



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Integrating Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) in Language Teaching

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: May 24, 2024	Over the past two decades, due to globalization and the changes it brought about, the objectives of second language teaching education have drastically shifted from mainly emphasizing on the linguistic approach to the intercultural approach. Consequently, many higher education institutions are set out to develop meaningful internationalization in education to cultivate learners' intercultural competence skills. In this regard, this study is an attempt to investigate the beliefs of Iraqi EFL University Instructors regarding the incorporating intercultural communicative competence (ICC) into English language education. A total number of 50 Iraqi university teachers, from AL-Iraqia, and Baghdad Universities participated in this study. All the participants held a master's degree, with nine of them also possessing a PhD, instructors specialized in various English degrees. The findings of this study revealed a clear discrepancy between instructors' beliefs and their classroom teaching practices, suggesting a standardized approach for ICC, as well as providing training programs to capitalize the importance of ICC, and to ensure learners that are well-equipped with the needed tools and abilities to successfully operate in an intercultural environment.
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### INTRODUCTION

In today's globalized world, where people from different parts of the globe are required to successfully interconnected and intertwined with one another, resulting in unprecedented challenges and complexities for individuals. In this regard, cultivating communicative competence in intercultural situations is an asset to bridge the wide chasm of encountered differences. Accordingly, to keep up with these challenges a significant step towards interculturality has been taken, prompting to substantial changes in second language teaching objectives (Fang & Baker, 2021, Starkey 2018 Alaei & Nosrati, 2018). As a result, intercultural learning and education have become key components and common practices in foreign language education. Given the close intertwining of culture and language, the main goal of second language education is to cultivate intercultural speakers who can effortlessly juggle different perspectives, navigate diverse cultures, and who are ready to engage in effective meaningful conversations (Hua, 2018; Jam et al., 2018).

Since teachers play an essential role in developing students' ICC, therefore, they are required to seek more fundamental ways to advocate for and optimize intercultural communicative competence (ICC) in their classes. ICC refers to the ability to use language appropriately and effectively to achieve desired outcomes with individuals from diverse cultures (Fantini, 2020; Sercu, 2006). From this standpoint, Byram (1997) argued that language learning is not merely about "surviving" intercultural

situations but rather enabling learners to optimize their experiences. Hence, learners need to be equipped with ICC and other necessary tools to thoughtfully reflect on social and cultural processes (Byram, 1997). To improve ICC, teachers also need to assume new roles. They must deepen their understanding of ICC and recognize that their duty extends beyond merely passing on theoretical knowledge. Instead, educators must teach concepts that help learners become lifelong language learners and effective communicators.

Despite the sharp increase in the importance of the ICC, it continues to present significant challenges for teachers who wish to integrate it into their workflows (Baker & Fang, 2021). As a result, many teachers might be aware of the benefits ICC can bring to their classes but are ill-prepared to meet expectations due to their relatively inadequate understanding of ICC (Syam et al., 2020). To promote ICC among students, it is crucial for educators overseeing the courses to possess a comprehensive grasp of the concepts associated with ICC (Banjongjit & Boonmoh, 2018).

In the context of Iraq, ICC education is unfortunately not as prevalent as expected, with cultural and intercultural communication often ignored or sidelined. There is scant empirical work cited regarding the application and uptake of ICC in Iraqi language education programs, as well as the perceptions and beliefs of EFL university teachers and the methodologies they employ to foster and enhance ICC. The findings of this study could serve as a reminder that educators' beliefs of ICC might influence their teaching process. This, in turn, will prompt them to reconsider their attitudes, stereotypes, behaviors, and skills, and encourage them to update their teaching pedagogies regarding ICC. Given these factors, this study aims to address this knowledge gap by exploring:

1. To what extent is intercultural communicative competence prioritized in current English as a Foreign Language (EFL) programs?
2. What are the reasons behind this degree of prioritization?

## **2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the concept of ICC, it is imperative to first revisit the foundational notion of communicative competence (CC). This term, which has been prevalent for over 40 decades, was notably introduced by the linguist Hymes (1972) as a critical response to Chomsky's theory of linguistic competence. He contended that Chomsky's (1965) theoretical framework was excessively narrow, as it largely disregarded sociocultural competence, thereby relegating it to the periphery of linguistic inquiry.

Therefore, Hymes (1972) placed great emphasis on the sociolinguistic aspect of CC and considered it cornerstone of the concept of communicative language teaching and its development (Byram, 2021, p. 13). Later, Canale and Swain (1980) stated that CC is a synthesis of specific skills and a body of knowledge. They proposed four main components, namely linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence, and finally, they added discourse competence.

