



Assessing Knowledge and Awareness in Intercultural Communicative Competence Among EFL Postgraduate Learners: A Situational Approach

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Abstract

The study at hand attempts to assess intercultural communicative competence (ICC) level for postgraduate English Foreign Language learners (EFLs) in three Iraqi's universities, using triangulation methodology in collecting data to fill in the gap of using inaccurate methodologies in assessing ICC. The study adopted a modified model of Alvino Fantini's (2001) model of intercultural communicative competence. This study will concentrate on two components of ICC: awareness and knowledge. The tools used in this study are intercultural communicative competence questionnaire (ICCQ) which explores how students perceive their intercultural competence (IC), oral proficiency interview (OPI) to test learners' oral language proficiency, and situational judgment test (SJT) to objectively assess their ICC level. Therefore, the study belongs to mix-method methodology. The sample were thirty postgraduate EFL learners, with 10 individuals from the University of Mosul, 10 from the University of Anbar, and 10 from the Tikrit University and each group of ten is homogeneous in terms of gender. The collected data underwent several statistical analyses to obtain reliable results. The results reveal that the ICC level among postgraduate EFL learners in the three universities is generally low.

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تقييم المعرفة والوعي في الكفاءة التواصلية بين الثقافات لدى طلاب الدراسات العليا لتعليم اللغة الإنكليزية كلغة أجنبية: منهج قائم على المواقف

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المستخلص

تحاول الدراسة الحالية تقييم مستوى الكفاءة التواصلية بين الثقافات (ICC) لدى طلاب الدراسات العليا في تعليم اللغة الإنكليزية كلغة أجنبية (EFLs) في ثلاث جامعات عراقية، باستخدام منهجية التثليث في جمع البيانات لسد الفجوة الناتجة عن استخدام منهجيات غير دقيقة في تقييم الكفاءة التواصلية بين الثقافات. اعتمدت الدراسة نموذجاً معدلاً عن نموذج ألفينو فانتيني (2001) للكفاءة التواصلية بين الثقافات. ستركز هذه الدراسة على مكونين من مكونات الكفاءة التواصلية بين الثقافات: الوعي والمعرفة. الأدوات المستخدمة في هذه الدراسة تشمل استبيان الكفاءة التواصلية بين الثقافات (ICCQ) الذي يستكشف كيف يقيم الطلاب كفاءتهم الثقافية، واختبار الكفاءة الشفوية (OPI) لاختبار كفاءة الطلاب

في اللغة الشفوية، واختبار الحكم الموقفي (SJT) لتقييم مستوى الكفاءة التواصلية بين الثقافات بشكل موضوعي. بناءً على ذلك، تنتمي هذه الدراسة إلى منهجية البحث المختلط. شملت العينة ثلاثين طالبًا من طلاب الدراسات العليا في تعليم اللغة الإنكليزية كلغة أجنبية، بواقع 10 أفراد من جامعة الموصل، و10 من جامعة الأنبار، و10 من جامعة تكريت، وكل مجموعة من العشرة أفراد متجانسة من حيث النوع الاجتماعي. خضعت البيانات المجمعة لعدة تحليلات إحصائية للحصول على نتائج موثوقة. تكشف النتائج أن مستوى الكفاءة التواصلية بين الثقافات بين طلاب الدراسات العليا في تعليم اللغة الإنكليزية كلغة أجنبية في الجامعات الثلاث عمومًا منخفض.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الكفاءة التواصلية بين الثقافات , الثقافة , التواصل

1-Introduction

As the post-methods era ended an era marked by globalism and cultural integration, the fluxes of foreign language acquisition (FLA) have evolved to include not only the acquisition of linguistic skills but also a thorough understanding of cultural shades.(1) highlights the significance of this integration, stating, "In language teaching we are always dealing with cross-cultural encounters, and what typically happens is that the student applies his native rules of speaking to the target language rules which may imply a very different social significance". Accordingly, achieving a linguistic proficiency in a second language (SL) or foreign language (FL) is no longer satisfactory to communicate with others affectively and appropriately. Furthermore, Bennett (1998) as cited in (Ilyas, 2021) (2) "epitomizes the role of culture in language learning in an amusing yet smart statement "to avoid becoming a fluent fool, we need to understand more completely the cultural dimension of language".

