

Aleksandra Wach

Uniwersytet im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3341-6347>

waleks@amu.edu.pl

Wiktoria Cholewa

Uniwersytet im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu

<https://orcid.org/0009-0005-7962-5760>

wikcho2@st.amu.edu.pl

“There is much more to communication than just language”: Intercultural training for English majors

The article presents the results of a mixed-methods study conducted during an elective proseminar in which the participants ($N = 34$), English majors in the undergraduate program, received intercultural training. The aims of the study were to find out which dimensions of intercultural competence were developed as a result of the training and to investigate the participants' opinions about the usefulness of the course for the development of their intercultural competence. The research data were collected through the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (Chen, Starosta, 2000) administered before and after the training, and the participants' written evaluations of the course. The quantitative analysis revealed significant increase in three out of five components of the scale: interaction engagement, confidence, and attentiveness. These results were complemented and elaborated upon by the qualitative findings, which uncovered the participants' perceptions about the benefits of the training in enhancing their knowledge about interculturality and communication, various skills, and positive attitudes. They also pinpointed the teaching procedures that helped them develop.



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1. Introduction

According to the United Nations' (2020) estimations, the size of the migrant population worldwide exceeded 280 million in 2020, and this number has been steadily growing. The most dynamic increase in these figures, of more than 15 million incoming migrants in the years 2015-2020, has been recorded in Europe. According to the Polish Office for Foreigners (2023), about a million Ukrainian citizens resided in Poland in 2023. The changing sociopolitical situation, together with the rapid development of technology and a globalization of business, commerce, and other spheres of life, has created a need for high levels of intercultural communicative competence (ICC), defined as “the complex skills required for effective and appropriate interaction with individuals from different language and cultural backgrounds” (Fantini, 2020: 53). Fostering ICC has thus been increasingly recognized as an essential objective in education at all levels to prepare young people for the demands of modern life, to encourage them to respond to and embrace diversity, and become informed and aware citizens (OECD, 2019; Kohler, 2020; Council of Europe, 2022). This objective is particularly significant in higher education, which equips students with various skills that aid them in pursuing advanced academic paths and finding their place in the competitive, multicultural job market (Arasaratnam-Smith, 2020; Arasaratnam-Smith and Deardorff, 2023).

The changing reality has had an impact on second and foreign language (L2) education, which has experienced a shift from the cultural to the intercultural orientation (Baker, 2012; Gębał, 2019; Kohler, 2020; Róg, 2016), influenced particularly by Byram's (1997, 2021) conceptualization of ICC. Intercultural language education takes various forms, one of them being intercultural training, understood as learner-centered, usually practice-oriented, workshop-like techniques with the aim of preparing trainees to function in a multicultural society (Gudykunst et al., 1996; Triandis, 2004). While practical recommendations on incorporating intercultural training in L2 teaching have appeared in the literature (Białek, 2017; Janowska, Badzioch, 2016; Wilczyńska et al., 2019), research on its effectiveness, especially in the Polish context, has been scarce. The present study addresses this research gap by posing the following questions:

1. Which areas of intercultural sensitivity did the participants, English majors, develop over the intercultural training?
2. How did the participants evaluate the effectiveness of the course in terms of promoting their ICC?

2. Literature review

2.1. The concept of intercultural communicative competence

The concept of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is complex, and most ICC models encompass cognitive (knowledge), behavioral (skills), and affective (emotions and attitudes) dimensions. In Byram's (1997, 2021) model, knowledge (*savoirs*) includes the knowledge of self and other, and of individual and societal interaction processes, skills include interpreting and relating (*savoir comprendre*) and discovery and interaction (*savoir apprendre/faire*), while attitudes (*savoir être*) are related to relativizing self and valuing others. The final dimension is critical cultural awareness or political education (*savoir s'engager*), which refers to the ability to evaluate one's own culture and that of others critically. In Deardorff's (2006) process-oriented model, respect, openness, and curiosity serve as the initial attitudes needed to develop further ICC dimensions. These are: knowledge, which comprises self-awareness, deep cultural insights and sociolinguistic awareness, skills of listening and observing, and skills of evaluating, analyzing and interpreting. The right attitudes and appropriate levels of knowledge and skills then lead to internal changes within the learner's mind (internal outcomes), which eventually result in effective behavior and communication in intercultural contexts (external outcomes). The role of attitudes is thus pivotal in acquiring knowledge and skills, and, consequently, in a progression from an individual perspective to successful intercultural communication.

