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Developing Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) of English majors in courses dealing with the culture of English-speaking countries

UNESCO (2013: 16) describes "intercultural competences" as: (1) the necessary linguistic knowledge and awareness when interacting with people from different cultures; (2) relevant knowledge about specific cultures; (3) broad comprehension about the issues that arise when members of different cultures interact; (4) adaptable attitudes that encourage creating and sustaining contact with diverse members of society. The development of intercultural competence has increasingly been recognized as a vital aim of foreign language (L2) education. The aim of the study was to investigate the relationship between courses related to the culture of English-speaking countries and the development of intercultural communicative competence of English philology students. Specifically, it explores participants' opinions on whether the culture courses support students' ability to acquire academic-level communicative competence, fluency in formal and informal language, and a holistic understanding of the spectrum of Anglophone communities. The participants of the study were English philology students and lecturers teaching culture courses. A mixed methodology was used with two types of research methods: a student survey and semi-structured interviews with lecturers. The results of the study allow for a formulation of didactic implications for the development of intercultural competence of English philology students.

1. Introduction

Navigating the rapidly changing political scene has been crucial to the success of young people entering society. Acquiring appropriate cultural knowledge is instrumental to such success. In the exploration of Intercultural Communicative Competence, a plethora of studies have focused on the development of Intercultural Communicative Competence in the foreign language classroom (Huang, 2021; Lim and Griffith 2016; Ahnagari and Zamanian 2014). The goal of the project was to address the link between cultural studies classes and the development of Intercultural Communicative Competence in English majors. Specifically, it aimed to investigate how strategically constructed culture-related classes impact students' language skills, cultural knowledge, and cultural awareness.

2. Overview of definitions of culture

Liddicoat and Scarino (2013: 17-18) cover a range of definitions and outlooks on language, culture, and communication. These essentialists perceived culture as features of a social group set within a country's boundaries; such an approach to culture has permeated language teaching. Essentialists see culture as a monolith, a set of characteristics often associated with the concept of high culture. This concept includes artistic creations—such as literature and music—as well as history and philosophy that in the eyes of a nation represent the pinnacle of achievement, part of Big 'C' culture. Furthermore, researchers, among them Gumperz (1982a, 1982b, as cited in Liddicoat, Scarino, 2013: 19-20) and Hymes (1974, 1986, as cited in Liddicoat, Scarino, 2013: 19-20), describe culture as an amalgamation of beliefs, values, practices, body language, and language. Consequently, "verbal" and "non-verbal" communication, language and signs, may be perceived as the window to another culture. Though the approach explores how language is connected to the concept of culture, Liddicoat (2002, as cited in Liddicoat, Scarino, 2013: 20) points out that learners are still subjected to consuming culture as an immutable set of information. Over time the view of culture has evolved, and Geertz (1973, 1983 as cited in Liddicoat, Scarino,

2013: 20) sees it as a shifting interconnected structure of practices and symbols steeped in historical information distinctive to a social group. Educators arm students with the ability to analyze the meaning of products of culture, as every product is a symbol of culture. In contrast, Nathan (2015: 104) explains that non-essentialists view both Big 'C' and small 'c' culture as having fluctuating, changing, internally divided, diverse, and diverse characteristics which are not confined by borders. With the non-essentialist view, Bayart (2002, as cited in Liddicoat, Scarino, 2013: 20-21), Sewell (1999, as cited in Liddicoat, Scarino, 2013: 20-21) and Bhabha (1994, as cited in Liddicoat, Scarino, 2013: 20-21) sharply diverge from the previous understanding of culture, understanding it as a dynamic and constantly developing concept with people identifying with multiple cultures. Influenced by current events in society and language, members of a culture pick and choose the traditional practices they want to engage in.