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Effective assessment techniques are essential for developing language learning in general and particularly ICC. Accurately evaluating the level of ICC among EFL learners is of utmost importance. The lack of practical and efficient assessment instruments hinders one's ability to gauge practical application and real competence in real-world intercultural contexts. Most often, the assessment tools that are utilized in ICC research rely on self-reported questionnaires. However, these measures may be influenced by various potential biases, including social desirability bias, recall bias, response bias, lack of insight, privacy concerns, or fatigue, as reported by Paulhus (1991) (3).

To More accurate and reliable assessing of ICC, it has to offer real-life scenarios likely encountered by learners interacting with native speakers because interaction is co-constructed. Filling in this gap will be important in order to ensure that educational programs can adequately foster and evaluate ICC, thereby equipping learners with the skills to relate to and communicate efficiently in various cultural contexts. So that learners can extend their classroom experience to the outside world and be able to use it in real life communications.

There are only a few examples of Situational Judgement Tests (SJT) specifically relevant to the context of intercultural competence (IC) (4).

Accordingly, this study will hopefully contribute to enriching this field by providing additional SJTs that can be used to assess and enhance EFL learners.

1.2. Aims of the Study

The aims of this study involve the following:

1. Assessing the level of knowledge and awareness dimensions in the ICC of Iraqi postgraduate EFL learners.
2. Investigate the influence of the target language proficiency on level of knowledge and awareness dimensions in the ICC.

1.3. Research Questions

The current study aims to answer the following questions:

1. What are the levels of knowledge and awareness in intercultural communicative competence (ICC) among postgraduate EFL learners?
2. Does language proficiency of the target culture influence the level of awareness in intercultural communicative competence (ICC) among postgraduate EFL learners?

1.4. Procedure and Data Analysis

To conduct this study thirty EFL postgraduate subjects are selected from three Iraqi universities –university of Mosul, university of Anbar, and university of Tikrit-From various colleges major in teaching the English language and its branches, during the 2022-2023 and 2023-2024 academic years. Ten subjects were selected from each university, employing a Stratified Random Sampling strategy to achieve this distribution. Therefore, the selection process was not random concerning gender, as an equal number of participants were deliberately chosen from both males and females, ensuring a balanced representation—half male and half female.

The collected data underwent several statistical analyses to obtain reliable results such as t-test, ANOVA, and descriptive analyses.

1.5 Model of the Study

This study employs Fantini's (2019) (5) ICC models with some simple modifications. Fantini's (2001) (5 a) model is designed to be applied to overseas participants during their sojourns in various countries. Fantini defines ICC with components including fifteen Personal Characteristics or traits, three Areas/Domains (relationships, communication, and collaboration), four

Dimensions (Attitudes, Knowledge, Skills, and Awareness), Language Proficiency, and attainment levels. Consistent with this, Fantini developed two self-assessment questionnaires, the AIC and AICC forms, for practical evaluation of these competencies.

Fantini's model is considered more comprehensive than other models. This is due to its multinational perspective, which is applicable across a broader range of cultural contexts.

2. Review of Literature

The origin of intercultural communication (IC) is frequently attributed to the establishment of the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) by the Federal Government in 1946. The main aim is to develop government officers, diplomats, and other professionals (e.g. business experts) to advance U.S. national foreign affairs interests in Washington and overseas (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1990). The term 'intercultural communication' was coined in 1950 by the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) after employing Edward T. Hall, an anthropologist who is frequently referred to as the 'founding father' of the formal study of IC. (J.NMartin et al., 2012). Despite the influential role of the FSI in developing IC in recent decades, the term and concept of IC have a longer history.

