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Research Paper

Developing Intercultural Sensitivity Through Interculturality-Laden Tasks: Male vs. Female Iranian EFL Learners

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Abstract

In recent decades, developing intercultural sensitivity is one of the formidable challenges in foreign language education. EFL learners require appropriate intercultural skills to interact more effectively in culturally diverse settings. This study aimed to examine the effectiveness of using interculturality-laden tasks in enhancing Iranian English language learner' intercultural sensitivity in Anzali, Iran. To this end, a sample of 44 intermediate EFL learners was selected through convenience sampling from a pool of 60 based on their performance on Quick Oxford Placement Test. The sample was then randomly assigned to a control group, with no intercultural training, and an experimental group receiving intercultural training during an eighteen-session treatment. Afterward, Chen and Starosta's intercultural sensitivity scale (ISS) and seven intercultural tasks were administered for two groups to evaluate their level of intercultural sensitivity prior to and after treatment implementation. The data collected through ISS was analyzed by conducting

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a multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA). Moreover, the data from intercultural tasks went through content analysis. The results manifested a notable enhancement of experimental groups' intercultural sensitivity under the definitions of Byram's ICC model. However, no significant difference between male and female learners' intercultural sensitivity was detected. Implications and suggestions for further research are discussed.

Keywords: Intercultural Communicative Competence, Interculturally-Laden Tasks, Intercultural Sensitivity, Gender, Iranian EFL learners

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1. Introduction

Globalization, development of communication and information technologies, and the superdiversity of communities have changed human communities into a globally connected network in which people need to increase their global skills in intercultural contexts. This phenomenon has drastically modified the purposes of second and foreign language teaching and learning. Several scholars have asserted that linguistic foci of so-called communicative competence are no longer adequate to equip the 21st century learners with essential global skills and competencies. Critical thinking, intercultural skills, and cultural awareness are three major global skills that second or foreign language learners are required these days to possess and improve. Accordingly, the concept of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) as an extension of communicative competence has been proposed to address the global needs of twenty-first century learners (Byram, 1997; Canagarajah, 2016; Deardorff, 2006; Kramsch, 2013; Lazar, 2007; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013; Sharifian, 2014). ICC empowers a foreign language learner to mediate among different cultures. Accordingly, the utmost objective of the paradigm

is to develop in learners both sensitivity to cultural diversity and the ability to use this sensitivity in cross-cultural contexts (Marczak, 2010).

Intercultural sensitivity (IS) is regarded as prerequisite for intercultural competence (Hammer, Bennett & Wiseman, 2003); in other words, to be interculturally competent, individuals first should foster intercultural sensitivity. Some others believed that ICC is the behavioral aspect of intercultural sensitivity and awareness (e.g., Peng, Rangsipahat & Thaipakdee, 2005). According to Bhawuk and Brislin (1992), the concept is defined as, "a sensitivity to the importance of cultural differences and to the points of view of people in other cultures" (p. 414). They also pointed out the greater intercultural sensitivity can lead to greater intercultural competence.

Hismanoglu (2011) argued that intercultural tasks within EFL settings connect to behavior and speech patterns, such as proper conversational topics, prejudice and stereotyping, verbal and non-verbal communication, reacting to cultural shock, criticizing and complaining, gendered identities, men and women, personal space restrictions and opening and closing a conversation. Similarly, Moloney and Harbone (2010) maintain intercultural practice in the classroom environment entails "ask students to think and act appropriately within a growing knowledge of the culture within language (p. 281). This kind of practice entails educational planning that provides time and space for discovery, analysis, reflection, and intercultural exploration. However, teachers' workload, lack of sensitivity and required expertise, poor facilities, and shortage of time are among the major reasons for neglecting ICC contents in English language education (Hismanoglu, 2011; Tran & Duong, 2018). Consequently, many learners are unable to deal with the intercultural dangers resulting from an unsuitable selection of conversation topics, differences in verbal and non-verbal interaction, or negative stereotyping during their classes (Hismanoglu, 2011). To put it differently,

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such language learners may end up learning about intercultural issues and culture shock through real traumatic experiences.

At this juncture, regarding ICC teaching and learning in the Iranian context, there exist certain inevitable requirements in the EFL curriculum, which necessitate a shift from linguistic approach to interculturality perspective. In recent years, certain endeavors have been made to enhance particularly EFL learners' ICC through integrating some specific courses into the curriculum. Nevertheless, there should be more research study that probes Iranian learners' engagement in pedagogical tasks and intercultural courses with the aim of ICC enhancement (Alemi & Hesami, 2014; Mekheimer & Amin, 2019; Rahimi & Soltani, 2011; Vahdat, Anai Sarab & Ghobadi, 2020). Moreover, the gender variable was examined as one of the possible predictors in which it could affect the participants' intercultural sensitivity. Prior ICC studies have demonstrated conflicting results as to gender differences. (Bayles, 2009; Karimi, Chalak, & Heidari Tabrizi, 2019; Yuen, 2010). Some evidence suggests that male EFL learners are more successful in intercultural encounters, while some scholars have indicated female learners are better compared to male. Finally, the third trend has reported no significant difference between male and female learners in terms of ICC development.

