

An Investigation of Iranians and International English Students' Attitudes towards Intercultural Communicative Competence

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Abstract

The present study aimed to investigate the attitudes and perceived nature of thinking and understanding towards intercultural communicative competence (ICC) among International English major students. Accordingly, this study employed the paradigm of a sequential mixed-method research, in which it comprised a qualitative phase followed by a quantitative phase. The participants of the first phase of the study were 30 undergraduate English major students in their third year at Isfahan Islamic Azad University in Iran; and the participants of the second phase of the study included 30 international ESL students in their first year at Gonzaga University (GU), in Washington, U.S. The analysis of narratives in the first phase of the study indicated that the participants had diverse attitudes towards intercultural encounters. The results of the statistical analyses of the second phase of the study showed that the most important individual difference variables directly influencing students' intercultural communicative competence were their communication apprehension and their perceived communicative competence. This study also showed that students' self-image as communicators were of utmost importance: if students believe they are good communicators in English, they are more likely to be self-confident and are more likely to take part in intercultural encounters. Thus, instructors should help students achieve a realistic self-image about their performance in English and support them if they lack self-confidence.

Keywords: Attitude, Encounters, Intercultural Communicative Competence, Iranian EFL Students, Perceived Competence

Introduction

Intercultural communication takes place when individuals influenced by different cultural communities negotiate shared meanings in interaction (Ting-Toomey, 1999). What counts as intercultural communication depends in part on what one considers a culture, and the definition of culture itself is quite contestable. Some authorities limit the term “intercultural communication” to refer only to communication among individuals from different *nationalities* (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003). Other authorities, in contrast, expand the notion of intercultural communication to encompass inter-ethnic, inter-religious, and even inter-regional communication, as well as communication among individuals of different sexual orientations (Martin & Nakayama, 2015). In this sense, all interactions can be arrayed along some continuum of interculturalness (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003). Interactions are most highly intercultural when individuals’ group identities are most salient in determining the values, prejudices, language, nonverbal behaviors, and relational styles upon which those individuals draw. To the degree that interactants are drawing more on personal or idiosyncratic values, personality traits, and experiences, the interaction can be characterized as more interpersonal than intercultural.

According to the finding of a study performed by Pourakbari and Chalak (2015), it can be inferred that the participants’ weakness in interaction confidence should also be derived from challenges in both language and cultural aspects. These two barriers must be overcome in order to improve interaction confidence. As second language and culture learning is rather a comprehensive and chronological process, there is a long way for Iranian learners to go in perfecting their foreign language and cultural competence. Only a linguistic competence can hardly help Iranian learners achieve a fairly satisfactory intercultural competence without rich intercultural experience in reality. Through adjusting Iranian learners’ attitude and behavior in intercultural interaction and gaining more intercultural knowledge consciously, their interaction confidence will be improved and then their intercultural sensitivity will be raised.

When reviewing the literature on intercultural communication competence, it can be found that there are some inconsistencies in how the construct itself is being labeled. Different authors have used different terms to refer to the very similar construct. The variety of terms used can be attributed to different factors: terms either vary according to how culture is defined, or may be attributed to the academic tradition the author comes from (Kramsch, 1998a). As some scholars use terms inconsistently or interchangeably, it is rather confusing and challenging to survey what is

being covered by the ‘buzz-word’ intercultural communication (Bakic-Miric, 2008).

A significant number of theories have been developed within social sciences to understand the nature of intercultural competence (IC) and to reveal what makes someone a successful and competent communicator in intercultural encounters. Theories on Intercultural Competence are mostly concerned with adaptation and adjustment and focus on social issues.

An evaluation conducted in a study by Pourakbari and Chalak (2015) states that there is still some room available for improvement in terms of the general level of Iranian learners’ intercultural sensitivity. Improving intercultural sensitivity will help intercultural communication more successfully and effectively. Iranian learners with their special educational background and professional skills can always serve as bridges between different cultures; and, developing their intercultural sensitivity will better equip them for their future intercultural obstacles to overcome. Dusi, Messetti, and Steinbach (2014) believe that the progress of intercultural communication competence needs involvements in the daily practices with specific focus on social skills, self-awareness, cultural-information, and organizational awareness. The higher degree of intercultural contacts in the era of globalization asks individuals to be more skilled in intercultural communication (Ameli & Molaei, 2012).

Samovar and Porter (1991) states that IC occurs whenever a message producer is a member of one culture and a message receiver is a member of another, and whenever the parties to a communication act bring with them different experiential backgrounds that reflect a longstanding deposit of group experience, knowledge and values, we have intercultural communication.

The arbitrary selection of terms used in the academic fields dealing with intercultural situations challenges clear definitions of the construct of ICC. Some authors use the terms intercultural communicative competence, others prefer intercultural communication competence, whereas some use either of the terms interchangeably with intercultural competence. Therefore, a review of definitions of both is essential in understanding these constructs in intercultural dimensions.

There is, however, a similar term, Communication Competence, very often used in the field of communication studies (Duran & Spitzberg, 1995). I believe that the confusing overlap between the terms intercultural communication competence and intercultural communicative competence (both abbreviated in the literature as ICC) is due to the fact that these two

academic fields use the distinct terms communication competence (communication studies) and communicative competence (applied linguistics) mostly independently of one another. The definitions of communication competence tend to emphasize two important criteria in communication: (a) effectiveness and (b) appropriateness. In Spitzberg and Cupach's (1984) definition, communication competence is the ability to choose a communication behavior that is both appropriate and effective in a given situation. Spitzberg (1988) states that competent communication is an interaction that is perceived as effective in fulfilling certain rewarding objectives in a way that is also appropriate to the context in which the interaction occurs.