Chen and Starosta's (1996) model also includes the cognitive dimension, which is realized as intercultural awareness, the behavioral dimension, referred to as intercultural adroitness, and the emotional (affective) dimension, which is intercultural sensitivity – the ability to cultivate positive emotions before, during, and after intercultural encounters. Chen and Starosta (1996) see four key personal traits as a basis for cultivating intercultural sensitivity. One of them is self-concept, closely related to self-esteem and affecting how individuals communicate with others. Another trait is open-mindedness, which involves a person's readiness to communicate openly and accept diverse perspectives. A third attribute is having a nonjudgmental

attitude, which means refraining from harboring biases against others during intercultural exchanges. The final trait is social relaxation, which refers to the ability to manage anxiety during intercultural interactions. As Chen and Starosta (1996) concluded, these four characteristics “expedite the process of psychological adaptation by increasing a person’s general psychological well-being, self-satisfaction, and contentment within a new environment” (p. 364). In 2000, the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS), a tool designed to measure sensitivity in intercultural interaction contexts, was designed. It includes 24 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale, divided into five categories: interaction engagement, respect for cultural differences, interaction enjoyment, interaction confidence, and interaction attentiveness (Chen, Starosta, 2000). This scale was used as a data collection tool in the present study.

2.2. Intercultural training in higher education

Intercultural training is broadly defined as a course in which trainees are engaged in activities with the aim of developing their intercultural competence within cognitive, emotional, and behavioral domains, so that they are better prepared for successful intercultural contact (Triandis, 2004). Such training is predominantly associated with multinational corporate contexts and has only recently been broadened to other fields, including education (Landis, Bhawuk, 2020; Pusch, 2004).

Discussing various options in the design of intercultural training, Gudykunst et al. (1996) distinguish between didactic (oriented toward acquiring knowledge, mainly through lectures, discussions, and critical incidents) and experiential (involving hands-on activities, such as role-play and simulation) approaches. Another distinction concerns culture-specific and culture-general training, where the latter prepares trainees to interact with representatives of any culture by raising their intercultural sensitivity and awareness of the influence of culture on behavior. In a similar vein, Wilczyńska et al. (2019) list three types of training: knowledge-based, consisting in transmitting cultural knowledge and analyzing specific cultural phenomena, interaction-based, best illustrated by role-plays and simulations, in which participants get deeply involved in a cultural situation, and collaboration-based, in which participants work together to achieve particular culture-oriented goals. Białek (2017) discusses the pros and cons of implicit and explicit intercultural training, suggesting that implicit training, integrated with practicing communication skills, may appear to be a more viable option in L2 education. As noted by Karpińska-Musiał and Orchowska (2019),

the educational context and the role of the instructor as an intercultural mediator are crucial factors influencing the type and shape of intercultural training.

Intercultural training activities vary in terms of emphasis, which can be cognitive, affective or behavioral, and in terms of risk levels associated with, for example, self-disclosure, embarrassment or feeling uncomfortable. Therefore, careful sequencing of activities in the course is recommended. Importantly, training sessions should be followed by a debriefing stage to help learners understand the core of the activities and to mitigate potential negative feelings (Paige, Martin, 1996; Gębal, 2019). Kallschmidt et al. (2020), in an overview of assessment options in intercultural training, point to the evaluation of trainees' satisfaction with the course and measurement of aspects of intercultural sensitivity, as this dimension appears to be "[a] particular learning outcome of many cross-cultural training programs" (p. 340). The present study was in line with these considerations.

