

International School Teachers in Iran and Their Intercultural Communicative Competence: Does Sociocultural Background Make a Difference?

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Masoomeh Estaji and Sarvenaz Tabrizi

Allameh Tabataba'i University, Tehran, Iran

Abstract

This research study examined international school teachers' perceptions of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), and whether or not the teachers' sociocultural background could predict their ICC level. To collect data, 55 international school teachers participated in the quantitative phase of the study, out of which nine were selected for a semi-structured interview in the qualitative phase. Participants were requested to complete two questionnaires, one to gather demographic information and one to assess their perceptions and level of ICC (Yildiz, 2016; Zhou, 2011). The results of data analysis showed that, in the context of teachers working in international schools in Tehran, sociocultural factors such as age, number of countries visited and duration of the visits, and number of languages spoken, could not predict teachers' perception of ICC; gender was the exception. The quantitative findings revealed the lack of connection between prior international experience of the teachers and their ICC perception. Teacher participants found ICC as a way of respecting other cultures and accepting cultural differences. They also believed that attending international schools would positively affect students and teachers' cultural identity.

Keywords

Intercultural communicative competence, international school teachers, sociocultural background, teachers' perceptions

Introduction

English is used in a variety of cultural contexts (Baker, 2012) and is a tool for communication in the world of education, business, and technology (East, 2008). Successful communication and interaction with people of other languages and cultures requires the development of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), 'the ability to communicate effectively and

Corresponding author:

Masoomeh Estaji, PhD, Allameh Tabataba'i University, Faculty of Persian Literature and Foreign Languages, South Allameh St, Modiriya Fly-over, Chamran Highway, Tehran, 1997967556, Iran.
Email: mestaji74@gmail.com

appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes' (Deardorff, 2008: 33). As cultural dimensions have been integrated into language teaching studies (Byram, 1997), ICC development should be also added to the language teaching curricula (Baker, 2012).

International schools, using international curricula different from the curriculum of the host country and often having students from numerous countries, are increasing in number (Greenlees, 2006; Pollock & Van Reken, 2009). International schools mostly use English as the language of education (Hayden & Thompson, 2008). The fact that English is now spoken by non-native speakers more than by native speakers (Kachru, 2006) means it is highly likely for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners to encounter English speakers with various sociocultural backgrounds. This is more notable in international schools because the diversity of cultures is often a key element of such environments. For students to be prepared for the education required in the 21st century, they need to develop their ICC, and teachers are required to create a vital link in assisting students in that matter (Cushner, 2012).

Teachers of students in educational contexts worldwide may not necessarily be familiar with the concept of ICC and its importance, which can make it challenging for them to act as cultural mentors for their students. Research indicates that in some contexts teachers are not well prepared for the task of providing effective mentoring because they themselves are in what may be thought of as the ethnocentric phase of Bennett's (1993) six phased developmental model of culture sensitivity: 1-Denial; 2-Defence; 3-Minimization; 4-Acceptance; 5-Adaptation; 6-Integration, where the first three indicate ethnocentrism and the second three ethnorelativism.

Although it has now become essential to be able to communicate with people from different cultures, and the number of international schools in Tehran – the location of the study described in this article – is rising, not much attention has been given to the perception and level of ICC of teachers working in international schools. This study examined the ICC perception and level of teachers working at international schools in Tehran.

Literature Review

Culture, as a multifaceted and umbrella term, refers to the code of meanings, social conventions, and evaluations that an individual or a group of people use to speak and think about the world. Shiraev and Levey (2004) view culture as a group of symbolic systems including knowledge, norms, values, beliefs, language, art, and customs, as well as the habits and skills learned by members of a given society. Language and culture are interrelated (Kramsch, 1998). It is only when we learn about the target culture that second language teaching or learning is complete (Peck, 1998). Culture affects the way students make meaning and interpret things (Magyar & Robinson-Pant, 2011). One of the representations of culture in a community is education. Education is engaged with various aspects of culture, including in international schools where students often come from diverse cultures.

