AVE Trends in Intelligent Techno Learning

Students' Awareness of Intercultural Competence in the English Language Classrooms

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Abstract: This study aims to explore, holistically, students' cultural awareness, attitudes, views and perceptions of intercultural communicative competence in foreign language teaching and learning. The study also explores students' understanding of the relationship between language and culture and how cultural knowledge helps them communicate effectively in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. Moreover, the study attempts to synthesize findings from prior studies and apply them to the local Macedonian context to identify possible discrepancies between established research results and actual cultural teaching practices in Macedonian EFL classrooms. The study pays particular attention to students' perspectives, as learners are directly affected by changes in pedagogical approach and the inclusion of cultural content in second language education. The study explored their current understanding of culture to assess their awareness of cultural differences, intercultural communication and the importance of cultural competence in language learning. The results are expected to provide insight into the current level of cultural awareness among EFL learners and indicate areas that need to be given more attention. Finally, the research will provide evidence-based recommendations that may help language teachers, curriculum designers, and future researchers improve intercultural teaching practices and create more culturally responsive learning environments in Macedonia and similar educational contexts.

Keywords: Cultural Awareness; Intercultural Communicative Competence; Cultural Teaching Practices; Macedonian EFL Classroom; Second Language Teaching; Similar Learning Contexts; Intercultural Competence.

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1. Introduction

The paper is undeniable that it has become increasingly common (and imperative) to meaningfully interact with persons and groups from diverse cultural backgrounds more tangibly, as advances in research, business, (communications) technology, and the rise of cross-border mobility, economic interdependence, and, holistically speaking, the effort that goes into globalization is gradually reaching more and more communities worldwide [3]. In light of these developments, such stark shifts in society's intercultural stances naturally affect many institutions and, in particular, pose a major challenge for secondary language education [1]. In recognition of this rising volume of intercultural contact, it is clear that one needs to possess (and cultivate) a good command of a skill set that facilitates communication by allowing one to be observant of others, to have an appropriate

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level of sensitivity and respect for them, be adept at mediating between cultures, maintaining cross-cultural relationships, and being an active participant in many different communities [2]. Language, after all, is a 'culturally conditioned' phenomenon, executed through "socially constructed practices with fluid and negotiable boundaries that are intricately and dynamically interconnected". Culture transcends the individual human lifespan, as its many material and immaterial facets are seamlessly passed down and adapted through every subsequent generation – as Samovar and Porter define culture in this manner: …the deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, social hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relationships, concepts of the universe, and material objects and possessions acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving [4].

This lived cultural experience shapes a person's whole perspective and profoundly informs their patterns of behavior; more broadly, these experiences are expected to extend beyond the individual and be shared with their immediate community and beyond [5]. Correspondingly, "culture can be understood as the shared patterns of behaviors and interactions, cognitive constructs, and affective understanding that are learned through a process of socialization". Often, when concepts and messages from one community are communicated through the use of language as a vessel of culture to others from more distant communities (and by extension, cultures), one generally forgets that others view the message as detached from the cultural context in which it was created, which can become a common source for misunderstandings to arise [6]. While translations and interpretations alleviate the linguistic disparities in cross-linguistic communication, what is often lost is the nuance of socio-cultural connotations that are imbued in linguistic expression. This is why learning a second or foreign language (namely English, as it is the most proliferated contemporary lingua franca of the modern world) is instrumental as a tool for fostering effective communication across vastly different contexts; but resisting the societal pressure or not acquiring it with full proficiency could also result in marginalization, exclusion and limited access to opportunities for global intercultural communication [7]. Committing to language learning should (albeit indirectly) force the individual to begin to understand their own cultural experience and expectations and prompt them to confront (and work on unlearning) previously held beliefs regarding the 'self' and the 'other' or, in other words, discard the stigma that is associated with the notion of 'otherness' (foreignness) that is often assigned to cultures other than one's own [8].