Studies on intercultural communication competence conducted in the field of communication studies view people engaged in communication interactants, and focus on whether and how communication is effective and appropriate (Spitzberg, 2000). Studies on intercultural communicative competence on the other hand, in the field of applied linguistics view the parties of communication language learners/users; researching whether their utterances are appropriate in the given intercultural context (Byram, 1997; Kramersch, 2010).

One way of describing whether an individual is competent in intercultural situations is to refer to their ICC. Byram (1997) argues for using the term ICC, as it displays and maintains a link with recent traditions in foreign language teaching (FLT), and it broadens the concept of communicative competence (CC). Byram (1997, p.7) defines ICC as the "individual's ability to communicate and interact across cultural boundaries". An individual "with intercultural competence" in Byram and Fleming's definition 'has the knowledge of one, or, preferably, more cultures and social identities and has the capacity to discover and relate to new people from other contexts for which they have not been prepared directly' (1998). Byram (2008) defines the intercultural speaker (IS) as someone who, being aware of cultural differences and similarities can function as a mediator between distinct cultures and diverse sets of beliefs, values, and behaviors.

In Byram's (1997) model, the components of ICC include (a) attitudes, (b) knowledge, and (c) skills. Byram specifies the components by providing a detailed description of each: attitudes concern the ones towards people perceived as different, in other words attitudes that are frequently labeled as prejudices or stereotypes. The attitudes required for successful IC need to include curiosity, openness, and readiness to suspend disbeliefs and judgments about other cultures and about one's own. Byram distinguishes

two types of knowledge: (a) knowledge of social groups and their practices in one's own or in one's interlocutor's country, and (b) knowledge of the process of societal and individual interaction. These kinds of knowledge are partly acquired through socialization (a) and institutionalized learning (both (a) and (b)). The third sets of components are skills: the ability to apply knowledge and tailor it to different situations. The two distinct categories established are (a) skills of interpreting and relating, and (b) skills of discovery and interaction. It is when individuals, drawing on their *previous knowledge*, are required to analyze, interpret and relate to a manifesto of a different culture; whereas the skills of discovery and interaction denote the ability to recognize significant cultural phenomena, elicit their meanings and find out how they interact with other phenomena, thus, the ability to acquire *new knowledge*. In other words, the required skills include the ability of making use of existing knowledge together with the ability to recognize and acquire new knowledge in the course of the interaction. There is a fourth component: critical cultural awareness that enables individuals to critically evaluate perspectives, practices and products of their own, and their interlocutors' cultures.

The individual's existing knowledge of their own and their interlocutor's culture, and of the interaction process in general is bound in multiple and complex ways with their skills of interpreting and discovering, that is to say, with their ability to make use of previous knowledge and acquire new knowledge, and with their critical awareness. As Byram (1997) argues, his model of attitudes, knowledge and skills already includes a refined definition of the other three competences as Van Ek states, that is, social competence, strategic competence and sociocultural competence. The new definition of these competences, in his understanding, makes up intercultural competence, which combined with linguistic, socio-linguistic and discourse competences make up ICC.

Despite the fact that Byram (1997) describes what he means by these three competences, he fails to add how his definitions relate to the original usage of the terms. As discussed above, the term linguistic competence was first used by Hymes (1972), the term sociolinguistic competence by Canale and Swain (1980), and the term discourse competence by Canale (1983) and later by Celce-Murcia, M., Dörnyei, Z., and Thurrell, S. (1995). In Hymes's definition, linguistic competence is responsible for understanding and producing grammatically correct sentences, whereas sociolinguistic competence is the term Canale and Swain (1980) use in their model to

emphasize the social aspect of communication; yet discourse competence is described by Canale (1983) as included in sociolinguistic competence.

The motivation to write this article derived from researchers' long years of experience living in different countries that people perceive and perform differently in intercultural situations. The researchers intended to get a clearer picture of the circumstances influencing individuals' behavior in intercultural encounters. In fact, their interest in individual differences and language learning triggered the core idea underlying this research: certain individual variables influence the way language learners behave and interact in intercultural situations. Thus, the objectives of the study were twofold: to evaluate the students' attitudes towards intercultural encounters and to characterize the students' perceived intercultural communicative competence in relation to their success, motivation, attitudes, anxiety and willingness to communicate. The following research questions were formulated to explore, survey, and investigate the complex nature of the international English major students' perceived intercultural communicative competence:

RQ1: What are the international English students' attitudes towards intercultural communicative competence?

RQ2: What components can affect international English students' motivation, willingness to communicate and success in relation to perceived intercultural communicative competence?

Method

Participants

Participants of the qualitative phase of the study were 30 English students in their third year at Khorasgan University, Isfahan, Iran. All of them had completed introductory courses on a wide range of topics from different fields, such as linguistics, applied linguistics, communication studies, socio and psycho linguistics. As a result, students became familiar with the basic theories underlying intercultural interactions during their studies. The age of students ranged from 23 to 28. There were 22 female and 13 male participants. All participants were native speakers of Iranian language (Persian), and considered English their first foreign language. All of them had been studying English for a minimum of six years at the time data were collected.