In the context of language teaching, there has been a change in recent years in the way culture is approached, moving from a foreign-cultural approach to the multicultural approach. The foreign-cultural approach is 'based on the concept of the single culture, associated with specific people, a specific language, and normally with a specific territory' (Risager, 1998: 243). The intercultural approach is 'based on a concept of culture that takes its point of departure in the fact that different cultures are structurally related to each other' (Risager, 1998: 244). Contextualizing the foreign language has become harder for teachers. They are asked to relate many cultures – the foreign culture, the learner's own culture and, often, other cultures – hence taking a transcultural approach.

ICC relates to the capacity to perceive and react to differences between one's culture and the culture of others. These features are difficult to acquire, yet teachers are responsible for their own learning and knowledge of other cultures (Byram & Zarate, 1997). Bennett (2011) defines ICC skills as 'a set of cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills and characteristics that support effective and appropriate interaction in a variety of cultural contexts' (p 3), and believes in the importance of appreciating other people's cultures when communicating with people of those cultures. In his view, cognitive skills are 'cultural self-awareness, culture-general knowledge, culture-specific knowledge, and interaction analysis. Affective skills comprise curiosity, cognitive flexibility, motivation, and open-mindedness; while behavioral skills include relationship building skills, behavioral skills (listening, problem solving), empathy, and information gathering skills' (p 3).

One dominant model in the world of ICC is Byram's (1997) five-factors model, which includes attitude (*savoir-être*: which has both emotional and cognitive dimensions), knowledge (*savoir*: which focuses on both declarative knowledge (know-that) and procedural knowledge (know-how)), the skills of interpreting and relating (*savoir comprendre*), the skills of discovery and interaction (*savoir apprendre/faire*: with both skills being essential to find solutions for intercultural conflicts), and critical cultural awareness (*savoir s'engager*). ICC development helps students to become translingual and transcultural. It enables learners to work between languages, interact with speakers from diverse cultures, and reflect through other languages and cultures individually and worldwide.

Considering the significance of sociocultural background, with race, sexual orientation, nationality, gender, color, language, physical or mental handicap or subcultural affiliation as its main elements (Buryánek, 2002), socioeconomic status (SES) as a part of sociocultural background has been defined as 'a measure of one's resources and prestige within a community' (Krieger et al, 1997: 345). Resources include both material goods (for instance, owning a home) and assets (such as savings); prestige is one's status in a social hierarchy, which is mostly decided by classification of education and profession according to the esteem placed on each by the society in question.

Having an appropriate level of intercultural perception is essential for building productive relationships and operating effectively in a multicultural environment. Teachers and students must define, recognize, and relate to different cultures in order to perform effectively and implement strategies for coping with the challenges posed by intercultural environments and situations. Teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions of culture can echo in their classroom teaching. Many research studies have been conducted on teachers' perceptions and beliefs about intercultural competence. Atay et al (2009) undertook a nationwide research study in Turkey on EFL teachers' views regarding the use of an intercultural approach in foreign language education. The study showed that EFL teachers had a positive disposition toward teaching intercultural competence; however, they valued achieving proficiency more than any other culture teaching objectives.

Another study undertaken in Spain (Clouet, 2012) showed that even though teachers had a positive perception of culture teaching in EFL classrooms, they prioritized achieving proficiency to use the foreign language. In a seminal study by Bickley et al (2014), teachers had a strong belief in the value of integrating intercultural communicative competence into the classroom. Instructors believed that the classroom cultural context existed to varying extents but that development was not systematic. Likewise, in Yang et al's (2018) study of 43 university teachers in China, participants' objectives in teaching intercultural communicative competence were more skill-oriented, and varied in accordance to contextual factors.

Although extensive research has been conducted on EFL teachers' perceptions of ICC, previous studies have not considered international school teachers' perceptions of ICC. The current study investigates the role of sociocultural background in determining international school teachers' perceptions of ICC by focusing on the following questions.

1. Is there any relationship between international school teachers' sociocultural background and their perceptions and level of intercultural communicative competence?
2. Does the teachers' sociocultural background predict their perceptions and level of intercultural communicative competence?
3. How do teachers working for international schools perceive intercultural communicative competence?