In doing so (especially alongside ICC), learners might gain awareness of their own or others' multicultural identity and transition between diverse cultural contexts, as it is becoming virtually impossible to be merely mono-cultural in any contemporary society, with intercultural relations on the rise [9]. Viewed through an intercultural lens, the foreign language classroom ought to be a place of cultural juncture, where the goal is to go beyond merely developing linguistic ability and into highlighting the significance of how interaction in a cultural context (as a result) can profoundly impact the learners' beliefs, values, perceptions, and social relationship patterns. Learners, unfortunately, and far too commonly, if not frequently exposed to authentic media involving the second language, are learning said language in a factually superficial, culturally isolated, and decontextualized manner, achieving at most a 'consumer-tourist' type of communicative competence, as termed by Byram, far removed from being meaningfully involved in any target language community [10]. Moreover, the language they are taught in the classroom is the societally elevated (standardized) national form, which leaves little room to understand the minute cultural nuances present in various social or regional varieties of a language [11]. They may thus conceive of culture in abstract terms, with little to no cultural awareness, and lack the tools to understand what aspects of culture are; culture is also not always explicitly presented to them as a valuable part of communication in another language.

As a result, learners may have little idea what language learning can do for cultural enrichment; as such, they may be unequipped to cope with cultural diversity in their immediate environment and beyond and may struggle to handle conflicts in interactions head-on and with grace [12]. However, this endeavor of intercultural competency is not always feasible to execute in the context of the foreign language learning classroom, stemming from a variety of factors that concern the material and training resources accessible to those involved in the functioning and organization of the learning facility, as well as, more narrowly, the educators' and learners' readiness and willingness to fully engage with the notions and complexities of learning and teaching culture formally during the length of the language learning course [13]. Developing (and cultivating) this type of intercultural competence and integrating the instruction of this skill set in the context of a second language learning classroom has long been recognized as a highly relevant and essential part of learners' communicative competence, as well as being of interest to applied linguistics researchers who are working on optimizing language learning; at this point, it is unanimously endorsed as highly beneficial for language proficiency betterment by many prominent educational institutions, professional organizations and policymakers worldwide, such as the Council of Europe in 2001, UNESCO in 2009 and ACTFL in 2006. To say this development hasn't affected language-learning curricula and teaching materials at all would be an understatement [14].

But the reality of the matter is that, from a 'bottom-up perspective', the outcome of "the impact of this (intercultural) shift on the micro-level of planning, materials, and assessment design, as well as on classroom practices, remains unclear" [15]. Educational institutions cannot always thoroughly keep pace with the theoretical developments in the domain of interculturalism, nor do the educators and curriculum makers necessarily possess the skills, knowledge, or resources needed to translate aspects of ICC into effective pedagogical practices and steps of immediate action they can take (such as techniques,

strategies, and activities), and then balance those considerations on top of the numerous already present demands and expectations put on language teaching as a profession. Any effort (if there is effort) going into the implementation of an intercultural dimension in language learning is ultimately granted to be undervalued. Its role is perceived as 'secondary', as priority is generally given to the more tangible, practical and readily assessable parts of language that one is expected to engage with superficially. Cheewasukthaworn and Suwanarak [5] try in their review to pinpoint the most common challenges that impact ICC adoption and integration in an EFL teaching context as deriving from several factors [16]:

- The Teachers' Lack of a Firm Grasp of ICC as a Concept and Knowledge of How to Approach it
- Lack of a Consistent Culture-Teaching Methodology Fit for a Language Classroom
- Lack of Objective and Systematic Assessment of ICC
- Inadequate Administrative Support and Learning Materials

Bringing interculturality into the EFL classroom would require the educators to shed preconceived notions of how culture functions, undergo further intercultural immersion themselves, and seek avenues for further training, as the likelihood of them being holistically familiarized with either ICC and/or the target culture and equipped for the endeavor of teaching such is often lower than one may think [21]. ICC may also occasionally involve discussing topics that are inappropriate, controversial, or even offensive to people from certain cultural backgrounds, which may be another reason it is not readily incorporated into ELT [17]. This shouldn't necessarily disparage any individual or institution from attempting to reevaluate their existing practices and bring aspects of intercultural communicative competence to the forefront of their language learning and teaching practices, even if it is limited in its scope; as the occurrence of any meaningful and introspective cross-cultural discourse, supplying learners with aspects of 'cultural deposits' and involving them in intercultural collaboration is bound to influence them for the better in the long run, especially if it takes place frequently enough for it to make a noticeable difference [18]. When students enter an intercultural classroom, teachers must guide them and describe the environment; when this happens, learning becomes learner-centered, engaging, interactive, participatory and cooperative. Today, teachers are not expected to drill students or transmit information [20]. Still, they must turn learners into researchers, teach them to think critically, and express their opinions through authentic texts and multimedia materials; in this way, the environment becomes a learning space where knowledge, opinions, and new values are shared [19].

