

Kurdish EFL Teachers' and Learners' Perceptions of Intercultural Communicative Competence

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates Kurdish EFL teachers' and learners' perceptions of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) within the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Using a mixed-methods approach, data were collected from 120 English educators and 100 university students through questionnaires and follow-up interviews with 16 teachers. The findings reveal that while both groups recognize the importance of ICC, significant gaps exist between theoretical understanding and practical implementation. Gender differences and varying levels of engagement with intercultural competence were identified, suggesting the need for enhanced teacher training and curriculum reform to better integrate ICC into EFL instruction in the Kurdish context.

Keywords: Intercultural Communicative Competence, Kurdish EFL context, teacher perceptions, learner attitudes, culture teaching.

INTRODUCTION

The interconnection between language and culture has long been recognized as fundamental to effective foreign language education (Byram, 1997; Kramsch, 1993). As globalization intensifies intercultural encounters, the development of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) has emerged as a critical objective in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction worldwide (Deardorff, 2006; Bennett, 2009). ICC extends beyond linguistic proficiency to encompass the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for appropriate and effective communication across cultural boundaries (Byram, 1997). Despite growing international consensus on ICC's importance, its integration into EFL curricula remains inconsistent, particularly in contexts where research has been limited (Sercu, 2005). The Kurdistan Region of Iraq represents such an underexplored context, where English language teaching faces unique sociocultural, institutional, and pedagogical challenges. Understanding how Kurdish EFL teachers and learners perceive ICC is essential for developing culturally responsive pedagogies that serve diverse student populations.

This study addresses a significant gap in the literature by examining Kurdish stakeholders' perceptions of ICC through both quantitative and qualitative lenses. Specifically, it investigates: (1) the importance teachers and learners assign to teaching culture and ICC; (2) their conceptualizations of culture and intercultural competence; (3) the actual place of culture in Kurdish EFL classrooms; (4) preferred approaches to cultural integration; and (5) gender differences in culture learning beliefs. By foregrounding voices from the Kurdish context, this research contributes empirical evidence to inform more inclusive and contextually appropriate ICC pedagogies.

Research Questions

This study investigates Kurdish EFL teachers' and learners' perceptions of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) through six primary research questions:

RQ1: What are Kurdish teachers' and learners' perceptions of intercultural competence?

RQ2: What are teachers' preferences and practices for adopting and integrating cultural aspects of the target language?

RQ3: Are there significant gender differences in teachers' and learners' perceptions and attitudes toward culture learning and ICC?

Literature Review

Conceptualizing Intercultural Communicative Competence

Byram's (1997) seminal model of ICC positions intercultural competence as comprising five interrelated components, or *savoirs*: knowledge of self and other (*savoirs*), skills of interpreting and relating (*savoir comprendre*), skills of discovery and interaction (*savoir apprendre/faire*), attitudes of curiosity and openness (*savoir être*), and critical cultural awareness (*savoir s'engager*). This framework emphasizes that linguistic competence alone is insufficient; learners must develop the capacity to mediate between cultures and critically evaluate cultural practices. Subsequent scholarship has refined and expanded Byram's model. Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) proposed Intercultural Language Learning (IcLL), which emphasizes active construction of cultural understanding through noticing, comparing, reflecting, and interacting. Bennett's (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) conceptualizes intercultural competence as progressing from ethnocentric stages (denial, defense, minimization) toward ethnorelative stages (acceptance, adaptation, integration). These frameworks collectively underscore that ICC development is both multidimensional and developmental.

Teacher and Learner Perceptions of ICC

Teacher beliefs significantly influence instructional practices (Pajares, 1992; Richardson, 2003). Studies examining EFL teachers' perceptions of culture teaching have revealed generally positive attitudes toward ICC integration, yet notable gaps between stated beliefs and classroom implementation (Byram & Risager, 1999; Sercu et al., 2005; Larzén-Östermark, 2008). Teachers frequently cite barriers including insufficient training, time constraints, examination pressures, and unclear curricular guidelines (Karabinar & Guler, 2013). Learner perspectives are equally critical yet less frequently investigated. Research indicates that students generally recognize culture's importance in language learning and express interest in developing intercultural skills (Kahraman, 2016). However, learners' conceptualizations of culture often emphasize surface-level "small-c" aspects (daily life, customs, food) over deeper sociolinguistic and pragmatic dimensions (Cortazzi & Jin, 1999). Gender represents an additional variable influencing cultural learning attitudes. While research on gender differences in ICC perceptions remains limited, studies suggest that female learners may demonstrate greater openness to intercultural experiences and higher levels of cultural empathy (Deardorff, 2006).