Methods

Participants

Participants of this research study were tutors and teachers working in international schools located in Tehran. International schools in Iran, which operate under the supervision of the Ministry of Education, are not permitted to hire teachers from overseas countries; therefore, teachers who participated in the study were Iranians or teachers with dual citizenship including Iranian citizenship. All had Iran as their homeland and in referring to travel they meant traveling out of Iran. There are seven international schools located in Tehran and all were approached in this research study. Teachers were selected through convenience sampling. Of all the 55 teachers approached, both male (N=8, 14.54%) and female (N=47, 85.45%) agreed to participate. Both homeroom and subject teachers participated in the study. Participants' age varied from 20 to 46 and over, with the most recorded age range 31 to 35. Information regarding the sociocultural background of the participants was elicited through a demographic questionnaire. In addition to age and gender, participants were asked about the number of languages they speak, number of countries they have visited, duration of their visits to other countries, and their level of education. These items were chosen based on Buryánek's (2002) classification of sociocultural groups, including race, sexual orientation, nationality, gender, color, language, socioeconomic status, physical or mental handicap, or subcultural affiliation.

The vast majority of the teachers in this study (65%) could speak two languages, 20% of the participants could speak 3 languages, 11% were fluent in 4 languages, and 4% could speak five languages. When asked if they had travelled to other countries, 40 (72.73%) answered yes, 8 (14.54%) answered no, and 7 (12.72%) did not respond to the question. Those who had travelled were asked about the number of countries they had visited and the duration of their visits. Participants were also asked to add the purpose of their stays. They had the option of choosing from study, visit, training, and work. Of those who answered the question, 17.8% indicated staying for the purpose of studying, 55.1% had been visiting, 7.6% had gone for training, and 15.3% reported staying for vocational purposes. 4.2% noted having lived abroad with family and not for any of the reasons given above. Some had stayed abroad for a variety of reasons and not for only one. The results can be found in Table 1.

With respect to teachers' academic education, 14 (25.45%) had a Bachelor's degree, 34 (61.81%) a Master's, 4 (7.27%) had a PhD and 3 (5.45%) had other teaching certificates. In the qualitative phase of the study, nine participants were picked for a follow-up semi-structured interview.

Instrumentation

A sequential explanatory mixed methods design was chosen, having both quantitative and qualitative research phases. In the quantitative phase of the study, two questionnaires were used, one to gather information regarding the sociocultural background of the participants and one to examine the ICC perception and level of participants. The qualitative phase consisted of follow-up interviews with teacher participants.

Table 1. Number of countries travelled, duration of visits, and purpose of travels.

Number of Countries	Frequency
No Answer	7
0	8
1	13
2	8
3	6
4	3
5	3
6	1
7	2
8	0
9	1
10	1
11	2
Duration of Travels	Frequency
Under 1 year	18
1 to 2 years	4
2 to 3 years	3
Over 3 years	13
No answer	2
Purpose of Travels	Percentage
Study	17.8
Visit	55.1
Vocational	15.3
Training	7.6
Other Purposes	4.2

Demographic Information Questionnaire. This questionnaire was designed with the purpose of gathering demographic information about the participants. Data gathered included age and gender, and the amount of time they had been exposed to foreign cultures through interactive and non-interactive encounters. Data on the amount of time they teach per week and the number of years they have worked as a teacher at international schools were gathered. The number of languages they could speak and countries they had visited were also asked through this questionnaire.

Teachers' ICC Perception Questionnaire. Teachers' perceptions of ICC were investigated by adapting Yildiz's (2016) questionnaire, originally taken from Serçu (2005). Part One, concentrating on the teachers' perceptions of ICC, contained 24 items, from which six were reverse-scored. Part Two focused on the ability, knowledge, skill, and willingness of the teachers with respect to ICC, which was interpreted as their level of ICC. This part of the questionnaire was adapted from Zhou (2011), entailing 20 items with none being reverse scored. Participants' responses were on a 5 point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5).

Teacher Interview. In the qualitative phase of the study, purposive sampling was used; out of 17 teachers who were willing to be interviewed, 9 were selected based on their teaching experience,

for an in-depth semi-structured interview which took around 20 to 25 minutes. For the quantitative aspect of the study teachers were divided into three groups: those with less than two years of experience, with two to five years of experience, and with over five years of teaching experience. For the interview, only those with more than five years of teaching experience were selected. Questions for the interview were selected from the questions and observation checklists of Yildiz (2016) and Zhou (2011), in accord with the purpose of this study and the questionnaires. The questions were reviewed by three Applied Linguistics experts from language and content appropriateness perspectives. The interviews were recorded using a voice recorder app. Where interviewees could not be interviewed in person, they were asked to participate using Whatsapp and Telegram.