2. Literature Review

Despite the confounding nature of intercultural communicative competence as a concept, there are a multitude of strategies and techniques that can be used to pedagogically approach the subject and integrate cultural components into the language learning classroom in a way that would sensitize the learners to the many aspects of a target language's culture and simultaneously be involved in the teaching of the structures and functions of language, as well as the four main language skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking). However, integrating 'culture teaching' in EFL would entail a plethora of parameters that are (in)directly related to socio-political and ideological factors. This, in turn, explains why language used to be separated from 'culture' in prior paradigms of teaching language, and justifies why the focus of classroom activities so far was devoid of cultural aspects, thus 'condemning EFL instruction to a decontextualized method bereft of cultural scope' [1]. Teaching culture, understandably, inevitably includes discussions of loaded (or potentially controversial) topics that are inseparably linked to it; not everyone is willing to do so, as it is tricky to navigate without causing offence or indignation. First and foremost, the subject of interculturality has to be introduced to students by working on several major areas of culture: the behaviors and traditions that shape it (how they are learned and shared), what factors have a significant influence on culture, the symbols, ideas and values that mark a certain culture and how it functions internally as a way to maintain community coexistence and cohesion. Another issue that has to be accounted for in the context of an EFL course is familiarizing learners with the notion of intercultural communicative competence by using the following four teaching components [7]:

- Cultivating Learners' Positive Attitude Towards ICC
- Supplying Them with Knowledge of ICC
- Fostering Both ICC and Linguistic Skills Simultaneously
- Enhancing Their Critical Competence in Target Language Communication

Culture teaching in general can be conceptualized in a myriad of ways, with the most common views centering around four approaches [9]:

- The Foreign Cultural Approach (Purely Target Culture Focused and Mono-Cultural)
- The Intercultural Approach (Comparative Across Cultures)
- The Multicultural Approach
- The Trans-Cultural Approach (Not Tied to a Specific Culture)

Educators have several avenues when integrating ICC into a classroom context – they can opt for using teaching materials that are written with a critical and intercultural perspective in mind, or they can take responsibility into their own hands by either extrapolating from existing teaching materials by presenting them in an intercultural light and fostering discussions among learners, or potentially supplementing the gap in materials with personally sourced authentic external media; lastly, a crucial strategy for a seamless incorporation of interculturality in the classroom is to pursue comparative analysis between the local and target culture and encourage learners to do their own in turn. However, it is advisable (for language educators) to exercise caution and not go to extremes by prioritizing native speaker type competence and integration of only the target culture values in language teaching practices, as that can send the erroneous message to learners that they are inadvertently devaluing local values at the cost of privileging the foreign ones. Lee et al. [12] have proposed six instructional goals that can serve as a framework for structuring culture-teaching into second language classes, as those goals revolve around the skills that the learners will be able to cultivate successfully during ICC acquisition [7], such as Interest, Who, What, Where, When and Why.

Activities that develop ICC emphasize multiple perspectives (multiperspectivity), invoked through witnessing a cultural event, situation or phenomenon (in visual or verbal format). To be particular, some meaningful activities that can be used to engage learners in intercultural skills are the following: collaborative and project work, debates and reflective discussions, critical discourse analysis, role plays and simulations, creative writing and poetry, ethnographic tasks involving real life observation, critical incident tasks and most importantly, using various types of realia and authentic culture-portraying media; whether it be audio/visual or both, electronic or print textual media of any kind (but literary works in particular are touted as useful in the development of ICC), as they offer an insight into authentic conversational discourse in its natural context [8]. Many tout the effectiveness of role-play as a means to gain intercultural competence; as per Donahue and Parsons, role-play serves a double purpose: it develops and cultivates the process of trans-cultural dialogues (necessary for establishing an empathetic atmosphere) and lends itself well to teaching the necessary rules of the convention once the appropriate atmosphere is established. Role-play prompts learners to immerse themselves in a different cultural experience, which causes them to reflect on cultural traits that would usually be perceived as normal in the learners' own culture; additionally, as it is a form of play, it also alleviates the anxiety that would otherwise arise from traditional teaching methods [10].

