

# Developing and Assessing Intercultural Competence through Ethnographic Interviews in the Domestic Context of Teacher Education in Iran

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## Abstract

Although the importance of intercultural competence (IC) training has been increasingly recognized in recent scholarly reviews, home-based approaches invite further investigation in this paradigm. This study aims to make a contribution by exposing a domestic context to assess IC development through using qualitative and quantitative methods. To do so, sixty two undergraduate EFL student-teachers were guided to conduct two either on-line or face to face reflective ethnographic interviews over a sixteen-week course of cross-cultural communication. The quantitative findings obtained from the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) questionnaire showed a significant increase in the participants' Perceived Orientation (PO) and Developmental Orientation (DO) after the course. Qualitative findings also revealed significant growth, provoking some new perceptions, and emphasizing the student-teachers' positive responses to both IDI assessment and the intercultural interactions. The exploratory analysis of the participants' reports on the ethnographic interviews resulted in seven emerged themes which conceptually matched the traditional IC model. Therefore, the study shows that using reflective ethnographic interviews in a mixed methods design is helpful in developing and assessing student-teachers' IC.

**Keywords:** Domestic intervention, Intercultural competence, Intercultural exchanges, Teacher education, Ethnographic interviews

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## INTRODUCTION

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, mobility has become more common among people and along with social mobility geographical mobility similarly entails change of status which requires adapting to concepts, values and beliefs of different social groups (Byram, Duffy, & Murphy-Lejeune. 2009). Especially for the students and teachers, it shortly becomes obvious that cultures of the same professional training or academic discipline are not the same in different countries. Therefore, Intercultural Competence (IC) is increasingly emphasized in the mission statements of educational and governmental institutions willing to create well-furnished citizens for the constantly changing contexts of this different age. Developing IC is more necessary in language teaching since growing interaction among countries has provided students with a wealth of new chances to participate in intercultural contacts and international communication. Consequently, teachers' intercultural interest and experience seems to be vital to fulfill the needs of this ever-growing interculturally conscious population (Damen, 1987, Saboori, Phishghadam, Hosseini Fatemi, & Ghonsooli, 2015). Studies on teacher education programs also reveal the positive effect of such experience on improving intercultural teaching (He, Lundgren, Pynes, 2017). However, in Iran few studies on intercultural relationship (e.g., Najarzagdegan, 2016; Nemati, Marzban, Maleki, 2014) have actually attempted to update nationwide guidelines toward integrating IC into all levels of foreign language learning and teaching. In order to address some of these issues, the present study has tried to use mixed-methods data obtained from an interview-based course design in an Iranian teacher-education setting

Moreover, the existing international literature on IC increasingly suggests using "ethnographic approaches" to expand foreign language learners and teachers' awareness of processes involved in cultural acquisitions in different contexts (e.g., Allen, 2000; Holmes & O'Neill, 2012; Ericksen, 2021, Sercu, 2004). So far, most of the investigations have focused on language students who interact in multicultural contexts or study

abroad (Byram et al., 2009; Strugielska & Piątkowska, 2016, Wolff & Borzikowsky, 2018). The present study sought to search if an interview inquiry approach can develop IC of Iranian EFL student-teachers “at home” when economic and political factors inhibit beyond border exchanges. An additional issue in IC studies is that most of the investigations have had Euro-American participants (e.g., Almeida, Simoes & Costa, 2012) and the resulting theories are potentially ethnocentric in their conceptualization and findings (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). Therefore, due to the possible Western bias, conducting research in a context with different psychocultural and socio-economic conditions is required. The present research used the literature on ethnographic approaches to design a reflective interview project and to assess the participants’ IC development revealed in their written materials and their scores on a well-known IC measure (IDI) as well.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

According to Deardorff (2006), there is no agreement on the intercultural competence terminology. This concept has been referred to by different terms in various disciplines and approaches. Regarding the assessment tools and available literature, Fantini (2009) found a variety of terms being used, such as cross-cultural adaptation, multiculturalism, global competence, intercultural sensitivity, intercultural maturity, cultural intelligence, cross-cultural awareness, international communication, global citizenship, and intercultural competence.