Considering intercultural development as one of the crucial goal of English language education, the following research questions were raised:

1. Does instruction through interculturally-laden tasks improve EFL learners' intercultural sensitivity? If yes, how?
2. Are there any differences between Iranian male and female EFL learners regarding the development of intercultural sensitivity through interculturally-laden task instruction?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Intercultural Communicative Competence

In light of numerous admirable attempts which look at the concept of intercultural communicative competence from a variety of perspectives (Houghton, 2014; Sakuragi, 2008), the proposition which considers ICC from English language education is now well-established (Byram, 1997; Canagarajah, 2016; Deardorff, 2009; Lazar et al., 2007; Sharifian, 2013). The term ICC is an expansion of communicative competence (CC) which was initiated by Dell Hymes (1972) as a critique of and reaction to the Chomskyan linguistic competence (Chomsky, 1965). Based on Chomsky (1969), linguistic competence concerns itself with the language knowledge of a speaker-hearer in an ideally homogeneous community, remaining uninfluenced by performance variables. Hymes (1972) distinguished CC from what Chomsky recognized, and considered linguistic competence as one of the components of CC. Hence, CC comprises linguistic and sociocultural competences as well. The construct was further expounded upon by scholars like Canale and Swain (1980) and Van Ek (1986). It was Van Ek's effort that integrated it into foreign language education and changed it to a fundamental notion in communication language teaching (CLT). AS Aguilar (2009) argued CC has been influential for about three decades, and most ELT textbooks currently used by learners conform to this approach. However, the meaning of communicative competence has been modified by different researchers over the passage of time. While some scholars (Alcon & Safont, 2007) relied largely on pragmatic dimensions, others embraced the sociocultural dimensions of communicative competence (Celce-Murcia, 2007; Van EK, 1986). Van Ek (1986), in addition to grammatical, (socio) linguistic, and discourse competences, highlighted the importance of social and sociocultural competences (Hismanoglu, 2011).

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At this juncture, as a consequence of new educational technologies, Communicative Language Teaching is insufficient for training students for effective communication and cannot help them in varied pedagogical settings (Zarei & Khazaie, 2011). Accordingly, the concept of ICC emerged in instructional materials, curriculum, and assessment. Several scholars and theoreticians have provided various definitions for this concept in different disciplines (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006; Fantini, 2009). From a more general perspective, ICC is the capability to interact successfully and perfectly in intercultural interactions and the ability to mediate between languages and cultures (Byram, 1991; Chen & Die, 2014). Scholars gradually understood that ICC is a multifaceted concept and encompasses various components such as knowledge, skills, attitudes, effectiveness, motivation, and appropriateness that are mutually dependent elements and non-linear in essence. These conceptualizations of the construct have resulted in the development of several ICC models. Among them Byram's ICC model (1997), Fantini's model of ICC (2000), and Deardorff's pyramid model of ICC (2004) have been regarded as the most credible ones in educational settings. However, the most influential and exhaustive definition of the concept is offered by Byram (1997) who recognized five *savoirs* as complementary to the intercultural communicative competence of the language learners. According to Byram, ICC embraces the following components:

1. Intercultural attitudes (*savoir etre*): This component implies a tendency to defer distrust about various cultures, curiosity and openness, and belief about one's native culture;
2. Knowledge (*savoirs*): Obtaining knowledge of social groups and cultures in learners' own country and interlocutors' country;

3. Skills of interpreting and relating (i.e., *savoir comprendre*): It refers to the capability of interpreting an event or document from a foreign culture, to describe it, and associate it with those from the learners' native culture;

4. Skills of discovery and interaction (i.e., *savoir apprendre/faire*): It includes the ability to gain a fresh grasp of a culture, its practices, and to employ that knowledge, attitude, and skills in real life interaction.

5. Critical cultural awareness (*savoir s'engager*): It is concerned with the ability to evaluate and critically judge different cultures.

Byram (1997) asserted that the development of all above-mentioned elements assists learners to become a critical contributor in intercultural exchanges not merely a *consumer* of culture.

As for the data-driven studies on boosting intercultural competence, several studies have been conducted in different parts of the world. Rahimi and Soltani (2011), for instance, tried to research the impact of using Mirrors and Windows textbook and interculturality-laden tasks on 36 Iranian participants. The results of the students' responses to the pre- and post-treatment ICC questionnaire indicated that intercultural training fostered the participants' intercultural sensitivity level. Moreover, Kusumaningputri and Widodothis (2018) described the utilization of digital photograph-mediated ICC tasks by Indonesian learners and found that employing ICC tasks and photographs could increase learners' intercultural awareness. A recent study by Chen and Zheng (2019) suggests the use of transformative culture-learning journals to facilitate EFL learners ICC growth. Galante (2015) and Petrović (2018) used digital literacies and telecollaboration projects to extend learners' intercultural horizons. The findings confirmed that the emergence of new generation internet devices provides exceptional opportunities for the enhancement of ICC and can engage learners in applying Byram's (1997) ICC model in English language classrooms.

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In another study, Tran and Duong (2018) have conducted action research by applying an intercultural language teaching model to integrate intercultural concepts into English language classes. The above-cited model consisted of four main teaching stages, Input, Notice, Practice, and Output. The participants of their research were 16 boys and 31 girls, all EFL learners aging between 21 to 40 years in three intact classes in Vietnam. The researchers taught the participants using a wide range of sources about language and intercultural knowledge and let them explore and practice their language and interpreting skills. The results of their investigation unveiled that the students' ICC and LC gradually changed positively as a result of the thirteen-week ICC course. In the same vein, Ghasemi Mighani et al. (2020) studied to which extent an intercultural course enhanced students' ICC. The results indicated that the participants' ICC level promoted significantly in behavioral, cognitive and affective dimensions of intercultural competence based on Byram ICC (1997) model. However, despite extensive literature on integrated ICC in language learning contexts (Hagar, 2018; Karimi et al., 2019; Zhang, 2020) scholars still grapple with the challenges between theory and practice and practically applying ICC in real language classrooms. Furthermore, a large number of studies focusing on ICC enhancement (Alaei & Nosrati, 2018; Ghasemi Mighani et al., 2020; Kusumaningputri & Widodo, 2018) have demonstrated conflicting and inconclusive results, thus this area needs further research. Finally, this study employed Byram's (1997) ICC as the theoretical backbone of the study because very few studies have used this model to develop intercultural sensitivity among Iranian EFL learners. These major reasons provided the drive for the current study.