Previous research into the effectiveness of intercultural training is represented in the literature by small-scale case studies in various educational contexts and disciplines. Kováčová and Eckert's (2010) quasi-experimental research involving 40 students of different faculties from Poland, Czech Republic, Ukraine, and Germany employed a trainee satisfaction scale, trainer observations, a pre-/post-test design using a case study about cross-cultural challenges, and interviews conducted 4-8 months after the training. The results showed a higher rating of didactic training than experiential training in several areas, including the final overall evaluation. Post-test scores uncovered enhanced culture specific knowledge, empathy, as well as the ability to recognize culturally driven misunderstandings, to identify more subtle cross-cultural interaction issues and to attribute misunderstandings to cultural norms in both training conditions, didactic and experiential. The delayed interviews revealed effects of the training in real-life encounters, such as activation of knowledge in intercultural interactions, adjustment strategies, and conscious cultural learning. A similar methodology was employed in Bussel and Krause's (2015) study with a sample of 40 college students in Germany, and training based on critical incidents. The post-test results pointed to increased ability to cognitively and affectively analyze the incidents, to use appropriate problem-solving strategies, and to draw conclusions. Moreover, observations highlighted the benefit of cooperative learning, which facilitated critical reflection on intercultural issues and challenged students' preconceptions through peer interactions. While students improved their perceived intercultural skills, their self-efficacy related to studying or working abroad did not significantly change, suggesting that longer interventions

might be needed for substantial impact on developing their confidence in real-life experience abroad. In Vromans et al. (2023), the intercultural training utilized an online tool featuring cultural packages, value lenses, and critical incidents in a blended learning environment in a management course at a Dutch university. Data in the qualitative study, collected through semi-structured interviews with nine participants, revealed a number of factors that were perceived as promoting the development of participants' ICC, with the teaching methods, including the online tool, a presentation assignment, in-class discussions and small group work being particularly appreciated. Next, in-class intercultural contact through teamwork, multicultural groups, and cultural informants, was considered beneficial. The participants also listed intercultural experiences outside the classroom and a range of motivational factors, such as interest in other cultures, the applicability of learning, relevance for future career and daily life, and feeling comfortable thanks to the positive class atmosphere as factors strengthening their intercultural learning.

Finally, in the context of a language faculty, Siek-Piskozub (2017) traced the ICC development of 59 English majors, future teachers, in an MA seminar devoted to the topic of interculturality in L2 education. Throughout the course, the students engaged in discussions and topic presentations, role-plays and simulations. The data collection tools comprised pre-/post-course drawings of mind-maps illustrating participants' conceptualizations of ICC, pre-/post-course questionnaires measuring participants' awareness of their ICC levels, a course evaluation questionnaire, and the trainer's observations. The findings indicated a growing awareness of the complex nature of intercultural competence and processes involved in cross-cultural communication, and openness toward participating in discussions and sharing their opinions and (sometimes very personal and intimate) experience. The self-evaluations pointed to a certain increase in the domains of knowledge and skills, but not attitudes, with particularly low scores concerning the readiness to relativize their own culture. The researcher's explanation is that a change in attitudes is a long-term process and may be unattainable within a single course.

The present study contributes to existing research on the effects of implementing intercultural training in higher education by focusing specifically on the affective ICC dimension, which has been largely neglected by previous research, in the context of a foreign language faculty.

3. The study

3.1. Participants and context

A total of 34 second-year students at the Faculty of English, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań participated in the study. They came from two cohorts, each enrolled in one edition of the proseminar “Intercultural competence in foreign language education” in two subsequent academic years: in 2021-2022 ($n=20$) and 2022-2023 ($n=14$). The participants studied different programs available at the faculty, and only about half of them were in the teaching specialization. Concerning nationality, 33 of the students were Polish, and one was Russian.

The course was an elective, four-credit proseminar for second-year undergraduate students. The class met once a week for 15 weeks (total of 30 hours of instruction) over a single semester. The syllabus covered topics such as: culture definitions and analogies, ICC models, cultural identity, prejudices and stereotypes, intercultural conflict resolution, cultural values, and communication styles. It had a primarily practical orientation and, apart from a few knowledge-providing sessions on some of the topics, mostly included a range of hands-on activities, such as: discussion, role-play, simulation, problem-solving, drawing, critical incidents, and responding to audio-visual materials. The activities were adapted by the teacher from Berardo and Dear-dorff (2012), Council of Europe (2016), Georgescu (2018), and other sources that contain practical ideas for intercultural activities. The notes for trainers provided by the authors of the activities, including their risk levels, were followed, and each session ended with an oral debriefing stage. Another important systematically used technique was an intercultural portfolio, in which the students wrote about their intercultural experiences, describing the situations and providing their reflections on them. The portfolio was kept throughout the semester as homework, and the entries were regularly submitted on Moodle.