Participants of the quantitative phase of the study were 30 international ESL students male and female in their first year with different nationalities and their L1 being languages other than English at Gonzaga University took part in this phase of the study. The fundamental elements driven the

researchers to select the participants for this phase of the study from Gonzaga University were: (1) it was not possible for the researchers to obtain such group of international students as participants for this study in any universities or English institutes in Iran. (2) The fact that the first author of the present article lived in the United States for more than 25 years and completed his BSc and MA at Gonzaga University; hence, he was familiar with the university, the regulations, and its different ESL classes.

Instrumentation

Personal Narratives (phase one)

To implement the qualitative phase of the study the researchers asked six international students at GU from different countries to write one page of retrospective narrative about their experiences, opinions, expectations, and learning with different cultures in all aspects they could think of. Then, the retrospective narratives were collected and the texts were analyzed, then three narratives were selected to be utilized for the qualitative phase of the study. A senior's opinion was also considered in selecting the final narratives. These personal narratives were interesting enough to provoke participants' ideas about similar experiences: one narrative was an account of a successful intercultural communication encounter, one was an unsuccessful one, and one was about differences in lifestyles in different countries. Finally, the narratives were used as a guide for data collections of the qualitative phase of the study. The participants were also asked to fill in a personal questionnaire on their background: their age, gender, mother tongue, the number of years studying English, and the number of IC courses completed.

Intercultural Communicative Competence Questionnaire (ICCQ) (phase two)

The findings of the first phase of the study (qualitative) were implemented in the second phase of the study (quantitative). The first phase revealed that students' behavior in intercultural situations was affected by *situational aspects*, *knowledge aspects*, and *affective aspects*. In order to better understand how these aspects actually influence students' attitudes and perceptions toward ICC, the researchers designed, validated, piloted and implemented the ICC questionnaire in a second phase of the study. The ICC questionnaire presented the development, piloting and implementation of an instrument to survey the international English students' ICC. The variables the questionnaire measured were *Motivation*, *Willingness to Communicate*, *Perceived ICC*, *Perceived Communicative Competence*, *Frequency of*

Intercultural Contact, Communication Apprehension and Perceived Language Proficiency.

To develop the ICC questionnaire, first an item-pool was drawn up (Dörnyei, 2003, 2007). Then the following sources were used to help create as many potential items as the researchers could think of: *findings of the first phase of the study, findings of previous qualitative studies, and items borrowed from published questionnaires* (Dörnyei, 2007). This indicated how the item-pool was created and resulted in the pilot questionnaires (PQ1 and PQ2) and the final questionnaire (FQ).

The ICC questionnaire items were carefully selected and the opinion of a senior researcher was also considered. The initial version of the questionnaire was subjected to a think-aloud study in order to detect shortcomings. After that, the modified version was piloted on a smaller sample to check validity and reliability. The data collection instrument was the final ICC questionnaire (FICCCQ). As a result of the changes subsequent to the pilot study, FICCCQ was composed of the final selected items. The structure of the FICCCQ was as follows:

Section I was made up of items to which participants answered with percentage values. These items comprised the reduced and modified version of McCroskey's (1992) willingness to communicate (WTC) scale.

Section II included perceived intercultural communicative competence (PICC) and perceived communicative competence (PCC). The items on PICC developed for this study were based on Byram (1997), whereas the items on PCC were adapted from McCroskey and Richmond (1987). Answers to these items were percentage values, similarly to the previous section.

Section III contained items to which answers were indicated on a five-point Likert scale (5=strongly agree; 1=strongly disagree). These items were the modified and shortened version of McCroskey's communication apprehension scale (1992).

Section IV consisted of items on various affective aspects and ICC. The answers were provided on a five-point Likert-scale (5=absolutely true; 1=absolutely not true). This section combined various scales: on motivation and on perceived L2 competence (Nagy, 2009); and on intercultural contact (some items were adapted from Csizér and Kormos, 2009, and some items were developed by the researchers themselves). This section also contained items on ICC, such as knowledge, skills and attitudes. These items were created by the researchers as a result of careful review of corresponding literature (Byram, 1997; Jaeger, 2001; Kramsch, 1998b; Zaharna, 2009).

Section V were data on the background of the research participants, i.e. their age, their gender, the number and level of foreign languages they speak and the amount of time they had spent in foreign countries. These items were mostly open-ended.

The Qualitative Phase

The qualitative phase of the study was carried out to uncover the factors contributing to the English major students' attitudes towards intercultural communication encounters. The researchers' intention was to get a holistic view on students' evaluation of their previous intercultural encounters, to be able to determine what factors influence their performances, and to gain an in-depth understanding of their experiences. Qualitative studies on ICC mostly employ interviews, diaries, narratives or observation for data collection.

The Quantitative Phase

The quantitative phase of the study consisted of analysis and calculations of factors, relationships, variance, affective variables and all the data obtained from the first phase of the study. Here a questionnaire was employed to explore how these variables are related to ICC. To examine the relationship between these variables, correlation analysis was performed, aiming to uncover the strength and direction of the relationship between variables (Dörnyei, 2007). Thus, apart from correlation, multiple regressions were also performed to get a more precise picture on participants' ICC. Regression analysis is a frequently used statistical technique that aims to explain variance in the level of one variable on the basis of the level of other variables. Regression analysis makes it possible to assess the strength of the relationship between each predictor variable to the criterion variable (Cohen, West & Alken, 2003).

