

Predicting Taiwanese college students' intercultural sensitivity: What truly matters?

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This study aims to assess and contribute to understanding of Taiwanese college students' intercultural sensitivity. It specifically examines the predictive power of students' English proficiency and other international experience variables that could enhance intercultural sensitivity. These variables include taking cultural courses, living abroad, traveling and studying overseas, doing overseas service and having foreign friends. A modified Intercultural Sensitivity Scale was adopted as the research instrument. A questionnaire was conducted with 159 English majors from a Taiwanese technological university. A quantitative analysis shows that *Interaction Engagement* is the most significant intercultural sensitivity dimension, followed by *Interaction Respect and Enjoyment* and *Interaction Attentiveness*. The weakest dimension is *Interaction Confidence*, which is also closely linked to English proficiency. However, for the students in this study, English proficiency does not correlate with the other three ISS dimensions. The best predictor of proficiency is experiences of having foreign friends. For the dimensions of *Interaction Confidence*, *Interaction Engagement* and *Interaction Attentiveness*, there are significant differences between participants having and not having foreign friends. This suggests the need to provide interesting, meaningful and personal intercultural experiences for language learners which could be established through person-to-person cross-cultural encounters and which might develop into real friendships.

Keywords: intercultural communicative competence; cultural sensitivity; English proficiency; EFL; college students; Taiwan

Introduction

Due to modern globalization and internationalization, intercultural communicative competence (ICC) has become a key educational goal for contemporary universities and colleges. English language competence has been promoted as an important means for connecting with the world. It is generally assumed that a lack of proficiency in a target culture's language will affect cross-cultural interactions and could lead to misunderstandings. Yet, previous research has not clearly established the extent to which language proficiency might affect the development of intercultural competence in learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). In addition to English proficiency, it is expected that cross-cultural experiences such as short and long-term overseas studies, internships and other types of international service will also affect people's intercultural development. This research explores which factors might have the greatest influence on Taiwanese EFL college students' intercultural learning. It particularly aims to understand whether their English proficiency is related to their ICC and aims to identify key factors that pertain to their intercultural experiences which can help predict their intercultural competence. The following three research questions guided the analysis:

1. What intercultural communicative competence, English proficiency and intercultural experiences do Taiwanese EFL college students often experience?
2. Could Taiwanese EFL college students' English proficiency levels predict their intercultural communicative competence?
3. Could Taiwanese EFL college students' intercultural experiences, such as intercultural courses, international travel, study abroad and having foreign friends, predict their intercultural communicative competence?

Literature review

Developing intercultural competence and language competence

Combining language communication competence and intercultural competence, Byram (1997) coined the term "intercultural communicative competence" to emphasize the importance of developing learners' intercultural ability through foreign language teaching. He proposed shifting the language learning model of native speakers to a model for developing "intercultural speakers", that is, speakers who can interact in cross-cultural contexts by communicating effectively and appropriately with people from different cultures. In Byram's model, learners' attitude, knowledge, skills and critical awareness affect and are affected by the communication abilities of linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence and discourse competence. It stresses that developing interculturally appropriate attitudes, such as openness, curiosity, flexibility, respect, and empathy, toward both people of other cultures and those of one's own is the most essential requirement to facilitate cross-cultural understanding and sympathy. Byram (1997) suggested that beliefs and behaviours can only be changed through experiences and reflections and later added that intercultural education should focus on linking intercultural competence with intercultural citizenship (Byram, 2008).

Although Byram's ICC model has been promoted in language classrooms, its applications remain scant. Young's (2009) research focused on 104 experienced language teachers in the USA, UK and France and found that although teachers generally agreed that the development of intercultural competence was important, ICC had been absent in their syllabi. In Taiwan, Cheng (2012) and Chao (2016) found that English language teachers' cultural self-awareness was also not reflected in their teaching. There were inconsistencies found in their intercultural competence and their teaching practice. Koester and Lustig (2015) did an extensive literature review on ICC and concluded there was a gap between theory development and real practice. They proposed that more research was needed on "positive exemplars" (p. 21), which could produce successful models and examples for teachers and learners to follow.