Data Collection Procedure

To be able to collect the required data from international schools and gain their consent to cooperate, authorization was obtained from the Department of International Schools in the Ministry of Education. In addition, the researcher secured teachers' consent for cooperation in the study.

Before commencing the main phase of data collection, a pilot testing stage was completed with 30 teachers to ensure reliability and with 100 teachers to analyze the construct validity of the questionnaires prior to distribution to the 55 participants. The nine interviews were transcribed and themes extracted for further analysis.

Results

Research Question 1

The first question investigated if teachers' sociocultural background was related to their perception and level of ICC, with the following factors considered as the components of sociocultural background, whose correlations with the given factors were analyzed with ICC scores (ie ICC perception, ICC level, and ICC total):

- Age
- Gender
- Number of languages spoken
- Number of countries visited
- Duration of visits to other countries

In order to convert the data relating to some of these variables such as age and duration of visit, which were in the form of many descriptive categories, the categories were organised in ascending order and then converted to ranks to be included in Spearman correlation analysis. The descriptives of the variables in the question (the sociocultural factors and ICC perception) were then computed and presented in one table (Table 2). Likewise, the skewness and kurtosis ratios were computed for all variables except gender as a nominal variable by dividing the skewness and kurtosis values by their standard errors (Table 2). Since some of the ratios turned out to be beyond ± 1.96 , the scores were not considered sufficiently normally distributed; Spearman rho correlation was therefore chosen as a non-parametric measure to answer the first research question.

Table 3 presents the spearman rhos on the correlations between age, number of languages, number of countries visited, and duration of visits to other countries. Evidently, all these variables show very low and insignificant correlations with ICC perception, ICC level, and ICC total ($p > .05$); therefore, the null hypothesis in terms of these variables was supported. That is to say, no

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for sociocultural factors and ICC.

	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Skewness		Kurtosis	
						Statistic	Std Error	Statistic	Std Error
Age. Order	54	1.00	7.00	4.33	1.89	.000	.32	-1.032	.63
Languages	54	2	5	2.54	.84	1.46	.32	1.25	.63
Countries	48	0	11	2.81	2.91	1.49	.34	1.67	.67
Duration. Order	46	.00	24.00	9.36	7.18	.30	.35	-.92	.68
ICC. Perception	55	66.00	110.00	90.12	8.34	-.020	.32	.46	.63
ICC. Level	55	49.00	100.00	77.12	8.28	-.12	.32	2.13	.63
Total. ICC	55	125.00	206.00	167.25	14.49	.18	.32	1.15	.63
Valid N (listwise)	45								

Table 3. Correlations between sociocultural factors and ICC.

			ICC. Perception	ICC. Level	Total. ICC
Spearman's rho	Age. Order	Rho	-.16	-.08	-.14
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.24	.52	.30
		N	54	54	54
	Languages	Correlation Coefficient	-.01	.02	.013
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.89	.87	.92
		N	54	54	54
	Countries	Rho	.061	.21	.15
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.68	.14	.28
		N	48	48	48
	Duration. Order	Rho	-.028	.16	.086
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.85	.28	.57
		N	46	46	46

relationship was found between teachers' sociocultural background – including age, number of languages, number of countries visited, and duration of visits to other countries – and their perception and level of intercultural communicative competence.

Since gender was a categorical variable, its relationship with ICC was investigated by eta, which is an association measure between an interval variable (ie ICC scores) and a categorical variable (ie gender). Table 4 presents the eta values, which indicate that ICC level and ICC total scores of the participants are significantly correlated with gender ($p < .05$).

In order to delve into the nature of these eta values, the descriptives of ICC level and total scores were computed across participants' gender (Table 5).

As can be seen in Table 4, females in this study had a significantly higher ICC level and total ICC scores on average than did the males ($p < .05$). Therefore, the null hypothesis in terms of gender was rejected. That is to say, teachers' gender was significantly correlated with ICC level and total scores, with females showing much higher ICC level and total ICC scores than males.