2.2 Intercultural Sensitivity (IS)

A key to growth intercultural competence is intercultural sensitivity. A focal point in intercultural sensitivity is an individuals' desire which stimulates

them to appreciate, respect other cultures and accept differences among them. IS is regarded a major concept contributing to the overall ICC level (Bhawuk & Brislin, 1992; Chen & Starosta; 1997, 2000). As Hammer et al. (2003) point out, “greater intercultural sensitivity is associated with greater potential for exercising intercultural competence” (p. 422). Thereupon, Iranian EFL learners with higher IS level could have a more effective intercultural encounters with people of different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. To assess the IS level of the participants of the current study, Chen and Starosta (2000) IS scale is used. The scale consists of five major elements: interaction engagement, interaction attentiveness, interaction confidence, respect for cultural differences and interaction enjoyment.

2.3 Gender

Of the literature reviewed, twenty-five studies investigated the effect of gender differences on intercultural sensitivity (Kohli & Haskollar, 2020). Researches that investigate the two variables have been contradictory, for instance, some scholars (e.g., Bayles, 2009; Karimi, Chalak, & Heidari Tabrizi, 2019; Yuen, 2010) asserted that there is not any relationship between the two variables. In contrast, other researchers (e.g., Helmer, 2007; Holm, Nokelainen, & Tirri, 2009) confirmed that female learners gain a higher level of intercultural sensitivity. Based on Vande Berg et al. (2009) research project, female participants achieved a higher level of IS after intercultural experience. In another study conducted by Karimi, Chalak and Heidari Tabrizi (2019) to develop L2 learners IS and reflective thinking through photovoice method yielded similar conclusions. Eventually, much uncertainty still exists about the effect of gender differences on intercultural sensitivity. Thus, the main objective of the study was to provide some opportunities for the Iranian English learners to foster their intercultural sensitivity through intercultural tasks.

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3. Methodology

This part displays the participants' profiles, research instruments, as well as how the data is garnered, operationalized, and analyzed.

3.1 Participants

A sample of 44 Iranian EFL learners, within the age range of 21 to 30, was chosen through convenience sampling from a pool of 60 English language learners at a private language institute in Anzali, Guilan province, Iran to participate in this quasi-experimental study. Although intercultural training can be practiced with different age groups, according to Byram (1997) higher cognitive development is required for comprehension of abstract concepts; thus, the participants (21 to 30 years old) were assumed to be an appropriate target for this purpose, equipped with proper cognitive capacities to fulfill the requirements of the study. They were randomly assigned to two groups of experimental and control. In each group, there were 10 males and 12 females. The Oxford Quick placement test (OQPT) was administered to guarantee their homogeneity. All participants were at intermediate level as their scores fell between 30 and 47 out of 60 (Allen, 2004). Most of them spoke Gilaki as their first language, Persian as their second language, and English as third one. They had different ethnic backgrounds as Gilak, Persian, and Turkish. All the participants worked with Touchstone series, Level 4 (McCarthy, McCarten, & Sandiford, 2014) during the research period. Furthermore, they had experienced over four years of studying General English. Most of them were university students. The demographic information indicated that none of them had previously participated in an intercultural training course and only a small number of them (four) had traveled overseas.

3.2 Instrument

3.2.1 Oxford Quick Proficiency Test

An Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT) of Oxford University Press (2003) was administered to the participants to ensure their homogeneity. The test

contained 60 multiple-choice items in grammar, vocabulary, reading, and cloze tests and the learners answered in 30 minutes. Concerning the overall band scores of the test, the participants whose scores were between 30 and 47 out of 60 are taken to be at the intermediate proficiency level. Based on the results of the test, 44 intermediate learners were selected as the target sample of the study.

The reason for the researchers' selection of QOPT to measure the participants' language proficiency laid in the fact that its validity has been reported by about 6000 researchers from 60 different countries and also the reliability index of the said test was 0.90 for the 60 item tests (Geranpayeh, 2003).

3.2.2 Intercultural Communication Textbook

A text book entitled *Mirrors and Windows* written by Huber-Krieger et al. (2003) was employed during the eighteen sessions to teach intercultural concepts. It has been written for intercultural concerns, and its units are all related to the themes proposed by the Common European Framework for languages (2001). It contains various activities, tasks, and stories to foster the enhancement of ICC through highlighting the differences and similarities between the learners' own and other cultures. The themes included in the coursebook were importance of time, silence and turn-taking, eating habits, verbal and non-verbal interaction, gendered identities, romance, dislocated polygamy, household chores, religion, personal space, directness, complaining, and criticizing.

The objective of the course was to cultivate the learner's intercultural awareness and to develop their empathy, respect, open-mindedness, and curiosity toward other cultures in order to well-managed intercultural encounters. Additionally, the textbook aims to stimulate learners to use reflection, analysis, discovery and critical thinking to foster their ICC.