A greater understanding needs to be determined about how different language proficiency levels can affect the development of intercultural competence. According to Bennett, Bennett, and Allen (2003), there is a "typical fit between language proficiency levels and developmental levels of intercultural sensitivity" (p. 255). Laopongharn and Sercombe (2009) found in Thailand that increased ICC produced more proficient English language usage in intercultural interactions. Similarly, Mirzaei and Forouzandeh's (2013) study of Iranian college students confirmed an association between ICC and L2 learning motivation. Fantini (2006, 2012) affirms that developing intercultural competency in language increases the effectiveness of learners' interactions and communication in intercultural dialogues. Using a sample of 194 Bosnian college students, Aydogan and Akbarov (2015) investigated the predictive power of five variables that were found to be relevant for developing intercultural sensitivities. Their findings revealed that verbal

expressiveness and verbal abilities were good predictors for intercultural sensitivity variance, but other predictors such as English competence and emotional attitudes toward English were not.

In contrast to the studies reported above, Jackson (2011) found no evidence to suggest that linguistic learning and intercultural competence develop simultaneously when students study abroad and are immersed in a foreign culture. Indeed, Jackson (2011) found that foreign language learners with a good command of grammar and vocabulary in their target language did not necessarily exhibit an equivalent ability in intercultural competence and intercultural communication. This review of the literature suggests a clear need for more research in understanding the relationship between language proficiency and intercultural communication development.

Developing intercultural sensitivities and the EFL classroom

It is widely accepted that EFL classrooms have great potential for intercultural development. Byram (1997) encourages language teachers to build their language learning curriculum around ICC, with a particular focus on critical cultural awareness. It is also suggested that language teachers should distinguish cultural learning from intercultural learning with an aim of providing knowledge about how learners can survive in a new culture and avoid making incorrect assumptions or basing behaviour on stereotyped attitudes, values, and beliefs about certain nations or regions (Byram, Nichols, & Stevens, 2001; Roberts, Byram, Barro, Jordan, & Street, 2001; Wilkinson, 2012). It should also be noted that culture does not reside only in literature, text, or cultural products (Risager, 2006; Roberts et al., 2001). Teachers should teach about the lives and behaviours of the people in other cultures with a broadly anthropological methodology (Dervin, 2010; Enkson, 2001).

In developing ICC, Byram (1997) asserts that the classroom is an important place to promote interculturality and lists three main advantages. First, students can learn knowledge and skills in a more systematic and structured way; second, teachers can provide their students with greater guidance; and third, reflection is promoted throughout the learning process, which can contribute to a change in attitude and consequently result in behavioural change.

Unfortunately, even though language teachers may want to include intercultural learning in their curriculum, language textbooks are not very helpful (Godwin-Jones, 2013). A recent study by Gordon and Mwavita (2018) regarding the effectiveness of an intercultural course in Taiwan revealed that coursework alone may not be the best way to help students gain intercultural sensitivities. Factors that were more likely to enhance students' intercultural sensitivities had come from outside the classroom, including students' religious affiliations, overseas travel experiences, studying abroad and participating in cultural events. The authors concluded that experiencing other cultures could positively affect students' intercultural sensitivities.

Language instructors' understanding of intercultural competence and their ability to teach these concepts in language classrooms have also been found to affect the results of students' intercultural development through classroom learning (Ghanem, 2017). This suggests it would be fruitful to investigate further the learning options, both in-class and out-of-class, which can best influence the development of ICC.

Developing intercultural competence and international/intercultural experiences

Several factors, including studying abroad (Bennett et al., 2003; Heinzmann, Künzle, Schallhart, & Müller, 2015; Jackson, 2011, 2012), intercultural courses (Byram, 1997; Ghanem, 2017) and intercultural encounters (Gordon & Mwavita, 2018), were found to have the potential to promote learners' intercultural sensitivities and competence. However, evidence about influence and implementation of these factors tends to be inconsistent.

