Examining Intercultural Communicative Competence in Collectivist and Individualistic EFL Teachers

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Abstract: This study is an attempt to investigate the difference in intercultural competence between collectivist and individualistic Iranian EFL teachers. To this end, the researcher administered ICC questionnaire and collectivists individualistic questionnaire to collect data from EFL teachers. After two months of data collection, 106 teachers responded to the items of both questionnaires. The data were analyzed through running independent samples t tests to find the difference between collectivists/ individualistic groups of teachers regarding their responses to ICC questionnaire. The results revealed that there is a significant difference between these groups and collectivists teachers had a higher mean in comparison to the mean score of individualistic teachers. Moreover, the results of further analysis showed that there is no significant difference between male and female EFL teachers regarding their responses to the ICC questionnaire. The results can be beneficial for both administrators and teachers.

1. Introduction

Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) is an indispensable part of any educational setting and the need for high quality teachers is getting more crucial. Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) is the capacity to understand one's own and other cultures and to communicate effectively and appropriately with those of other cultures. Language teachers are required to have an acceptable perception of ICC. Among the personality traits, being collectivist or individualistic is under study to find the possible effect/relationship on different aspects of teachers' performance in real classes. Intercultural communication is a 'must' in global and interdependent relationships. It is dynamic in nature as a result of the increasing frequency and intensity of interactions between multinational, multiethnic, and plurilingual scholars, students, clients, and travelers, to name a few categories. The assertion that it is critical in a world filled with differences has become a universal reality in the modern day. People of diverse cultural backgrounds are now more interconnected than ever before due to globalization. Therefore, in a world with numerous distinctions and diversity, it is essential to have the competence to navigate diverse cultural landscapes. This is where intercultural communicative competence (ICC) comes into play in foreign language instruction. Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is the capacity to understand one's own and other cultures and to communicate effectively and appropriately with those of other cultures. The growing acceptance of

ICC as one of the pedagogical goals of foreign language instruction has sparked a robust discussion regarding the impact of individualism and collectivism on EFL teachers' competence to foster intercultural competence. Individualism and collectivism, as well as their effect on the intercultural communicative performance of EFL teachers, will be discussed in the second section of this paper, which addresses the second important variable of the study.

It is important to note that neither culture nor IC lend themselves to straightforward definitions, and the purpose of this paper is to present a focused discussion, based on the vast body of literature on the topic, that relates to the research study being conducted here. Diverse fields, including business and management, politics, and psychology, as well as the more traditional academic fields of applied linguistics and education, have conducted interdisciplinary research on intercultural communication (IC). While this is beneficial for the expansion of knowledge in the field, it makes it more difficult to agree on a single definition. Similarly, cultural complexity is well-established. In these studies, it is difficult to provide an authorized definition.

In addition, the difficulty of identifying culture has been noted as a barrier associated with this idea. In fact, it appears that the complexity of culture itself has contributed to the illumination of IC. One reason an average person has developed into an intercultural communicator who encounters cultural differences on a regular basis is that cultural proximity is higher. Globalization is the primary element responsible for the transition, as nations with considerably divergent languages, cultures, and worldviews come into contact and become mutually dependent. They frequently collaborate and act as partners in a variety of fields, despite the fact that some of them may be hundreds of miles apart geographically. As a result of political and socioeconomic changes, an increasing number of people are able to cross national borders and work as global students, nomads, tourists, and employees. Contrary to popular belief, the ease with which people may function as global citizens does not extend to their interpersonal relationships.

Participants in intercultural contacts face increased potential for cultural miscommunication. The manner in which they overcome challenges is inextricably related to their success or failure in the communication process. Thus, more than ever before, the greatest challenge they have is in how they deal with the cultural disparities they encounter.

The preceding line is backed by the experience of numerous interlocutors who are competent in a specific foreign language, most frequently English, and thus possess adequate linguistic abilities, yet nonetheless fail to achieve their communication objectives. To emphasize one critical point once more, in a postmodern world distinguished by cultural variety, the majority of communication failures are the result of a poor degree of intercultural communicative competence, if not a complete lack of it. Linguistic proficiency is no longer a necessary condition for communication success, as communication must be seen as more than the exchange of data and the transmission of messages. It consists of two mutually reinforcing levels: a factual one that involves the sharing of knowledge, and an interpersonal one that facilitates the building of relationships between speakers. In both circumstances, cultural variations are significant. In the first example, communication success is contingent on the receiver comprehending the speaker's message within another cultural context, which accounts for its interpretation and final assignment of meaning during the decoding step.