Michael Byram, a Professor Emeritus at Durham University (UK), has been instrumental in emphasizing the significance of the intercultural aspect in second language teaching and learning, both in Europe and globally. He highlights a common oversight among interculturalists, who often neglect the linguistic component in their work. Byram draws a clear distinction between IC and ICC. The former refers to the ability to engage appropriately in one's own language with individuals from different cultural backgrounds, while the latter encompasses "the ability of second language speakers to mediate/interpret the values, beliefs and behaviors (the 'cultures') of themselves and of others and to 'stand on the bridge' or indeed 'be the bridge' between people of different languages and cultures" (6).

3. Concepts Related to the Study

The following subsections explain essential concepts related to this study.

3.1. The Notion of Culture

Culture" has been described by Williams(1981) (7) as one of the two or three most intricate words in the English language (p.3). It derives from the Latin word 'cultura', which literally translates to tilling or cultivating the soil. The first use of the concept 'culture' in 18th century in Europe was linked to the process of cultivation or improvement. However, by the mid-19th century, some scholars began employing the word 'culture' to refer to a universal human capability or capacity (LeVine, 1973) (8). Over years, the term 'culture' began to refer to the realization of national

ideals and the enhancement of the individual, especially through education. In 1869, the English poet and cultural critic Matthew Arnold wrote that 'having culture' meant to 'know the best that has been said and thought in the world' (Jackson, 2014) (9).

In 1952, Kroeber and Kluckhohn, as cited in (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012) (10), published a critical review of over 162 notions of culture, ranging from "learned behavior" to "ideas in the mind", and so on. They then proposed the following widely-quoted definition of culture:

"Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts. The essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e., historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values. Culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, and on the other as conditioning elements of further action."

3.2. Communicative competence (CC)

The concept of 'communicative competence' (CC) is emerged by Dell Hymes, in 1966, as a disapproval or opposition to Chomsky's narrow perspective notion on language use and competence. Hymes argues that effective language communication needs more than merely innate grammatical knowledge; it also involves a practical use of language within social context (Hymes, 1966) (11). Hymes further develops the concept, highlighting the importance of sociocultural context, appropriateness, and the ability to engage in meaningful communication. He claims that CC needs for proficiency in the grammatical aspects of language and the ability to use language effectively and appropriately in social contexts (Hymes, 1972) (12).

3.3. Intercultural communicative competence (ICC)

The term 'intercultural communicative competence' is invented by Byram (1997) (6) as a reformulation of Van Ek's (1986) Communicative Ability Model. Byram (1997) (6) draws a clear distinction between intercultural competence (IC) and ICC. The former refers to the ability to engage appropriately in one's own language with individuals from different cultural backgrounds, while the latter encompasses "the ability of second language speakers to mediate/interpret the values, beliefs and behaviors (the 'cultures') of themselves and of others and to 'stand on the bridge' or indeed 'be the bridge' between people of different languages and cultures. Therefore, Byram (1997) (6) defines ICC as "individual's ability to communicate and interact across cultural boundaries" (p.7). Furthermore, (Fantini, 2019) (5) expands on this, describing ICC as "a complex of abilities needed to perform effectively and appropriately when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself" (p.34).

3.4. Components of ICC

Many scholars from various disciplines have offered different perspectives on ICC and its components, but this study will focus specifically on the pedagogical perspectives. Thus, Fantini (2006) (5a) model is chosen in this study. According to Fantini (2006) (5a), ICC consists of several clusters or components that include: various characteristics; three areas or domains (i.e., relationships, communication, and collaboration); four dimensions (i.e., knowledge, attitude, skills, and awareness); host language proficiency; and developmental levels. A comprehensive survey questionnaire was designed to encompass all of these areas, including a critical yet often overlooked question: the correlation between the development of host language proficiency and other areas of second competence development.

3.5. Knowledge and Awareness

Knowledge refers to the grasp and information that a human has about particular facts, concepts, and procedures. In the context of ICC, knowledge commonly includes perception of cultural norms, values, practices, and worldviews of distinct cultural groups. This knowledge can be factual, such as knowing the history and traditions of a culture, or procedural, such as understanding how to communicate effectively in a different cultural context. For example, Byram (1997) (6) defines knowledge in intercultural competence as "knowledge of social groups and their products and practices in one's own and in one's interlocutor's country, and of the general processes of societal and individual interaction." This entails not merely knowing the facts about a culture, but also understanding the underlying motives or reasons for cultural traditions and how they impact communication.