Developing a working definition for IC, one of the widely used terms, is an issue that has concerned the scholars for more than five decades. Deardorff (2006) used the Delphi technique to document an agreement among intercultural experts on IC aspects. The final aspects were classified and placed into a model (IC Process Model) whose emphasis on internal and external products derived from the development of specific attitudes, knowledge and skills inherent in the concept. Given the fact that the

dimensions in this model are still broad, each feature can be developed into more detailed measurable outcomes and equivalent indicators depending on the situation (Deardorff, 2011). The total external output of intercultural competence is defined as *appropriate* and *effective* behavior and communication in intercultural contexts, which can be expanded based on the indicators of suitable behavior in detailed contexts. So, the term IC always implies communicative competence which means it has linguistic, sociolinguistic and discourse components (Sercu, 2004).

In professional domain, this definition has four distinguishable dimensions namely knowledge, skills, attitudes and traits. In Chen and Starosta's (1996) model, *cognitive* (intercultural awareness), *affective* (intercultural sensitivity), and *behavioral* (intercultural adroitness) components have been focused for an effective interculturalist. From the cognitive perspective, the effective interculturalist has self and cultural awareness that can reduce the inherent uncertainty and ambiguity in intercultural interaction. From affective perspective, an effective interculturalist is supposed to be an open-minded and unbiased person who has a positive self-concept in social interactions. From the behavioral perspective, an effective interculturalist has good technical skills, proper interaction management, self-disclosure, behavioral flexibility along with social skills in verbal and non-verbal settings. IC also has some contributing *personality traits*, including respect, empathy, interest in cultures, tolerance, flexibility, open-mindedness, sociability and positive self-image (Kealey & Ruben, 1983).

In Byram's (1997) model, three factors are significant in intercultural communication including attitudes, knowledge and skills. For him, having the *attitudes* of avoiding one's own cultural identity and developing worldview are necessary for an effective intercultural communication. In this model, *knowledge* has been divided into two categories. The first category is depicted as knowledge of social groups and their culture in one's own and the interlocutor's country. The second one is represented as knowledge of interaction processes at both individual and

social levels. Therefore, this sort of knowledge embraces individuals' cultural and linguistic behavior in intercultural communication. Skills are also explained in two ways. The first one is related to the *interpreting* and *relating skills* defined as the capability to understand an event or document from another culture and to connect it to events and documents in one's own culture (Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009). *Discovering* and *interacting* are other sets of skills depicted as "the ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices, and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction" (Byram, 1997, p. 35).

As Spitzberg and Changnon (2009) stated, the contemporary models and theories of intercultural competence can be classified into five types: developmental, compositional, co-orientational, causal process and adaptational. Although the frameworks and taxonomies are different, most confirm the ongoing process of intercultural competence development which can be acquired through intercultural interaction. The process of awareness growth in the broadly approved Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) (Bennett, 1993) is moving from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism indicating how individuals become more and more interculturally sensitive and competent while experiencing or being exposed to cultural differences across six stages from denial, defense, minimization, acceptance, adaptation to integration. Considering the themes, Deardorff (2009) also classified the field as concentrating on (a) the significance of identity and relationship development, (b) the significant role of interconnectedness and context in intercultural competence, (c) the necessity for the boundary transcendence, (d) a complete change of differences, and (e) the necessity for respecting each other.

Reviewing the models shows some problems like being over simplified and ethnocentric as well as having non-operational and outdated concepts of adaptation (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). Consequently, as Weng and Kulich (2015) pointed out, a corrective way to move away from the too cognitive and behavioral focus in IC investigations is encountering

cultures from within, following the “rich text” outlook of ethnography and preparing intercultural communicators to perceive ethnographic skills and attitudes. Communicators are then directed to use them to participate in, communicate with, and keep the observations of different cultures from the emic view of those who are active in the contexts.