One need not reiterate the proliferation and significance of information technology (particularly electronic media and online communication platforms) in developing and sustaining intercultural communicative competence; individuals from anywhere in the world can broadcast themselves and their work across the broader Internet. As such, learners can seek out content from a variety of cultures, be directly exposed to culturally significant places, events and situations and have plenty of opportunities to network with individuals from around the world from the comfort of their local residence [12]. The Internet is especially convenient as an avenue for gaining and applying (intercultural) communicative competence skills through interaction, as meeting individuals from other cultures in the traditional (in-person) sense is not always feasible due to either the language learners' or the educational facility's lack of resources (or other kinds of constraints). This raises the question of whether, since learners can learn ICC in the classroom, it is feasible (or advisable) to assess intercultural competence. Evaluation is an important part of second-language teaching because it motivates both learners and educators to take it seriously and commit to it. This can be a technically challenging endeavor in the context of evaluating intercultural competence, though, as the educator would have to continuously and closely monitor minute changes in the learners' behaviors and attitudes to ascertain whether their stances regarding culture and cultural diversity have changed or improved towards favoring cultural relativity; but if one lacks the resources, is not familiar enough with the concept, or does not know how to operationalize the components relevant to ICC precisely, this would seem like a convoluted and aimless process [8].

Beyond being technically demanding, it also raises moral concerns about whether it is appropriate to evaluate attitudes, quantify tolerance and assess students' level of social responsibility, since every individual has a different understanding of culture (or interculturality) and progresses at their own pace. When discussing intercultural assessment, it would be remiss not to mention the portfolio's major role in evaluation: notably, the specific tools developed by the Council of Europe, the European Language Portfolio (ELP) and the Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters. The first includes a language passport, a language biography and a dossier of all student work (finished and ongoing); the second requires learners to analyze and reflect on their intercultural encounters and the emotional responses they prompted. One could always generally refer to premade scales and instruments as a way to evaluate the state of interculturality in the learner in a more straightforward manner, or in particular, Chen and Starosta [6] Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS), the Ang et al. [1] Cultural Intelligence Scale (CQS), or Fantini [8] ICC questionnaire, as they are most notable; the latter two both consisting of items for measurement split across four dimensions respectively – metacognitive, cognitive, behavioral and motivational intelligence for the CQS; and knowledge, attitudes, skills and critical awareness for the ICC survey.

2.1. Prior Research Review

Because this paper exists only in the context of prior work on the same subject, it is only fair to consider the research findings that inform its development and necessity. Since intercultural communicative competence is of utmost relevance to the core of

language learning and teaching, over the past few decades, many academics have tried their hand at figuring out its complexities, its assessment and diagnosis, its role in language learning, its strengths and weaknesses (especially when it comes to its conceptualization and implementation in the language classroom), how it affects the process of language learning for the better, the impact it has on language learners' perspective towards culture; and an issue especially pertinent to this study – does ICC being implemented and promoted in the second language classroom actually reflect cultural understanding and presence of conscious cultural awareness in learners and the value they assign to culture in the context of language learning. As far as this issue is concerned, the plethora of studies regarding intercultural communicative competence in the EFL classroom direct their focus purely on the teaching culture aspect of ICC and tend to explore and especially value the educator's perspective on the matter, with a scant handful of studies that solely give attention to the learners' perceptions, opinions, attitudes and beliefs, even though they make up a crucial part of the language (and by extension, culture) learning equation. More often than not, they are relegated to a secondary perspective to the educators involved in the study, and their perceptions are not always explored in depth.