3.2.3 Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS)

The ISS was established by Chen and Starosta (2000). The scale was a 5-point Likert-scale comprising 24 items measuring the participants' intercultural sensitivity level as both a pretest and posttest. It is divided into five components: Interaction Engagement (items 1, 11, 13, 21, 22, 23, and 24), Respect for Cultural Difference (items 2, 7, 8, 16, 18, and 20), Interaction Confidence (items 3, 4, 5, 6, and 10), Interaction Enjoyment (items 9, 12, and 15) and Interaction Attentiveness (items 14, 17, and 19). Items (2, 4, 7, 9, 12, 15, 18, 20, and 22) were reverse-coded.

Interaction Engagement tapped the participants' emotion of participation in intercultural encounters. Respect for Cultural Difference is related to tolerating different opinions and cultures. Interaction Confidence deals with how confident learners are in intercultural encounters. Interaction Enjoyment concerned with learners' response toward interaction with people of cultural diversity. Interaction Attentiveness suggests learners' endeavor to perceive what is going on communications.

According to Chen and Starosta (2000), "higher scores of this measure are suggestive of being more interculturally sensitive" (p. 10). The alpha reliability coefficient of the scale, with nine items reversely coded, was 0.86 based on a survey conducted by Chen and Starosta (2000) in the United States. Other studies have been established the internal consistency of the scale ranged from 0.58 to 0.79 (e.g., Fritz, Mollenberg & Chen, 2002). Its adjustability to employ with different cultural settings attested by Fritz et al. (2002). In the current study, the scale was initially piloted with learners sharing the characteristics of the target population and its internal consistency as estimated by Cronbach's alpha was found to be .86.

3.2.4 Intercultural Tasks

Seven intercultural tasks were selected from each unit of *Mirrors and Windows*: An intercultural textbook which enjoyed topics like late arrivals, body weight, shake hands, the glass ceiling and household chores, intercultural relationship, cultural differences in raising children and different approaches to education. These tasks started with a reading text followed by some questions to encourage learners to make intercultural judgments and compare and contrast their own and other cultures. The participants were required to record orally their viewpoints on those tasks for five minutes both before the commencement of instruction and after its completion. Then, the researchers would be able to trace likely changes as the result of intercultural training through content analysis.

The selection criteria of these tasks were their potential for creating opportunities to probe cultural differences and the feasibility of drawing a multiplicity of judgment and viewpoint. On the other hand, as Lazar (2003) stated skills, knowledge and attitudes that are essential for effective intercultural encounters have to be observed, discussed and exercised; thus, the tasks will likely create those opportunities for learners and get them more involved in-class discussion and practice intercultural issues.

3.2.5 Rubric for Analysis of Intercultural Tasks

The rubric was developed by the association of American colleges and universities (2010), which evaluates participants' intercultural sensitivity level. Despite several intercultural rubrics, the significant benchmark of using this rubric was that its major components are almost in line with three main components of Byram's (1997) model of ICC (i.e., knowledge, skills and attitude).

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The rubric had six major components and included three major components of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Within these three components, each had two subcategories which further investigated specific dimensions of ICC. The knowledge dimension had subcategories of self-cultural awareness and cultural worldview knowledge. The skills dimension included two subcategories of empathy and verbal and nonverbal communication. Finally, the attitudes comprised of the subcategories of curiosity and openness.

Each level of the rubric showed more demonstrations of understanding of the six main components that make up the rubric. The rubric had four values, such as 1 – Benchmark: it represented minimal and surface awareness of cultural differences 2 – Low milestone: it demonstrated a partial understanding of cultural diversity 3 – High milestone: it indicated that learners recognize intellectual dimensions of more than one perspective in communication and start to suspend judgment with culturally different others and 4 – Capstone: it expressed full understanding of cultural differences in nonverbal and verbal interaction. The results are shown in Table 5.

3.3 Data Collection Procedure

Primarily, the research procedure began by administering the background questionnaire and the placement test to check the homogeneity of the participants. Then, the intercultural sensitivity scale including 24 items and seven intercultural tasks were administered as the pre-test to investigate the two participating groups' level of intercultural sensitivity before any treatment implementation.

It should be noted that negatively worded ISS items (2, 4, 7, 9, 12, 15, 18, 20, and 22) were reversed before any calculations. The two groups were further randomly assigned to experimental and control groups. One of the

authors, who met the class twice a week, conducted the treatment. The course lasted 18 sessions of 90 minutes each.

In both groups, the first session was allotted to the introduction of the course, explained course objective and requirements and answering the participants' questions.

In the experimental group, some steps were regularly followed throughout each session. "Mirrors and Windows" textbook was used to conduct the treatment. This book has been written specifically for the intercultural concern. The topics covered in the class contained concepts such as time, silence and conversation, eating habits, verbal and non-verbal communication, gendered identities, romance, dislocated polygamy, household chores, religion, personal space, directness, complaining and criticizing, etc. In each session, the researcher introduced the topic and raised some questions related to the topic to get students warmed-up. Then, they were required to compare and contrast their own culture with other cultures.

Regarding different sections of each unit (reflecting on your own culture, discovering other cultures, activities, projects and language work) the participants encountered various reading passages about different cultures and ethnographic tasks and ideas to foster their intercultural understanding and openness toward other cultures. For instance, in one of the activities regarding eating habits in different cultures, they discussed preparing and serving food in their own and other cultures. In other tasks regarding the importance of the concept of time, they were asked to classify themselves on a punctuality scale and to evaluate their native culture with different cultures on these dimensions. They employed different strategies as discovery, noticing, analysis and critical thinking for performing the tasks. At the end of each unit and as a weekly assignment, the participants were required to

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interview people from other cultures and discuss the given intercultural tasks through social networking sites/media (e.g., Facebook).