## **Ethnographic Interviews and IC**

According to Alred, Byram, and Fleming (2003), developing IC cannot be achieved without interaction and encounter. However, encountering the differences does not automatically result in being intercultural. Programs trying to promote “ethnographic awareness” can simplify analytical and reflective processes required to make intercultural encounters effective. A basic way to develop ethnographic awareness is interviewing the informants where participant observation or field work opportunities are not easily available (Roberts, Byram, Barro, Jordan, & Street, 2001). Some scholars support using “ethnographic interview” techniques as a tool for learning culture in various contexts like classroom (Bateman, 2002), study abroad programs (Czura, 2016; He, et al., 2017; Yasin Çiftçi & Daloğlu, 2021), teacher training and classroom contexts (Byram & Duffy, 1996; Ward & Ward, 2003). In intercultural education, using ethnographic interviews has been proved to improve language teachers’ understanding of the complexity often faced with differences conceptually, emotionally and analytically (e.g., Byram et al., 2009; Strugielska & Piątkowska, 2016). Likewise, the growing bulk of intercultural studies inspire learners and teachers to embark on various kinds of ethnographic projects to scrutinize target cultures (Holmes & O’Neill, 2012, Yang, 2009). For example, to develop a working definition for IC, Yang (2009) conducted a three-phase study using pilot ethnographic interviews, a survey study for creating a framework and a researcher made IC test administered to 248 college students.

In fact, the fundamental theoretical perspective in ethnographic interviews is that culture is a dynamic and live social construct (Kramsch

1993). However, as Weng and Kulich (2015) argued these useful techniques are not free from limitations like the higher cost and intensive labor necessary in such programs because most of them are done overseas to enhance ethnographic interviewer's chance of face to face personal interaction with people who have different language and live in other countries. Moreover, language instructors should have a great variety of roles to implement an ethnographic approach (e.g. evaluator, participant observer, interviewer) (Knapp, 1999), which in turn emphasizes proper ethnographic teacher and learner training. Finally, as long-term ethnographic projects collect unique, rich and complex data, replication of their findings are difficult and can be challenging in the time-limited curriculum (Nunan, 1992).

## **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

Ethnographic interviews have not been applied much in teacher education programs in Iran where pre-service and in-service teachers face limitations such as few studies abroad opportunities, limited funding and less international exposure at home. However, as Wilkinson (2012) asserted, every time national and foreign boundaries are less clear, home-based teachers may more willingly face differences with no obligation to leave home. As a result, it is now practical to study how to develop foreign language teachers' IC by small home-based interview projects that take advantage of the available other cultural groups "at home." Nevertheless, how such initiatives might be recognized in Iranian teacher education contexts needs to be taken into account.

Given the research challenges mentioned above and the intended focus, this study sought to address the following questions:

1. Does an ethnographic interview training approach help EFL student-teachers increase their IC under the domestic limitations in Iran?
2. In what areas do Iranian EFL student-teachers show an increase in their IC?

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

The participants in this study were 62 male (n= 32) and female (n= 30) student-teachers majoring in teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) who enrolled at two teacher training universities in Iran. They were selected from the sophomore and junior students whose band scores on IELTS language proficiency test was above 6 since conducting ethnographic intercultural interviews with foreigners requires a good command of language. Freshmen were excluded from the original sample pool since they had not passed any intercultural communication courses. The females and males' age range was between 19-24 and 19-25 respectively. None of the participants had lived or traveled abroad.

### **Instrumentation**

#### ***IDI Questionnaire***

The latest version (v.3, Hammer, 2012) of the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) was applied in pre and post-test manner before and after the training intervention to measure intercultural development of the participants along a continuum. This questionnaire has been developed based on Bennet's (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) with three ethnocentric stages including *Denial*, *Defense*, and *Minimization* are at one end of the continuum and *Acceptance*, *Adaption*, and *Integration* as ethnorelative stages are at the other end.

IDI has been used widely in an extensive range of IC investigations (Cusher & Chang, 2015; Yuen, 2010). It has been translated into more than fourteen languages and used in various cultures and contexts including more than thirty countries with high reliability and validity rate (Hammer, 2011). However, for the purpose of being used in the current study, it was piloted with a sample of 23 student-teachers with similar features to those of the real participants and they found no ambiguity in the items. The reliability



index, assessed by Cronbach's alpha formula, was found to be .92.