CC embodies a contextualized proficiency that enables individuals to establish and attain realistic goals to maximize their success in a given situation. However, in this approach, culture was still viewed as background knowledge aiming mainly at protecting foreign speakers from linguistic and non-verbal errors (Byram & Esarte, 1991). Fantini added that CC expanded the traditional narrow perspective of language teaching and went beyond linguistic components to include interpersonal skills relevant to the target culture (Fantini, 2018).

Building upon the multifaceted framework of CC, contemporary discourse has witnessed a natural progression towards the conceptualization of ICC in light of expanding global dynamics. As international relationships burgeon, ICC studies have ascended to prominence to address the exigencies of our interconnected world (Piller, 2017). ICC, an inherently complex competency, has been scrutinized across diverse fields, yielding various terminologies, such as international or global

competence (Fantini, 2020). Byram (2021) succinctly defines ICC as the ability “to interact with people from another social group in another language” (p. 97). In line with this, Byram’s (1997) model comprises five interconnected savors, i.e. knowledge, skill, attitude, interpreting and relating, critical awareness, and skill of discovering and/or interacting. Those interlinked competencies not only help intercultural speakers obtain an effective body of information but also maintain intercultural interpersonal relationships through shared understanding. Byram (1997) added an aspect that CC has been lacking, which is the ability to adapt one's communication patterns to be congruent with her/his cultural counterparts in a specific setting. As a result, Byram (1997) debunks the 'native speaker' model norms and rules, which was once regarded as the most ideal mechanism for CC, as it sets potentially unattainable goals for English learners to achieve. He instead set out to propose the 'intercultural speaker', as a more attainable and valid model than a previously prevailing model, the 'native speaker'. Furthermore, Byram (1997) argued that a competent intercultural speaker possesses linguistic and sociocultural skills and knowledge that enable him/her to effectively mediate between different cultures, such mediation including maintaining meaningful relationships with others while including and establishing their own culture and one's identity. Most importantly, intercultural speakers display sensitivity toward their counterparts and their cultural and understanding of their cultural position and also they have an awareness of otherness (Byram, 1997, Young & Sachdev, 2011).

Language education focusing on ICC should prioritize two key aspects: firstly, embracing intercultural learning as a pivotal component in EFL instruction, and secondly, equipping learners to navigate and mediate between their own culture and others (Byram & Zarate, 1997; Kanval et al., 2024). Therefore, the main purpose of ICC education is to help English learners become cognitively independent, enabling them to process, criticize, and apply information rather than simply imparting knowledge. In a similar concern, Byram and Wenger (2018) emphasized the need for guiding learners to attain intercultural competence. Consequently, educator needs to take accountability for their roles as intercultural meditators and facilitators, who serve as a bridge between their own culture and other cultures (Czura, 2016). The ultimate goal, therefore, is to raise the need to prepare EFL teachers to work on their ICC pedagogical practices. Since, language teachers are known for devotedly focusing on supplying their learners with linguistics competence and admonishing or entirely deploying other equally or more important aspects of the language (Jata, 2015; Young & Sachdev, 2011; Rashid et al., 2023).

A number of studies have investigated ICC implementation and EFL teachers’ perceptions and beliefs about it, these studies showcased that teachers seemed to be attentive to the significance of the ICC in language teaching, yet they were ill-prepared and unable to integrate into their classes. One of the most discussed studies is that of secur (2002), examining teachers’ teaching practices in the context of ICC of Belgium, Denmark, and the United Kingdom. Findings revealed that teachers’ practices did not align with the ICC framework. Notably, teachers’ willingness to implement ICC did not translate into good practice of ICC in their classes. On the same note, Atay et al. (2009) studied Turkish English teachers’ attitudes towards ICC in foreign language teaching. Results showed positive attitudes but infrequent implementation of cultural teaching practices in classrooms. Similarly, Cheng (2012) conducted a study in which he interviewed five Taiwanese teachers, to investigate whether their understanding of ICC would result in the development of their self-reported pedagogical practices. It was found that teachers’ practices lacked intercultural awareness, which also signified a similar lack in their pedagogical approaches. Intriguingly, most teachers knew how crucial ICC is to English language education. In the same context, Young and Sachdev (2011) conducted a study in which they investigated the beliefs and practices of teachers from the USA, UK, and France, concerning the application of ICC to English education programs. The findings showed that they are aware of the importance of the ICC approach, yet they are ill-prepared to integrate it into their practice, in addition, there are insufficient materials and a very little focus on ICC in the curriculum.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Research design**

A sequential explanatory mixed-method research design was employed to answer the two research questions (Creswell & Plano Clark 2011). In order to present a well-rounded picture of the issue, the researcher collected both quantitative and qualitative data. This means the study underwent two phases, the first and the dominant phase was quantitative data collection, in this phase the researcher gathered data regarding English language university instructors' beliefs of ICC via questionnaire. Subsequently, the second phase, the qualitative data collection, where interviews were implemented to support and enrich the quantitative phase.