Procedure

In qualitative phase of the study the participants were asked to read the three personal narratives mentioned above as a guide and to write a short personal narrative in English of about 200-300 words of their own encounters, experiences, opinions, expectations, and learning with different cultures. Their narratives should describe an event where they felt similarly to one of the sample narratives. This took place in a classroom and was administered by one of the researchers during 60 minutes.

Then, the participants' narratives were read several times to obtain general understanding of the type of information in the text. Meanwhile, two senior literature professors were asked to read the narratives and to identify the themes and focal points which were considered for the analysis. Finally,

the students' defined intercultural encounters were categorized according to the following categories:

- 1) The students' definitions of intercultural encounters.
- 2) The students' narratives differences.
- 3) The context analysis of interaction.
- 4) Analysis of the Participants' role in IC encounters.

In quantitative phase of the study, in order to find out how the participants will interpret the questionnaire items, two think-aloud sessions were administered with three participants who were similar to the sample participants, but were not in the study. The aim of the think-aloud study was to explore how participants would comprehend and interpret the items as well as to detect possible shortcomings in item wording, vocabulary use or layout. The administration procedure of the final questionnaire (FQ) was supervised by the researchers and the head of English department in November 2016. After collecting the completed questionnaires they were coded so that the anonymity of participants could be ensured. Finally, the results were digitalized and ready for the statistical analysis using SPSS 20.0.

Design

This study employed the paradigm of a mixed-method research and comprised a qualitative phase followed by a quantitative phase. Mixed-method studies integrate the two approaches, that is, qualitative and quantitative at one or more stages of the research process with the aim of achieving a fuller understanding of a target phenomenon (Dörnyei, 2007).

Results

To analyze the participants' narratives, they were read many times to obtain general understanding of the type of information in the text. Then, two senior literature professors were asked to read the narratives and to identify themes and focal points; their inputs were also considered. After that, the students' defined intercultural encounters were categorized. Table 1, illustrates the identified patterns of the students' narratives analysis:

Table 1
Patterns in Students' Narratives

Knowledge	Factors :	IC Knowledge	Ignorance	Language proficiency	Awareness
Affective	Factors :	Motivation	Anxiety	Attitudes	Anger WTC
Topic	:	Successful	Unsuccessful	Surprise	
Context	:	Country	Setting	Interlocutor	
		Iran, Abroad	Private, Public	Social Status, Linguistic background	
Focus	:	Language use		Differences	
		English, Farsi		Life style, Meals, Tradition, Religion	

Participants' Topics of Narratives

The participants' narratives were analyzed on the basis of what kind of memory they wrote about:

Table 2
Participants' Topics of Narratives

Type of Encounter	No. of Students
Successful communication encounters	14 students
Unsuccessful communication encounters	5 students
Surprise in lifestyles	11 students

With the exceptions of three students, almost all participants' narratives presented situations in which actual interactions of individuals were involved, in which they talked in English with either a native speaker (NS) of English, or a non-native speaker (NNS) such as people from European countries, or Asians; the other three participants' narratives described surprises at the differences of lifestyle when they visited other countries or observing people from other cultures in Iran (Table 3).

Table 3
The Interlocutors' Origin

(NS) s of English		(NNS) s of English		
GB	US	European	Asian	Others
3	2	17	6	2

Summary of the First Phase of the Study

To summarize this phase of the study, the students described their intercultural encounters in terms of Successful, Unsuccessful, and Surprise, and mostly defined intercultural communication as situations in which English was used as a common medium. In most narratives, the participants

stated that they perceived the encounters influential in their lives. Followings are some of their quotes:

"This was an important event in my life." (Participant 22)

"I will never forget this encounter." (Participant 11)

"This was so embarrassing not to know the differences in cultures." (Participant 3)

However, some participants indicated events in which they neither had communication act nor the language use, but they specified the surprise they had at observing other cultures; and for two students intercultural interactions did not even mean interacting in a foreign language.

Out of 30 students that participated in this phase of the study 14 students had visited foreign countries, eight wrote about European countries, like France, England or Germany, and two students described their trips to far east like India and Malaysia, one student to the US and one to Antalya. We should keep in mind that not all students have the luxury of being blessed with wealthy families who could afford these kinds of trips to get to know a broad range of cultures and people. One of these blessed students stated:

"Thank god I have a family that is fortunate enough to be financially well off and enjoys travelling all over the world. Because of this, I have visited many countries and have learned about different cultures in my life." (Participant 10)

Never the less, those students who were not lucky enough to have been abroad they showed their emotions in not very favorable terms. Some pointed out not having the financial feasibilities and other lack of possibilities, and some did not state any reasons.