Awareness, on the other hand, is more about consciousness and sensitivity to cultural differences. It implies recognizing that cultural differences exist and understanding the influence these differences have on communication and interaction. Awareness is about being mindful of one's own cultural prejudices and assumptions and how they might affect interactions with people from other cultures.

According to awareness in intercultural competence refers to an individual's ability to be conscious of one's own cultural worldview and the impact of one's actions and communication on others. It's more about a reflexive understanding of the cultural dynamics at play in intercultural interactions, which requires a level of self-awareness as well as awareness of others.

In a nutshell, knowledge is about what individuals know about others culture (facts, procedures, and so on). Awareness refers to how conscious individuals are of the existence and impact of cultural differences.

4. Data Analysis, Discussion & Results

Considering that this study focuses on ICC, it is crucial to define the personal variables and cultural orientation of the sample, as these elements may impact the interpretation of the obtained results. The background information of the sample was gathered through the initial section of the ICCQ, and is detailed as follows:

All participants are Iraqi and most of them are Muslims, with ages ranging from 24 to 52 years old. The students were divided into four age groups: group one (24-29 years), group two (30-37 years), group three (44-46 years), group four (52 years). Thirteen students (43.33%) fall under the first age group (24-29 years), twelve students (40%) belong to the second age group (30-37 years), four participants (13.33%) fall under the third group (44-46 years), and one student (3.33%) belongs to the fourth group (52 years). Additionally, 50% of the participants are male, and the other 50% are female. The bar chart (1.1) shows the percentage of each age group. The distribution of age and gender can be seen in the bar chart (1.2).

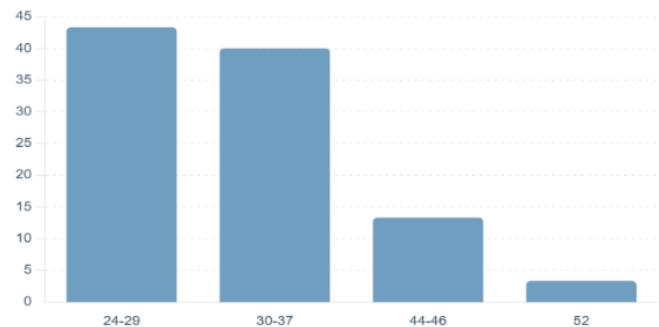


Figure (1.1) percentage of each group of ages

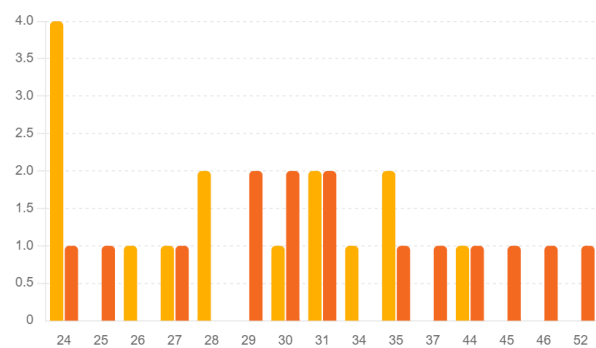


Figure (1.2) Distribution of Age and Gender

Male Female

Regarding their ethnicities, twenty-five participants (83.33%) are Arabs, two participants (6.67%) are Turkmen, one participant (3.33%) is Kurd, one participant (3.33%) is Assyrian, and one participant (3.33%) is Shabak. All participants speak their respective ethnic group's language as their mother tongue. In terms of additional languages, most participants reported speaking only English, except for the Kurd, Turkmen, Shabak, and Assyrian participants, who also speak Arabic. Additionally, three participants reported speaking a second acquired language, two of them speaks Kurdish, and the other speaks Turkmen. Thus, participants who are trilingual (23.33%) are seven and the remaining twenty-three participants (76.67%) are bilingual. Consequently, those who acquire more than one Iraqi culture “bicultural” and “multicultural” identity form (23.33%) of the sample. Due to the presence of only one participant with a multicultural identity, this aspect is excluded from the analysis as it is statistically challenging to evaluate. Concerning religion 29 participants (96.67%) are Muslims and one participant (3.33%) is Christian. None of the participants have visited the UK/USA before. However, seventeen participants (56.67%) reported previous interactions with British/American people without specifying whether these interactions took place in the virtual world or the real world. These details about the students' background information are summarized in Table 1.1.