This version of IDI includes 50 items which measure perceived orientation (PO) showing how individuals evaluate themselves along an intercultural development continuum and developmental orientation (DO) which measures individuals' main orientation toward cultural commonalities and differences, selected demographic items, and five open ended questions related to individuals' context and background. The intercultural development progresses from less complex perceptions or experiences (more monocultural mindsets) to more complex cultural diversity experiences (more intercultural mindsets). Individuals and groups can recognize their positions along the *Denial*, *Polarization (Defense or Reversal)*, *Minimization*, *Acceptance*, and *Adaptation* stages. Denial shows the orientation that might be recognized by individuals toward cultural differences such as family, but recognition of deeper cultural differences like cultural values might be ignored or avoided. The Polarization stage represents individuals who may consider "us" versus "them" in cultural differences. The Persons who are at polarization stage usually have an excessively critical view toward either other cultural values (Defense) or their own cultures (Reversal). *Minimization* describes individuals who highlight cultural commonality in the way that cultural differences might be minimized. In *Acceptance* level, individuals identify and respect cultural differences, and *Adaptation* is a level at which they feel easy at changing their cultural mindsets and manners in culturally grateful and authentic ways. The last two stages both are higher levels along the IDI continuum.

### ***Ethnographic Interviews***

The procedural steps of conducting interviews were adopted from Wang and Kulich's (2015) model in which eight steps were followed:

1. *Reflect on and write up one's "Own-Culture Story"*. This exercise has been recommended in IC studies (e.g., Weigel, 2009) as a way of knowing our own cultural identities, promoting more sensitivity and furnishing a

scale before having interaction with otherness. The participants were also requested to use their stories in their interviews to make their own culture and identity known by the interviewees.

2. *Select a target cultural group and informant(s) representing that group.* Regarding availability or interests, student-teachers were asked to choose “Cultural Others” from various countries with different cultural backgrounds. Because wide-reaching internationals are not easily accessible in Iran, the participants were allowed to use social networks for having virtual interviews.

3. *Do Internet or library research on the groups to prepare interview topic.* The participants were asked to do some research on their selected target cultures to find potential interview topics. Forming cultural hypotheses about the topics based on these explorations was also suggested.

4. *Establish and extend relationships by sharing “own cultural stories”.* Student-teachers were supposed to use some selected pictures and stories from their own culture to help them introduce themselves and open up the interviews in order to provoke reciprocal responses.

5. *Carry out “friendly conversations”.* Due to the unusual nature of the project-based ethnographic interviews, student-teachers were directed to open up friendly conversations with their interviewees to clarify interview topics, enhance mutual trust and being respectful before starting the formal interviews.

6. *Write out reflective journal entries.* The participants were asked to provide two reflective journal records after each interview for some purposes like describing what they noted verbally or nonverbally in their observations, how they recorded their feelings and responses and reflecting on any sensitive features of the overall intercultural encounter.

7. *Conduct formal interviews.* The topics of the interviews could be the same or related. The participants were supposed to develop the second interview consistent with the first one in order to understand the selected topics better. The interval time between the interviews had to be at least two weeks to provide time for reflection, analysis and preparation for the next

actions. The interviews could be done face to face or virtually through social networks like epal and WeChat.

8. *Review the process and write up a final report.* To write a final report, the participants were asked to review their experiences and notes. They were asked to write how their IC was developing through these encounters and what kind of cultural knowledge and awareness they obtained. The important and informative episodes also were to be summarized in order to share the reflective thoughts. By considering the limitations in forming the hypotheses before the interviews, the participants could think about their own structures of reference (before, during and after the encounters) and all of the provided notes, summaries and reports were added to each student-teacher's portfolio.

## **Data Collection Procedure**

Before starting this program, the whole population of EFL student-teachers in two teacher training universities in Iran was informed about the project. They signed a consent form to show their agreement to take part in the study. Then, they took an IELTS exam and 62 participants whose band scores were above 6 were chosen.