3.2. Data collection and analysis

There were two sources of data. Quantitative data came from the pre-/post-training ISS (Chen, Starosta, 2000) filled in by all participants ($N=34$) on Moodle. The selection of the ISS as a data collection tool was guided by an assumption that the relatively brief training was likely to influence the affective dimension of participants’ ICC, conceived as self-perceived heightened engagement and openness in intercultural interactions. Qualitative data were obtained from written reflective evaluations of the course generated as

open-ended answers to the question: “What did I learn during this proseminar?”, which 29 of the participants provided anonymously in pen-and-paper form in the final classes.

The study utilized the original form of the ISS (Chen, Starosta, 2000), which consists of 24 items on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = uncertain, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree. Its internal consistency was $\alpha = .884$ before, and $\alpha = .823$ after the course. A descriptive statistics analysis was performed for each of the five subcomponents of the scale: interaction engagement, respect for cultural differences, interaction confidence, interaction enjoyment, and interaction attentiveness. Following this, the Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test was run to assess the differences between the pre- and post-course results for each of the subcomponents. IBM SPSS Statistics v. 29 was used for the quantitative data analysis, with the significance level at $p = .05$.

The qualitative data underwent thematic analysis in which five thematic categories related to the benefits of the intercultural training were identified: “teaching procedures”, “knowledge about interculturality”, “knowledge about communication”, “skills”, and “attitudes”.

4. Results

4.1. The Intercultural Sensitivity Scale

Table 1 presents the results of the scale obtained before and after the training within each of the five subcomponents of intercultural sensitivity.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test results for pre- and post-training ISS ($N = 34$)

ISS subcomponent	Stage	M	SD	Z	Sig.	Effect size
Interaction engagement	Pre	3.99	0.43	-2.675	.007*	$r = -.46$
	Post	4.25	0.36			
Respect for cultural differences	Pre	4.54	0.43	-1.039	.299	$r = -.18$
	Post	4.61	0.35			
Interaction confidence	Pre	3.01	0.80	-2.179	.029*	$r = -.38$
	Post	3.42	0.70			
Interaction enjoyment	Pre	4.01	0.56	-1.552	.121	$r = -.26$
	Post	4.43	0.46			

ISS subcomponent	Stage	M	SD	Z	Sig.	Effect size
Interaction attentiveness	Pre	3.62	0.57	-3,224	.001**	$r = -.55$
	Post	4.08	0.56			

Key to the mean scores: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = uncertain, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p \leq .001$

Source: own study.

According to the data in Table 1, a statistically significant increase between the pre- and post-training measurements was found in three ISS components: interaction engagement, interaction confidence, and interaction attentiveness ($p < .05$), with a medium effect size in the case of interaction engagement ($r = -.35$) and interaction confidence ($r = -.38$), and a large effect size in the case of interaction attentiveness ($r = -.55$). In the remaining ISS subcomponents, the differences in the mean scores appeared to be non-significant.

4.2. The participants' evaluations of the course

The thematic analysis revealed 22 codes falling within five categories in the participants' written evaluations of what they had learned in the course. Table 2 presents a summary of the identified categories and the specific codes within them.

Table 2. The categories identified in the participants' evaluations of the course in terms of their ICC development ($N = 29$)

Thematic categories	Codes
Teaching procedures	Variety of activities
	Interesting materials
	Stimulation of critical thinking
	Exchange of opinions
	Student integration
	Intercultural portfolio
Knowledge about interculturality	Definitions and models of culture and ICC
	Cultural lenses in perceiving the world
	Links between culture and values
	Culture-specific knowledge

Thematic categories	Codes
Knowledge about communication	Complexity of intercultural communication
	Influence of culture on communication
	Communication styles
	Avoiding miscommunication
Skills	Noticing cultural differences
	Interpreting behaviors
	Intercultural interactions
Attitudes	Sensitivity to cultural phenomena
	Openness
	Respectfulness
	Consciousness of one's prejudices
	Enhanced curiosity

Source: own study.