In the second scenario, it comprises culturally specific expectations for the type of interpersonal relationships that are appropriate for a certain communication act. Taking the preceding observations into consideration, intercultural communication can be defined as the exchange of information between speakers who have distinct cultural identities when "a message producer is a member of one culture and a message receiver is a member of another". Their disparate cultural backgrounds result in their incongruent experiences of communication techniques, which may cause them to have difficulty communicating with one another. Mikułowski Pomorski (2005) posits that the primary goal of intercultural communicators is to understand people and to be understood by them despite the

presence of culture-specific disparities in their encounters. Thus, as Byram (2012: 3-4) asserts, successful intercultural communication cannot be judged merely on the basis of information interchange efficiency but also on the basis of the effectiveness with which interpersonal relationships are established and maintained.

Perhaps the most well-known cultural continuum is that of individualism vs. collectivism (Singelis, 1995). Individualism is a characteristic of civilizations in which "relationships between individuals are loose; each individual is expected to look after himself and his immediate family" (Hofstede, 2011:51). In such societies, group membership is not required; an individual may join numerous organizations without any of them exerting a significant influence on his or her behavior (Hofstede, 1980). As Waterman (1984) asserts, an individualistic person is more likely to adhere to universal moral standards and act in accordance with what he or she considers to be right. Individualistic culture members are said to value their personal time, freedom, challenge, straightforward communication style, and material benefits at work (Hofstede, 1980). Teachers at such educational institutions frequently promote competition, risk-taking, directness, openness, originality, and new problem-solving approaches. Self-reliance and independence are highly emphasized and valued. Students are typically motivated to participate in their learning process, take on leadership roles in class, speak their opinions during class debates, and challenge their lecturers. On the other side, teachers view dispute as a stimulating activity.

A good teacher is typically defined as "one who can pique pupils' attention, communicate clearly, employ effective instructional methods, and coordinate a variety of activities" (Watkins, 2000:168). Thus, teaching is not considered as the transmission of knowledge from teacher to students, but as the sharing and negotiation of knowledge and meaning, a process that requires significant interaction between students and teachers within a mutually acceptable social framework.

Collectivism, on the other hand, has been defined by Triandis (1995) as a social pattern comprised of closely connected individuals who see themselves as members of one or more collectives (family, coworkers, tribe, nation); are primarily motivated by the norms and obligations imposed by those collectives; are willing to prioritize the collective goals over their own personal goals; and emphasize their connection to other members of these collectives. The majority of one's identity is determined by one's participation and role in a group, such as the family or work team. The group's survival and success supports the individual's well-being, so that by taking into account the wants and sentiments of others, one protects oneself. The importance and value placed on community harmony and interdependence are emphasized. According to Hofstede (2011), collectivist societies assume that any individual is born into one or more tightly knit "in-groups" from which he or she cannot disassociate.

Despite the growing importance of intercultural education as a reflection of educational policies and practices in order to reduce prejudice, identity conflict, and power struggles in societies with ethnic, linguistic, religious, and sexual differences, little research has been conducted on the subject in our educational context. Intercultural education promotes multiculturalism by ensuring democratic values (Bennett, 2003). According to Fase (1994), the primary goal of intercultural education is to teach pupils how to coexist in a diverse society (Leeman, 2003). Intercultural education is built on the principles of collaborative learning and discourse (Batelaan & van Hoof, 1996).

Teachers are primarily responsible for the upkeep of this environment and its operations. The success of teachers in completing these tasks is contingent upon their level of intercultural competence. As a result, instructors are critical in fostering intercultural communicative competence. It appears necessary to distinguish between individualistic and collectivist teachers, since their attitude will undoubtedly influence their students' development of intercultural communication competence. There has been little research conducted in the Iranian educational system to elucidate various facets of teachers' intercultural communication skills. The primary objective of this study is to close this gap in order to increase instructors' awareness of the issue.

2. Research Questions

RQ1: Is there a significant difference in intercultural competence between collectivist and individualistic EFL teachers?

RQ2: Is there a major difference in intercultural competence between male and female Iranian EFL teachers?

3. Participants and Setting

In order to select the participants of the present study, the researcher use Morgan (1970) Table of determining sample size. To have a valid number of participants for generalizing the results of this study, 150 EFL teachers teaching in public schools and private institutions in Mashhad, Khorasan Razavi, Iran were selected. The demographic information of the respondents was gathered at the first section of the questionnaires. Both male and female teachers were selected with the age range of 25 to 35 and they all speak Farsi as their native language.

4. Instruments

Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)
Intercultural Communicative Competence Scale (ICCS) was used to measure Iranian EFL teachers' index intercultural communicative competence. It was first developed and validated by Alaei and Nosrati (2018) including 17 questions.