Quantitative data were collected through the IDI questionnaire in order to find the participants' growth of IC. At first, the questionnaire was administered as a pre-test just before the ethnographic interview training began and the second time (post-test) after the project was finished. Pre-test scores used as a pre-program benchmark and post-test scores showed the changes in the intercultural competence. To see whether the changes of PO and DO scores were statistically significant after conducting the intercultural interviews dependent t-tests were conducted.

The project aimed to increase student-teachers' experience in intercultural encounters, direct their awareness toward cultural differences, encourage them to think about the relationship between themselves and others and to expand their communicative skills. The objectives and

procedures were clearly explained at the beginning of the sixteen-week program by the researcher who was the instructor as well. Short lectures and training sessions along with instructional handouts were given before and during the project. The training instructions centered on clarifying the purposes of the ethnographic interviews, how to be aware of variety in language use, cultural differences, and contextual demands. All the eight procedural steps of conducting ethnographic interviews were also explained. The participants could choose a self-describing picture and prepare an identity explanation to write the “My Cultural Story”. Using online social networking tools like Epal and WeChat were suggested for finding the online interviewees from other cultures; however, the participants could find their partners among the foreigners in their own living place. They could conduct their interviews on the topics like food, friendship, education, family, childhood, invitation, social events and intercultural marriage. Reflective thoughts and structured observation were necessary to write the post-interview journals and final reports. The student-teachers were supposed to conduct two interviews by considering all the mentioned points and for enhancing the accuracy of perceptions during the project all qualitative parts were prepared in their native language (Persian). During the treatment sessions, the participants shared the interviews contents and results with their classmates. The researcher would analyze the reports and discuss them in the next session. Therefore, students could get necessary hints and suggestions to improve their interviews.

## **Data Analysis**

The quantitative data obtained from running the questionnaire were analyzed through running Paired Sample t-tests to determine whether PO and DO changes were statistically significant after intervention of the intercultural interviews. To classify the qualitative data, Krueger’s (1994) five stages of analysis, including data familiarization, recognizing a thematic frame, indexing, recording and interpretation were applied. The

emerged themes were further sub-coded as required.

## RESULTS

The IDI pre and post-test scores were compared through running dependent t-tests to track the changes in the participants' IC before and after intervention of the ethnographic interviews. Changes in PO and DO are presented in table 1.

**Table 1.** Pre and post-test perceived orientation (PO) and developmental orientation (DO) scores.

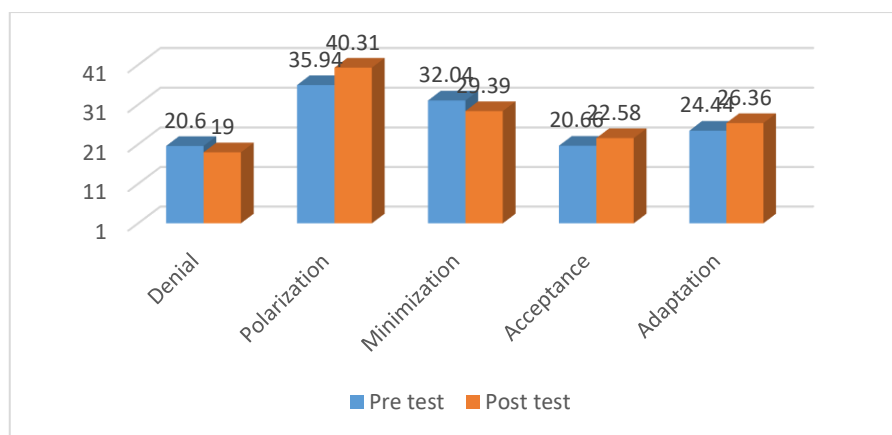
Group	Pre			post			Change	t	sig
	Mean	SD	Range	Mean	SD	Range			
DO(N=62)	133.5		98.64-	140.6	13.8	107.29	+7.06	-	0.0
	7	12.3	103.42	3	1	-		5.34	0
PO(N=62)	154.7		139.26	163.9	5.99	159.49	+9.23	-	0.0
	3	5.18	-	6		-		4.87	0
			142.52			152.15		0	