#### **3.2 Participants**

A total of 50 Iraqi EFL university instructors were recruited to take part in this study (for both quantitative and qualitative phases). Participants were selected from two different public universities, namely, Al-Iraqia University and Baghdad University. In terms of demographics, 13 participants were male, and 37 were female. The ages of the participants ranged from 26 to 50 years old. All participants held a master's degree, with nine of them also possessing a PhD. Instructors specialized in various English degrees including applied linguistics, TEFL, literature, and English translation. The participants' years of teaching experience varied from 3 to 20 years.

#### **3.3 Instrumentation**

##### **3.3.1. Intercultural Communicative Competence Questionnaire**

To gather the necessary data for this study, a questionnaire designed and developed by Duisembekova (2021) was adopted and modified to assess the participants' attitude toward ICC. Specifically, the survey measured four components of ICC, namely knowledge, attitude, awareness, and skill. The survey consisted of 34 items, based on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree". The questionnaire was divided into two parts; the first part of the survey was designed to acquire demographic data, including gender, age, field of specialization, and years of teaching experience, while the second part focused on participants' beliefs towards ICC.

##### **3.3.2. Semi-structured interview**

Following the survey administration, seven out of the 50 participants volunteered for interview sessions, representing both universities. Each participant responded to eight open-ended questions based on a semi-structured interview protocol. Prior to recording their answers, participants consented to the recording process. To establish rapport, interviews were conducted in both Arabic and English languages. Each interview lasted approximately fifteen minutes, and the recordings were later transcribed for analysis.

#### **3.4 Data collection and analysis**

The process of data collection started in February 2024 and was completed in April. It involved two main phases: the first phase involved distributing the questionnaire via online platforms. Upon completion of the questionnaire phase, the second phase began, which consisted of conducting semi-structured interviews with volunteers. Participants were asked to respond to eight open-ended questions to provide a deeper understanding of their perceptions, beliefs, practices, and opinions regarding ICC.

To address the first research question, quantitative data analysis was conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22. The obtained results of the questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. ANOVA was run to address the extent to which ICC was prioritized in the current EFL programs. For the second research question, which was

qualitative in nature, the researcher performed a thematic analysis of the interview transcriptions (the transcriptions can be found in Appendix A).

## RESULTS

To examine whether the teachers' perception of ICC affects cultural practices and cultural prioritization in language schools, the results of descriptive statistics, displayed in Table 1, are provided for each subcategory of ICC.

**Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Participants in Each Category**

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Skill	50	36.00	10.00	46.00	21.7200	9.64056
Awareness	50	24.00	6.00	30.00	16.2600	7.69259
Knowledge	50	32.00	8.00	40.00	17.0200	6.70513
Attitude	50	30.00	16.00	46.00	29.3200	8.04944
Valid N (listwise)	50					

The first research question addressed the extent to which ICC was prioritized in current EFL programs. To answer this question, the researcher followed the study conducted by Duisembekova (2021) and divided ICC perception scores into three groups (i.e. low, mid, and high) by computing the border lines at 33.33rd and 66.66th percentile ranks. Table 2 tabulates the results of descriptive statistics.

**Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Teachers' Perception of ICC**

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness		Kurtosis	
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
High	5	120.00	162.00	140.6000	16.51666	.185	.913	-1.105	2.000
Mid	38	60.00	113.00	82.9211	12.29014	.241	.383	.181	.750
Low	7	44.00	58.00	51.7143	4.49868	-.630	.794	.668	1.587
Valid N (listwise)	5								

Regarding the normality of the data, the ratios of skewness and kurtosis over their respective standard errors were within +/- 1.96, thus, one-way ANOVA was run to compare the teachers' ICC perceptions groups.