Jackson's (2011) case study regarding a short-term study abroad programme illustrated that even short-term overseas studies could be effective in improving learners' intercultural competency. Similarly, in Switzerland, in a large-sample, longitudinal quasi-experiment, Heinzmann et al. (2015) found that compared with being educated in the home country, overseas study programmes (both short and long-term), could develop students' intercultural competence and have lasting effects on the sojourners. This was demonstrated through a delayed post-test. Jackson (2012) identified a number of critical issues influencing successful development of intercultural competence during overseas study, including specific programme features, variables in the host countries and the sojourners' personality characteristics. Researchers also agree that individuals that are open to a new environment, in a different culture and are well received by their hosts, may develop a broader sense of self and a greater chance of acquiring a global identity (Bennett, 2008; Heinzmann et al., 2015; Jackson, 2008; Kinginger, 2009).

Another intercultural opportunity for developing students' intercultural competence is through real contact with someone of a different culture and language. In a quasi-experiment study, Rienties, Alcott, and Jindal-Snape (2014) found that working with co-national students, cross-cultural contact and doing cross-cultural group projects were found to be preferred by most students and was more effective in improving learners' intercultural abilities. Sherrill, Mayo, Truong, Pribonic, and Schalkoff's (2016) study of 170 American medical students found that previous social interaction with Latinos in a Spanish-speaking country and better proficiency in the target culture's language could best predict intercultural competence. Peng and Wu (2016) contend that pathways of intercultural contact are beneficial for advancing Chinese college students' intercultural competence; specifically, domestic social media (as direct contact) and cultural products (as indirect contact) are relatively more significant than multimedia and courses.

Conversely, there is also research evidence for negative outcomes of intercultural collaborations. Kramsch and Thorne (2002), in researching interactions between American and French students, found factors such as communication failures and differences in cultural perceptions of genres. Shih and Cifuentes (2003) also found that Taiwanese students and their American counterparts had differences in on-line learning styles, lacked a shared language, experiences and worldview. Kim, Choi, and Tatar's (2017) research found differences in socio-cultural values and conventions between Korean students and other international students. Therefore, even though direct contact with another culture might motivate language learners to advance their linguistic and intercultural competence, cultural differences could negatively affect attitudes towards intercultural encounters.

Recent studies on factors influencing Taiwanese students' intercultural sensitivities

Research regarding factors that influence intercultural competence in Taiwanese participants has been quite scarce. Liu and Lee's (2011) study of three Taiwanese college students that had participated in a cross-cultural overseas service-learning programme found that the most important factor enhancing their intercultural competence was the

mutual cooperation between volunteers of diverse backgrounds. Chang, Chen, Huang, and Yan (2012) researched 10 Taiwanese volunteers on international service missions and identified three factors that could trigger personal intercultural growth and change, which included exploration of an unknown world, learning from zero and revelation of their unknown selves. A more recent empirical study of Taiwanese 7th grade EFL students (J. J. Chen & Yang, 2014) found technology-enhanced intercultural projects provided linguistic and intercultural benefits and authentic and meaningful language learning experiences. Su (2018) conducted a larger study to assess intercultural sensitivities among 1191 Taiwanese students and found that among the 4 dimensions of his intercultural sensitivity scale (adapted from G.-M. Chen & Starosta, 2000), learners' interaction engagement and confidence were most significant. Also, a range of variables were identified to be interrelated with intercultural sensitivity, including learners' ethnocentrism, EFL interest and attitudes towards native English speakers.

The above review of the literature contains diverse studies with varied foci, but taken together their findings suggest that the key to enhancing learners' intercultural competence is to gain greater insight and understanding of factors significant to increasing intercultural sensitivity. Since research regarding Asian students' intercultural competence is scant, this study will focus on identifying the factors affecting Taiwanese EFL college students' intercultural competence. It strives to gain greater understanding of significant issues, provide useful guidance to EFL teachers, students and administrators, and assist them in developing effective intercultural programmes and activities which can enhance learners' intercultural competence.

Method

Sample

This study uses a quantitative survey for data collection. Participants were 159 Taiwanese Year-2 students in a technological university in Taiwan; 135 (85%) were females and 24 (15%) males, with an average age of 20.38. They were all majoring in English. Their university offers a wide variety of international programmes and cross-cultural experiences, including short and long-term international study programmes, overseas volunteer programmes, international internship opportunities, English conversation corners and intercultural communication courses, in order to promote students' intercultural competence. At the time the data collection took place, the participants had already been exposed to these different learning opportunities.