Research Question 2

In analysis of the previous question, it was found that out of sociocultural background factors, only gender was significantly correlated with ICC level and ICC total ($p < .05$). To examine if

Table 4. Eta (Gender).

		ICC. Perception	ICC. Level	Total. ICC
Gender	Eta	.26	.27	.30
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.05	.04	.02
	N	55	55	55

Table 5. Descriptive statistics for ICC perception across gender.

Genders		N	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Skewness		Kurtosis	
							Std Error	Std Error		
Male	ICC. Perception	8	66.00	105.00	84.87	11.99	.18	.75	.19	1.48
	ICC. Level	8	49.00	85.00	71.62	10.41	-1.53	.75	3.69	1.48
	Total. ICC	8	125.00	182.00	156.50	19.25	-.28	.75	-.64	1.48
	Valid N (listwise)	8								
Female	ICC. Perception	47	77.00	110.00	91.02	7.37	.45	.34	-.10	.68
	ICC. Level	47	64.00	100.00	78.06	7.61	.59	.34	.56	.68
	Total. ICC	47	150.00	206.00	169.08	12.91	.96	.34	.65	.68
	Valid N (listwise)	47								

international school teachers' gender could predict their ICC perception and level, and answer the second part of the first question, running regression analysis was required. Only gender and ICC level and ICC total were included in the regression analysis with gender (coded into dummy variable) as predictor variable, and ICC level and ICC total as predicted variables.

In Table 6, values given under the heading Adjusted R Square indicate how much of the variance in the dependent variable the model is able to explain. The adjusted R square values, expressed as percentage, show that the largest variance explained by gender is in ICC total 9% variance (small effect size). The minimum variance explained by gender is related to ICC level (ie 7%, with small effect size).

Tables 7 and 8 represent the statistical significance of the results. The Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) tests the null hypothesis that multiple R in the population equals 0. As the results indicate, the model reaches statistical significance for both ICC level and total ($p < .05$); therefore, the predictor variable (ie gender) makes significant predictive contribution to the models (ie predicting ICC level and total significantly).

Tables 9 and 10 present all the unstandardized regression coefficients b and constant which could be inserted in the linear regression formula (ie predicted variable = b multiplied by predictor variable + constant) for predicting the ICC level and total scores if gender data were available. These formulae are as follows (though they should be used cautiously with regard to R squared values reported above):

$$\text{ICC Level} = 6.43 \text{ by gender value (ie 1 for female, 0 for male)} + 71.625$$

$$\text{ICC Total} = 12.58 \text{ by gender value (ie 1 for female, 0 for male)} + 156.50$$

Table 6. Model summary (ICC level).

Predicted variable	Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std Error of the Estimate
ICC level	I	.27 ^a	.076	.059	8.03
ICC total	I	.30 ^a	.095	.078	13.91

^aPredictors: (Constant), Gender I

Table 7. ANOVA^a (ICC level).

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig
I	Regression	283.42	1	283.42	4.386	.041 ^b
	Residual	3424.68	53	64.61		
	Total	3708.10	54			

^aDependent Variable: ICC. Level.

^bPredictors: (Constant), Gender I.

Table 8. ANOVA^a (ICC total).

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig
I	Regression	1082.77	1	1082.77	5.59	.02 ^b
	Residual	10261.66	53	193.61		
	Total	11344.43	54			

^aDependent Variable: Total. ICC.

^bPredictors: (Constant), Gender I.

Table 9. Coefficients^a (ICC level).

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
I	(Constant)	71.62	2.84		25.20	.00
	Gender I	6.43	3.07	.27	2.09	.04

^aDependent Variable: ICC. Level.

Table 10. Coefficients^a (ICC Total).

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig
		B	Std Error	Beta		
I	(Constant)	156.50	4.92		31.81	.00
	Gender I	12.58	5.32	.309	2.36	.02

^aDependent Variable: Total. ICC.

Table 11. Teachers' perception of intercultural communicative competence.