"If I had better financial situations, I would travel around the world." (Participant 13)

"Unfortunately, I have never been abroad." (Participant 19)

"I like to meet people from different countries and learn about different cultures, but I don't have the money." (Participant 2)

Iranian students are deprived of many opportunities; they do not have as many options as other students from other countries have like European students. Iranian students are deprived of the privilege of extensive traveling; they do not have chances to acquaint themselves with other cultures either at the university, in the neighborhood where they live, or during leisure activities like European students do. European students have none of those limitations. There is the host family program or *ERASMUS* for the US, Canada, and all European countries; Iranian students are deprived of that and deprived of hundreds of other privileges. Followings are what some students wrote:

"We don't have any foreign students at our university like the US and European universities; therefore to meet and have communicative encounters with people from other cultures will be next to nothing." (Participant 1)

"There are not any foreign students or instructors in our universities or English institutes like other countries. And, we don't have host family program in Iran. So, you see we are very limited to have English communications with people of other cultures in Iran. I personally go out and try to start conversations with tourists. Isfahan is a tourist attraction city which is full of tourists." (Participant 17)

"Iranian students have extreme limitations to have communicative encounters with people of other cultures; when I have the chance to meet people from other cultures, which are often the tourists, I usually take it." (Participant 7)

Out of 30 students participated in this phase of the study only one student visited an English-speaking country. What keeps the Iranian students from visiting these countries are mostly due to two factors, visa and lack of financial means; not only does the researcher confirm this reality, since he has spent more than 25 years of his life in the US, GB, and other countries, but also he asked all the participants this question personally. And with the exception of one very wealthy girl among the students, they all confirmed the above reality. Furthermore, the student narratives also indicated that although the participants in this phase of the study had many things in common, they were all in their twenties, were born and grew up in Iran, spoke Persian and English, were enrolled to the same university studying in the same degree program, there were vast differences between the amount and quality of their intercultural encounters. Evidently, even students who could not afford travelling overseas have also had opportunities to acquaint themselves with members of other cultures in their own country.

All participants provided information on the context of the encounter; in which the context was presented in terms of the *interlocutor* and the *specific setting* of the interaction. Results revealed that students had limited contacts with NSs of English; only four narratives described situations in which a NS of English was involved. As a result, participants used English in intercultural encounters mostly with other members for whom English was also a foreign language. The intercultural experiences participants noted in their narratives with NSs of English were very pleasant and memorable. The positive memories participants wrote about in connection with their NS

contacts are very important, as they play a key role in attitude formation. As Byram (1997, p. 35) described it, the attitudes required for successful intercultural communication include curiosity, openness, and readiness to suspend disbeliefs and judgments about other cultures, and about one's own. These attitudes are most easily formed if the participant has had pleasant experiences with members of other cultures. According to Dörnyei & Csizér (2005) attitudes towards speakers of a language most often determine attitudes towards the target language, and thus it also has an impact on motivation to learn the language.

With regards to the NNSs interlocutors, the remaining twenty-six narratives comprised a substantial variety of people with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, both from Europe (16) and from Asia (10). Table 4 presents the nationality of the interlocutors who were NNSs of English.

Table 4
The Nationality of Interlocutors who were NNSs of English

European Nationalities:	Asian Nationalities
Belgian 1, Denmark 2, French 2, Hungarians 4, Italian 1, Nederland 2, Norwegian 2, Turkish 2	Arab 1, Chinese 3, Japanese 1, Korean 3, Thai 2

With regards to the specific setting of the encounter, in 25 narratives, participants provided a detailed description of the setting of the encounter (Table 5).

Table 5
The Categories of the Specific Settings of Students' Interaction

Public places			Private places		
Open settings	Closed settings	Total	Open settings	Closed settings	Total
15	5	20	3	2	5

In 95% of the narratives the students themselves were directly involved as communication partners. In other cases, the participants wrote about events in which they had an observer's role. These encounters mostly accounted for the surprise they felt at becoming familiar with others' lifestyles. The students' narratives indicated that an intercultural encounter does not necessarily have to involve verbal communication acts; observing other cultures attentively is also stimulating for students and such

opportunities raise their awareness towards differences across cultures. The participants' narratives identified the following patterns: *Attitudes towards other cultures, Motivation, Willingness to communicate, Language proficiency, Anxiety, Cultural differences, Knowledge of other cultures.*

Cultural differences or lifestyles were pointed out by participants in most narratives. This shows that participants tend to perceive intercultural encounters in terms of difference. They frequently emphasized the difference in a variety of aspects of foreign cultures, such as social behavior, everyday life, meals, traditions and religion. Culture shock happens as a result of feeling of anxiety because of losing our familiar signs and symbols of social interaction (Samovar & Porter, 2004, p. 295). A vast collection of empirical research confirms this stating that when speaking about their intercultural experiences participants tend to highlight difference across cultures, be that difference in eating habits, food, clothing, social practices, conventions of interactions or any basic aspects of everyday life (Nagy, 2003; Callahan, 2010).

Cognitive aspects, such as knowledge of other cultures and language proficiency had strong effects in students' narratives on their intercultural experiences. Almost every student wrote about these categories; they either described how their knowledge or language proficiency facilitated their intercultural encounters, or wrote about how their lack of knowledge and their limited language proficiency hindered their success.