Measure

The main instrument of this study was a self-designed questionnaire, consisting of questions regarding demographic background, previous intercultural experiences, current College Student English Proficiency Test (CSEPT) scores, and a 13-item Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS). To avoid miscommunication, all items in the survey were written in the participants' native language of traditional Chinese.

The assessment tool of intercultural sensitivity was adapted from the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS) model of G.-M. Chen and Starosta (2000). A 5-point Likert scale (1 corresponding to *strongly disagree* and 5 to *strongly agree*) was utilized as the measurement and applied to the modified ISS. The adapted model was comprised of four dimensions: (1) *Interaction Confidence (ICF)*, which included 4 items that were designed to determine participants' level of confidence when interacting with people of other

cultures; (2) *Interaction Respect and Enjoyment (IRE)*, which was divided into 4 items and referred to participants' orientation and tolerance towards their counterparts' culture, along with opinions (positive or negative) and reactions toward communicating with people of different cultures; (3) *Interaction Engagement (IEG)*, which had 3 items that were particularly concerned with understanding participants' feelings when engaging in intercultural communication and (4) *Interaction Attentiveness (IAT)* consisting of 2 items that focused on participants' efforts to understand and make meaning from interactions in cross-cultural situations.

Statistical results were derived from exploratory factor analysis and ISS reliability tests, which were designed to ascertain both validity and reliability. The ISS was determined to be quite good. Statistical results of all 13 ISS items were above 0.50, with an exploratory factor analysis and a common variance factor of 66.745. Good internal validity was indicated. Furthermore, the total index carried a reliability coefficient of 0.834, with a Cronbach α for each dimension ranging from .516 to .845. According to Henson (2001), this can be considered appropriately significant. The reliability analysis of each dimension is illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Reliability analysis for Intercultural Sensitivity Scale dimensions

ISS dimensions	<i>ICF</i>	<i>IRE</i>	<i>IEG</i>	<i>IAT</i>	Total
Cronbach's Alpha	.845	.719	.657	.516	.834
<i>N</i>	4	4	3	2	13

Procedures

The survey was administered at the end of the 2017 spring semester during a writing course, entitled *Discussion and Writing*, which was a required course for all participants. Before the Google survey link was provided, all students were informed that the research was to be carried out anonymously and voluntarily, in order to maintain high ethical standards. The response rate was 91%. It took participants approximately 15 minutes to fill out the questionnaire. After the data was collected, an SPSS statistics programme for Windows was used to process descriptive statistics, factoring of correlation coefficient analysis, *t*-testing and regression.

Findings

Intercultural sensitivity descriptive analysis, English proficiency and intercultural experiences

Table 2 displays the descriptive statistic values for all variables. Derived from the 5-point Likert scale, the ISS total mean score was factored at 3.67 (*SD* = 0.49), which indicated that the participants had an intermediate intercultural sensitivity level. Competences ranked from highest to lowest are: *Interaction Engagement* (4.16), *Interaction Respect and Enjoyment* (4.01), *Interaction Attentiveness* (3.47), and *Interaction Confidence* (3.02). The particularly low mean score for *Interaction Confidence* and *Interaction Attentiveness* showed respondents had generally low confidence in cross-cultural contexts and lacked sensitivity to suitable meanings that were communicated by foreigners during intercultural interactions. The students' proficiency test scores (CSEPT) ranged from 106 to 345 (the highest possible score being 360). Their CSEPT mean score was 262.68,

which showed the general respondents' English proficiency was at an upper-intermediate level (an equivalent of 600 in TOEIC, a B2 in CEFR and a 4.0-4.5 IELTS).

Table 2. Mean and SD of ISS dimensions and CSEPT ($N=159$)

Dimension	<i>ICF</i>	<i>IRE</i>	<i>IEG</i>	<i>IAT</i>	<i>ISS_TOTAL</i>	CSEPT
<i>Mean</i>	3.02	4.01	4.16	3.47	3.67	262.68
<i>SD</i>	0.73	0.65	0.63	0.74	0.49	44.42

Key: IEG: Interaction Engagement; IRE: Interaction Respect and Enjoyment; IAT: Interaction Attentiveness; ICF: Interaction Confidence

The three items with the highest mean scores in the ISS's were "I am open-minded to people from different cultures" (4.43), "I would not accept the opinions of people from different cultures" (4.35, reversely coded) and "I don't like to be with people from different cultures" (4.23, reversely coded) (see Table 3). The first of these relates to IEG and the other two relate to IRE. This clearly illustrates that most participants were open-minded, willing to respect different opinions from people of other cultures and enjoyed intercultural interactions.