It consists of three sections: First, there are four questions about the respondents' general background. The second section includes 10 items (from item 5 to 14) measuring encountering with other people in home country. The last section includes 3 items measuring the index of situation where teachers meet people in their home country (See Appendix A). The reliability index of this questionnaire was calculated after gathering the data using a Cronbach alpha test.

Individualism and Collectivism Scale (INDCOL)
To measure if a teacher belong to the category of collectivists or individualists, the researcher used Individualism and Collectivism Scale which includes 16 items related to vertical and horizontal individualism and collectivism. It was first developed and validated by Singelis et al. (1995).

The items should be mixed up prior to administering the questionnaire. All items are answered on a 9-point scale, ranging from 1= never or definitely no and 9 = always or definitely yes.

5. Procedure

Data Collection and Analysis
To collect the required data, the researcher made groups in both Telegram and WhatsApp and invite teachers to join them for giving information about the purpose and the process of answering the items of the questionnaires. Two questionnaires were convert into a single google form and its link was shared in these groups.

After gathering the data, the participants' responses were collected as a spread sheet including their demographic information as well as their responses to ICC and individualistic and collectivists questionnaires. The excel file was converted to SPSS to analyze the data. The reliability of the questionnaires was calculated through running Cronbach alpha tests. The normality of data was measured through Kolmogorov-Smirnov index. Two independent t test were applied to measure the difference between individualistic and collectivist teachers regarding their gender and intercultural communicative competence.

The first section of this heading includes the demographic information of the participants. It

presents their gender, academic degree, and their field of the study.

Table 1 Demographic Information of the Participants Based on Gender and Major

		Major			Total
		Literature	TEFL	Translation	
Gender	Female	12	29	6	47
	Male	15	17	15	47
	Prefer not to say	3	5	4	12
	Total	30	51	25	106

As seen in Table 1 equal number of male and female participants responded to the questionnaire (N=47) and the rest of the respondents (N=12) preferred not to say their gender.

Table 2 Demographic Information of the Participants Based on Major and Degree

		Degree			Total
		B.A.	M.A.	Ph.D.	
Major	Literature	18	11	1	30
	TEFL	11	35	5	51
	Translation	16	9	0	25
	Total	45	55	6	106

Table 2 shows that majority of the respondents were TEFL MA graduates (N=35). Literature graduates with B.A. degree (N=18) were the most frequent teachers. The flow of having higher education among Iranian teachers is also shown in this research in case of having 55 M.A. holders.

Table 3 Reliability of the Instruments

Questionnaire	Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
Individualistic Collectivist	.81	16
ICC Questionnaire	.79	17

Table 3 shows that both questionnaires used in this study enjoyed satisfactory reliability indices calculated by running Cronbach's alpha (.81, .79). The next step to decide on parametric data analysis after making sure of the normality of the gathered data.

Table 4 Normality of the Gathered Data

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov[a]			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Col. Indiv.	.109	106	.06	.969	106	.014
ICC	.084	106	.056	.987	106	.364

To calculate the normality index, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used. The significance level is higher than .05, thus it can be concluded that the hypothesis of normality was not rejected and the data are normal. Hence, the parametric analyses were used for inferential statistics. (Table 4)

To answer the research questions and confirm/reject the research hypotheses, an independent samples t-test and one way ANOVA were used. The research questions are answered in the following:

The First Research Question

To measure the possible significant difference in intercultural competence between collectivist and individualistic Iranian EFL teachers, the researcher employed an independent samples t test. To show the mean scores and other descriptive statistics, the Table 5 was generated:

Table 5 Descriptive Statistics for Individualistic and Collectivists EFL Teachers Regarding ICC

	ColInd	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
ICC	Individualistic	39	35.30	5.49	.88
	Collectivist	67	40.32	6.46	.79

Based on the number of items on Individualistic/Collectivists questionnaire and the scale used for

measuring the total score, 39 Iranian EFL teachers were individualistic and 67 were collectivists. The mean score of collectivists teachers (M=40.32) were higher than the individualistic teachers (N=35.30). To measure whether this difference is significant, an independent samples T- test was run.

Table 6 Independent Samples t Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means			
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
ICC	Equal variances assumed	.029	.865	-4.06	104	.000	-5.02
	Equal variances not assumed			-4.24	90.21	.000	-5.02

Table 6 shows the parametric analysis for measuring the difference between the mean scores of two groups (individualistic and collectivists teachers) regarding their ICC scores. The results of the independent samples t test revealed that there is a significant difference between the performance of these groups of teachers in ICC questionnaire (t (104) =4.06, sig. =.000). Considering the mean scores of these groups presented above, teachers with collectivists tendencies had higher scores on ICC questionnaire in comparison to individualistic teachers, thus the first research hypothesis was rejected.