Affective variables are related to feelings, as they are emotional characteristics influencing how individuals react to certain situations (Dörnyei, 2005). Motivation and attitude are commonly considered the two major affective variables (Dörnyei, 2005; Ellis, 1994). These two were shown in 22 narratives. Other affective variables like, anger, anxiety and willingness to communicate (WTC) were also reflected in students' writings. Overall 28 patterns related to affective variables were identified in the narratives; their distributions were as follows: *Attitude (35%), Motivation (28%), Willingness to communicate (25%), and Anxiety (12%).*

Table 6
Students Patterns Related to their Affective Variables

Affective Variables	Percentage
Attitude	35%
Motivation	28%
Willingness to communicate (WTC)	25%
Anxiety	12%

Summary of the Second Phase of the Study

The first phase of the study revealed that students' behaviors in intercultural situations were affected by *situational aspects*, *knowledge aspects*, and *affective aspects*. In order to better understand how these aspects actually influence students' ICC, the researcher designed, validated, piloted and implemented a questionnaire in the second phase of the study. The second phase of the study consisted of analysis and calculations of factors, relationships, variance, affective variables and all the data obtained from the first phase of the study. A descriptive statistics was also implemented to summarize numerical data on different characteristics of participants, i.e., their ICC, their willingness to communicate (WTC), their motivation, anxiety, language proficiency, etc. The variables the questionnaires measured were *Motivation*, *Willingness to Communicate*, *Perceived ICC*, *Perceived Communicative Competence*, *Frequency of Intercultural Contact*, *Communication Apprehension* and *Perceived Language Proficiency*. To examine the relationship between these variables, correlation analysis was performed, aiming to uncover the strength and direction of the relationship between variables (Dörnyei, 2007). Apart from correlation, multiple regressions were also performed to get a more precise picture on participants' ICC.

Overview and explanations

The primary aim behind this study was to find out about participants' ICC. The ICCFQ comprised two scales to elicit data on students' ICC: (1) items on the PICC-scale (Alpha=0.75) in which the participants had to indicate in percentage how competent they believed they were in those described situations; (2) items on the ICC scale (Alpha=0.85) that followed the basis of Byram's content specification of ICC (Byram 1997), in which case participants indicated how true each statement was for them using a 5-point Likert scale (1=absolutely not true, 5=absolutely true).

The items of the ICC scale fell into the principal components of *knowledge, skills* and *attitudes*. Using descriptive statistics, the results revealed that the average students scored 2.97 on the ICC scale (SD=0.28). In addition, the sub-scales of ICC on *knowledge, skills* and *attitudes* displayed roughly similar results, with somewhat higher SDs, though. (Table 7)

Table 7
Performance Scores on ICC Scale on a 5-Point Likert Scale

	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
ICC	30	2.11	3.98	2.97	.287
ICCK*	30	1.89	3.88	2.95	.446
ICCS*	30	1.88	3.87	2.98	.494
ICCA*	30	1.98	3.96	2.96	.438

*ICCK: knowledge component; ICCS: skills component; ICCA: attitudes component

To find out more about students' ICC, the researcher created categories of *low, average* and *high* ICC establishing the categories based on scores one standard deviation below and above the mean of the ICC scale. Table 8 shows the number of students in each category.

Table 8
Distribution of Participants on the ICC Scale

	Frequency	Percent
ICC (L)	4	13.3
ICC (A)	20	66.6
ICC (H)	6	20.1
Total	30	100.0

The majority of the students (66.6%) achieved an average score on the ICC scale. Over 13 percent of the sample can be classified as low ICC, whereas 20 percent scored above the average level, indicating high ICC.

The second measure on students' ICC included in the instrument was the PICC scale, to which students were requested to reply by giving percentage values. Participants' answers to the PICC scale indicated 0 for the lowest value and 100 for the highest. (Table 9)

Table 9

Performance Scores on the PICC Scale

	N	Min	Max	Mean	SI
PICC	30	29.15	100	72.78	12.12

As Table 9 shows, the PICC mean score of the sample was 72.8 (SD=12.12). The PICC categories were established similarly to the ICC categories: students scoring within one standard deviation below and above the mean score were considered having average PICC. Table 10 shows the number of students with low, average and high PICC.

Table 10

Distribution of Participants on the PICC Scale

	Frequency	Percent
PICC (L)	5	16.6
PICC (A)	21	70.1
PICC (H)	4	13.3
Total	30	100.0

As Table 10 presents, the majority of students fall within the average category (70.1%), whereas over 16 percent can be classified as having low PICC, and over 13 percent as having high PICC.

How ICC and PICC relate to one-another

The reason for including two different types of scales to measure ICC was the need for getting diverse data from multiple sources. However, for more complex statistical analyses one single variable on ICC was needed. Thus, at this point it was crucial to merge the two values. This, however, is not unproblematic: first, evidence is needed that the two scales relate to one another, and second, the fact that they elicited different answer types (5-point Likert scale and percentage values) yields for equating the two types of answers.

In order to get a solid and reliable measure of students' ICC, the researchers intended to map the relationship between their scores on the ICC scale and their scores on the PICC scale. To investigate this relationship, the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was computed. (Table 11)

Table 11

Correlation	Components of ICC and PICC Scales			
	ICCK	ICCS	ICCA	ICC
ICCS	.617*			
ICCA	.012	.118		
ICC	.657*	.726*	.463*	
PICC	.201*	.291*	.112	.312*

*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

With reference to the principal components of the ICC scale the correlation coefficient indicated strong relationship ($p < .01$) between the *knowledge* component of ICC (ICCK) and the *skill* component of ICC (ICCS) ($r = .617$). The obtained results showed no significant relationship between ICCK and attitude component of ICC (ICCA), and between ICCS and ICCA. As for the PICC scale, significant correlations ($p < .01$) were found with the ICC scale ($r = .312$), and with two principal components of the ICC scale: ICCK ($r = .201$) and ICCS ($r = .291$). The results revealed a significant relationship between the ICC scale and the PICC scale, thus, there was evidence that the results of the respective scales can be merged. As the two scales required different types of answers, there was a need to establish a common value for them, to be able to gain the combined scores. This was done using the following equation: combined ICC = $1/2 [(ICC-2)*20+PICC]$.