Table 3. Score in each item of ISS

Dimensions	Item	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
Interaction Confidence (ICF)	1. I am pretty sure of myself in interacting with people from different cultures.	3.43	0.883
	2. I always know what to say when interacting with people from different cultures.	2.92	0.89
	3. I can be as sociable as I want to be when interacting with people from different cultures.	2.76	0.868
	4. I feel confident when interacting with people from different cultures.	2.96	0.881
Interaction Respect and Enjoyment (IRE*)	5. I don't like to be with people from different cultures.	4.23	0.85
	6. I get upset easily when interacting with people from different cultures.	3.91	0.917
	7. I often get discouraged when I am with people from different cultures.	3.56	1.004
	8. I would not accept the opinions of people from different cultures.	4.35	0.739
Interaction Engagement (IEG)	9. I tend to wait before forming an impression of culturally-distinct counterparts.	4.06	0.946
	10. I am open-minded to people from different cultures.	4.43	0.881
	11. I have a feeling of enjoyment towards differences between my culturally-distinct persons.	3.99	0.815

Interaction Attentiveness (IAT)	12. I am sensitive to my culturally different counterpart during our interaction.	3.36	0.881
	13. I try to obtain as much information as I can when interacting with people from different cultures.	3.58	0.923

*Items 5 to 8 (all in the IRE section) are reversely coded.

Table 4 provides details of participants' international experiences. The descriptive statistics show that the most common intercultural experience was having foreign friends ($N=131$, 82.4%), followed by overseas travel ($N=108$, 67.9%) and intercultural courses ($N=57$, 35.8%). About a quarter of them had experiences of overseas study/internship/exchange. Very few had stayed overseas for more than 6 months ($N=12$, 7.5%).

Table 4. Counts and percentage of international experiences ($N=159$).

Intercultural Experiences	Yes	No
Intercultural courses	57 (35.8%)	102 (64.2%)
Overseas stay more than 6 months	12 (7.5%)	147 (92.5%)
Overseas travel	108 (67.9%)	51 (32.1%)
Overseas study/internships/exchanges	41 (25.8%)	118 (74.2%)
Having foreign friends	131 (82.4%)	28 (17.6%)

Results of correlation between CSEPT and intercultural sensitivities

Research question 2 aims at determining whether English proficiency could be used as a predictor of the intercultural sensitivities of these Taiwanese EFL students. Surprisingly, findings revealed that the level of English was positively correlated only to the *Interaction Confidence* of the respondents (Pearson $r = .274^{***}$), and the degree of association between the two variables was low ($r^2 = 0.075 < .16$), indicating that only 7.5% of intercultural sensitivities can be explained by CSEPT scores and vice versa. The other three dimensions revealed no relation to English competence (see Table 5).

Table 5. Product-moment correlation between CSEPT score and ISS dimensions

Item	CSEPT	ICF	IRE	IEG	IAT	TOTAL
Pearson r	1	.274^{***} ($r^2=0.075$)	0.061	-0.09	0.017	0.099
p		0	0.443	0.261	0.834	0.215

^{***} $p < .001$

Findings suggest that if the participants' English proficiency were higher, they would probably have more confidence interacting with a culturally-distinct counterpart who speaks a different language. However, an individual's English ability is not affected by, nor has an effect on, the other three intercultural sensitivity dimensions, such as the

tolerance of other cultures, willingness to make an effort to understand the meaning of cross-cultural interactions or embrace a different culture with a more open mind.

