural understanding. By acknowledging and navigating these limitations, educators can pave the way for the successful integration of intercultural communicative competence into language education in Iran.

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## Appendix A

### English Artist Project

Students are tasked with creating a 10-slide Google Slide biography about their favorite artist, along with a canvas reproduction of one of the artist's works. Each student will present for approximately 5 to 7 minutes in class and are encouraged to incorporate props such as videos, posters, or music to enhance their presentation.

The analysis should focus on the artist's life, body of work, legacy, uniqueness, and historical context. Additionally, students should provide insights into the selected painting or sculpture, including its title and the story behind it. The assessment considers both the content and the presentation style, which may vary widely due to the diverse range of artists, countries, time periods, and art movements. Students should aim to be well-versed in their material, avoiding reading directly from notes. Creativity and interactivity in presentations are encouraged.

It's important to note that artistic skill is not the basis of evaluation; rather, students are assessed on their efforts to capture the style of their chosen artist.

## Appendix B

### English Biography Project

For this project, the student should consider notable individuals from an English-speaking country or background.

Select a person of English-speaking descent for research. This person may be historical or contemporary and can be famous in any field. The more intriguing the subject, the easier the project will be.

Research on the chosen individual should involve the use of at least four sources. Keep track of sources for inclusion in the final presentation. Various resources such as printed materials, online sources, music, TV, etc., may be utilized.

The presentation in class should last 4-5 minutes and must be delivered without notes. Detailed specifics, such as exact dates, are not necessary. Students can include a short audio or video sample and start with the name or nickname of the famous English person. Mention the individual's age or birth year and, if applicable, the year of death. Include information about their place of origin, which can be illustrated on a map.

Discuss interesting facts about the person before they became famous, such as childhood anecdotes and the path that led them to their renowned career. Provide details about their career and accomplishments, including awards, achievements, and any charitable contributions or affiliations. Finally, share personal opinions about the chosen individual and explain the reason for selecting them for the project.

## Appendix C

### Interview Questions

1. Can you distinguish contrasts between your own culture and those of English-speaking cultures? How do you perceive the differences between American and Persian-speaking cultures? Kindly provide a few instances as examples.
2. Can you pinpoint resemblances between your own culture and English-speaking cultures? How do you view the similarities between American and Persian-speaking cultures? Please provide a few examples.
3. Are you capable of engaging in a conversation with an individual from a different culture? Do you aspire to communicate with someone in another language? What are your reasons for wanting to, or not wanting to?
4. Drawing from your understanding of the cultures studied in your class, can you envision establishing a friendship with someone from a diverse culture? What factors contribute to your inclination or reluctance?
5. Do you find pleasure in acquiring knowledge about various cultures' traditions, holidays, concepts, or daily routines? Could you provide some instances of what you've learned?
6. Have you encountered individuals from different cultures either through life experiences? Could you share your experiences? Are you generally intrigued by the prospect of connecting with people from diverse cultures?
7. As a result of your involvement in the English Artist Biography Projects, both your own and your classmates', did you derive enjoyment from reimagining art and exploring art from other cultures? What prompted this sentiment, or what led to your lack of enthusiasm? What insights did you gain about the culture, country, or people through these artistic projects?
8. Did you derive satisfaction from sampling new foods or beverages or participating in cultural festivals? Could you elucidate your reasons for enjoying or not enjoying these experiences? What parallels and disparities did you observe between the cuisines, drinks, or celebrations from English-speaking countries and those of yours?
9. Did you find delight in listening to or singing music from other cultures? What were the reasons behind your enjoyment or lack thereof? What parallels and distinctions did you notice between the music or lyrics from English-speaking countries and those of the yours?
10. In a broader sense, do you possess an interest in traveling to different countries? Do you entertain the idea of studying or residing abroad in another country, either for a short period or an extended duration? What influences your inclination or disinclination towards these prospects?
11. Do you consider the acquisition of a foreign language important? Could you elucidate the reasons behind your perspective?
12. Throughout the previous academic year, as you compared your own culture to others, did you sense an enhanced understanding of yourself as an American? If so, what insights have you gained? Similarly, do you believe you have also attained a deeper comprehension of the English language or its grammar? If yes, please elaborate on what you've learned.
13. Generally speaking, do you feel at ease or uneasy when you find yourself engaging with individuals from different cultures? Could you provide reasons for your comfort level or discomfort? Kindly elaborate.

14. Typically, when you interact with individuals from diverse cultures, do you encounter challenges in dealing with distinct behaviors or ways of behaving? What factors contribute to your ease or difficulty in such situations? Please elaborate.
15. In a general context, do you derive enjoyment from watching movies or TV shows in English or another language? Kindly elaborate on your preferences.
16. In a general context, how do you view music in English or another language? Does it resonate with you? Please provide reasons for your viewpoint.
17. In a general context, what are your impressions of artwork originating from different cultures? Do you appreciate observing it or gaining insights about it? Explain the reasons behind your perspective.
18. Do you find pleasure in learning about renowned figures from other countries or cultures? Could you elaborate on why you enjoy or do not enjoy this activity?
19. Are you capable of comprehending a meme, cartoon, or text in a foreign language? Do you find pleasure in reading them in English or another language? Could you explain your preferences?
20. Do you believe it is important to consider the values and beliefs of another culture when engaging in communication with someone from that culture? Kindly elucidate your perspective.