Afterward, they were required to present their findings through in-class group discussions, and compare and contrast them in the upcoming sessions. Additionally, in the language section, students were required to work on various topic-related idioms and proverbs and discuss them regarding cultural differences. The researcher strived to organize awareness-raising discussions through pair and group works.

The control group, however, the same amount of time was spent on cultural concepts with reference to traditional method of teaching culture. In each session, they were given a reading on different aspects of cultures (for example, eating and drinking habits in different countries, verbal and non-verbal communication, the concept of time in different cultures, gendered identities, educational approach in various cultures, etc.). They were required to read, translate the text, and answer the questions without reflecting on their own and other cultures. There were not any intercultural judgments and critical thinking. At the end of the semester, both groups were administered the intercultural tasks and ISS scale once again as a posttest to scrutinize possible changes in participants' intercultural sensitivity level and pursue their progress after the course.

3.4 Data Analysis

MANCOVA was run to test the effect of intercultural tasks and gender on intercultural sensitivity and its components. Moreover, the content analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data collected from intercultural tasks. Furthermore, two members of the researcher team read all the transcribed tasks written by the students in two groups. Finally, the learners' papers were coded based of intercultural rubric.

4. Results and Findings

This section consists of two sub-headings that include (1) quantitative analysis, (2) the qualitative findings. The statistical results will be presented first, and then the additional qualitative analysis will be incorporated in the last topic.

4.1 Quantitative Analysis

Multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was run to investigate the impact of interculturality-laden tasks on the improvement of the intercultural sensitivity of EFL learners. All assumptions related to MANCOVA (i.e., normality, linearity, homogeneity of regression slopes), homogeneity of variances, and homogeneity of covariance matrices were checked.

Table 1
MANCOVA; Overall Intercultural Sensitivity by Groups with Pretest

Effect	Value	F	Hypothesis df	Error df	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Pillai's Trace	.698	15.278	5	33	.000	.698
Wilks' Lambda	.302	15.278	5	33	.000	.698
Hotelling's Trace	2.315	15.278	5	33	.000	.698
Roy's Largest Root	2.315	15.278	5	33	.000	.698

The results of MANCOVA ($F(5,33) = 15.27, p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .698$) (see Table 1) represented that the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group on overall intercultural sensitivity after controlling for the effect of pretest. Table 2 displays the results of MANCOVA on each component of intercultural sensitivity. The results also revealed that the experimental group had a significantly higher mean than the control group on components of intercultural sensitivity after controlling for the effects of their pretest.

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Table 2

MANCOVA; Components of Intercultural Sensitivity by Groups

Dependent Variable	Groups	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval		F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound			
Interaction Engagement	Experimental	4.001a	.066	3.868	4.135	34.37	.000	.482
	Control	3.434a	.066	3.300	3.567			
Respect for Cultural Differences	Experimental	4.101a	.059	3.982	4.220	44.12	.000	.544
	Control	3.528a	.059	3.409	3.647			
Interaction Confidence	Experimental	4.190a	.059	4.070	4.310	57.85	.000	.610
	Control	3.528a	.059	3.408	3.648			
Interaction Enjoyment	Experimental	3.888a	.098	3.689	4.087	7.00	.012	.159
	Control	3.506a	.098	3.307	3.705			
Interaction Attentiveness	Experimental	3.555a	.092	3.368	3.741	4.16	.048	.101
	Control	3.279a	.092	3.092	3.465			

Note: Covariates appearing in the model are evaluated at the following values: PreInterEng = 3.51, PreRes = 3.62, PreInterConf = 3.61, PreIntEnjoy = 3.55, PreIntAttentive = 3.30.

As revealed in the Table 2, the experimental group had significantly higher means than the control group on; interaction engagement (F (1,37) =34.37, $p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .482$), respect for cultural differences (F (1,37) =44.12, $p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .544$), interaction confidence (F (1,37) =57.85, $p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .610$), interaction enjoyment (F (1,37) =7.00, $p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .159$), and interaction attentiveness interaction engagement (F (1,37) =4.16, $p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .101$).

Table 3 illustrates the effect of gender on overall intercultural sensitivity. The results (F (5,33) =.634, $p > .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .088$) indicated that gender did not have any significant effect on overall intrcultural sensitivity after controlling for the effect of pretest.

Table 3
MANCOVA; Overall Intercultural Sensitivity by Gender with Pretest

Effect	Value	F	Hypothesis df	Error df	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Pillai's Trace	.088	.634	5	33	.675	.088
Wilks' Lambda	.912	.634	5	33	.675	.088
Gender Hotelling's Trace	.096	.634	5	33	.675	.088
Roy's Largest Root	.096	.634	5	33	.675	.088

The results of MANCOVA for the effect of gender on components of intercultural sensitivity are displayed in Table 4. The findings indicated that there were not any significant differences between male and female groups' means on none of the components of intercultural sensitivity.

Table 4
MANCOVA; Components of Intercultural Sensitivity by Gender

Dependent Variable	Groups	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval		F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound			
Interaction Engagement	Male	3.731a	.094	3.540	3.922	.034	.854	.001
	Female	3.707a	.086	3.533	3.880			
Respect for Cultural Differences	Male	3.850a	.089	3.669	4.030	.277	.602	.007
	Female	3.785a	.081	3.621	3.949			
Interaction Confidence	Male	3.907a	.097	3.710	4.104	.432	.515	.012
	Female	3.819a	.088	3.640	3.998			
Interaction Enjoyment	Male	3.591a	.108	3.372	3.809	1.713	.199	.044
	Female	3.785a	.098	3.587	3.984			
Interaction Attentiveness	Male	3.420a	.100	3.217	3.623	.002	.965	.000
	Female	3.414a	.091	3.230	3.598			

Note: Covariates appearing in the model are evaluated at the following values: PreInterEng = 3.51, PreRes = 3.62, PreInterConf = 3.61, PreIntEnjoy = 3.55, PreIntAttentive = 3.30.