This also seems to be the case for the local (Macedonian) context that will be under investigation for this paper, as no works inquiring about students' intercultural communicative competence and intercultural awareness (as of writing) have been located during the preparatory stages of the realization of this research paper, meaning that there is a research gap in need of addressing and answering. The following studies that will be outlined below are merely a few whose subject matter and procedure show themselves as relevant for the purposes and methodology of this paper (however, they consist of varying methods, and their quality or specificity is limited by the researcher's circumstances and context). Susilo [19] doctoral paper investigates and develops critical intercultural awareness (CIA) in students in an Indonesian foreign language learning context, specifically through video-assisted intercultural tasks as the means of pursuing that intervention. The research uses a one-group pretest-posttest design, in which a sample of fifty students receives a ten-week intercultural intervention (ten video-related tasks that require deep engagement with the material). The author used a mixed-methods approach, using several data-collection methods (instruments): semi-structured interviews, participant observations, questionnaires and documentation, to better understand the subject's nuances and triangulate the data. In addition to the students, he also interviewed several teachers to gather supporting data. The results reveal that the intervention was successful; the interview and observation findings indicate that students developed openness and curiosity, the ability to analyze, contrast and evaluate cross-culturally and critically and a critical understanding of cultural diversity and relativity.

Overall, participants favored the materials, tasks and teacher scaffolding; however, those less confident or well-versed in ICC found the intercultural intervention a bit challenging to engage with but still showed improvement. Baroudi [3] study examines the extent to which ICC is promoted in the EFL university classroom, students' level of ICC mastery, their attitudes toward it, and instructors' attitudes and practices in promoting intercultural communicative competence. The research design that the author opted for is a case study of a single university, where the data were obtained through both qualitative and quantitative means. The study participants include an internally (and culturally) diverse sample of 127 students and 10 instructors. The study used questionnaires (for students), interviews (for instructors), and course policy sheets to provide a well-rounded understanding of the issue. According to the results, the English language students in that particular setting have a moderate (average) score in terms of intercultural competence, with the attitude dimension (as it is defined in Byram's ICC model) being the one with the highest mean score at 3.73, closely followed by skills, awareness and knowledge. This means that students pursuing higher education at Eastern Mediterranean University (EMU) have a fairly average but satisfactory level of intercultural competence to be decent intercultural speakers and adjust their behavior accordingly in many cultural contexts. Bagui and Adder [2] use literary texts to promote learners' intercultural communicative competence.

It aims to assess students' attitudes and explore teachers' perceptions and strategies for implementing ICC in the classroom. The necessary data were obtained through the use of a short mixed-type questionnaire, in which forty students were the participants, as well as gathering supporting data from the teachers via interviews. The study found that the students showed negative attitudes and a general lack of intercultural awareness toward the target culture, making them insufficiently interculturally competent to avoid or manage culture clashes when they arise. The teachers involved, however, had a more positive or neutral outlook on ICC, and they claimed to use additional media to supplement their teaching. Gulbinskienė and Lasauskienė [9] examine the presence and state of intercultural communicative competence among EFL learners at two distinct Lithuanian universities, using a survey to assess learners' general knowledge of target-language culture and society. The study involved sixty students, most of whom showed an average awareness of the benefits of cultural knowledge about the target-language culture but still felt a lack of confidence in their intercultural competence when interacting with the host culture, yet were open to improving their skills. Fantini [8] investigated the role of ICC in the EFL classroom using a single-case study design and a mixed-methods approach (a questionnaire, interview and participant observation) to understand the issue from multiple perspectives. The study included 17 university students enrolled in a course to earn an ELT degree. Most preferred the more tangible, practical aspects of culture that would further their professional development over the subjective aspects that indicate personal development and growth. Most participants held a positive, respectful view of interculturality and wanted to

implement it in their future teaching through media and dynamic activities; however, this wouldn't take precedence over the linguistic aspects of language teaching.

3. Methodology

The Methodology section should provide clear, detailed, and transparent procedures that allow the study to be understood, evaluated, and replicated. Authors must ensure that the methodological approach aligns logically with the research objectives or review aims. Following from what was set out and established in the literature review and based on the considerations mentioned above, this study aims to find an answer to these three research questions:

- What is Macedonian EFL secondary school students' intercultural competence level (referring in particular to the city of Strumica)?
- How does the students' ICC level differ internally within the school sample?
- How does the students' ICC level differ between sample groups from other secondary municipal schools within the same city?

This study will be conducted using a non-experimental, between-participants cross-sectional design; its research methodology is quantitative, all to gather data relevant to the aim of this paper, as well as to provide a nuanced description of the current state of the phenomenon, which is to examine the state of learners' intercultural communicative competence and their perceptions of culture's role in the EFL classroom. This decision is based on using a quantitative instrument (survey) to collect data from participants (specifically, a questionnaire). The data gathered from the research instrument will be thoroughly analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistical methods.