**Table 3: Test of Homogeneity of Variances**

		Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
ICC	Based on Mean	2.619	2	47	.084
	Based on Median	2.265	2	47	.115
	Based on Median and with adjusted df	2.265	2	41.332	.117
	Based on trimmed mean	2.645	2	47	.082

Table 3 presents the results of ICC for four different methods: based on the mean, median, median with adjusted degrees of freedom, and trimmed mean. The test results indicated that the variances were insignificantly different across groups, as evidenced by the p-values above 0.05: 0.084 for the

mean, 0.115 for the median, 0.117 for the median with adjusted degrees of freedom, and 0.082 for the trimmed mean. Thus, the assumption of homogeneity of variances was met for ICC in this analysis.

**Table 4: ANOVA Results for Three Groups of Teachers**

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	23353.488	2	11676.744	80.690	.000
Within Groups	6801.392	47	144.710		
Total	30154.880	49			

The analysis reveals a significant difference between the three groups of teachers, as indicated by the F-value of 80.690 and a p-value of .000 (Table 4). These results suggest substantial differences in ICC among the three groups of teachers with regard to the practice of culture. In order to see which ICC perceptions groups were of significantly higher practices of culture teaching, post-hoc pairwise comparisons were run via the Tukey test (see Table 5).

**Table 5: Tukey HSD Multiple Comparisons**

ICC	ICC	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Low	Mid	-31.20677*	4.94784	.000	-43.1811	-19.2324
	High	-88.88571*	7.04379	.000	-105.9325	-71.8389
Mid	Low	31.20677*	4.94784	.000	19.2324	43.1811
	High	-57.67895*	5.72278	.000	-71.5288	-43.8291
High	Low	88.88571*	7.04379	.000	71.8389	105.9325
	Mid	57.67895*	5.72278	.000	43.8291	71.5288

\*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

The mean differences between each pair of groups are all statistically significant at the 0.05 level, as indicated by the p-values of .000. Specifically, the low group had significantly lower ICC scores, compared to both the mid group (-31.20) and the high group (-88.88). Similarly, the mid-group scores were significantly lower than those of the high group (-57.67). The 95% confidence intervals for these differences do not include zero, further confirming the significance of these differences. Thus, there are clear and substantial distinctions in ICC among the low, mid, and high groups of teachers in terms of the prioritization of culture.

To analyze the qualitative data, the responses were categorized and synthesized based on common themes and patterns. A detailed breakdown of the analysis for each question is presented below:

Question 1: Which aspects of English language teaching are important for you? Teaching the language (grammar/ vocabulary) or the culture? Why?

Participants expressed a diverse range of perspectives regarding the importance of different aspects of English language teaching, particularly grammar/vocabulary, and culture. Some participants underscored the significance of both grammar/vocabulary and culture, highlighting their complementary roles in language instruction. For instance, participant 6 mentioned

P6: "Although I am a grammar instructor, I concentrate on vocabulary more than grammar mainly because I believe vocabulary is the tool that equips the learners to communicate ideas more

effectively. Even if they lack grammatical knowledge, they are still able to convey some meaning. Culture comes last, since the learners are excited to learn the language itself as a means to communicate, they will be less interested in the cultural aspect of any language-learning journey. However, there are some intelligent learners that they know learning a language will be easier through understanding the culture. For them, the plan will be different.”

They argued that while grammar and vocabulary serve as foundational elements, cultural understanding enriches communicative competence. However, opinions varied regarding the prioritization of these aspects, with P1 suggesting that the emphasis may depend on the teaching context. In their home country, grammar takes precedence, whereas in a foreign country, cultural aspects become more relevant. Moreover, P7 emphasized the integration of culture into language teaching, noting that it enhances students' understanding of nuances and facilitates more effective communication with native speakers. These themes collectively underscore the multifaceted nature of language instruction, where a balanced approach that integrates both linguistic and cultural elements is deemed essential for fostering comprehensive language proficiency.

Question 2: Do you think English language teachers need to highlight English culture in their classes?

In response to this question, the majority of respondents (P2, P3, P4, P5, P7) emphasized the importance of incorporating English culture into language instruction, citing its role in providing context for language use and facilitating effective communication.

P2: “Yes, indeed. Learning a language is very complex and should be done by following some secure steps, that is why we have language levels, usually we do not step to the next level until we do not reach acceptable result in the current level. It is brilliant to include culture in teaching a language but I think it is important to know when it would be the right moment for that.”