Table (1.1) Summary of Participants' Background

Sample size	Background information		Number of students	Percentage
	Gender			
	Gender	Male	15	50%
		Female	15	50%
	Age	Gr1 (24-29)	13	43.33%
		Gr2 (30-37)	12	43%
		Gr3 (44-46)	4	13.33%
		Gr4 (52)	1	3.33%

30	Nationality	Iraqi	30	100%	
	Religion	Islam	29	96.67%	
		Christianity	1	3.33%	
	Ethnicity	Arab	25	83.33%	
		Kurd	1	3.33%	
		Turkman	2	6.67%	
		Shabak	1	3.33%	
		Assyrian	1	3.33%	
	Mother language	Arabic	25	83.33%	
		Kurdish	1	3.33%	
		Turkmen	2	6.67%	
		Shabaki	1	3.33%	
		Neo-Aramaic	1	3.33%	
	Other languages	English	30	100%	
		Arabic	5	16.67%	
		Kurdish	2	6.67%	
		Turkmen	1	3.33%	
	Bicultural Identity	1st culture	2nd culture	1	23.33%
		Arab	Kurdish		
		Arab	Turkmen	1	
Shabak		Arab	1		

	Assyrian	Arab	1	
	Kurdish	Arab	1	
	Turkmen	Arab	2	
Total			7	
Have you ever interacted with British/American people before?	Yes		17	56.67%
	No		13	43.33%
Have you been to the UK/USA before?	Yes		-	-
	No		30	100%

3	Intermediate	#
4	Novice	1-2

Regarding SJT scoring schema, each scenario is assigned one point, resulting in a total score out of twenty. The scoring process was conducted automatically by Google Services, using a rubric specifically designed to evaluate students' ICC.

Thus, the study will deal with three types of data: ICCQ data, SJT data and OPI data. Regarding ICCQ and OPI data are analyzed, resulting the following Table (1.3)

Items of ICCQ	N	Mean	S.D. value	Test Val.	T cal.	T tab.	Sig
Knowledge	30	4.9266	2.171593	5	0.185	2.045	0.854546
Awareness		5.8133	2.018489	5	2.207		0.035384
OPI self-assessment		4.8000	1.447947	5	-0.75655		0.455422

Data is normalized in order to achieve homogeneity of variance in the ICCQ. Therefore, the Likert scale of the self-assessment is normalized to numerical values, converting participants' data into standardized scores. For this purpose, i.e., converting self-assessment evaluations for each participant on a Likert scale (0-5) to a final normalized score, the following general formula is utilized:

$$\text{Normalized Score} = \left(\frac{\text{Sum of Scores}}{\text{Number of Items} \times 5} \right) \times \text{Target Score}$$

Accordingly, the total score of ICCQ is out of 20.

As for OPIs, proficiency-levels description altered into numerical values, as in table (1.2)

Table 1.2 Numerical Scoring for Proficiency-levels

	proficiency-level	Score
1	Superior	9-10
2	Advanced	6-7-8

The t-calculated value (0.185) is much smaller than the t-tabulated value (2.045), and the significance level is 0.855, which is far greater than the conventional alpha level of 0.05. The mean score for knowledge is not significantly different from the test value of 5. This suggests that participants' self-assessed knowledge is approximately equal to the test value of 5, indicating no significant deviation from the expected level.

The t-calculated value (2.207) is slightly greater than the t-tabulated value (2.045), and the significance level is 0.035, which is below the alpha level of 0.05. The mean score for awareness is significantly higher than the test value of 5. This suggests that participants' self-assessed awareness is higher than the expected level, indicating a significant positive difference.