... P< **0.001**

As table 1 shows all participants experienced growth in their DO (Pre = 133.57; Post = 140.63) and PO (Pre = 154.73; Post = 163.96) after the training. The DO mean score had an increase of 7.06 (SD = 13.81), while the PO mean score showed an increase of 9.23 (SD = 5.99). The results of the t-test also represent significant change in development of the participants' IC thanks to intervention of the face to face or on-line ethnographic interviews (DO:  $t = -5.343$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; PO:  $t = -4.870$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

Figure 1 compares the group means fall within each category of the Developmental Orientation before and after the project. The student-teachers' pre-IDI mean within the *Denial* stage was 20.60 which decreased to 19.00 on the post-test. Regarding the *Polarization* stage including *Defense* or *Reversal* stages, the mean had an increase of 4.37 from the pre to

the post-test (Pre = 35.94; Post = 40.31). The mean score of the *Minimization* stage on the post-test was lower than that of the pre-test (Pre = 32.04; Post = 29.39). These three stages make the monocultural viewpoints in the IDI questionnaire. For the multicultural viewpoints, the mean scores within the *Acceptance* stage increased from 20.66 to 22.58. Participants showed improvement at *Adaptation* stage as well (Pre = 24.44; Post = 26.36). The findings in the table and figure consistently revealed growth in the student-teachers' IC from a monocultural mindset to multicultural mindset.



**Figure 1:** Pre and post range of developmental orientation.

On the other hand, coding and thematic analysis of the reports revealed the impact of ethnographic interviews on development of the participants' IC after the training intervention. They emphasized renewed visions, affirmed opinions and implications for their teaching practices (to keep them anonymous, all the participants' and interviewees' names are pseudonyms). Seven main themes emerged:

*1. Having interaction with a diversity of partners.*

The student-teachers had high motivation to conduct the interviews from the beginning of the project. Forty of them selected on-line partners and the rest

chose international interviewees who lived in their own country. Domestic cultural partners were foreigners who were working in Iran in industrial and business sectors or those who had married Iranian partners. Both on-line and domestic interviewees had various nationalities including Italian, English, German, Turkish, Chinese, Iraqi, Afghan, Pakistani, and Australian. The variety of selected cultural partners and the patterns investigated by the participants showed that they gained the ability to involve in wider and deeper cultural interactions and obtained more intercultural curiosity, skill, knowledge, and awareness of various cultural patterns.

### *2. Developing a new awareness of their own cultures.*

Based on the student-teachers' reports, writing their "Cultural Story" provided them with a new insight into their own culture. They had to review their culture more rationally and critically in order to introduce it to their interviewees. For example, Hamid mentioned:

I had never realized that my culture was very effective in my life before this project. Unfortunately, I had ignored it in the past. Now this new awareness has made my cultural identity influential in my life, beliefs and feelings.

According to Alred et al. (2003), in intercultural experiences learners review their own culture with self-knowledge and criticism which results in bringing value regarding themselves and others.

### *3. Increasing awareness of cultural differences*

Student-teachers also realized that understanding cultural differences would lead to having fewer problems while working with their future students who definitely would have various cultural backgrounds. Sahar interviewed an Afghan businessman and noticed:

Now I am able to understand cultural differences better than before. For instance, I was unaware that Afghan students' unwillingness to participate in group work might have cultural reasons. Therefore, facing Afghan students in my classes will remind me to encourage them to be more group-oriented and explain them how the classrooms might be different from those they had in their own country.

#### *4. Preventing cultural judgment*

Analysis of the qualitative data showed that many student-teachers could abandon their negative attitudes and prejudices toward their interviewees' culture and stop judging others based on those preconceptions. For example, Arash commented:

I thought that western students were completely free in their individualistic classrooms and they were not supposed to study as hard as Asian students in the teacher-centered classes. But I realized this stereotype after conducting an interview with David an Australian college student who had to study hard to do his individual or group assignments.