3.1. Participants

The population is comprised of the entirety of the current student body in secondary school education in the Republic of North Macedonia. However, the study will be limited to all students across the four years in three secondary municipal schools in the city of Strumica: SOU "Jane Sandanski", SOU "Dimitar Vlahov", and SOU "Nikola Karev". Each of the secondary schools specializes in a certain type of secondary education – the first (or gymnasium) is split between humanities, mathematics and physical sciences, and economics; the second specializes in the domain of agriculture, medicine, chemistry, catering and tourism; and the third specializes in vocational education (of industrial trades and electrical engineering). The target population chosen for sampling is currently in their 3rd year of secondary education. From this target population, students would be randomly selected as participants, in accordance with the target population size, aiming for a 95% confidence interval.

The sample size calculation indicates that from the collective number of students undergoing their third year of study between the three secondary schools (which is around 570), 132 of them will be randomly chosen for the sample, which has then been divided equally between the three target secondary school populations as a random sample of forty-five participants per school. The initial sampling method used for this study is (non-probability) convenience sampling, as the population reasonably and readily accessible to the researcher is limited to only a few school establishments and sampled from a certain year of study. Further, random sampling within the class clusters of that school year was used to construct a representative sample of 3rd-year students from that secondary school. The data were collected from participants in a group setting. Participation in this study is voluntary; the survey will be announced before administration, and participants will remain anonymous, in line with research ethics. Methods that have previously been published should be referenced, and only relevant modifications should be mentioned.

3.2. Instrument for Data Collection

The research instrument that will be utilized for the realization of the data collection aspect of this research paper is an adapted form of the forty-item students' questionnaire presented in Baroudi [3] study, which is in itself technically adapted from part VII of Fantini [8] ICC survey (that part containing 53 items in total). The modifications were made in accordance with the literature review and pragmatic considerations for executing the instrument. Researchers omitted many original questions because they were redundant, irrelevant to the study's subject and participants, or to the local context in which the study is conducted, as well as for pragmatic reasons. Thus, the adapted (reduced) questionnaire has ten questions. The researchers also slightly altered the questionnaire's format and layout to improve readability for participants. The researchers also revised the wording to make the text accessible to students of all proficiency levels. This research instrument, used in previous studies including the one mentioned above, has been tested for reliability and validity multiple times; its initial reliability was satisfactory, with $\alpha = 0.89$ or higher for each section of the questionnaire. The instrument will be administered in a field setting (secondary school) over a single class period, with a brief 10-minute interval allotted for responses. The questionnaire will be

available in both print and online formats to ensure accessibility when physical resources are scarce or there is no network connection.

This study will be conducted in 3 distinct stages: instrument preparation, data collection and data analysis. The educators will be informed in advance of the survey's purpose and schedule and will randomly distribute it to the target student population. At the time of administration, a questionnaire will be handed to respondents after they are informed of the aims and subject of the study; their anonymity will be assured, and then they will be instructed to carefully read through each part of the questionnaire before marking down their responses (as well as to be truthful in their responses). They will also be told not to feel pressured to answer items they do not know and to ask the instructor or researcher for clarification. Lastly, after respondents finish the questionnaire, the researcher will thank them for their time, voluntary cooperation and participation and will hand out and collect the questionnaire sheets. Once the data collection phase is complete (over a few-day interval), the researcher will enter the questionnaire responses into Microsoft Excel spreadsheets, check for missing answers and analyze them using descriptive and inferential statistics. Lastly, the researcher will interpret the findings in a reader-accessible manner, with the report describing the study's outcomes regarding students' intercultural competence level and their attitudes toward culture and culture teaching in language learning.

4. Results and Discussions

RQ1: What is Macedonian EFL secondary school students' intercultural competence level?

