

Intercultural Language Teaching in EFL Contexts: Principles, Interventions, Approaches and Future Directions

Jingjing Zhou, Florence Gilliam Kayad*, Vimala Govindaraju

Faculty of Education, Language and Communication, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, Kuching, Malaysia

*Author to whom correspondence should be addressed.

Abstract: *This paper examines Intercultural Language Teaching (ICLT) in EFL contexts, focusing on its theoretical links between language and culture, core principles, effective interventions, and existing challenges. It reveals insufficient ICLT implementation due to traditional pedagogies, gaps in teacher practice and qualitative research. Implications for research and practice are proposed to enhance learners' intercultural communicative competence (ICC).*

Keywords: Intercultural Language Teaching; EFL; Intercultural Communication Competence.

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1. Introduction

Over the past decade, language teaching has focus more relevance on ICLT on the policy level in many countries, such as USA, European countries, and Malaysia. The Council of Europe emphasizes the importance of ICLT, it introduces the Intercultural Dimension into the aims of language teaching to help language learners to interact with speakers of other languages on equal terms (Council of Europe's Common Framework of Reference, 2001). In Malaysia, the multi-ethnic population and the pressure of internationalization have improved the awareness of ICLT in higher education (Mahmud et al., 2010). The awareness of ICLT in language teaching reflects the emerging concerns about the cultivation of global citizens within the global context and multiculturalism (Byram, 2020).

However, the existing researches reveal a persistent lack of attention to ICLT in EFL teaching (Khan et al., 2023). This is partly due to the current teaching approach, which views language as a set of discrete norms and skills rather than as a tool for intercultural communication in the nation's multilingual environment. Grammar is the primary focus of English instruction in classroom, with little to no utilization of authentic learning materials to promote student participation (Bradford, 2018; Byram, 2020; Oranje & Smith, 2017).

Intercultural exposure is considered as an effective way to improve learners' ICC, the majority of intercultural experiential learning activities center on making direct contact with people from different cultural backgrounds (Yang et al., 2025). These activities involve both domestic and international students, either in-person or through technological means (Harrison & Peacock, 2009; Silla et al., 2023). However, despite higher education institutions' effort to offer students more opportunities, many financial and environmental barriers still hinder direct intercultural communication among students and people from different cultures. Therefore, developing ICLT strategies in EFL context are necessary.

A more adaptable constructivist framework for enhancing EFL instruction that incorporates real interaction with meaning-making in cultural contexts can be provided by ICLT. This method allows EFL students to study English in a meaningful, experiential, and personal way that can have a lasting effect on their intercultural understanding and abilities.

2. ICLT in English as Foreign language teaching

The first concern in ICLT is the relationship between culture and language teaching (Byram, 2020; Kramsch & Zhu, 2016), which has impact how to teach ICC in the EFL context. Language teaching has the responsibility to prepare learners for interaction with people of other culture background. In Risager (2007), the word linguacultural is used to highlight the connection between language and culture. The author suggests that the national paradigm should be replaced with a transnational one, highlighting the intricacy of language use and the movement of linguacultural over national borders. Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) examined various approaches to cultural analysis and contend that incorporating them into language education is essential. They depict a continuum where culture is most pronounced in people's conduct at one end and language's ability to convey cultural meanings at the other.

2.1 Core principles of ICLT

Scholars proposed the teaching principles for ICLT. Liddicoat et al. (2003) proposed a set of principles that provides a starting point for developing ICLT, which could be viewed as a sequence of four interconnected processes, namely attention, comparison, reflection, and interaction. Comparing and contrasting their experiences with language and culture is the most fundamental level of operation that students can carry out. Comparison of similarity and difference serves as a tool for reflection, which is an essential part of the classroom process. Liu (2020) explored the application of this ICLT principles in EFL teaching of China and found it was effective in development students' comprehensive competence.

Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) proposed five principles for ICLT of active construction, making connections, social interaction, reflection and responsibility. Active construction involves meaningful knowledge construction in a sociocultural context that enables learners to develop personal and intercultural spaces from their own perspectives. Making connections involves a constructive analysis of the similarities and differences between the linguistic and cultural family and the target language and culture. Social interaction refers to communication that crosses linguistic and cultural boundaries and engages new conceptual systems through language. Reflection indicates the underlying process of conscious awareness and consideration. Finally, Responsibility encourages learners to participate in successful communication across languages and cultures in order to develop cross-cultural awareness. The five ICLT principles represent a complete model or a holistic approach to intercultural language learning and teaching in the process of acquisition, processing, practice, reflection and awareness raising. These principles are suitable for intercultural language learning because it emphasizes the active participation of learners through social interaction and critical reference.