The Second Research Question

The second research question deals with the possible significant difference in intercultural competence between male and female Iranian EFL teachers. Since the participants were divided to three groups based on their gender (male, female and prefer not to say), the researcher used one way ANOVA to study the role of gender in teachers' ICC scores.

Table 7 Descriptive Statistics

	N	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Male	47	38.59	5.60	26.00	49.00
Female	47	37.40	7.04	24.00	59.00
Prefer not to say	12	42.25	7.25	28.00	56.00
Total	106	38.48	6.57	24.00	59.00

Table 7 displays that the number of male and female participants (N=47) were equal, their mean scores, standard deviation, minimum and maximum scores. The third group in this research was those who did not prefer to say their gender. The data of ICC questionnaire obtained from these groups were analyzed through running one way ANOVA.

Table 8 ANOVA test for ICC Scores Based on Participants' Gender

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	225.57	2	112.787	2.697	.072
Within Groups	4306.88	103	41.814		
Total	4532.46	105			

Table 8 shows that there is not a significant difference among three groups (male, female, and prefer not to say) regarding their responses to ICC questionnaire F (2,103)=2.69, sig.=.07). Since, the significance level is very close to the critical level (.05), the results may be influenced by the number of the participants or other interfering hidden variables, thus the results should be cautiously interpreted. Based on the results, the second research hypothesis is also rejected.

6. Discussion

The analysis germane to the first research question revealed that there is a significant difference in intercultural competence between collectivist and individualistic Iranian EFL teachers. The literature is replete with studies in case of ICC and personality traits such as identity all over the world; however, few if not any, paid exclusive attention to the relationship between ICC and collectivism and individualism features of EFL practitioners. The findings of the present study are in line with Peng and Wu (2016) who believed that persons with personality characters of openness, socicompetence, and compatibility shaped more intercultural communication, which can have a constructive effect on their ICC. In line with the findings of the present study, some other researches have reported that introverts are less likely than extroverts to involve in social interactions with persons from dissimilar cultural background. In the same line of inquiry, a more recent research project in this realm was conducted by Peng and Wu (2016) who studied the intercultural contact and its effects on ICC. The obtained results showed that intercultural contact pathways enhanced Chinese EFL learners' ICC.

The findings of the present study can be beneficial for policy-makers and administrators as well as teachers who are the real practitioners in the classrooms. The implications are explained under these two categories. According to Byram (2012) it is suggest to expand the use of ICC in language classrooms. Based on the European context, Byram's approach emphasized the importance of both linguistic proficiency and cultural understanding. To develop learners' language proficiency as well as their cultural understanding, administrators and school principals can look for teachers with higher experience of using two components in classrooms to influence students' ICC.

Considering the other variable of the present study, collectivist and individualistic teachers, administrators are recommended to employ the Singelis's et al. (1995) questionnaire to identify the degree of collectivist/individualistic of their English teachers and use those who are collectivists to apply more ICC principles in the classroom. One issue which can help teachers to be more effective in English classes is to study more recent research findings in case of reading the abstracts of papers published in well-known journals. The findings of this research can help teachers their understanding of the impact of being collectivists on their understanding and taking advantage of ICC. Regarding teachers' gender, it was found that male and female teachers do not have a significant difference regarding their ICC performance irrespectable of being individualistic or collectivists. It can help language institutions not to hesitate whether to use a male or female teacher for developing learners' ICC.

This study used both male and female teachers to collect data and measure their possible difference. It is suggested to use one gender and consider teachers' years of teaching experience to find any difference between novice and experienced teachers' ICC and their sense of collectivism or individualism. Moreover, to have a between group comparison, it is suggested to omit the third option in data collection phase to use other analyses types and compare male and female as well as novice and experienced teachers' ICC.

7. Conclusion

This study employed a survey design to compare two groups of male/female and collectivists/individualistic EFL teachers. It is recommended to other researchers who are interested in this field of research to use whether correlational or experimental designs to find the correlation between teachers ICC and their collectivists/individualistic characteristic. Using an experimental design can help teachers under investigation to develop their perception and implication of the principles of ICC to help their learners enhance ICC. Since the researcher had limitations for data collection, it is suggested for other researchers to conduct more comprehensive studies in a vast

geographical area and collect data from more EFL teachers in Eastern, Western, Southern or Northern part of the country and compare the results based on their characteristics.

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