Moreover, based on the Table 4, there were not any significant differences between male and female groups on; Interaction Engagement (F

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(1,37) = .034, $p > .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .001$), Respect for Cultural Differences (F (1,37) = .277, $p > .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .007$), Interaction Confidence (F (1,37) = .432, $p > .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .012$), Interaction Enjoyment (F (1,37) = 1.713, $p > .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .044$), and Interaction Attentiveness (F (1,37) = .002, $p > .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .000$).

4.2 Qualitative Findings

The intercultural sensitivity tasks given to the experimental and control groups in pretest and posttest all aimed to trigger ICC orientation and also to permit the involvement of the containing factors of Byram's ICC model in replying to the questions and tasks.

All the participants' tasks were recorded and transcribed. Afterward, the tasks were graded using the intercultural rubric and content analysis by the authors. As stated earlier, the rubric was employed as a coding frame to conduct analysis. It had six major components and three dimensions of knowledge, skills, and attitudes and four values, Benchmark, Low milestone, High milestone and Capstone.

The scale was used to assess the performance of the participants on the tasks both in pre and post-tests. To increase the dependability of data analysis, all researchers conducted the content analysis. Table 5 depicts the findings. In the experimental group, there were 2 participants in the first grade, 4 participants in the second grade, 8 participants in the third grade, and 8 participants in the fourth grade. In the control group, most of the participants were in the first and second grades. It indicated that they remained the same in their intercultural awareness.

The participants' naming pattern contained an ID which followed the sequence of an ordinal number for student number, gender and their ICC level.

Table 5
Intercultural Task Results (Based on Intercultural Rubric)

Intercultural Group (IC)	Pre-Test Level	Post-Test Level	Control Group (CG)	Pre-Test Level	Post-Test Level
1F2	1	2	1F1	1	1
2F4	2	4	2F2	1	1
3 F2	1	2	3 F3	2	1
4F4	3	4	4 F1	1	1
5 F4	3	4	5 F2	2	1
6 F3	1	3	6 F3	2	2
7 F4	2	4	7 F1	1	1
8 F3	1	3	8 F1	1	1
9 F2	1	2	9 F2	1	1
10 F1	1	1	10 F1	2	1
11 F3	1	3	11 F2	1	2
12 F3	1	3	12 F1	1	1
13M4	3	4	13M2	2	2
14M2	2	2	14M3	1	1
15M4	2	4	15M2	2	2
16M3	1	3	16M1	1	1
17M3	3	3	17M2	1	2
18M3	2	3	18M3	2	2
19M3	1	1	19M3	1	1
20M3	3	4	20M2	1	2
21M3	2	3	21M2	2	2
22M4	3	4	22M1	1	1

Note. M stands for male, F stands for female

The extractions below represented the participants' viewpoints in responding to intercultural tasks.

4.2.1 Knowledge (Cultural Self-awareness)

Excerpt 1: Shake hands task, one participant said:

I know the concept of personal space; shaking hands are important but different in other cultures. I try to adapt

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myself to them and learn more about cultural differences as well. (Participant 6F3)

The task cited above shows that the participant utilized knowledge of cultural frameworks to make sense of cultural differences. This participant reached level 3 on intercultural rubric. At this level, one can identify their own cultural rules and does not need to look for sameness and as a result be comfortable with the complexities that new perspectives suggest. While in pretest she expressed sometimes, it is difficult to get used to other cultural norms in terms of body language, eye contact and I prefer my own culture. She had preference for her own cultural norms and expected the same in others.

Excerpt 2: The glass ceiling and household chores task, another participant uttered:

Today, women around the world are more aware of their roles in comparison to the past, so they don't accept inequalities in their life. I try to accept those changes in the world. However, in different cultures and even in Iran due to the fact that both men and women are working outside, they share household chores. In the past, old couples thought differently and put most of the household on women's shoulders, but today everything is changed (Participant 15M4).

The above quote reveals that the participant has gained appropriate knowledge of cultural differences in Iran and other cultures. Plus, in the sentence *Today everything is changed" and I try to accept those changes in the world*, it seems some traces of ICC development (savoirs & savoir être) have appeared, and the participant has gained level 4 on the intercultural rubric in posttest. However, in the pretest, he declared that in Iran, women take care of children, and this is very good because it can bring peace for children, and other cultures should do like us. Thus, based on the description of the rubric and class observations, he has preferred their own cultural norms, and the researchers placed him on the second level of the rubric.

4.2.2. Knowledge of Cultural Worldview Frameworks

Excerpt 3: Cultural differences in raising children task, one participant expressed:

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In China, parents coach their children to learn new skills, and in the U.S they are willing to wait until the child shows initiative, while in Iran parents send their children to different classes to find their potential. It is not fair to criticize our own culture and value other cultures; I think the final product should be a child with great responsibility both in society and in the family. In some cultures, children are quiet and respect their parents, while in other cultures encourage children to speak up and be independent. In my view, children should feel secure and comfortable with their parents, no matter where they live (Participant 7 F4).