However, participants also recognized the need for contextual appropriateness, with some (P1, P6) suggesting that the emphasis on cultural instruction should align with students' learning objectives and the anticipated multicultural or monocultural contexts in which they will use the language. Overall, the insights gleaned underscore the widely acknowledged benefits of integrating cultural content in language classes to enhance students' communicative skills, while also highlighting the importance of tailoring instructional approaches to meet specific learning needs and goals.

Question 3: Do you think language and culture are separated or embedded?

The themes derived from participants' responses shed light on the relationship between language and culture in language teaching. A prevailing perspective among most participants (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P7) is the inseparability of language and culture, emphasizing that a comprehensive understanding of cultural context is integral to proficient language use.

P1: “Language and culture are two faces of a coin. There are so many studies indicating that culture can hugely contribute to the process of language acquisition and learning.”

However, an observation made by P6 highlights the contextual variation in language instruction, indicating that some programs may adjust teaching approaches to align with local cultural perspectives, potentially distancing the language from its native cultural context.

P6: “It is not easy to answer this question, however, it depends on the program itself. Surprisingly, sometimes teachers try to modify the English language programs in a way that suits the Iraqi mentality and therefore away from the culture of the language. This comes as a result of the conservative nature of most Iraqi people that reject any other culture. It's impossible to generalize, yet this is a fact that can be seen. Concerning the question, I believe that eventually, teaching any language works hand in hand with the culture of that language. It is really difficult to separate them

and if we do so, we violate the learning experience. It's worth mentioning that some areas of learning are inherently culturally loaded content e.g., teaching literature."

The insights gleaned from these themes underscore a consensus on the interconnectedness of language and culture, while also recognizing the challenges posed by contextual variations in maintaining the authenticity of cultural learning within language education.

Question 4: Can you explain your understanding of ICC and its importance in English language teaching?

Participants' responses to Question 4 illuminated their understanding of ICC and its significance in English language teaching. The themes that emerged underscored the multifaceted nature of ICC, with participants (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P7) describing it as encompassing various components such as cultural awareness, empathy, adaptability, and effective communication across cultures.

P5: "Based on my understanding of the concept ICC is the ability to interact and act appropriately around people of different cultures. In order to install empathy, understanding, and acceptance in our students towards others is crucial."

Furthermore, practical strategies for fostering ICC were highlighted, including cultural awareness activities, effective listening, demonstrating respect, and fostering adaptability, as articulated by P2.

P2: "As is commonly known, ICC refers to the ability to understand cultures, including your own, and use this understanding to communicate with people from other cultures successfully. It includes verbal (spoken) and non-verbal (body language and voice pitch or sound) elements. This can be achieved through giving presentations on aspects of the target culture and exploiting the teacher's own expertise of their own culture. Intonation and stress play a key role, too. For example, when I was a PhD student (2014-2020) at Cardiff University, United Kingdom, I noticed that rising intonation is required when making a request and, if missing, the speaker might come across as rude. Consequently, not having this kind of knowledge would represent a major obstacle to a successful and meaningful dialogue."

These insights collectively emphasize the recognition of ICC as a complex and multifaceted competence crucial for facilitating meaningful intercultural communication. Additionally, the acknowledgment of practical strategies underscores the importance of incorporating ICC development into both teaching practices and student learning experiences.

Question 5: Are you confident in your intercultural competence? If so, what factors contribute to your confidence in this area?

The responses to Question 5 revealed varying levels of confidence in ICC among participants, with factors contributing to this confidence differing accordingly. Some participants (P1, P2, P5, P6) expressed confidence in their ICC stemming from exposure to diverse cultures and active learning strategies.

P1: "My confidence stems from traveling, reading, and the openness of my mind."

Conversely, others (P3, P7) indicated feeling less confident due to limited cross-cultural experiences. Furthermore, there was recognition among several participants (P3, P4, P7) of the importance of continuous improvement in ICC, highlighting the need for ongoing learning and engagement with diverse cultures.

P7: "I am not fully confident in my intercultural competence, but I recognize the importance of continuously improving and developing in this area. I am culturally aware, open to learning, and practical experience, and seeking feedback."



These underscore the influence of personal experiences and exposure to different cultures on confidence levels in ICC, emphasizing the significance of continuous learning and cultural engagement in developing and enhancing intercultural competence.

Question 6: In your professional growth, how do you ensure you are up-to-date on the current effective practices for teaching ICC?