ICC in the Kurdish Context

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq presents distinct sociocultural and educational characteristics. Following decades of political instability, the region has pursued educational reforms, including adoption of the communicative-oriented "Sunrise" curriculum in 2007. However, implementation challenges persist, including teacher-centered pedagogies, limited resources, and curricula emphasizing linguistic over cultural competence (Sofi-Karim, 2015; Hassan, 2014). Research on culture teaching in Kurdish EFL contexts remains scarce. Existing studies highlight tensions between imported textbooks reflecting Anglo-American cultures and learners' need for locally relevant content (Hassan, 2014). This gap underscores the necessity of investigating how Kurdish stakeholders conceptualize and value ICC within their specific educational landscape.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design (Creswell, 2007), collecting quantitative and qualitative data concurrently to achieve comprehensive understanding of participants' ICC perceptions.

Quantitative data provided breadth through measuring attitudes across larger samples, while qualitative data offered depth by capturing nuanced experiences and contextual factors.

Participants

The participant pool comprised two primary groups:

Participants included 40 university English instructors (20 from Sulaimani University, 20 from Raparin University) and 80 school teachers from various institutions across Sulaimaniyah province. Gender distribution was equal (60 males, 60 females). Educational qualifications varied: 60% held master's degrees, 30% bachelor's degrees, and 10% doctoral degrees. Teaching experience ranged from 1-25+ years. Undergraduate students from the English departments of Sulaimani University ($n = 60$) and Raparin University ($n = 40$) participated, with equal gender distribution (50 males, 50 females). Most were third- and fourth-year students aged 18-25. **Interview Participants:** Sixteen experienced teachers (8 from each university) were purposively selected for semi-structured interviews to provide rich qualitative insights.

Instruments

Teacher Questionnaire: A 23-item survey adapted from Han Hui (2010) and Kahraman (2016) assessed teachers' perceptions across four dimensions: (1) personal information; (2) language and culture teaching objectives; (3) attitudes toward ICC instruction; and (4) teaching methods and materials. Items employed 5-point Likert scales ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." The instrument demonstrated acceptable reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .681$).

Learner Questionnaire: A 20-item survey adapted from Kahraman (2016) measured learners' perceptions of culture's importance, cultural learning preferences, and attitudes toward ICC. The instrument showed high reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .993$).

Semi-Structured Interviews: Interview protocols adapted from Sasani (2018) explored teachers' conceptualizations of culture and ICC, teaching practices, perceived challenges, and experiences with cultural integration. Fifteen questions addressed background information, teaching objectives, culture-language relationships, and intercultural competence understanding.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection occurred during 2021-2022. Due to COVID-19 impacts, questionnaires were administered online. Interview data were collected through written responses to ensure thoughtful reflection.

Quantitative Analysis: Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations) characterized participants' responses. Chi-square tests examined gender differences in perceptions. SPSS software facilitated statistical analyses.

Qualitative Analysis: Interview transcripts underwent thematic analysis following established protocols (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Coding identified recurring themes related to culture conceptualizations, ICC understanding, implementation challenges, and contextual factors. Themes were systematically organized and interpreted in relation to research questions. Findings from quantitative and qualitative strands were merged during interpretation to identify convergence, divergence, and complementarity, thereby enhancing validity through triangulation.

RESULTS

Importance of Teaching Culture and ICC

Teacher Perspectives

Teachers demonstrated strong positive attitudes toward integrating culture into language instruction. When asked about interest in teaching cultures of English-speaking countries (Q1-Q2), 75.83% reported that their students were "very interested," while 79.16% indicated personal interest in culture teaching (Table 4.1).

Table 4.1: Teachers' Interest in Culture Teaching

Question	Very Interested	Undecided	Not Interested	Total
Q1 (Student interest)	75.83%	15%	9.16%	99.99%
Q2 (Teacher interest)	79.16%	8.33%	12.5%	99.99%

Regarding the necessity of including cultural items in curricula (Q9), 70% deemed it necessary (25% "very necessary," 45% "necessary"), while only 9.16% considered it unnecessary. These findings indicate widespread recognition among teachers that culture constitutes an essential component of EFL education.

Table 4.2: Frequencies and Percentages for Necessity of Teaching Culture

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Very interested	178	49.4%
Interested	88	24.4%
Undecided	49	13.7%
Less interested	31	8.6%
Not interested	14	3.9%
Total	360	100.0%

Aggregating responses across items Q1, Q2, and Q9, 73.8% of teachers expressed being "very interested" (49.4%) or "interested" (24.4%) in teaching culture, while only 12.5% indicated disinterest, and 13.7% remained undecided (Table 4.5, Figure 4.1).

Learner Perspectives

Students similarly valued cultural learning. Regarding the importance of learning cultures of English-speaking countries (Q1), 62% agreed or strongly agreed (Table 4.3). Moreover, 75% recognized the importance of obtaining information about target culture (Q2), and 82% emphasized understanding their own culture (Q4).