The participants referred to the teaching procedures, mainly the activities used, as enhancing their intercultural learning. They pointed to the variety of activities and captivating materials that stimulated their interest in the course content and engaged their critical thinking about culture-related topics. One student wrote, “The activities gave me food for thought”, and another added, “The discussions and role-plays were an eye-opening experience, they made me think in new ways about the topics.” The thought-provoking content was recognized by more students, as summed up in this quote: “I appreciate that the course was more about thinking and reflecting about certain issues than just focusing on getting a grade.” One student liked the video-materials covered in class so much that she sometimes shared them with her family and discussed them further at home. The students also stressed the benefits of pair- and group-work, which was the basic format employed in most activities, such as role-plays, group discussions, problem-solving activities, etc. They stressed the relevance of exchanging opinions with peers in probing the topics in more depth. A related benefit stimulating learning was the sense of community among the classmates that emerged from exploring the engaging, often personalized topics together, as illustrated by this quote: “Not only did learn a lot, but I have also made new friends.” The activity that was specifically mentioned the most frequently in the evaluations was the intercultural portfolio that the students filled in as a regular homework assignment. It appeared to successfully evoke reflections about cultural phenomena. One student admitted, “Through writing portfolios I reflected on my own views and similarities and differences

between cultures, which is something I previously often overlooked, taking it as an unchangeable fact that I never really thought about.” Another student noted that the portfolio strengthened classroom learning: “The portfolio was a good way to learn and reflect on our own experiences while using the concepts introduced in the course.”

Within the category of knowledge about interculturality, most students acknowledged having learned about the multidimensionality of the concepts of culture and ICC. This is evidenced in the following quotes: “I learned that there are many dimensions of culture, not just what we see” (the student was apparently referring to the iceberg metaphor of culture) and “Before the course, I thought I knew a lot about culture, but I learned so many new concepts and terms (...). The proseminar was an informative and enriching experience.” Importantly, the extended definition of culture as a broad and dynamic social phenomenon was a new discovery to some students: “I learned that cultural characteristics differentiate people in general, even in the same family, not only people from different countries.” The students also wrote about the concept of “cultural lenses”, how it explains one’s perceptions of the world and one’s often biased reactions to otherness. This concept stimulated an interesting in-class discussion and was recalled in the portfolio entries. Referring to this, one student wrote, “I learned that culture shapes how we see things, and sometimes people have a completely different point of view, which is normal.” The topic of values as a cultural phenomenon was also perceived as enriching in terms of knowledge, as admitted by the following quote: “[I learned] that cultures do not only stem from where we are born, but also cultures are shaped by the choices we make in life. (...) There is no single ‘good way’ of living, because there are various values.” Finally, although culture-specific knowledge was not a topic per se in the course, some students mentioned they that had broadened their knowledge about habits, lifestyles, and problems faced by people in other countries, probably because such facts appeared as contextual information in some of the audiovisual materials, role-plays and critical incidents.

The training activities also appeared to be a source of information about communication. A number of the students pointed to the complexity of communication in the intercultural context. The students made the following statements: “There is much more to communication than just language. Even if you know the foreign language very well, you may still be misunderstood” and “I gained a new perspective and higher awareness of the cultural and intercultural elements evident in everyday communication.” The influence of culture on communication was an important finding for other students as well. One of them wrote, “Our cultural background is evident in what [sic] and how we speak.” This is connected to another relevant topic,

that of communication styles. In class, the students detected traces of direct and indirect communication styles and matched them to low-context and high-context cultures, which they found highly interesting, as acknowledged by one student: "I learned that there are different communication styles which reflect some cultural differences. This knowledge is very useful." Some comments were linked to the topic of missed communication and potential conflict that it can cause: "I understood the reasons for problems in intercultural communication, from language barriers to various preconceptions."

Some quotations were related to the students' perceptions about the skills they developed through participating in the activities. Most comments in this category concerned the ability to notice cultural phenomena, for example: "I started to pay more focused attention to cultural differences when watching movies, reading articles, or just browsing the Internet. I notice much more than I used to." Some students wrote about their enhanced skill of interpreting other people's behavior, which can be seen in this quote: "I have developed the ability to interpret people's actions through understanding how culture impacts our life and thinking." This example illustrates how the student uses the knowledge gained in the course to be a more conscious observer. Broadened knowledge also translates into enhanced interaction skills, which was brought up by a number of students. This point is evident in the following quotations: "Now during intercultural interactions I take into account cultural factors, because I am more aware of them"; "I started to pay more attention to my conversations with foreigners, and I draw deeper conclusions from them. I think about the backgrounds of my interlocutors", and "I have learnt to be more gentle and understanding when talking to people from other cultures." The final quote reveals, apart from enhanced interaction skills, a positive attitude toward one's intercultural interlocutors.