The new, combined values were calculated, and to obtain more reliable results participants were classified again according to the new, combined scores (Table 12).

Table 12

Students' Scores on the Combined ICC Measure (0-100)

	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
ICC-C	30	36.21	93.40	62.21	8.21

On average, students' combined ICC score is 62.21(SD=8.21). Similarly to previous steps the categories of low, average and high ICC were established. The number of students in each category is shown in Table 13.

Table 13

Participants on the ICC Scale, based on the combined scores

	Frequency	Percent
ICC (L)	6	20.1
ICC (A)	20	66.6
ICC (H)	4	13.3
Total	30	100.0

As Table 13 presents, the majority of students fall within the average category (66.6%), whereas 20 percent can be classified as low ICC, and 13.3 percent as high ICC. These frequency measures display more similarity with the frequency measures for the single ICC scale than with the frequency measures of the single PICC scale, but this difference is minor. What all the frequency measures show is that although results in the three categories display normal distribution, there are always slightly more students with low ICC than with high ICC.

To find out about participants' affective profiles, results of the WTC scale (Alpha=.75), the CA scale (Alpha=.85) and the motivational scale (Alpha=.70) were analyzed. Results are shown in Table 14.

Table 14

Scores for the Affective Scales (WTC: 0-100; CA, MOT: 5-point Likert Scale)

	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
WTC	30	43.12	100	73.16	14.34
CA	30	0.46	3.98	2.11	.64
MOT	30	2.98	4.82	3.79	.32

Results show that on average, participants scored 73.16 on the WTC scale (SD=14.34), where they had to indicate their answers in percentages; 2.11 on the CA and 3.79 on the MOT scales, which required answers on a 5-point Likert scale 1 meaning low CA and low MOT, and 5 meaning high CA and high MOT. However, SD for the CA scale was much higher (.64 as opposed to .32 of the MOT scale) indicating that participants' answers for this scale were more varied.

As a next step, categories of high, average and low WTC, CA and MOT were established. Table 15 shows the frequency measures for each category for all three affective variables.

Table 15
Participants on the WTC, CA and MOT Scales

	Frequency	Percent
WTC (L)	5	16.6
WTC (A)	17	56.7
WTC (H)	8	26.7
Total	30	100.0
CA (L)	7	23.3
CA (A)	20	66.7
CA (H)	3	10.0
Total	30	100.0
MOT (L)	5	16.7
MOT (A)	21	70.0
MOT (H)	4	13.3
Total	30	100.0

Somewhat more than half of the students (56.7%) can be characterized by average WTC, over 16 percent by low WTC, whereas 26.7 percent by high WTC.

As for CA, a majority falls within the average category (66.7%), whereas more than 23.3 percent of participants have low CA and 10 percent are highly anxious about communication in English.

Results for motivation fit the best the normal distribution curve: 70 percent of students have average motivation, and participants at each end of the scale are more even (16.7% for low scores on MOT, and 13.3% for high scores on MOT).

The qualitative phase of this study revealed that affective factors contribute to how students act in intercultural situations. However, the researcher wanted to obtain quantitative evidence on the relationships between affective variables and ICC. To find out more about these relationships, the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was computed for participants' combined ICC scores, their WTC, CA and MOT. Results are shown in Table 16.

Table 16
Correlation Matrix of Affective Variables and ICC

	ICC	WTC	CA
WTC	.428*		*
CA	-.512*	-.363*	*
MOT	.216*	.202*	-.102

* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

In this phase of the study regression analysis was performed to get a clearer picture on the relationships among these variables. The analysis was meant to find out how much variance in individuals' ICC scores can be explained by the affective variables WTC, CA and MOT. Results show that students self-perceived communicative competence and L2 proficiency display similarities: 19 students had average scores on the PCC scale, and 21 had average scores on the PL2 scales. 4 respondents had low PCC scores, whereas 7 had high; as for the PL2 scores, 4 students scored low, and 5 scored high. In case of the ICO scale, 22 students fell in the average category, 5 students scored high on this scale, indicating very frequent intercultural contact; whereas 3 scored low.

The correlation analysis was performed to find out whether the above individual difference variables are related to ICC. The analysis revealed significant ($p < .01$) relationships between each of the individual differences and ICC. PCC had the highest correlation ($r = .638$) with ICC, and PL2 had a similarly high value ($r = .512$). The ICO variable had somewhat more modest, yet still significant correlation with ICC.

Discussion

The primary goal that initiated this study was to explore about students' ICC. The study indicated that an objective data on competence could be attained by ICC scale and PCC scale. Correlation analysis revealed that these two scales could be merged; hence, a consistently well founded measure of participants' ICC was obtained. The average combined ICC score of students was 20 (0-100). Almost 66.6% of the students had average ICC scores, whereas 4 scored higher than the average and (21.1%) of the students were characterized by low ICC. Research show that time spent in an English speaking country or a foreign country significantly enhances students' attitudes and openness towards other cultures, thus facilitating ICC (Nagy, 2008; Pedersen, 2009). However, bio data of students revealed that they had spent relatively little time in English-speaking or foreign countries; moreover, enormous individual differences were found: almost half of the students (48%) had not been to English speaking countries before, and out

of them, 25 students had never been abroad. Therefore, their relatively high average ICC scores may result from their studies and other experiences.