Newton (2016) proposed five principles for ICLT, namely balance of cultural and linguistic focus in language lessons; integrate both implicit and explicit with clearly states intercultural outcomes; foster learners' acquiring and learning process; take into account the diversity of learners and contexts with a variety of intercultural language activities; and focus on developing learners' ICC rather than native speaker competence. These principles provide guidelines for ICLT in EFL context.

2.2 Effective ICLT interventions

Culture-oriented teaching materials, classroom activities, teaching strategies and intercultural integrated curriculum are the main teaching interventions in ICLT. He (2014), Rodriguez and Carranza (2017) found positive effects on learners' ICC development by using cultural-based teaching materials in classes such as contemporary English language films and literary texts. Some scholars found the effectiveness of developing students' ICC by incorporating comprehensive teaching strategies such as a reflective learning model (William & Chen 2021) and flipped classroom teaching model (Gowindasamy, 2017). Learners' ICC could be enhanced through integrated intercultural programs such as an intensive intercultural service-learning program and civic engagement experiences (Liu, 2018).

Tran and Duong (2018) built an on-going process of ICC acquisition ICLT model to facilitate EFL learners' ICC development. Three parts, Language-Culture, the main training process (Input-Notice-Practice-Output), and the ICC, which are systematically integrated. The ICLT model is thought to be an efficient method of teaching intercultural language and assisting students in achieving their ICC. This study demonstrated how the ICLT model may provide students with ICC to enable them to become intercultural speakers, proficient in a second language, and capable of acting in a way that is both appropriate and effective in the context of globalization. Pedagogical

interventions take place in a limited space with a pre-designed teaching plan, they can be more challenging and require specific teaching procedures, materials, activities or tasks and strategies.

Five ICC development stages were put forth by Sun (2016), namely conceptualizing, implementing, analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating. Gu (2021) suggested a five-phase ICC teaching process that includes the following stages, namely adjustment, reflection and evaluation, exploration through communication, attitude development, and knowledge construction.

According to Gu (2021), before entering into intercultural communication experiments, ICC teaching begins with attitude development with the goal of fostering learners' positive cultural awareness and motivation. The knowledge construction stage comes next, during which the instructor helps students create new understandings of language, culture, communication, and other subjects by facilitating ongoing discussions in which they negotiate meaning across the diverse points of view held by participants and by continuously practicing a variety of intercultural skills. In the reflective and evaluative stage, teachers guide learners to reflect and evaluate their progress and shortcomings in previous performance where they modify, compare, and synthesize their intercultural attitudes, knowledge, and skill perspectives. In the adjustment stage, learners adjust and modify the ICC system in the new communication situation according to their own reflection, through which learners experience the continuous development of ICC.

Deardroff (2023) summarized the feasible strategies for implementing the ICLT paradigm in higher education. She pointed out that intervention measures for developing cross-cultural abilities in foreign education can use ethnographic questioning techniques, be guided by experiential learning, or follow the theory of transformative learning. Vromans et. al. (2025) holds that the factors promoting learning are teaching tools, intercultural contact (teamwork, multicultural classrooms, cultural informants), motivational factors and intercultural experiences. Learning is carried out through experience, reflection, abstract conceptualization and experimentation. Learning dilemmas occur in adaptation and stereotypes.

2.3 Prominent ICLT approaches

The intercultural language teaching model originally proposed by Byram (1997; 2021), is most recognized and used to guide foreign language teachers in promoting students' ICC. The model integrates language and culture into all stages of language learning. However, according to Oranje and Smith's (2017) survey of teachers' awareness of this ICLT approach, a large proportion of teachers remain completely unaware of it, and a small number have only heard of the name.

Content-Based Instruction (Snow, 2001) and Content and language integrated learning (Coyle, 2007) have shown how culture can be acquired more efficiently in EFL teaching, and seek to give the language classroom a content which is cognitively and emotionally demanding. Chaouche (2022) emphasized the ICLT approach should focus on the learning process that the learners' exploration of their own culture and the target culture and the discovery of the relationship between language and culture. Liao and Li (2020) investigated the ICLT teaching practices of EFL teachers in China and found that teachers usually teach using language material driven or intercultural topic driven, or a mixture of both approaches. By choosing the sections of the materials that were pertinent to different cultures, the instructors employed the tactic of making the most out of the materials they had created for teaching languages. This allowed them to teach ICC. Intercultural theme driving refers to the teacher's strategy of organizing teaching around an intercultural theme, which includes up-to date news that arouse heated discussion in media, and topics that the teachers considered as profound. According to Liao and Li (2017), the ICLT pedagogy could be divided into intercultural skills or awareness oriented teaching according to different teaching focus and style. Liao and Li (2017)'s study established a classification system for ICLT teaching strategies, providing an ICLT teaching strategy analysis framework for subsequent research and helping scholars more accurately evaluate the effects of different teaching methods, and the existing research results are rarely applied to teaching practice (Wang & Pan, 2019).