Table 4.3: Importance of Culture and Culture Learning (Learners)

Item	A	B	C	D	E
Q1: Learning English-speaking cultures important	16%	46%	20%	11%	7%
Q2: Obtaining target culture information important	30%	45%	15%	6%	4%
Q3: Shared values and beliefs important	9%	42%	31%	10%	8%
Q4: Understanding own culture important	22%	60%	6%	10%	2%
Q5: Developing positive attitude important	19%	23%	51%	6%	1%
Q6: Spending more time on culture important	20%	39%	14%	20%	7%

Note: A = Very Interested; B = Interested; C = Undecided; D = Less Interested; E = Not Interested

Notably, 52% believed cultural learning fosters positive attitudes and tolerance toward other cultures (Q5), aligning with ICC objectives emphasizing attitudinal dimensions.

Perceptions of Culture and Culture Learning

Conceptualizations of Culture

Teachers' open-ended definitions of culture (Q6) revealed diverse yet convergent understandings. The most prevalent conceptualization (39.16%) emphasized "traditions and customs," including social habits, local circumstances, traditions, morals, manners, interactional rituals, social norms, and cultural customs. This reflects a "small-c" culture orientation focusing on everyday practices. The second most common definition (29.16%) described culture as "daily life and habits," encompassing routines, conventions, and mundane aspects of living. Historical, geographical, and political dimensions represented 25% of responses, while 12.5% referenced literature, art, and music—aspects of "big-C" culture. Smaller proportions addressed educational systems (11.66%) and norms, values, and social behaviors (9.16%). Some participants acknowledged difficulty articulating culture's complexity, revealing gaps in cultural knowledge that may hinder effective instruction. Interview data corroborated these patterns. Participant 7 defined culture as "traditions, customs, a community's way of life, the food they eat, the clothes they wear, and the money they use." Participant 2 described it as "the way of living of an entire society,

which includes manners of eating, dress, language, rituals, beliefs, traditions, currency, behavior, and norms." These definitions emphasize observable, tangible cultural elements consistent with "small-c" culture. Few participants referenced underlying value systems, belief frameworks, or "mental software" (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005) that govern cultural thought patterns and behaviors.

Teachers' Perceptions of Teaching Objectives

Teachers prioritized general language learning objectives over specific cultural goals. Language proficiency objectives ranked highest: assisting students to acquire English proficiency for future needs (Q4-4: 67.5%), developing long-lasting learning enthusiasm and self-confidence (Q4-5: 65.83%), and promoting scientific research methods and cooperation awareness (Q4-6: 64.16%). Cultural objectives received substantial but comparatively lower endorsement: raising awareness of world culture (Q4-2: 63.33%), promoting understanding of own identity and culture (Q4-3: 61.66%), and promoting familiarity with English-speaking countries' cultures (Q4-1: 58.33%) (Table 4.4).

Table 4.4: Frequency and Percentage of List of Objectives in ELT

Objective	Frequency	Percentage
Q4-4: Acquire English proficiency	81	67.5%
Q4-5: Develop learning enthusiasm	79	65.83%
Q4-6: Acquire research methods	77	64.16%
Q4-2: Raise awareness of world culture	76	63.33%
Q4-3: Promote own culture understanding	74	61.66%
Q4-1: Promote target culture familiarity	70	58.33%

Among specific culture teaching objectives (Q5), teachers most valued: widening students' horizons (Q5-9: 79.16%), making teaching more interesting and motivating (Q5-8: 77.5%), promoting ability to handle intercultural contact (Q5-7: 76.66%), and raising awareness of similarities/differences among English-speaking countries (Q5-11: 75.83%) (Table 4.5).

Table 4.5: Result of Culture Teaching Objectives in Four Dimensions

Item	Frequency	Percentage
Q5.9: Widen students' horizons	95	79.16%
Q5.8: Make teaching interesting	93	77.5%
Q5.7: Handle intercultural contact	92	76.66%
Q5.11: Awareness of similarities/differences	91	75.83%
Q5.10: Evaluate/sensitivity to cultures	89	74.16%
Q5.6: Understand own culture	88	73.33%
Q5.2: Daily life information	86	71.66%
Q5.4: Cultural expressions	85	70.83%
Q5.5: Attitudes of tolerance	79	65.83%
Q5.3: Shared values and beliefs	69	57.5%
Q5.1: History, geography, politics	61	50.83%

These results demonstrate that teachers view cultural teaching primarily as enhancing motivation and broadening perspectives, general educational goals rather than systematically developing specific ICC competencies. Knowledge-oriented objectives (history, geography, values, beliefs) ranked lowest, suggesting teachers favor experiential and skill-based approaches over transmission of cultural facts.