	Frequency	Percentage%
Respecting people from other cultures	6	66.67
Being knowledgeable about other cultures	6	66.67
Being open minded	5	55.56
Accepting cultural differences	4	44.45
Being flexible towards other cultures	4	44.45
Not being judgmental of other cultures	4	44.45
Integrating cultures	3	33.34
Focusing on commonalities	2	22.23
Showing empathy towards people from other cultures	2	22.23
Having communication skills	2	22.23
Having patience about other cultures	2	22.23
Having tolerances about other cultures	2	22.23
Valuing other cultures	1	11.12
Being international minded	1	11.12
Having personal experiences with different cultures	1	11.12

Research Question 3

The qualitative question of the study explored how teachers working for international schools perceived intercultural communicative competence. To probe teachers' perceptions of ICC through a semi-structured interview, teachers were asked about their intercultural understanding, abilities required for effective communication with people of other languages and cultures, and personal experience they had in situations where they thought cultural differences should be addressed. In extracts from interviews cited below, all teachers are identified only by number to ensure their identity remains confidential.

After the interviews, recordings were transcribed, summarized, and coded; a number of themes were then elicited which are presented in Table 11. The most frequent word used in regard to ICC was 'respect', which 66.67% of the participants used to describe intercultural understanding. The importance of 'having the 'knowledge' of other cultures' was focused as much as 'having 'respect' for people of other cultures'. One interviewee made the following statement:

Intercultural understanding . . . is the same thing for me, the compensations you make with other people from different backgrounds to, you know, come up with a state where you can respect them and they can respect you. (Teacher 4)

Many believed in some specific characteristics required for ICC such as being open-minded, flexible, non-judgmental, empathetic, patient, tolerant, and international-minded. One teacher described ICC as follows:

I think the first thing that is very important to do or the ability that is very important to have, is to be impartial and to be able not to judge anyone. I know it's a little bit hard to get there, but to be able to accept other cultures' prejudices, their presuppositions, their backgrounds, and to be able to respect them is going to be the first step in communication. (Teacher 7)

This teacher participant was keen on not being judgmental. In particular, she highlighted the significance of being open-minded and empathetic toward people of other cultures:

It's then when you can truly communicate with an open heart and open mind and after that acceptance comes. I think being flexible and trying to meet people from different cultures halfway is very important because it kind of depends where you are trying to communicate. Maybe you are within the context of your own culture trying communication with someone that has been taken out of their own culture and being put into your own culture and it's going to be very difficult for them. So being flexible and trying to meet them halfway is going to be very important for me. (Teacher 7)

Another teacher participant of the study defined ICC as follows:

The ability to think beyond the norms and structure of one's own culture and grasp different norms and visions in order to finally integrate them in a harmonized manner. (Teacher 5)

Of all the themes, 'being international minded', 'valuing other cultures', and 'having personal experiences with other cultures' were the least frequent, with each being referred to by only one person (a different person in each case). In teachers' conceptualization of ICC, these features were found less important presumably due to the experiences, knowledge, and awareness they have had of these concepts, and that they were regarded not as significant as accepting cultural differences.

Participants were also asked to describe situations where they faced cultural differences and felt the lack of intercultural understanding had been problematic. Two participants referred to cultural differences between Iranians and East Asian students and families. One of the teachers, who was also an International Baccalaureate (IB) Coordinator, claimed that Iranian teachers might say things they did not mean literally but students from East Asian countries would take their words seriously; this could be problematic. The other teacher had faced lack of participation from her East Asian students and she believed this was because of their cultural background:

Students from East Asian countries normally act very conservative and reserved in interaction with teachers; something rooted in their respect for the hierarchy. Not knowing this might lead the teacher to interpret their lack of engagement or expression as reluctance or even weakness. Therefore, this cultural difference needs to be observed, and teacher and students should reach a common point of understanding. (Teacher 8)

One major concern of teachers was when they needed to include taboo topics in their curriculum. Since the official religion of Iran is Islam, some topics are considered taboo in this cultural context, such as alcohol or topics related to sexuality. Two teachers described two different situations where they did not know how to approach such topics. Religion has a great presence in Iranian culture and two teachers highlighted religious issues as a source of conflict. One described a situation where two students had a fight over Sunni and Shia opinion on Imam Ali (PBUH) who is a very respected figure among Muslims. The teacher had to interfere and commented:

You should know that we have different ideas and opinions about the same thing, but it doesn't mean that we have to just accept the other's ideas. We should just respect each other's idea. (Teacher 3)

Teachers had various experiences to talk about, showing that they were facing communication difficulties related to students' cultures and they were well aware of the cultural differences. In brief, all the teachers were familiar with the concept of intercultural communication and had faced it while teaching in international schools. They had high level and perception of ICC which could be seen in their definition of intercultural communication. They had also dealt with cultural issues first-hand and were able to find solutions for such problems; mainly with the support of their international schools.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the ICC perception and level of teachers working in international schools in Tehran. In particular, the study sought to examine the relationship between teachers' ICC perception and level and their sociocultural background.