3. Culture teaching in foreign language education

Textbooks for second, or foreign, languages (L2) frequently unify cultural groups by portraying the dominant society and ignoring minority groups. Cultural material is often placed at the end of classes, demonstrating a lack of appreciation for the significance of cultural education in L2 teaching (Damen, 2003: 71-87). As noted by Kramsch (2013: 57-78), within the sociolinguistic idea of culture in L2 teaching, the concept focuses on embodying the cultural practices of native speakers, such as their traditions, convictions, and values. Activities such as modeling and role-playing teach norms of sociolinguistic usage, according to the notion that "one language = one culture." The dominant group's activities, diets, festivals, and traditions are the main emphasis. Additionally, while L2 classes and programs introduce students to pertinent debates and ideas, they primarily focus on practical aspects of culture. However, Syam et al. (2020: 101-119) state that when implementing intercultural aspects in EFL teaching, teachers ought to help students understand how their opinions of others and themselves affect the effectiveness of communication. In order to foster learner autonomy, Roby (1998: 61-74) proposes the Devil's Advocate approach, the goal of which is for students to become critical autonomous learners by challenging their own and other's viewpoints and forcing them to actively dissect their own opinions.

According to Siek-Piskozub (2016), Żydek-Bednarczuk (2010), and Bandura (2007) the teacher ought to assume the crucial role of a cultural mediator, to later pass on this role to the student. Moroz and Deminenko (2022: 74) propose that intercultural education is essential to the

well-rounded student entering the job market. To develop intercultural consciousness in students, teachers ought to be armed with sufficient intercultural training and didactic materials which reflect an intercultural approach to teaching foreign languages (Bednarz 2019: 85).

4. Intercultural communicative competence (ICC)

Nowadays, globalization has increased the pressure on individuals to engage in successful interactions with those from other cultures (Chen and Starosta, 1996: 353-354). Intercultural competence provides (1) the requisite linguistic knowledge and awareness needed when interacting with people from different cultures; (2) relevant knowledge about specific cultures; (3) broad comprehension about the issues that arise when members of different cultures interact; and (4) adaptable attitudes that encourage initiating and sustaining contact with diverse members of society (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2013: 16). According to Spitzberg and Chagnon (2009: 2–52), the behaviors that fit the norms of a particular culture, the circumstances, and the degree of interaction between intercultural interlocutors that fit the norms of a particular culture are recognized components of intercultural communication. Intercultural communication entails actions that help all parties involved reach their intended communicative goals. The author enumerates assimilation, adjustment, and adaptation as terms used to describe the process of assimilating into the culture of the recipient and being "well adjusted" to the surroundings. Lifelong learning of these competences lessens stress and cultural shock, while providing the person with the skills they require. Intercultural communicative competence is an interdisciplinary concept present in diverse fields, from engineering, through business, religion, and health care (Deardorff, 2009). There are a number of models of intercultural competence and intercultural communicative competence that can also be useful in the context of L2 teaching.

For example, Bennett (2004) expands on the process of transitioning from ethnocentrism to ethno-relativism. The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity describes six developmental stages: denial, defense, minimization, acceptance, adaptation, and integration. Byram (1997, 2021) distinguished four intercultural competences, (1) linguistic competence, (2) sociolinguistic competence, (3) discourse competence, and (4) intercultural competence. Furthermore, intercultural competence consists of (1) skills of interpreting/relating, (2) attitudes (curiosity/openness), (3) skills of discovery/interaction, (4) knowledge, and (5) critical cultural awareness.

At its core, the revolutionary model of Intercultural Communicative Competence proposed by Byram (1997, 2021) opposes the past models

from before 1997 based on multicultural competences that put the native speaker on a pedestal, and instead it places the learner at the center. Furthermore, the Pyramid and Process Models of Intercultural Competence (Deardorff, 2006: 241-266) expand upon: (1) the emotional state of the intercultural speaker which dictates their desired external and internal outcomes, alongside (2) knowledge and comprehension, (3) skills of listening, observing, interpreting and analyzing, evaluating, and relating skills, and (4) requisite attitudes: respect, openness, curiosity and discovery.