The above-mentioned excerpt demonstrated that the learner has adequate information about different cultures and their own culture according to the second component of Byram's model of ICC (savoirs). Furthermore, she recognizes the cultural differences, expresses openness and curiosity toward other cultures. The researchers put her in level 4 on rubric. However, in pretest, she represented partial conception of the complexity of elements significance to members of other cultures in relation to her own culture and reached level 2.

Excerpt 4: Late arrivals task, another participant explained:

In general, in Iran, time and punctuality are not so important for majority of people, and delay is acceptable. Actually, I am a punctual person and cannot accept some delays. I really want to live in different countries that have rules for everything. I don't think other cultures are like us. (Participant 10 F1)

This participant criticizes his own culture and appreciates other cultures during the training phase regarding different issues. It represents that she does not have adequate knowledge about other cultures. For instance, in some countries like Greece, being half an hour late is normal and generally different cultures across the world value punctuality differently. She captured both in pre and posttest level 1 on the intercultural rubric. At this level, the participant demonstrates a minimal understanding of cultural differences, and

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it is likely that she cannot tolerate and adapt to their own and other cultures as well.

Excerpt 5: Educational system task, one participant expressed his opinion in this way:

Regarding the educational system, the major problems are courses are presented in theory and little attention is given to creative and practical ways. But recently, it has changed. Many countries try to experience different approaches to gain better results. Today, teachers understand the differences between students more and try to prepare them for future interaction. Of course, there are some problems and weaknesses in the educational system everywhere. In Iran, for example, due to the entrance exam, all students did not have the same chance to enter to the top universities, but now in some majors, students are admitted without entrance exam. In all educational systems, the main objective is independent learning. (Participant 4F4).

This participant tapped Byram's last component, i.e., critical cultural awareness (*savoir sengager*). This extract indicates that learner has grown a critical view and judgment toward their own and other cultures' educational system and endeavors to make a logical evaluation of different cultures despite the shortcomings found in every culture, and she gained level 4 on rubric. In pretest, she had the same idea and said I don't think educational system in Iran is poor, it has some problems and related authorities aim to deal with those problems, thus the researchers put her on level 3 on rubric.

4.2.3. Attitudes (Curiosity and Openness)

Excerpt 6: Intercultural relationship task, one participant answered:

If I were that person, I would have no problem marrying a person from a different culture. They can take opportunities to negotiate with the boy's family and get to know each other and have a positive attitude toward them and stop judging them. I think, it is a great experience and full of joy and amazing (Participant 16M3)

The task cited above imparts both curiosity and openness (*Savoir-être*) based on the first component of Byram's ICC model and bears witness to the

fact that his intercultural attitude is enhanced after training. Moreover, it indicated his readiness to suspend disbelief about target cultures. Therefore, the instruction phase had succeeded to push the learner to seek new information about the boy's family and culture, and the words (e.g., great experience, negotiate with families, positive attitude, stop judging, joy, amazing) revealed his enthusiasm toward other cultures. Thus, the researchers put the learner in level 3 in posttest, whereas he reached level 1 in the same task in pretest. He answered, in my view, her parents are right because it is better to marry someone who has one's own culture, and maybe it is difficult to cope with the struggles that arise in a situation with different cultures.

Excerpt 7: Body weight task, one participant proclaimed:

Today, people in all cultures are more concerned about dieting and prefer a slim figure because it is associated with beauty; thus, they try to go to the gym and have a healthy diet. I am personally eager to know other countries' eating habits and trying different food. (Participant 17M3).

The extraction above reveals that the participant had a positive attitude and showed willingness toward other cultures, hence it was considered in Byram's ICC component (*Savoir-être*), reaching level 3 in posttest. Moreover, he provided the same answer in pretest.

4.2.4. Skills (Verbal and Non-Verbal Communication)

Excerpt 8: Shake hands task, one participant mentioned:

It is better to have a positive attitude toward various cultures. For example, when I traveled to Germany 2 years ago, I was sitting in a restaurant with a girl I just met. It is common for everyone to pay on their own share in Germany, and I didn't know. But I was curious and willing to know about her culture regarding different issues and asked her different questions. She answered patiently; finally, I acted upon those rules. We have to respect each other's culture (Participant 20M3).

In the above quote, the participant asks questions about German culture (Level 4 on rubric). The uses of phrases like positive attitude toward other

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cultures, curious and willingness, and respect each other's culture all suggest that he has reached level 4 on rubric. At this level of skills, individual is able to articulate an appropriate understanding of cultural differences in verbal and nonverbal interaction and reach a shared understanding. Furthermore, this extraction taps *Savoir-apprendre/faire* (skill of discovery and interaction) from Byram's (1997) ICC model. In pretest, he acquired level 3 and his response to the same task was near to the above level, but his knowledge became more sophisticated due to the training he received.

4.2.5. Skills (Empathy)

Excerpt 9: The glass ceiling and household chores task:

In our family, my mother does everything. When I traveled for 3 months in Hungary, my Hungarian friend got sick for one month and needed to rest at home. Thus, I took care of him and did all the household chores. It was a difficult time for me since I have never done that before. This experience instructed me to be open to help all people since that problem might occur for me someday. Then, I wondered how my mother managed to do everything at home. I really felt ashamed that I did not help her at all. (Participant 13M4)

Based on level 4 of the rubric, skill (empathy) involves interpreting intercultural experience from more than one perspective, comprehending the feelings of other people, and showing capability to act in a supportive way. The participant mentioned above demonstrated empathy toward others and behaved appropriately within that cultural context. Therefore, the researchers decided to put him in the fourth grade on rubric. While in pretest, he reached level 3.