Results show that, except for gender, teachers' sociocultural background did not have a relationship with ICC and nor was it able to predict their ICC perceptions. Tarique and Takeuchi's (2008) study showed that intercultural exposure would support the development of cultural intelligence, thus suggesting that traveling as a form of intercultural exposure would develop ICC; this was in contrast with the findings of our study. Zimmermann (1995) argued that demographic factors such as gender, ethnicity, education level, and length of residence can be possible sources of variation in ICC and acculturation. Byram (1997) also claimed:

The social psychological perspective reminds us . . . that attributions other than nationality occur simultaneously: Gender, ethnicity, age, social class, and others. Where one of these is more important to the individuals or is given dominance by the particular context of the interaction, national identity and presumed culture will not be an issue, or will soon be ignored. Language difference is minimized, although a linguistic perspective suggests that it cannot be forgotten. (p 41)

Even though the study by Paige et al (2003) showed that being exposed to the target culture made a difference in teaching and learning, helping with advancement in both language and culture learning, the results of our own research showed that for Iranian teachers working in international schools, exposure through traveling had not had such an effect. The research by Paige et al (2003) demonstrates the capability of sociocultural factors to predict ICC, yet the results of our data analysis revealed that teachers' age, number of languages spoken, and number of countries visited could not predict teachers' perception and level of ICC. Ngwira et al (2015) conducted research with international adult students in central China, and concluded that length of stay did not enhance their cultural experiences: gender was the only factor which seemed to facilitate adaptation.

It should be noted that the factors investigated in this research may operate in sequential ways. Having the chance to live in other countries may open an individual to another factor; therefore, the interplay of factors is something worth investigating. More importantly, intercultural growth is a gradual and long-term process (Cushner, 2012); throughout this path many variables may be at work, representing complexity in the development of intercultural competence.

In this study, teachers' gender appeared able to predict their ICC levels and total scores, with females showing much higher ICC levels and total ICC scores than males; this is in accordance with social studies which show that gender has an influence on how males and females communicate. It is suggested that women like to share their emotion and affection more than men do; therefore, they may be more cooperative and affectionate with their communication (Floyd & Morman, 1998). Knutson (2006), meanwhile, believes that the differences between age, gender, social, ethnic, and regional groups as subcultures within a culture can affect cultural and intercultural communication.

These points are important for those recruiting teachers in international schools and for development of the standards used to evaluate teachers and their level of readiness to deal with international students. International school heads may be of the view that teachers with experience of living abroad are more appropriate for international settings, yet our research showed no such connection could be found in the Iranian context. This may suggest that a specific instrument should be defined for ICC evaluation of teachers, and that international school managers should distance themselves from such assumptions, which may not necessarily be based on what happens in reality.

The results of this research show that teachers working in international schools in Tehran had a high perception of ICC. Almost all were able to give examples of cultural barriers they have faced with their students. They were able to describe the differences between a normal class and an international class. Most had at some point embedded culture teaching and intercultural adaptation for their students. They were firm believers in the importance of ICC development in the curriculum. According to Wagner et al (2017), to promote profound intercultural understanding one proper strategy is to use coursework which revolves around the international facet of the extant curriculum. This finding is in accordance with other studies conducted with Iranian teachers such as that of Mostafayi and Nosrati (2018), who found that Iranian EFL teachers had high levels of ICC and intercultural sensitivity.

The results of this study are also consistent with those of Shirazi and Shafiee (2017), who conducted research on Iranian novice and experienced teachers' perceptions of ICC and found 'positive responses with respect to the attitude, skills and knowledge, importance, and relevance of the teachers' beliefs toward ICC' (p 272). In the current study, the frequency of use of terms such as 'respect' and 'acceptance' was an indicator of the positive attitude of teachers toward ICC. Most of the teachers working in international schools had seen positive effects on themselves while working with international students, both in their knowledge of various cultures and in becoming more open-minded, international, and global-minded.