5. Methodology

The present study uses mixed-methods methodology, with a questionnaire and interviews as tools for data collection. For the quantitative part, the student questionnaire was conducted online through Google Forms. It included a demographic section consisting of 4 questions, a section on Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), and an open-ended question on students' opinions. The questions in the ICC section were grouped into three parts a 7 question language section, 6 question knowledge section, and a awareness section with 8 questions. The answer format was a 5-point Likert scale, from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. The student questionnaire concluded with one optional open-ended question, asking students for additional elaboration on the development of ICC skills in culture-related classes. The internal consistency reliability was measured using Cronbach's Alpha for all variables and for each group of items. (Cronbach's Alphas were found to be: 0.783 for all variables, 0.771 for language, 0.791 for knowledge, and 0.869 for awareness.) The elicited data were analyzed quantitatively via the SPSS software with the use of a one-way ANOVA with Bonferroni correction to test the differences among the participants in different years of study.

For the qualitative part, interviews were conducted with 4 lecturers who were teaching courses on the culture of English-speaking countries. The interviews included 16 open-ended questions, with 3 demographic questions and 13 questions based on the respondents' experience and opinions on developing students' ICC in their courses. The interviews were transcribed and then coded.

The research questions were formulated as follows:

1. How did students perceive the impact of courses on the culture of English-speaking countries on the development of their language skills, cultural knowledge, and cultural awareness?
2. What were the lecturers' opinions on the role of culture-related courses in developing the ICC of students?

6. Participants

Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous in order to obtain more objective opinions. Using a questionnaire and a series of interviews, both designed by the researcher, the research project aimed to examine the opinions of both students and lecturers. 42 second year BA and first- and second-MA students of the Faculty of English in Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań participated in the questionnaire. It is essential to point out that the BA students chosen for the study were English Philology students of all specializations, as the class in question is obligatory for all students in the second year. However, the MA level students chosen for the study are part of the American Literature and Culture specialization, which is the only English Philology specialization with obligatory culture-related classes. Four lecturers who taught culture-related subjects were interviewed for the study. Information about the teacher participants is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic description of the interview participants (n = 4).

Degree, major	Work experience	Subjects	Overseas experience and ICC training
PhD, English philologist	20 years	Practical English, teacher training courses, British culture, Native American culture, Australian culture, New Zealand culture	After spending 3 years in the US, participated in courses, seminars and conferences where ICC was widely discussed
Bachelor's degree in English, Master's degree in English-Irish literature and drama, doctorate in history	Approximately 10 years	TEFL at university level, USA: past and present, Selected elements of history and culture of English-speaking countries, Practical English, Undergraduate seminar	1 year in Ireland, 15 years in Poland, a lot of travel - originally from the US Just explored ICC on his own
MA in English, PhD and habilitation in American literature	About 20 years	Practical English, Study of literary texts, History of American literature, British and American life and institutions, Literary theory	High school in England, regular trips to Germany and Holland, travel to Japan. as part of the general reading training in cultural theory of cultural transfer theory

Degree, major	Work experience	Subjects	Overseas experience and ICC training
MA in English, PhD with project in American Political Culture	About 25 years	History of English-speaking countries, British and American life and institutions, Australian and New Zealand life and institutions, British and American politics, Religion in the British Isles and North America, European integration, EU institutions, International organizations	Spent a part of every year in a foreign country (e.g. Ireland-in total one year; Malta; Gibraltar; United States-six times; Chile; Britain-in total two years)

7. Questionnaire results: Students' opinions

A one-way ANOVA revealed that there was a statistically significant difference in perceived progress in ICC dimensions within each of the three student groups: Language: $F(6.896) = 7.593$, $p = .003$; Knowledge: $F(9.932) = 7.593$, $p < .001$; Awareness: $F(9.932) = 8.263$, $p = .001$.

Post-hoc testing using a Bonferroni correction determined that there is a significant difference between groups of students in different years of study: second year BA and second year MA ($p = .002$); second year BA and first year MA ($p < .001$); second year BA and second year MA ($p = .005$).

The descriptive statistics for the answers on the three components of ICC skills are presented in Table 2. As can be seen, among the groups according to year of study, the 2nd year Master's students declared the greatest increase in language competence ($M = 3.85$). The first year Master's students were the group with the greatest declared progress in the area of knowledge ($M = 4.39$). In terms of the last competency, awareness, the 2nd year Master's students were the group with the highest mean score ($M = 4.32$).