As stated in the previous sections, the first phase of the study revealed that students' behaviors in intercultural situations were affected by situational aspects, knowledge aspects, and affective aspects. In order to characterize how these aspects actually influence students' ICC, the researcher designed, validated, piloted and implemented the ICC questionnaire in the second phase of the study. The variables the questionnaires measured were Motivation, Willingness to Communicate, Perceived ICC, Perceived Communicative Competence, Frequency of Intercultural Contact, Communication Apprehension and Perceived Language Proficiency. A descriptive statistics was also implemented to summarize numerical data on students' ICC, willingness to communicate (WTC), motivation, anxiety, language proficiency, etc.

The analysis revealed significant relationships between each of the individual differences and ICC. PCC had the highest correlation with ICC, and PL2 had a similarly high value. The ICO variable had somewhat more modest, yet still significant correlation with ICC. An additional finding is the correlation between the individual difference variables: PL2 and PCC were significant; and the coefficient obtained for ICO in relation to both PCC and PL2 was significant too, however, somewhat lower for PCC and PL2.

Regression analysis provided deeper insight into the relationship between these individual difference variables and PICC. As stated and illustrated in previous sections, ICC was entered as dependent variable, whereas the other individual difference variables were entered stepwise as independent variables, first PCC, then PL2 and then ICO.

The second measure on students' ICC included in the instrument was the PICC scale, to which students were requested to reply by giving percentage values. Majority of students fell within the average category (70.1%), whereas over 16 percent were classified as having low PICC, and over 13 percent as having high PICC. In order to get a solid and reliable measure of students' ICC, the relationship between the students' scores on the ICC scale and their scores on the PICC scale was analyzed, in which the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was implemented. The correlation coefficient for the principal components of the ICC scale indicated strong relationship between ICCK and ICCS. The obtained results showed no significant relationship between ICCK and ICCA and between ICCS and ICCA. As for the PICC scale, significant correlations were found with the

ICC scale, and with two principal components of the ICC scale: ICCK and ICCS.

In this study, descriptive statistics, correlation analysis and regression analysis were performed on the dataset. The statistical analysis revealed that:

1. The average combined ICC score of students was 20 (0-100). Almost 66.6 percent of the students had average ICC scores, whereas 4 scored higher than the average. However, (21.1%) of the student were characterized by low ICC.

2. On the affective variable scales (WTC, CA and MOT) results displayed normal distribution. The majority of students fell in the average categories regarding their willingness to communicate in English, their apprehension about it, and their motivation in doing so. In all cases there were slightly more students with high WTC, CA and MOT than with low, which seems to be the result of the fact that these students are English language majors and thus more willing, more motivated and less anxious to talk in English than an average language learner. Findings concerning the relationship between affective variables revealed the strongest negative relationship between CA and ICC, indicating that anxiety is most likely to affect performance in intercultural situations. Willingness to communicate in English was also found to significantly correlate with ICC.

3. Both students' perceived communicative competence and perceived L2 competence are strongly related to ICC. However, regression analysis proved that PCC explained almost 50 percent in the variance of students' ICC scores, thus revealing PCC to be a very important predictor of ICC.

4. Although students had a high frequency of intercultural contact, only a surprisingly weak link was found between the students' ICC and the frequency of their intercultural contact. Moreover, stepwise regression analysis excluded the ICO variable, and concluded that it does not explain variance in students' ICC scores. These results were rather unexpected as one would assume that students' exposure to foreign cultures through contact contributes to their ICC to a great extent.

It must be noted that although this study presented a carefully designed method to map the relationship between individual variables and ICC, caution must be taken when interpreting the results. As all the variables measured by the data collection instrument are embedded in context, the results must be viewed in context, as well. Some variables measured by the instrument (e.g., attitudes, motivation, anxiety) are very difficult to describe in numbers, as these experiences can best be understood in contextualized human experiences. Moreover, the results of the correlation analyses

revealed that almost all variables were connected with one-another, which brings it to the fact that the complex and multi-faceted construct of intercultural communicative competence is very difficult to adequately survey. This may also be supported by recent trends in research methodology viewing constructs in complex systems (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008). This complexity and embedded nature of the construct were the very reasons for choosing a mixed-method design in this dissertation, hoping to achieve a better, more complex understanding of students' experiences.

The findings of this study are beneficial for teachers, as the narratives provided by participants proved that revisiting previous intercultural experiences is a task students find interesting, useful and entertaining. The retrospective design of the task helped them to reflect on their and their interlocutors' behavior in light of what they had studied in their courses. The results of the study showed that students' ICC was affected by their anxiety. This echoed those of previous studies conducted with similar English language majors (Nagy 2009). Instructors should pay special attention to reducing learners' anxiety in classrooms, which can be achieved by creating a relaxed and friendly atmosphere free of competition. Raising students' awareness about the negative effects of anxiety is also crucial, as it may induce more conscious actions. Findings also suggest that students' self-image as communicators (their perceived communicative competence and their perceived L2 competence) are of utmost importance: if students believe they are good communicators in English, they are more likely to be self-confident and are more likely to take part in intercultural encounters. Therefore, instructors should help students achieve a realistic self-image about their performance in English and support them if they lack self-confidence.

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