#### *5. Avoiding the sense of cultural privilege*

Deardorff (2011) has considered cultural humility as a fundamental prerequisite to attain IC which encompasses the ability to respect other cultures modestly and showing tendency to assess oneself more analytically (Pinto & Upshur, 2009). Some of the participants stated that they could develop this cultural modesty. For example Ali said:

Before the interviews, I thought Persian culture is one of the most ancient due to the long history of my country which goes back to the Aryans settlement in Iran Plateau. Now, I know there are other old civilizations which are all unique and should be treated with respect. Hence, classifying cultures as superior and inferior is a kind of misconception.

#### *6. Developing willingness and courage to communicate with people from different cultures*

In the present study, the participants were encouraged to communicate with people from various cultural backgrounds. Reviewing the reports revealed that ethnographic interviews mostly contributed to increasing the participants' confidence in intercultural communication. After conducting two online interviews with one engineer from the UK, Reza reported:

Before the project, I was reluctant and even afraid of communicating with the native English speakers though I did not have language problems. I thought that there were a lot of cultural differences. However, communicating with Liz about educational systems, parties and home



through epal made me assured that English people are also eager to communicate with us. Therefore, I concluded that the conversation door is open if we are positive enough to actively take part in the interactions.

### *7. Improving the communication skills*

Findings revealed that student-teachers obtained communication skills such as taking the floor, questioning techniques and giving feedback. According to Nazanin:

Doing the interviews taught me that for being a successful communicator one needs to listen attentively and carefully. Otherwise, active engagement of the interlocutors is somehow impossible.

## **DISCUSSION**

This study has tried to design a home-based IC course in which EFL student-teachers were trained to conduct descriptive ethnographic interviews with interviewees from various cultures. The results provide teacher educators with insights regarding both design and assessment of comprehensive home-based intercultural studies.

Concerning the first research question, both quantitative and qualitative findings assert that student-teachers' IC improved significantly thanks to the reflective interview process. As Weng and Kulich (2015) have asserted, conducting interviews provides a good context for language learners to become familiar with culture of target language and this familiarity will improve their language learning as a consequence. Compared to other previous studies in this paradigm that used IDI to measure changes in IC (e.g., Dejaeghere & Cao, 2009) changes in the participants' developmental orientation scores were considerable (an increase of 7.06).

The qualitative analysis of the students' report also provided ample evidence of development and changes. As mentioned by Alred et al. (2003), IC undergoes deep changes as a result of educational interventions at cognitive, affective and behavioral levels. In line with the concerns of intercultural education and transformative pedagogy, the participants

represented a high level of achievement in cognitive complexity through criticizing and reexamining their own culture and reflecting on those of others. They could overcome undesirable affective factors like sense of superiority, privilege or preconception and created some desirable feelings instead (e.g., cultural modesty, sympathy, confidence) while their communication skills improved at the same time (e.g., taking the floor, questioning techniques, giving feedback).

These findings also addressed the main concerns of intercultural investigations especially those which have used constructivist and interpretative approaches through the rich descriptive details of patterns, knowledge and awareness. The signs of affective domain changes are evident through measurable IDI changes and attitudinal factors which are among the concerns of psychologists. Furthermore, growing evidence of agency and plurality addresses the worries of critical scholars by developing new consciousness of formerly undistinguished power.

In terms of RQ2, the qualitative analysis resulted in seven areas appeared to fit into the classic framework of IC including cognitive, affective and behavioral classification (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Categorizing the seven emerging areas based on classic IC areas.

Cultural level/mode	Emerging intercultural competence categories
Cognitive (patterns, knowledge, awareness)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Having interaction with a diversity of partners</li> <li>2. Developing a new awareness of their own cultures</li> <li>3. Increasing awareness of cultural differences</li> </ol>
Affective (psychological, attitudinal, sensitivity, motivation)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Preventing cultural judgment</li> <li>2. Avoiding the sense of cultural privilege</li> <li>3. Developing willingness and courage to communicate with people from different cultures.</li> </ol>
Behavioral (skills, responses, action)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Obtaining enhanced communication</li> </ol>

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skills

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The main emerged item was related to avoiding the sense of cultural privilege; however, other concepts appeared to represent Iranian cultural perspectives in deeper awareness of IC. The student-teachers' reports highlight the collective preferences in Eastern cultures like interpersonal sensitivity, relationship building and shared emotions (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). People who have collectivist cultures usually consider their connections very important. The participants in the present study concentrated on creating patience, honesty of thought and deed, shared respect and understanding for making positive intercultural relationships. As Spitzberg and Changnon (2009) stated, these concepts direct the attention toward the role of subconscious psychological and emotional elements in IC, especially those reflected in the original notion of transformation in intercultural communication.