A number of quotes expressing positive attitudes toward interculturality and otherness were detected in the evaluations. Sensitivity to cultural phenomena and to differences was frequently mentioned: "I am more sensitive regarding other people's backgrounds and how they behave." This is connected to becoming more open toward others. A student wrote, "I feel like I actually managed to grow in my understanding and accepting [sic] other people." Interestingly, a couple of participants openly acknowledged their own stereotypes and prejudices, stating that the course content helped them critically re-evaluate them. The following quote illustrates this: "I learned that I had some preconceptions and biases about other cultures. (...) I have become more open-minded." Finally, some students expressed their awakened curiosity about the topics of culture and interculturality, and about interesting facts concerning specific cultures, as exemplified by this quote: "What is

most important, I got more interested in other cultures and I try to do my own research on different cultural topics.”

5. Discussion

With reference to the first research question, the data elicited through the ISS (Chen, Starosta, 2000) indicated a significant increase in the measurements taken at the beginning and after the completion of the course within three out of the five areas of the scale: interaction engagement, interaction confidence, and interaction attentiveness. Specifically, interaction engagement embraces elements such as open-mindedness, cautiousness in forming opinions about others, expressing acknowledgment and understanding by giving positive responses and clues in interactions. Interaction confidence denotes being sure of oneself during interactions, knowing what to say and being sociable, and attentiveness is linked to being observant, trying to get enough information, and being sensitive to subtle meanings expressed by the interlocutor (Chen, Starosta, 2000). Apparently, participating in both the didactic and experiential intercultural training activities made the students believe that they developed in these areas. While an increase in the mean scores was observed throughout the scale, in relation to respect for cultural differences and interaction enjoyment it did not reach statistical significance. It needs to be noted, however, that in these two areas the mean scores at both the initial and the final measurements were the highest in the whole scale, perhaps leaving little room for improvement.

In principle, intercultural sensitivity in Chen and Starosta's (1996, 2000) model mainly concerns the readiness to develop positive emotions, based on understanding and appreciation, toward cultural differences. These emotional dispositions, in turn, are likely to promote effective and appropriate behavior in communicative intercultural encounters. This point of view aligns with Deardorff's (2006) premise that the right attitudes, which are the affective dimension in her process model, provide a valid foundation for a subsequent enhancement of one's intercultural knowledge and skills, leading to internal and external outcomes. In the present study, the increase on the ISS can thus be interpreted as a positive and important step in preparing the students for future private, academic, and professional intercultural interactions.

The data generated through the participants' evaluation of the effectiveness of the course in terms of promoting their ICC (research question 2) provide, to a large extent, a qualitative complementation and explanation of the quantitative data from the ISS. However, the thematic categories

that emerged from the data extended well beyond the affective ICC dimension, including the dimensions of knowledge and skills as well. Most of the quotations and codes expressed new or broadened knowledge that the students developed, mainly through the type of didactic activities, such as mini lectures, presentations, videos, and discussions, which confirms the effectiveness of this form of training, also acknowledged in Kováčová and Eckert's (2010) findings. The participants gained culture-general knowledge about the multidimensionality of culture, the concept of interculturality, but also about the nature of interpersonal interaction and communication, which is described by Byram (2021: 46) as “fundamental to successful interaction but not acquired automatically.” The concept of cultural lenses in perceiving the reality around us and the importance of cultural values, discussed at the beginning of the course, were eye-opening discoveries for the students that helped them make sense of certain phenomena explored in later sessions. There were numerous instances of the students' attempts to use their newly acquired knowledge to cognitively analyze the situations encountered in the activities, which was also reported in Bussel and Krause's (2015) study.

Enhanced knowledge about the nature of interactions, various communication styles, and culture-interaction links must also have contributed to the high levels of interaction engagement and attentiveness revealed through the ISS. Moreover, it is likely that it also increased the participants' self-confidence as intercultural speakers.