In this study, this refers to the ICC level of third-year secondary students in three municipal secondary schools in the city of Strumica, North Macedonia: "Jane Sandanski", "Dimitar Vlahov", and "Nikola Karev". The Cronbach alpha (α) for internal consistency reliability in sample A is $\alpha = 0.93$, sample B is $\alpha = 0.84$, and sample C is $\alpha = 0.89$ (and collectively from the entire data set, the Cronbach $\alpha = 0.96$), which suggests good to excellent instrument reliability. Of the estimated 132 participants, the researcher collected data from 122 individuals (92.4% of the estimated amount), which is still an adequate number for this study. The overall gender distribution across all three sample groups was 48.36% female respondents and 51.64% male respondents. Most of the participants surveyed show an average to moderately positive level of familiarity and understanding of concepts regarding culture and intercultural knowledge, attitudes, skills and awareness, as the results present the average response value (or mean) as 3.7, considering the five-point Likert scale utilized for this measurement with values ranging from strongly disagree (1) to agree (5) strongly.

RQ2: How does the students' ICC level differ internally within the school sample?

SOU "Jane Sandanski" respondents show an overall average score of 3.8. The female respondents make up 55% of the sample pooled for participation, whereas the rest (or 45%) are male respondents. The demographics of the sample reveal that the average answer value for female respondents is 3.88 (or 3.9) and the male average amounts to 3.7, with a rather small unstandardized mean difference between them (a value of 0.18), as well as an equally small standardized difference between the two group means, as the effect size indicator Cohen's d equals 0.19. This indicates that (at least in this random sample), on average, female individuals tend to be marginally more agreeable in their understanding of culture and intercultural matters. Individually, most responses to each of the ten survey questions lean toward 4, with only two questions having a different mode (question seven with more 5s and question 10 with more 3s). The first question, which asks respondents to rate their ability to define culture, averages 3.675, suggesting some confidence in their general knowledge. The second question asks respondents to rate their ability to compare cultures and averages 3.775, suggesting satisfactory ability to juxtapose cultures. The third question asks about their opinion of the role of culture in teaching a second language, with most in agreement (4.15); the fourth asks them to rate their attitude (openness and interest) toward other cultures (averaging 3.675). The fifth question asks respondents to rate their flexibility and adaptability to other cultures and languages (averaging 3.925, indicating respondents are moderately adaptable to other cultural environments). The sixth question asks whether respondents control their negative opinions of other cultures (average: 4, indicating agreement); the seventh assesses respondents' awareness that holding prejudices and stereotypes is inappropriate (4.075).

The eighth question inquires into the awareness of other cultures' perceptions of them (with an average value of 3.725); the ninth one examines the respondents' own view of themselves as 'culturally-influenced' individuals (averaging at 3.7); and lastly, question ten asks them to rate their ability to solve an intercultural misunderstanding, with most being unsure of their ability to do so (with a 3.3 average). The sample of respondents of "Dimitar Vlahov" shows a similar trend in the responses as those found in "Jane Sandanski" – their overall score averages at about 3.81; of which the female average is 3.94, and the male average score is 3.61; where the random sample is made up of 40.91% male and 59.09% female respondents. The unstandardized mean difference by gender is 0.33, and the standardized difference (d) is 0.34, which is considered a small effect size. As in the previous dataset, female respondents in the sample were slightly more agreeable on culture- and intercultural-related topics.

The individual question score breakdown is as follows: the most frequently chosen value on the response scale is (similarly) 4, closely followed by options 5 and 3, which appear more frequently under questions four and six, and questions seven and ten, respectively. The response average diverges slightly in the third sample of respondents, or more precisely, in the secondary municipal school of "Nikola Karev". This sample's average score is lower than the other two, at 3.50; it includes 71.05% male and 28.95% female respondents, with individual averages of 3.59 and 3.25, respectively. The unstandardized difference between these two-group means is 0.34, and Cohen's d is 0.28, indicating a small effect size for gender differences. The lower average score for female respondents may reflect random sampling variation. Still, it could also be interpreted as being affected by its much smaller size compared with the other two samples, which had a significantly more balanced internal gender demographic distribution. The most frequently chosen values vary significantly: 3s (Q1, Q6, Q7, and Q10) and 4s (Q2, Q3, Q5, and Q8) each appear four times, and 5s appear twice (Q4 and Q9). To make this information more visually accessible, it is presented in a tabular summary (Table 1).