2.4 Challenges and researches gaps

Compared with the rich research results of ICC theory and cultivation model, there are still few studies on ICLT. From the perspective of research object, current research on ICLT mainly discusses the principles and teaching interventions of ICLT, and there is little research on teachers' ICLT practice, the existing research results cannot

help teachers' teaching practice (Zhang & Yao, 2020). According to Chau (2019), teachers rarely carried out ICLT activities in the classroom despite having a very strong comprehension of the subject and a very good awareness of the aims of intercultural teaching, they mostly focus on a subset of ICC dimensions as learning outcomes (Zhang & Zhou, 2019), despite those dimensions interplaying and reinforcing one another (Deardorff, 2015; Fantini, 2020). Teachers' ICLT is mainly considered to impart the factual information related to culture products, less involving behavioral practice, especially values (Qian, 2022).

In terms of research methods, non-empirical studies are still the main research method (Wang & Pan, 2019). In the limited empirical research, quantitative method and controlled experiment method were still dominate while qualitative research is lacking (Wen, 2019). SPSS statistical software is widely used in the analysis and testing of research data. Although most comparative experimental studies last one to two semesters, the methods are not well described and the reliability and validity are usually not high enough to provide reliable experimental data for other researchers. Therefore, there is an urgent need for qualitative empirical research to explore how to effectively implement ICLT in English teaching in China to meet the development needs of students' ICC (Du, 2021; Fu & Gu, 2015).

EFL teachers still face the challenge of lacking ICLT method to include intercultural content into English language classrooms, and not all English language educators in EFL contexts are well-versed in the practice of intercultural language teaching (Tran & Duong, 2018). Even while they are eager to incorporate ICC, many EFL teachers are unsure of what it entails and may think it's only about passing along their own expertise to the students. Studies have indicated that educators frequently fail to adequately integrate ICC into their lessons, and some fail to fully understand the concept altogether (Megawati et al., 2020; Safa & Tofighi, 2022). We need theories of how skills and attitudes are learnt and therefore best taught (Byram, 2020). According to Hieu (2019), teachers understood the importance of culture in their EFL sessions, but they were ill-equipped to integrate ICC into their language instruction and to concentrate on intercultural dimensions and skills. The implementation of ICC teaching has not yet been integrated on a regular basis in their actual teaching and thus requires greater support and promotion (Smskova & Paulsrud, 2020).

3. Implications

3.1 Implications for future research

Based on the deficiencies identified in the current ICLT research, future studies should focus on the following directions. Priority should be given to in-depth qualitative research (such as case studies and classroom ethnography) to explore the practical experiences of English teachers in implementing ICLT. Specifically, the research can examine how teachers coordinate the tension between language and cross-cultural goals, their views on the integration of cultural content, and the contextual barriers they face (such as curriculum limitations and institutional support). Such research will provide meticulous insights into the "how" practice of ICLT, rather than merely the "what" principles exist, bridging the gap between theory and classroom reality.

It is necessary to conduct rigorous longitudinal studies to evaluate the long-term impact of ICLT intervention measures (for example, flipped classrooms) on the ICC development of learners. The hybrid approach design combines quantitative measurements (such as ICC scales) with qualitative data (such as learner reflections, interview records), providing a comprehensive understanding of how intervention measures shape learners' attitudes, knowledge, and skills over time. Furthermore, comparative studies in different English contexts (for example, urban and rural classrooms, and different levels of proficiency) can clarify the adaptability of ICLT strategies.

Research should explore effective models for training English teachers to implement ICLT. This includes investigating the impact of pre-service and in-service training programs that focus on intercultural pedagogy, such as designing culturally responsive materials or workshops that promote intercultural dialogue. The research can also examine how teachers' cognition (beliefs, knowledge and self-efficacy) evolves through this training and its subsequent impact on classroom practice.

3.2 Implications for practice

To promote ICLT, all stakeholders should give priority to adopting student-centered and context-rich teaching

methods, using simulated real communication scenarios (Wang, 2016) and intercultural role-playing to address the lack of an English language environment in non-English speaking countries. Secondly, enhance teachers' professional development to enable educators to design intervention measures that promote cognitive engagement and all-round development (Guo, 2022). Third, bridge the gap between research and practice, transform theoretical frameworks (such as Byram, 2021) into actionable strategies, and ensure that the assessment of intercultural communication skills (ICC) is consistent with teaching objectives (Gu, 2021).

4. Conclusion

Although the theory of intercultural communication ability (ICC) has been relatively well-developed, the research on intercultural language teaching (ICLT) is still rather fragmented, and there are significant gaps in both teacher practice and qualitative research. Addressing these gaps requires the integration of evidence-based principles, context-adaptive intervention measures, and continuous support for educators - all of which are key steps in equipping foreign language learners with the cross-cultural communication skills needed for global communication.

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