In response to Question 6, participants emphasized various methods for ensuring they remain up-to-date on current effective practices for teaching ICC in their professional growth. Many participants (P1, P2, P3, P4, P7) highlighted the importance of engaging in professional development opportunities such as workshops, conferences, and seminars, which provide valuable insights into evolving practices. Additionally, self-education through reading papers, books, and articles was identified as a method for staying informed (P5, P6). These insights underscore the significance of both structured professional development activities and self-directed learning in ensuring teachers' continued competence and effectiveness in teaching ICC.

Question 7: Do you consider ICC to be important to your students? If so, do you integrate it into your classroom?

Regarding Question 7, participants highlighted the importance of ICC for their students, with most (P2, P3, P4, P5, P7) expressing agreement on its significance. They reported integrating ICC into their classrooms to varying extents. While some participants (P1, P6) mentioned occasional or limited integration of ICC based on perceived student interest and relevance, the consensus was that ICC plays a crucial role in enhancing students' communicative competence and global awareness.

P6: "Honestly, no. they do not consider it important. However, I try to highlight its importance by remind them of the grave results of mis interpretation of culture using "mokusatsu error."

The insights reveal a varied approach to the integration of ICC, influenced by teachers' perceptions of its importance and student engagement levels.

Question 8: Based on your experience, what are the long-run benefits of developing intercultural communicative competence for language learners, both in their academic and personal lives.

Drawing from participants' experiences, the long-term benefits of developing ICC for language learners extend beyond the academic realm into their personal lives. Enhanced communication skills emerged as a prominent theme, with ICC improving students' ability to communicate effectively in diverse cultural contexts (P1, P3, P4, P7). Additionally, participants emphasized the role of ICC in fostering global citizenship, citing its contribution to empathy, cultural awareness, and preparation for international careers (P2, P5). Moreover, ICC was recognized as enhancing employability, opening up job prospects and opportunities in international settings (P6). These insights underscore the multifaceted advantages of ICC, including improved communication abilities, cultural sensitivity, and personal growth, ultimately equipping students for success in both academic and personal spheres.

The qualitative data revealed a strong consensus on the importance of integrating both language mechanics and cultural understanding in EFL programs. While there were variations in the emphasis placed on cultural aspects depending on the context and individual teacher perspectives, the overall sentiment emphasized on the importance of ICC for effective communication and global competence.

## **DISCUSSION**

The current study was carried out to investigate the Iraq EFL university-level teachers' beliefs and perceptions of ICC. The findings revealed a gap between teachers' cognition and their practices in integrating ICC in their classrooms. It was found that the Iraqi teachers expressed a positive attitude towards the integration of the intercultural approach and the development of the ICC. The finding was consistent with Sercu (2005), Safa and Tofighi (2021), and Young and Sachdev (2011) studies,

all of which showed teachers' positive views of ICC and their inclination to integrate it in their educational contexts. However, there was an apparent inconsistency between teachers' beliefs and their classrooms teaching practices, which is again similar to the results reported in studies, such as Young and Sachdev (2011) and Sercu (2005), Jata (2015) that showed that while English teachers were in favor of integrating and developing ICC, they still drastically failed to put ICC into practice. Consequently, the teachers appeared to actively avoid culture and ICC in favor of prioritizing teaching grammatical content or vocabulary in their teaching contexts. The qualitative data revealed a strong consensus on the importance of integrating both language mechanics and cultural understanding in EFL programs. However, while the participants described ICC as convenient and successful and recognized it as important, they still viewed it as a secondary skill that students were not required to achieve. Findings also revealed that there EFL teachers respective disciplines and years of experience did not have much of effect on their opinions and beliefs around ICC. Additionally, it is important to acknowledge that there were some reasons that underpinned the discrepancies noted between instructors' beliefs and their classroom practices, such as the prescribed curriculum, lack of ICC materials, time constraints, and lack of learners' interest. In the end, the findings of this study make a strong case for the importance of ICC, and send clear implications for teachers' preparation programs, and curriculum designers to place more attention on intercultural education with the goal of preparing teachers and learners who are able to engage with diverse cultures.

## CONCLUSION

The current sequential explanatory mixed-method research design was carried out to seek understanding on the Iraqi EFL university instructors' beliefs and views towards ICC. The findings revealed that participants enjoyed a relatively fair understanding of ICC model, however, they had a little or no practice of ICC in their classrooms. This suggested that good understanding of ICC did not necessary entail good practice. Accordingly, it is of high importance for English teachers' education and other language educational programs to proactively develop ICC training programs for teacher educators or pre-service teachers. To delineate the necessary steps needed to help teachers employ their theoretical knowledge of ICC in practical usage, which eventually lead them implement ICC in their classrooms.

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