Table 1: Average answer value (mean) of individual questions categorized by secondary school

	SOU "Jane Sandanski"	**SOU "Dimitar Vlahov"**	**SOU "Nikola Karev"**
Question 1	3.675	3.841	3,216
Question 2	3.775	4.023	3.079
Question 3	4.15	4.16	3.324
Question 4	3.675	4.136	3.947
Question 5	3.925	3.205	3.444
Question 6	4	3.932	3.474
Question 7	4.075	3.605	3,541
Question 8	3.725	3.682	3,649
Question 9	3.7	3.909	4,135
Question 10	3.3	3.614	3,158

Interestingly, the question with the highest mean overall among the samples is question three, which refers to rating the significance of learning the culture that is associated with the target language, indicating that two-thirds (two of the samples) of the respondents are in moderate agreement with the view of attaching importance to culture in the EFL classroom, and this would imply that they do not view it in a negative light (or as an obstacle to learning the target language). Based on the data above, the difference between the three samples appears minimal, as their means do not differ significantly. The unstandardized mean difference between sample group A (SOU "Jane Sandanski") and sample group B (SOU "Dimitar Vlahov") is 0.01, the mean difference between sample group B and sample group C (SOU "Nikola Karev") is 0.29, and the difference between sample group A and sample group C is 0.28. Cohen's d for each difference is as follows: d = 0.01 between group A and group B, d = 0.26 for group B and group C, and lastly, d = 0.25 between group A and group C. This indicates that the first two groups are remarkably similar in their response composition, whereas both differ from the third group by a small effect size.

RQ3: How does the students' intercultural competence differ between sample groups from other secondary schools within the same city?

Similarly, in performing the independent samples t-Test for two sample groups of unequal variances, the findings strongly suggest that the difference between the means of group A and B is negligible and statistically insignificant; however, the mean difference between group A and group C and the difference between group B and group C are both statistically significant, as they both show a t-statistic that is bigger than the t-critical value. More precisely, the t-test between sample groups B and C shows a t-stat of 2.878, which is larger than the two-tailed t-crit of 2.0; the t-test between sample groups A and C shows a t-stat of 2.732 and a two-tailed t-crit of 1.996. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was also conducted to determine whether students' choice of secondary school is statistically associated with their level of intercultural competence. The ANOVA showed marginal significance: F-value (2, 129) = 3.771; p = 0.000106563 (< 0.001), which is less than the alpha level of 0.05. Based on this finding, it is tentatively assumed that there is a weak relationship between the choice of secondary school and students' level of intercultural competence and awareness.

5. Conclusion

Like any other, the study at present has its fair set of limitations – it is limited within its focus of topic, availability of relevant literature, type of data gathered and instruments used, and the necessity for a pragmatic (varied in grade and proficiency level) sample size, as well as lack of direct researcher involvement in the data collection process. Further research and additional data sources would provide a more thorough understanding of the issue. As a caveat, it should not be taken for granted that circumstantial limitations may also hinder the responses from being truly generalizable across the population at large.

Moreover, it should also not be assumed in blind faith that the responses given by the samples are a hundred percent fully objective to their actual level of ICC, as the overall understanding of the second language, the concept of culture and its aspects, self-awareness, and how to deal with cultures other than one's own can vary greatly from one individual to the next. That said, this study, its findings and its implications for second language educators should not be understated, as intercultural relations continue to rise and explicit preparation for meaningful future intercultural experiences is necessary. This means that the incorporation and promotion of cultural content in the second language classroom is crucial for this goal to be achieved.

This can be done through the array of approaches and activities presented in the review, which offer useful suggestions for promoting intercultural competences in the EFL classroom and making ICC tools and models readily accessible to educators for classroom use. Furthermore, the results derived from this study provide feedback for educators' decisions in the future, namely by demonstrating that the foundation from which further development of ICC can be achieved in second language learners is not only solid, but possible and feasible to pursue, as the respondents already exhibit a satisfactory (fairly average to positive) level of cultural awareness and aptitude, regardless of their cultural background. Most respondents have strong self-awareness of cultural aspects and relationships and a moderately open attitude toward teaching culture and its role in second language learning, suggesting they are not explicitly opposed to further purposeful development of intercultural skills and competences. This is significant because, while the priority of most works regarding ICC in the classroom is focused on its instruction, it never pauses to consider whether the learners themselves are at a point in their language or mental development where conscious intercultural communicative competence being explicitly promoted in the second language classroom would be facilitative to their overall second language acquisition.

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