5. Discussion

The findings reported here evidenced the usefulness of training intercultural sensitivity through interculturality-laden tasks. The experimental group significantly outperformed the control group regarding all five dimensions of ISS after controlling for the effects of their pretest. Regarding the qualitative

analysis of the study, the content of the participants' ICC tasks were examined through content analysis and intercultural rubric for the signs of intercultural awareness based on Byram's (1997) model of ICC. A vast majority of the participants in the experimental group developed a more positive attitude, respect and understanding toward their own and different cultures over the course.

The usefulness of training through interculturality-laden tasks can be associated with several factors. First, learners can increase their intercultural sensitivity through a "cultural contrast" approach (Bennett, 1997, p.20). Based on Bennett (*ibid*), this approach has two steps: initially, learners become aware of their native culture and they then understand how their own culture is different from other cultures. The teaching material in this study was an intercultural communication textbook with various interactive tasks. Different sections of the textbook, for instance, reflecting on your own culture and discovering other cultures sections, required the participants to compare and contrast, explore cultural differences and similarities. This comparative approach helped them to become more aware of their native cultures and target cultures as well. Second, some scholars (Furstenberg, 2010a; Kearney, 2010) argued that learner in an intercultural perspective is viewed as a researcher who probes and scrutinizes a topic inside and outside of the classroom environment. Third, developing intercultural awareness needs the use of appropriate materials that motivate interaction among learners, reflection and critical thinking (Liddicoat, 2002; Liddicoat & Crozet, 2001). Similarly, some researchers believe that classroom settings are favorable places to raise learners' intercultural awareness. They also advocated the significant role of materials and explicit teaching in developing ICC (Alptekin, 2002; Nault, 2006).

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The results of this study are in congruence with the result of several studies conducted by scholars (e.g., Busse & Krause, 2015, 2016; Kural, 2015; Liu, 2016; Mekheimer & Amin, 2019; Rahimi & Soltani, 2011; Tunce & Paker, 2018; William, 1987) which all supported that training intercultural sensitivity equip language learners with proper intercultural competence to deal more effectively with interculturally- diverse settings. However, the studies informed that further research could be carried out on the ways that each component can be developed by the inclusion of intercultural notions in English language teaching.

A further concern was to explore the impact of gender on intercultural awareness. To this end, an equal number of males and females were used. The results of a MANCOVA indicate that there is not any significant difference between the males and females in their overall intercultural sensitivity levels. This finding is consistent with researchers (e.g., Bayles, 2009; Karimi, Chalak & Heidari Tabrizi, 2019; Yuen, 2010) who believe that there is no relationship between the two variables. However, contrary to the current research, other scholars (e.g., Helmer, 2007; Holm, Nokelainen, & Tirri, 2009) corroborated that female learner gain a higher level of intercultural sensitivity.

It is worth noting that there is a wide gap between Iranian culture and other cultures, Iranian EFL learners, if instructed interculturally, may become motivated to act open-mindedly and appropriately with people from diverse cultural backgrounds and develop respect, curiosity and postpone judgmental thinking. Thus, the findings of this study revealed that interculturally-laden tasks from Mirrors and Windows might bridge the chasms and assist learners to be sensitive to intercultural issues.

6. Conclusions and Implications

Effective intercultural communication depends on individuals' awareness of the language and culture of one another. Because interaction is comprised of more than interchanging of words, learners should also be conscious of the larger social picture of any social interplay. Such knowledge permits them to comprehend better the reactions of speakers from other cultures in particular interactive situations. For intercultural communication to happen with a minimum of misunderstanding and an utmost of information exchange, perceiving learners' own cultural patterns and those of the speakers from other cultures is vital (Decapua & Wintergerst, 2016). Regarding this line of thought, there have been a large number of studies in which the researchers tended to increase learners' intercultural sensitivity in western countries. However, there were few studies on developing such major competency in the Iranian context. Hence, the present study looked into the feasibility of fostering the participants' intercultural awareness through interculturality-laden tasks in the classroom settings. The findings revealed that the experimental group displayed major changes in their intercultural sensitivity level. Furthermore, intercultural training may enhance learners' ICC level by employing appropriate intercultural and pedagogical materials along with effective teaching methodology. Byram (1997) emphasizes ICC can be developed through various kinds of education and experiences in the process of fieldwork or in the classroom. As the results of the study suggest, through intercultural training and practicing different tasks learners can employ various strategies such as discovery, analysis and evaluation, compare and contrast their own culture and different cultures and contemplate reflectively on cultural differences in order to act successfully in cross-cultural interactions.

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The results of the research have several pedagogical implications for ELT material developers, instructors, and learners. The findings revealed that intercultural textbooks and tasks are useful materials for enhancing intercultural sensitivity. In designing materials, intercultural dimensions should be emphasized more to lead learners to intercultural awareness, greater tolerance, and a critical look at one's own and other cultures. It seems that the incorporation of intercultural dimensions in teacher training programs to increase teachers' intercultural awareness should be regarded as a priority. As Lazar (2003) stated, "making intercultural communication training an integral part of teacher education would have a beneficial multiplier effect in the field of education and beyond" (p. 70). Teachers need intercultural knowledge, skills and attitude to engage learners in learning intercultural concepts (Byram, 2008; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013).

The findings might be generalizable in EFL contexts with similar sociocultural conditions aiming at developing individuals' intercultural capability to interact more effectively in cross-cultural settings. To investigate the effectiveness of interculturally-laden tasks in other sociocultural contexts beyond the scope of this study, more longitudinal studies can be conducted with larger samples of different cultural backgrounds, different levels of language proficiency in EFL context, and using other intercultural materials as well.

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