Both qualitative and quantitative findings provided evidence to support the significant impact of this interview-based project on face to face or virtual involvement of the student-teachers in intercultural interactions and their movement toward becoming intercultural through analysis, reflection and action. The participants who chose international cultural encounters via on-line social networking tools and those who chose cultural partners in their domestic context both improved their IC. For example, Parsa interviewed an Italian middle-aged engineer who worked in a company in his hometown. His DO mean scores on the pre-test and post-test were 96.23 and 137.34 respectively which was the biggest mean score (41.11) in this research. Forty of the participants selected on-line partners to conduct their ethnographic interviews. This shows that "intercultural understanding can happen not only in the obvious cross-cultural interactions abroad, but also via domestic cultural diversity through on-line cultural exchange" (Wang & Kulich, 2015, p. 51).

The findings are also consistent with previous studies on ethnographic interviews (e.g., Arshavskyaya, 2018; Ericksen, 2021;

Magnan, 2019) which showed that learners can grow increased interest and greater openness toward world cultures by involving in ethnographic interviews. They can create a deeper awareness of themselves and their own culture through these interviews as well. Algouzi and Elkhair (2021) also believe that ethnographic interviews are able to help language learners become active interpreters and observers in enhancing their understanding of others, predicting and dealing with misinterpretations, and decentering themselves throughout intercultural interactions.

## **CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

Findings of this study provide quantitative and qualitative evidence for the significant effect of domestic intercultural interviews on improving EFL student-teachers' IC. The seven emerged themes obtained from the participants' cultural stories, reflective journals and reports also accentuate the benefit of reflective ethnography approach in both developing and assessing IC. As Pajares (1992) pointed out, teachers' opinions and attitudes affect their teaching methods. Therefore, their interest in cultural issues and intercultural communication can contribute to including them in their syllabus and lesson plan. Since intercultural experience is the major prerequisite to effective intercultural teaching teachers' international experience whether at home or abroad may lead to developing IC in their students (Byram, 1997). On the other hand, teachers have to be prepared to engage with learners from various cultural backgrounds and preparing them to become internationally competent is a vital and thought-provoking task. As a result, achieving this goal should be started from teacher education programs. The outcomes of the current study offer insights for teacher educators concerning the design of comprehensive intercultural programs in the domestic contexts especially those programs which are designed for pre-service teachers. Moreover, cooperation between school districts and university teacher education programs on the design and assessment of such intercultural programs targeting pre-service EFL teachers would increase the

chances of discussion toward a worldwide competent pedagogy (West, 2012). On the other hand, to create a source of motivation for Iranian students, this cooperation might result in including authentic and natural samples of English culture in the textbooks (Alijanian, Mobini, & Ghasemi, 2019).

Due to some limitations in this study some issues might be better illustrated through further studies. First, a rather small number of participants from two teacher training universities (n=62) which were selected through convenience sampling restricted generalizability of the outcomes along with explorative nature of the study. Second, although the study provided the opportunity to explore student-teachers' intercultural development, data obtained from classroom observation on how this experience would affect their classroom instructional activities requires longitudinal studies. Third, the participants' major may have affected the results. Replication with different samples of student-teachers from different fields of study is recommended. Fourth, since the procedures might not adequately match the ethnographic approach, further investigations with a more clear design which follows the expectations of ethnography are needed. Future research may also require considering the expense of such projects carefully in order to compare effectiveness of study abroad versus home-based investigations on developing pre and in-service teachers' IC.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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