Intercultural experience predictors in intercultural sensitivities t-test results

Table 6 illustrates the results of the *t*-test analysis for intercultural experience predictors of intercultural confidence. Significant differences were found to exist between learners who have and those who do not have experience in taking intercultural courses, staying overseas, overseas travel and overseas study/internships/exchanges in the ISS dimensions of *Interaction Confidence*. Explained variances were found to be 6%, 4%, 3% and 5% respectively. Findings indicated that if learners had the opportunity to engage in the previously mentioned intercultural experiences, it would enhance their confidence when interacting with culturally different counterparts. However, in the other ISS aspects, no significant differences were discovered between having and not having intercultural experiences.

Table 6. Intercultural experience predictors for interaction confidence *t* test

Dimensions	Class	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t value</i>	<i>p</i>	η^2
Intercultural courses	YES	57	3.25	0.70	3.137**	0.002	.059
	NO	102	2.89	0.71			
Overseas stay	YES	12	3.52	0.88	2.529*	0.012	.039
	NO	147	2.98	0.70			
Overseas travel	YES	108	3.11	0.71	2.3*	0.023	.033
	NO	51	2.83	0.74			
Overseas study/ internship/ exchange	YES	41	3.29	0.74	2.794*	0.006	.047
	NO	118	2.93	0.70			

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

Research question 3 aimed to determine the relationship between different cultural experiences, the ISS dimensions and their predictive power. Findings showed that apart from having foreign friends, no significance was found in *t*-test scores from any other ISS intercultural experience dimensions. Table 7 illustrates the *t*-test results of “having foreign friends” in various ISS dimensions. The most significant difference was found between respondents having and not having foreign friends in the ISS dimensions of *Interaction Confidence* ($t = 4.479***$), *Interaction Engagement* ($t = 2.052*$) and *Interaction Attentiveness* ($t = 2.193**$) with variances of 11%, 3% and 3% correspondingly. It was found to correlate with the total ISS ($t = 3.619***$) with a variance of 7%.

Table 7. Having foreign friends ISS *t*-test results

Dimensions	Having foreign friends	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t value</i>	<i>p</i>	η^2
ICF	YES	131	3.13	0.71	4.479***	0	.113
	NO	28	2.49	0.56			
IRE	YES	131	4.05	0.65	1.399	0.164	.012
	NO	28	3.86	0.64			
IEG	YES	131	4.21	0.63	2.052*	0.042	.026
	NO	28	3.94	0.60			
IAT	YES	131	3.53	0.74	2.193**	0.03	.030
	NO	28	3.20	0.69			
ISS_TOTAL	YES	131	3.73	0.49	3.619***	0	.077
	NO	28	3.37	0.42			

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

Predictive power of each variable

Regarding the predictive power of each independent intercultural sensitivity variable and dimension, significant coefficients were found only in objective variables of *Interaction Confidence* ($F=7.038***$, $R^2=0.217$) and *Total Intercultural Sensitivities* ($F=2.728*$, $R^2=.097$). Table 8 shows that in predicting *Interaction Confidence*, the most powerful variable was having foreign friends ($\beta=0.264$, $T=3.506**$), followed by intercultural courses ($\beta=0.18$, $T=2.454*$) and then English competence of CSEPT ($\beta=0.172$, $T=2.299*$). The other variables did not contribute significantly to the objective variable.

Table 8. Contribution of predictors when interaction confidence is taken as a criterion

Model 1	<i>R</i> .466	<i>R</i> ² .217	adjusted <i>R</i> ² .187	Standard error of skewness .65594	
Predictor	<i>B</i>	<i>SEB</i>	β	<i>T</i>	<i>P</i>
constant	1.665	0.328		5.067	0
Intercultural courses	0.272	0.111	0.18	2.454*	0.015
Overseas stay	0.281	0.206	0.102	1.362	0.175
Overseas study/ internship/ exchange	0.041	0.138	0.025	0.298	0.766
Foreign friends	0.502	0.143	0.264	3.506**	0.001

Overseas travel	0.103	0.123	0.066	0.837	0.404
CSEPT	0.003	0.001	0.172	2.299*	0.023

** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$ B: non-standardized regression coefficient; SEB: standard error of coefficient B; β : standardized regression coefficient; T = value of t -statistic and the p significance.

Table 9 depicted that in predicting the overall ISS, the only significant variable was having foreign friends. Surprisingly, it was found the CSEPT score did not contribute significantly to the total ISS either.