Table 2:. Descriptive statistics for amalgamated results, arranged into groups according to year of study

ICC dimensions	BA 2 (n = 22)		MA 1 (n = 13)		MA 2 (n = 7)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Language	2.94	0.61	3.19	0.48	3.85	0.55
Knowledge	3.65	0.63	4.39	0.30	4.38	0.49
Awareness	3.52	0.61	4.11	0.44	4.32	0.40

Table 3 presents descriptive statistics for the items in the dimension of language competence. As can be seen, the item examining the emphasis placed on the development of language skills along with the material discussed in class has the lowest mean (2.48). The item examining the discovery of vocabulary related to a specific topic during class had the highest mean in this dimension (3.95).

Table 3: Descriptive statistics for each question in the Language dimension

Questionnaire items	M	Median	SD
At least some teachers of culture-related courses pay attention to students' language use.	3.14	3.00	1.07
Academic language is one of the components of grading assignments in most culture-related courses.	3.36	4.00	1.00
In most culture-related courses, the focus is on the development of language skills alongside class content.	2.48	2.00	0.91
My culture-related courses provide students with speaking practice, especially during discussions.	3.60	4.00	0.98
My culture-related courses enable students to discover specific topic-related vocabulary.	3.95	4.00	0.85
Culture-related courses aid me in preparation for Practical English (PNJA) exams.	2.81	3.00	1.00
Culture-related courses inspire me to further work on my language skills.	2.88	3.00	1.23

Questions related to intercultural knowledge obtained the highest averages in the questionnaire. The question measuring whether culture-related courses inspire students to seek further information related to the topics covered in class had the lowest mean, with 3.57. The question measuring whether culture-related courses explain the historical background of attitudes of social groups had the highest mean of the entire questionnaire (4.36) (see Table 4).

Table 4: Descriptive statistics for each question in the Knowledge subgroup

Questionnaire items	M	Median	SD
My culture-related courses cover products and practices of social groups, such as documents, religious practices, and media.	4.24	4.00	0.79
My culture-related courses cover information on identities, and how members of social groups cooperate with, assimilate with, and accommodate each other and other groups. That is, my culture-related courses expand the scope of the information covered to include not primary information.	3.95	4.00	1.08
My culture-related courses explain the historical background behind the attitudes of social groups.	4.36	4.00	0.53
My culture-related courses encourage me to discover new information about social groups.	4.12	4.00	0.86
I can interpret and understand the importance of original documents that are crucial to another culture, such as movies, speeches, books, and constitutions.	3.81	4.00	0.99
Culture-related courses inspire me to look for further information connected with topics covered in the classroom.	3.57	4.00	1.08

Among the group of questions examining awareness, presented in Table 5, the question examining whether culture-related activities encourage students to criticize their own and other cultures has the lowest mean (3.31). The question examining the awareness of cultural differences and similarities between the student's culture and the cultures discussed in the courses has the highest mean among the subject group (4.10).

Table 5: Descriptive statistics for each question in the Awareness subgroup

Questionnaire items	M	Median	SD
My lecturer motivates discussions and encourages differences of opinion in the classroom.	3.88	4.00	0.77
My culture-related courses enable students to place their own culture in a wider historical and political framework.	3.36	3.00	1.05
My culture-related courses enable students to understand the value of cultural differences.	4.00	4.00	0.73
My culture-related courses enable students to understand how cultural differences influence the world at large.	3.95	4.00	0.93

Questionnaire items	M	Median	SD
My culture-related courses enable students to identify and highlight values and beliefs prevalent in each covered social group that stands behind the historical events covered.	4.07	4.00	0.74
My culture-related courses encourage students to criticize our respective cultures and other cultures.	3.31	3.50	1.09
I am aware of cultural differences and similarities between my culture and the cultures covered in the courses.	4.10	4.00	0.69
I am able to adapt my behavior and opinions to new topics covered in the class.	4.07	4.00	0.77