The knowledge about cultural and intercultural concepts clearly contributed to the perceived development of certain important skills, as the students frequently admitted they paid attention to and noticed cultural phenomena around them, that is, not only when interacting, but also when watching movies and series, and reading or viewing Internet content. It can thus be concluded that they developed the skill of interpreting and relating, “which draws on existing knowledge” and “may be confined to work on documents” (Byram, 2021: 48-49). The other skill from Byram's ICC (1997, 2021) model, that of discovery and interaction, was also evident in the students' quotes. It needs to be stressed that the participants, who were English majors, had ample opportunities to interact with people from other cultures, at least with the native speaker teachers at the faculty; some students also mentioned job-related or regular social contacts with foreigners. Most of them admitted focusing to a greater extent on some cultural nuances deriving from the interlocutor's background as a result of greater awareness of the specificity of intercultural communication. The skills of interpreting and relating and of discovery and interaction also transpired in the portfolio entries, which contained numerous examples of comparing

their own and other cultural phenomena or documents, drawing conclusions from intercultural encounters, interpreting others' behavior and trying to explain their successes and failures when communicating with people of different origins. Sometimes they also recalled serving as mediators between culturally different persons. It could be seen how the course content intertwined with out-of-class experience, and these two supported each other, as in Vromans et al.'s (2023) study.

The qualitative data also provide substantial evidence of the positive attitudes toward otherness and the concept of interculturality. Throughout the course, in all in-class activities and homework assignments, the students displayed high levels of respect for other cultures and diversity, as was also evident in the evaluations and portfolio entries. Aware of the cultural lenses that they wear, the students acquired higher levels of acceptance toward others and a willingness to respect others' motives and behaviors. In terms of the affective dimension of ICC training, the findings differ from the results of Siek-Piskozub's (2017) study, where the participants' attitudes were less impacted by the training. Perhaps this difference can be attributed to the different methodology used, as Siek-Piskozub's (2017) observations also pointed to the students' high engagement in the experiential activities, which can be interpreted as a demonstration of positive attitudes toward the course content.

Finally, the positive feedback on the teaching procedures employed in the course highlights the effectiveness of both didactic and experiential forms of intercultural training. The strength of the didactic techniques was their informativeness and the interest of the content, while the advantages of the experiential activities stemmed from the collaborative format, that is student engagement in groupwork and interaction with peers, in accordance with recommendations of Gudykunst et al. (1996) and Paige and Martin (1996). As in Vromans et al.'s (2023) study, the present participants found the activities highly motivating and thought-provoking, and, even though some admitted not being fond of groupwork, everybody appreciated the opportunities to exchange opinions, and the development of social skills through the group activities. The use of the intercultural portfolio also appeared to be appreciated as stimulating reflections and motivating participants to notice and interpret intercultural traces in their environments. The range of topics captured in the portfolio entries was impressively broad, as illustrated by some of their titles: "American accents", "Nordic shock", "Feria de Sevilla and Polish national holidays", "Korean grill", "My African friend", "A Czech misunderstanding", "Not just a hairstyle?" and many others. The students found keeping the portfolio a rather demanding, but at the same time a highly engaging and valuable task.

6. Limitations and suggestions for further research

Among the limitations of the present study, apart from the relatively small sample, the self-report nature of the data needs to be acknowledged. Both data collection methods employed in the study were based on the students' self-evaluation, either on a scale or in a narrative form, which resulted in a subjective account of their competence development. Moreover, the written evaluations differed in depth and complexity; while some were elaborate and detailed, others were brief and quite shallow. To address these concerns, it is suggested that further research should implement class observation as a more objective way of collecting data, and interviews as a source of more insightful perspectives on the participants' experience. Additionally, the present findings can serve as a foundation for conducting a longitudinal and comprehensive study exploring the attitudinal, cognitive and behavioral dimensions of ICC in a broader and more heterogeneous sample.

7. Conclusions

The findings of the study clearly indicate that implementing intercultural training in foreign language faculties in higher education institutions is both needed and appreciated. The participants reported increasing their knowledge, developing intercultural skills, and assuming positive attitudes toward otherness and diversity. These benefits are of high relevance for ensuring successful mutual understanding in the contemporary globalized world. As one of the students aptly summed up: "I am certain that the course will prove useful in my academic and professional life." Obviously, a semester-long course will not guarantee life-long success, but it seems that it sparked interest in the students and motivated them to pursue further development in the ICC dimensions. The positive results of the study demonstrate that the first step has already been taken. Another student's final comment transpired hope and enthusiasm: "Looking at all that I have learned [in the course], I believe that I have become more aware and understanding as a person." This seems to be a solid foundation for educating fully developed, highly successful "global graduates" who can make the world a better place.

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