### Appendix D: Interview Transcription

#### Student 1

21. Can you distinguish contrasts between your own culture and those of English-speaking cultures? How do you perceive the differences between American and Persian-speaking cultures? Kindly provide a few instances as examples.
  - Yes, as I come from Iran a country in the Middle East, it is natural for us to have different cultures from the others.
  - The differences belong to the social and religious beliefs.
  - Asian people are more emotional than English-speaking countries. Religious beliefs play an important role in all of the aspects of lives.
22. Can you pinpoint resemblances between your own culture and English-speaking cultures? How do you view the similarities between American and Persian-speaking cultures? Please provide a few examples.
  - It is difficult to talk about a culture that you have not lived in before.
  - In both of them, paying attention to education and technology is important.
23. Are you capable of engaging in a conversation with an individual from a different culture? Do you aspire to communicate with someone in another language? What are your reasons for wanting to, or not wanting to?
  - Yes, of course I can. I am always interested in getting familiar with different people coming from other countries. I can expand my international information.
24. Drawing from your understanding of the cultures studied in your class, can you envision establishing a friendship with someone from a diverse culture? What factors contribute to your inclination or reluctance?

- Looking for basic similarities plays an important role in making friendships. My imaginary friend must have had at least a few moral beliefs in common with me.
- 25. Do you find pleasure in acquiring knowledge about various cultures' traditions, holidays, concepts, or daily routines? Could you provide some instances of what you've learned?
  1. Yes, it is really fantastic and satisfying.
  2. I myself have learned some points about foods and celebrations.
- 26. Have you encountered individuals from different cultures either through life experiences? Could you share your experiences? Are you generally intrigued by the prospect of connecting with people from diverse cultures?
  - Yes, I have had the experience of meeting tourists in my country. It was a really enthusiastic life experience.
- 27. As a result of your involvement in the English Artist Biography Projects, both your own and your classmates', did you derive enjoyment from reimagining art and exploring art from other cultures? What prompted this sentiment, or what led to your lack of enthusiasm? What insights did you gain about the culture, country, or people through these artistic projects?
  - Art has always been a mutual language between all of the cultures around the world.
  - Considering the fact that art always expresses the beliefs of each society, it is easy to encounter mentioned points.
- 28. Did you derive satisfaction from sampling new foods or beverages or participating in cultural festivals? Could you elucidate your reasons for enjoying or not enjoying these experiences? What parallels and disparities did you observe between the cuisines, drinks, or celebrations from English-speaking countries and those of yours?
  - Yes, foods are always attractive for me and testing them is enjoyable for me.
  - There are differences in the recipes and also in the served drinks.
- 29. Did you find delight in listening to or singing music from other cultures? What were the reasons behind your enjoyment or lack thereof? What parallels and distinctions did you notice between the music or lyrics from English-speaking countries and those of the yours?
  - Music is a really powerful factor that can unite the people worldwide, because it is possible for people to be interested in different types of music no matter where they come from.
- 30. In a broader sense, do you possess an interest in traveling to different countries? Do you entertain the idea of studying or residing abroad in another country, either for a short period or an extended duration? What influences your inclination or disinclination towards these prospects?
  - Personally speaking, I myself really enjoy travelling. So, visiting new places and experiencing new cultures has always been fascinating for me.
- 31. Do you consider the acquisition of a foreign language important? Could you elucidate the reasons behind your perspective?
  - Being capable of talking in another language, increases people's abilities in expanding their opportunities in being successful in their lives.
- 32. Throughout the previous academic year, as you compared your own culture to others, did you sense an enhanced understanding of yourself as an American? If so, what insights have you gained? Similarly, do you believe you have also attained a deeper comprehension of the English language or its grammar? If yes, please elaborate on what you've learned.

- Yes, learning English language and grammar was really helpful in making me more familiar to American culture.
33. Generally speaking, do you feel at ease or uneasy when you find yourself engaging with individuals from different cultures? Could you provide reasons for your comfort level or discomfort? Kindly elaborate.
- It is easy for me to make new friendships specially with the people from other cultures. As a friendly person, I am comfortable with this situation.
34. Typically, when you interact with individuals from diverse cultures, do you encounter challenges in dealing with distinct behaviors or ways of behaving? What factors contribute to your ease or difficulty in such situations? Please elaborate.
- I imagine that only behavioral differences would be difficult for me to tolerate.
35. In a general context, do you derive enjoyment from watching movies or TV shows in English or another language? Kindly elaborate on your preferences.
- Yes, absolutely I enjoy. Because it helps me improve my language skills.
36. In a general context, how do you view music in English or another language? Does it resonate with you? Please provide reasons for your viewpoint.
- Totally I enjoy listening music in English.
37. In a general context, what are your impressions of artwork originating from different cultures? Do you appreciate observing it or gaining insights about it? Explain the reasons behind your perspective.
- As mentioned above, I personally admire experiencing different artworks.
38. Do you find pleasure in learning about renowned figures from other countries or cultures? Could you elaborate on why you enjoy or do not enjoy this activity?
- This factor doesn't carry importance for me.
39. Are you capable of comprehending a meme, cartoon, or text in a foreign language? Do you find pleasure in reading them in English or another language? Could you explain your preferences?
- Yes, animations have always been interesting and inspiring for me. Watching them also help me with improving my language skills.
40. Do you believe it is important to consider the values and beliefs of another culture when engaging in communication with someone from that culture? Kindly elucidate your perspective.
- Yes, of course. In this way you show your respect to the host culture.