A common view amongst students, derived from the open question in the survey, signaled positive sentiments for the culture-related classes in aiding students to develop their linguistic skills. This sentiment corresponds to questionnaire items relating to language skills development and the introduction of culture focused materials that encourage students' active language use during classes. This is illustrated by the following quote:

> I personally feel like culture-related courses helped me way more in my English than any one of them focused on actually teaching English. Learning grammar through experiencing living English in films and even in books is a lot more beneficial than doing exercises in classroom, and discussions about matters that truly interest us motivate us more to speak up than classes devoted to discussions. While I'm not advocating for getting rid of the PNJA classes completely, for me the benefits of culture-related classes were almost always more tangible and lasting. (Student 1)

A number of comments implied that students think they acquire language skills subconsciously. Additionally, students do not consider teaching language skills to fall within the scope of a lecturer's duty. This is an example of this view:

> While I feel that my language skills are in fact getting much better I wouldn't necessarily say it is thanks to the teachers - rather, the texts we read, videos we watch, etc. I don't think it's the cultural studies teacher's job to teach us the practical language skills but they always answer if the we ask about a word or expression. (Student 2)

However, some respondents called into question the content chosen for the description of components of culture, as illustrated by the following excerpt:

> In my opinion the topics in course are extremely specific and the information don't seem relevant to the topic of culture. Topic like legal systems, judicial systems seem very unnecessary information. (Student 3)

8. Interview results: Teachers' perspectives

Three broad themes emerged from the analysis. A common view amongst interviewees was that students tend to share common views among themselves, which does not cultivate fruitful discussions with multiple points of views. The following quotations aptly illustrate this:

> What is worrying to me is that students in the English department show more or less the same mode of thinking […]they cannot take the stand of the other representatives of the culture and they would use a lot of emotional adjectives that border on some kind of offence of other people, which they would probably not say in the presence of the other people but they do it in class there is no time or give reasoning why they do it, […] very rarely happens that somebody would like to play the devil's advocate. (Lecturer 1)

> One of the things you have to do in that situation is that you have to take on a role of "devil's advocate" if everyone tends to be like a Bernie Sanders supporter you almost inevitable get the counterargument. (Lecturer 2)

> Students at universities tend to be quite similar ideologically, so they have a common language. It's easy for them to talk and exchange views. (Lecturer 3)

> For example, I have Muslim students from Azerbaijan and Polish students […] So I'm showing the pictures of how different saints function[...]. One of the reactions of the Muslim students was "OK, so do you actually choose Saints?" […] and I knew what they were getting at the idea […] And I started to explain the whole thing to them, that it's a different approach. Then there was a laughing reaction of some sort (from Christian students). This was a challenge for me to say: listen, their comment was not stupid at all because they live different. (Lecturer 4)

The informants also reported the use of material and activities catered to students' needs, as can be seen in this example:

[…] these can be research papers where I ask students to expand some topics of their interests […] Also presentations done by students and I like them but I think that puts most students into passivity […] I think the most important is the debate, that would be spontaneous debate […] We have been for the last six years implementing reading newspapers, from just daily sometimes weekly newspapers and they definitely provide a lot of not only content material and language input […] (Lecturer 1)

[…] So it's pretty much presentations and it's not a discussion based class but you get into discussions in terms of the presentations and they are encouraged to do the presentations on the basis of the articles and newspapers and statistics to pose questions to the group. (Lecturer 2)

I also think that with students when they when they give a presentation, they often talk about things they know or like and that is often a very advanced and intricate knowledge of the foreign culture. […] YouTube, (authentic) objects, brochures legal (documents), debating. […] We staged situations, practical situations in everyday life, like we would file in a complaint with the institution, do things like that using real (document) forms, and people would play. (Lecturer 3)

Huge fan of videos, YouTube. […] Discussion, exchange of cultural opinions. (Lecturer 4)

In all cases, when asked about the goals and desired outcomes of the courses, the informants reported that they hoped to prepare students for intercultural relations in the world outside university. For example, they said:

I would like to make students aware of the existence and not to be surprised and first of all not to be hurt (emotionally in encounters with different cultures) […] So I would like them to see it as a whole to see the connection, for example between the world of politics and the world of culture and the world of education and etc. (Lecturer 1)

The thing that you will go into that situation and at some point if you are very much one side and you will meet someone who is very much on the other side, connecting with that person is very much finding that common ground […] to be able to appreciate and to look at it from the other side […] go into the world and have enough contextual knowledge […] (Lecturer 2)

No, I don't want students to be in any particular way. […] But I really try to show anecdotes and examples of a things which strike me as distinctly, it's about sharing, the knowledge and experience of very unusual and cultural attitudes. (Lecturer 3)

> First of all, I would like them to be totally open to anything that is broadly understood as culture of English-speaking-countries and my greatest satisfaction is that when they retain a detail from my courses and use it in a professional life. It could be teaching English to high school students, watching a series or recognizing that a scene is wrong in a historic TV series. [...] What I can do is to simply make them (students) curious and make them open to that (culture) and not just focusing on language and literature, but if they (students) hear something in politics of the United States they go and find out about an interesting detail [...] (Lecturer 4)

9. Discussion

Quantitative and qualitative analysis yielded preliminary answers to the research questions. The goal of the project was to address the value of cultural studies classes in terms of developing ICC in English majors. Specifically, it aimed to investigate how strategically constructed culture classes influence students' ICC, their cultural knowledge and their communicative skills in L2 (English). The first research question was designed to determine students' opinion on the impact of culture related courses on developing their ICC. It was found that students throughout each of the three groups valued the development of their intercultural knowledge the most, and the acquisition of culturally sensitive vocabulary. Several factors could explain this observation; as mentioned in the literature review (e.g. Kramsch, 2013). Consistently teaching relevant and diverse cultural content helps students recognize the culturally influenced language and actions used by interlocutors.

In relation to the second question, which concerned the lecturers' opinions on the value of courses on the culture of English-speaking countries in developing students' Intercultural Communicative Competence, the results indicated that students' inability to actively practice critical cultural awareness and openness (Deardorff, 2006: 241-266; Byram, 2020) through taking the role of the Devil's advocate (Roby, 1998: 61-74) impedes the overall development of their ICC. However, one of the lecturers' greatest goals is to provide students with enough appropriate skills to become autonomous intercultural speakers/citizens (Byram, 2021; Syam et al., 2020; Roby, 1998). Overall, these results indicate that the perception of the impact of culture-related courses on the development of ICC is deemed to be significant by both students and lecturers.

10. Conclusion

Throughout this paper I have emphasized the importance of connection between language and culture teaching. All examined groups were found to be competent in all three components of ICC skills, language, knowledge, awareness (mean scores were above 2.0 and often around 4.0).

Students benefit from the opportunity to be confronted with diverse, often polarizing, opinions of other students while practicing language skills in a semi-controlled environment, such as discussions. Discussions pose the prime opportunity to exercise all of the ICC skills: linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, openness, and knowledge. The class environment dictates the topic of the class and subsequently the tasks, but it is the students who utilize and interpret their cultural knowledge in the student-centric classroom. As the teaching of culture moves away from an essentialist portrayal of culture, it is crucial for classes teaching cultural knowledge to center on the students. Their experiences, opinions, and interpretations bring cultural diversity into the lesson, creating a semi-realistic environment in comparison to the teacher-centered classroom. Although students deem their cultural knowledge sufficient, and they are able to use skills while analyzing culturally impacted interactions, their work with materials discussed in class does not extend to the outside world. However, such a statement fails to point out that the students' overall desire is to explore cultural knowledge of their choice as an independent learning opportunity outside the classroom, which is something that could be explored further during culture-related courses. In the same ways discussions, presentations align with student-centered cultural education; the students can showcase their cultural insights, which may not only provide a chance to exercise ICC skills but also to boost students' confidence in their knowledge.

Therefore, the ICC teaching in culture-related classes can be further implemented by decentering the teacher, using authentic materials, and boosting the individual cultural interests of students.

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