Table 9. Contribution of predictors when ISS total is taken as a criterion

Model	R	R^2	adjusted R^2	Standard error of skewness	
1	.312	.097	.062	.47740	
Predictor	B	SEB	β	T	p
constant	3.267	.239		13.664	.000
Intercultural courses	.119	.081	.116	1.473	.143
Oversea stay	.073	.150	.039	.485	.629
Oversea study/ internship/exchange	.038	.101	.033	.373	.709
Foreign friends	.323	.104	.251	3.100**	.002
Overseas travel	-.001	.089	-.001	-.015	.988
CSEPT	.000	.001	.026	.325	.746

** $p < .01$

Discussion and conclusion

In recent research, the relationship between intercultural competence, language proficiency and previous intercultural experiences has come under scrutiny. The current study shows that many respondents showed a lack of confidence when interacting with culturally different others who speak a different language. Their low scores for interaction attentiveness suggest a deficiency in being sensitively aware of intercultural differences and in translating the intention of the messages sent by their counterparts. However, interaction confidence is directly related to the level of English proficiency. Therefore, it can be reasoned that an important strategy for building students' self-confidence would be improving their English competence and helping them know what to say in culturally different encounters. With better language competence, EFL students would know how to start an intercultural dialogue on topics that they are interested in. They might also feel more comfortable when socializing with people of different cultures if they have sufficient linguistic, sociolinguistic and discourse competence to express their opinions and make sense of their intercultural interlocutors.

The results of this study show that it is a myth that students with higher English proficiency are more sensitive to intercultural situations and thus are consistent with Jackson's (2011) conclusion regarding the problematic relationship between linguistic development and intercultural communicative development. The current study also demonstrates the complexity in the concept of intercultural communication competence which includes a variety of abilities, of which language is only one. It also implies that it would be a mistake to assume that students' intercultural sensitivities would increase automatically with and at the same rate and to the same degree as their English competence. As a result, it seems reasonable to suggest that English teachers should shift from teaching only grammar and vocabulary towards a language/intercultural hybrid approach in order to assist students in becoming real intercultural speakers (Byram, 1997).

The evidence shows that EFL speakers who have intermediate-levels of English can also enjoy culturally different interactions if they have an open mind and are willing to accept culturally different opinions or behaviours. This affective aspect of intercultural competence can motivate learners to improve their English proficiency, so that they can better understand their intercultural partners and improve communication.

Furthermore, the study reveals that EFL learners' intercultural experiences, specifically taking intercultural courses and acquiring friends from different cultures, positively contribute to their confidence in expressing themselves when interacting with others and understanding different cultures. One interesting finding is that the best predictor among all the variables of intercultural confidence, interaction engagement and interaction attentiveness was simply having foreign friends. This may be related to the opportunity to build friendships and personal connections. This unique feature of having foreign friends could motivate EFL students to advance their linguistic abilities and even adapt to change and transform their opinions and behaviours so that they can be involved and accepted by the community of their culturally different counterparts.

In conclusion, there is a growing demand from society to nurture students' intercultural communication competence and assist them to better interact in a world of diverse intercultural encounters, both locally and abroad. In response to these needs, language teachers and educators should equip their pupils with the language skills to increase their confidence using English as a lingua franca in order to interact better with people of different backgrounds. It is also clear that interesting, meaningful and personal intercultural experiences both in the classroom and other off-campus situations can help learners immerse themselves in language and culture in a constructive manner and will subsequently enhance their intercultural competence. Finally, as asserted by Byram (1997), when developing cultural sensitivities, the importance of intercultural courses cannot be neglected. Although their predictive power is less significant than having cross-cultural friendships, they were found to have a significant influence on both learning language and culture. When designing an intercultural curriculum, teachers can create opportunities through real world intercultural interactions and internet interactions, so that with their teacher's guidance, students can learn how to communicate with foreigners and build true friendships.

Further research is needed to address the limitations of this study. First, studies can be conducted using a larger sample size and EFL learners from different cultural backgrounds in order to develop a deeper insight into the predictive power of the various factors of cultural sensitivities among different populations. Second, qualitative methodologies could be used to explore how EFL learners' cultural sensitivities are framed by the factors described here.

About the author

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