From Cushner's (2014) perspective, to be interculturally competent one needs to be open-minded, interested in other cultures, aware of cultural universalities and diversities, withstand stereotypes and ambiguities, and be sufficiently competent to interact effectively with members of other cultures. Likewise, as Cushner and Mahon (2009) argue, to achieve good knowledge of other people and feel at ease in a novel environment, people need to gain extensive experience of different cultural contexts and adjust to the variations. These views have been all represented in the qualitative findings of this study.

Conclusions and Implications

This study explored the relationship between sociocultural background and perceptions of intercultural communicative competence of teachers working in international schools in Tehran, investigating whether sociocultural background could predict teachers' ICC perception and level. Results of this study showed that, in the context of Iranian international schools, teachers' age, number of languages spoken, number of countries visited, and duration of visits to other countries (as indicators of sociocultural background) did not have a relationship with ICC and were not capable of predicting their perception and level of intercultural communicative competence. Teachers' gender, however, had a significant relationship with their ICC and could predict the teachers' ICC level and total scores, with females showing much higher ICC level and total ICC scores than males.

As for the international school teachers' perception of ICC, responses in the interviews showed that these teachers have had good perceptions of ICC. They defined ICC as respecting other cultures, accepting the differences that exist between cultures, being knowledgeable about other cultures, being flexible, and being open-minded. It could be concluded that teachers working in international schools in Iran are moving away from ethnocentrism and are open to embedding cultural activities in their classes. Having teachers with high levels of ICC who have not experienced any form of intercultural communication education brings us to the realization that teachers have developed their ICC in an informal rather than educational setting.

These results showed that teachers mainly learned by experience. This should encourage international schools to provide teachers with learning opportunities to enhance the teachers' ICC level and perception. School managers should support teachers in this regard and facilitate the process

of internationalizing the school by focusing on intercultural perspectives. Besides setting teacher education and practicum courses for prospective teachers to develop their intercultural competence, experiencing international programs and studies will promote their personal, intercultural, and professional growth (Cushner & Brennan, 2007; Stachowski & Sparks, 2007). Coursebook designers develop tasks and activities on intercultural issues in teachers' guides, taking the opportunity to educate teachers on different aspects of culture.

It is acknowledged that the number of teachers working in international schools in this context was limited; therefore, convenience sampling was used for selecting the participants, meaning that any teacher willing to participate was part of the study, regardless of their sociocultural background. It may have been preferable to work with EFL teachers working in international schools. However, since these international schools have limited numbers of language specialists with EFL backgrounds, subject specialists with non-English backgrounds were also invited to participate. The other limitation of this study was the potential for the self-flattery syndrome to affect teachers in responding to the questionnaire items. Some participants may have chosen answers they believed would show them in a good light. This could have resulted in them choosing items that were not necessarily in line with their true beliefs but that seemed more acceptable in the eyes of the participant.

Hence, it would be beneficial to undertake follow-up research on international school teachers' pedagogical practices and to find factors, such as methodologies, teacher autonomy, pedagogical style, and teacher characteristics, which can have an effect on teachers' ICC perception and level in the Iranian context. International school managers' perceptions of ICC might also be considered in future research studies. Such studies might also concentrate on the effect of ICC teacher training on the professional development of teachers, assisting them in their ICC perception and in understanding how to integrate cultural and intercultural features into their teaching in international schools.

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Author biographies

Masoomeh Estaji is an associate professor of Applied Linguistics at Allameh Tabataba'i University (ATU), Tehran, Iran. She holds a PhD in Applied Linguistics from Allameh Tabataba'i University, and has presented and published numerous papers on methodology, testing, and second language acquisition (SLA) in a number of national and international journals. She became the exemplary researcher of ATU in 2020 and 2018. Her research interests include language testing and assessment, English for Specific Purposes, and teacher education.

Sarvenaz Tabrizi holds an MA in TEFL from Allameh Tabataba'i University and is about to begin research leading towards an MPhil/PhD with the Institute of Education, University College London. Her areas of interest are international education, cultural studies, and teacher education.