The t-calculated value (-0.757) is much smaller than the t-tabulated value (2.045), and the significance level is 0.455, which is greater than 0.05. The mean score for OPI Self-Assessment is not significantly different from the test value of 5. This indicates that participants' self-assessed oral proficiency is approximately equal to the expected level, with no significant deviation. The ICCQ components mentioned above were objectively assessed using the OPI and SJT. Each participant underwent these tests to measure their English language proficiency and their ICC knowledge and awareness levels. Table (1.4) shows analyses of data obtained from SJT and OPI.

Table (1.4) shows analyses of data obtained from SJT and OPI

Items of SJT	N	Mean	S.D. value	Test Val.	T cal.	T tab	Sig
Knowledge	30	3.233333	1.88795	5	-5.12535	2.045	0.000018
Awareness		3.566667	1.63334	5	-4.80651		0.000043
OPI		5.033333	1.86590	5	0.09784	0.922727	

The t-calculated value of -5.125 is significantly larger in magnitude than the t-tabulated value of 2.045. The p-value (0.000018) is much lower than the conventional alpha level of 0.05, indicating a statistically significant difference. The mean knowledge score (3.23) is significantly lower than the test value (5), suggesting that participants' knowledge, as assessed by the SJT, is below the expected level.

The t-calculated value of -4.807 also exceeds the t-tabulated value, indicating a significant difference. The p-value (0.000043) is far below 0.05, confirming the statistical significance. The mean awareness score (3.57) is significantly lower than the test value (5), indicating that participants' awareness is below the expected level.

The t-calculated value of 0.098 is much smaller than the t-tabulated value, indicating no significant difference. The p-value (0.922727) is far above 0.05, suggesting that there is no statistically significant difference between the mean and the test value. The

mean OPI score (5.03) is not significantly different from the test value (5), indicating that participants' oral proficiency is at the expected level.

Overall, Participants scored significantly lower than the expected level, indicating a deficiency in knowledge. Participants also scored significantly lower than the expected level, indicating a deficiency in awareness. Participants' oral proficiency is on par with the expected level, showing no significant difference.

Regarding the influence of English Language Proficiency on ICC Knowledge and Awareness. Although the ICC level is low, certain variables may have an impact on it. Variable as English language proficiency is analyzed by using, ANOVA, statistical method to compare the means of three or more groups to determine if there are any statistically significant differences among them. Table (1.5) shows Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) for the Impact of Language Proficiency on knowledge and awareness.

Table (1.5) shows Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) for the Impact of Language Proficiency on Knowledge and Awareness

Table (1.5) shows Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) for the Impact of Language Proficiency on Knowledge and Awareness

Language proficiency impacts on	Df	F.	Sig
Knowledge	7	1.237368	0.325175
Awareness		1.633421	0.178306

The F-value of 1.237368 for Knowledge indicates the degree of variance explained by the language proficiency on this dimension. The p-value of 0.325175 is above the conventional threshold of 0.05, suggesting that the impact of language proficiency on the Knowledge dimension is not statistically significant. In other words, there is no strong evidence to suggest that the language proficiency significantly influences the knowledge scores in this context.

The F-value of 1.633421 for awareness is slightly higher than that for knowledge, indicating a somewhat larger but still limited effect of language proficiency on awareness. The p-value of 0.178306, while lower than that for knowledge, remains above 0.05. This means that the effect of language proficiency on the awareness dimension is also not statistically significant.

The language proficiency does not have a statistically significant impact on either the knowledge or awareness dimensions, as indicated by the p-values greater than 0.05. This suggests that the language proficiency scores do not meaningfully predict or influence the levels of knowledge and awareness in this dataset.

5. Conclusions

In light of the findings of the study at hand, it can be concluded that:

In addressing the first question, "What are the levels of knowledge and awareness in intercultural

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communicative competence (ICC) among postgraduate EFL learners?" It was found that Iraqi EFL postgraduate learners show a relatively low levels of knowledge and awareness in intercultural communicative competence (ICC).

In response to the second question, " Does language proficiency of the target culture influence the levels of awareness in intercultural communicative competence (ICC) among postgraduate EFL learners?", the study found that the language proficiency does not have a statistically significant impact on awareness levels.

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