Preferred Cultural Topics

When selecting cultural topics for instruction (Q8), teachers favored "small-c" content: daily life (75.83%), school and education (74.16%), shopping/food/drink (71.66%), and environmental issues (69.16%) topped the list. Body language (68.33%), festivals/customs (64.16%), and values/beliefs (60.83%) followed (Table 4.7).

Table 4.7: Frequency and Percentage of 10 Most Favored Topics

Topic	Frequency	Percentage
Daily life	91	75.83%
School and education	89	74.16%
Shopping, food and drink	86	71.66%
Environmental issues	83	69.16%
Body language	82	68.33%
Festivals and customs	77	64.16%
Values and beliefs	73	60.83%
Social & living conditions	70	58.33%
Our own culture & identity	67	55.83%
Religious life & tradition	63	52.5%

Notably absent from top choices were history, political systems, literature, film, family life, and gender roles—"big-C" cultural elements. This pattern parallels findings from Byram and Risager's (1999) study of English and Danish teachers, who similarly prioritized everyday cultural practices over high culture. The preference for topics like environmental issues and own culture/identity reflects contemporary concerns and intercultural awareness principles emphasizing reflection on one's cultural positioning. However, avoidance of potentially sensitive topics (religion, political systems, gender roles) may reflect caution in navigating culturally conservative contexts.

The Place of Culture in Kurdish EFL Classrooms

Willingness to Teach ICC

When asked about willingness to promote ICC through teaching (Q10-5), an overwhelming 92.49% of teachers agreed or strongly agreed (26.66% strongly agree, 65.83% agree), with only 2.49% disagreeing (Table 4.8). This demonstrates high theoretical commitment to ICC development.

Table 4.8: Willingness to Teach IC

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Q10-5: I would like to promote ICC through teaching	26.66%	65.83%	5%	1.66%	0.83%

Similarly, 74.16% agreed that culture teaching is as important as language teaching (Q10-1), and 71.66% disagreed that integrating language and culture teaching is impossible (Q10-4). Regarding whether culture teaching affects students' attitudes (Q10-6), 59.99% disagreed with the negative statement, indicating belief in culture's attitudinal impacts.

Actual Implementation

Despite high willingness, actual implementation appeared limited. When asked about time allocation (Q7), 60% of teachers wanted to spend more time on culture teaching ("yes, very much so": 21.66%; "yes, to a certain extent": 38.33%), while 25% did not wish to increase time, and 10% held no opinion (Table 4.9).

Table 4.9: Spending Time on Culture

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes, very much so	26	21.66%
Yes, to a certain extent	46	38.33%
No, not particularly	30	25%
No, not at all	6	5%
No opinion	12	10%
Total	120	99.99%

Teachers citing reasons for not spending more time mentioned: time constraints due to heavy workloads, examination pressures prioritizing linguistic content, overcrowded curricula, lack of cultural teaching materials, insufficient training in culture pedagogy, and limited personal exposure to target cultures.

Teaching Materials and Methods

Textbooks dominated cultural instruction. When asked who chooses textbooks (Q12), only 22.5% of teachers selected their own; the majority were chosen by provincial educational administration (51.66%), local administration (13.33%), or schools/colleges (10.83%) (Table 4.10).

Table 4.10: Who Chooses the Textbook

Source	Frequency	Percentage
Teacher	27	22.5%
School/college	13	10.83%
Local administration	16	13.33%
Provincial administration	62	51.66%
Other	2	1.66%
Total	120	99.99%

Despite limited textbook choice, 57.5% reported freedom to use additional cultural materials (Q13), while 39.16% could not. Regarding textbook cultural content (Q14), 55.83% felt it existed "to a certain extent," 16.66% saw "little" content, and only 13.33% found "a lot." Teachers' satisfaction with cultural content (Q16) was moderate: 44.16% were satisfied "to an acceptable level," while 36.66% were dissatisfied. Critically, cultural content in examinations remained minimal. Teachers estimated that only 1-20% of exam content addressed culture (Q15): 50.83% estimated 1-10%, and 30% estimated 11-20% (Table 4.11). This examination focus on linguistic over cultural content likely constrains classroom practices.

Table 4.11: Estimated Cultural Content for the Exam

Percentage	Frequency	Percentage of Teachers
0%	10	8.33%
1-10%	61	50.83%
11-20%	36	30%
21-30%	10	8.33%
31-40%	3	2.5%
Total	120	99.99%

Teaching Techniques

Teachers most frequently employed textbook-based instruction (Q11-1: 88.33%), followed by comparing own and foreign cultures (Q11-11: 86.66%), role-play activities (Q11-4: 83.33%), dialogue recitation (Q11-5: 81.66%), and audio materials (Q11-6: 79.16%) (Table 4.12).

Table 4.12: Activities from Most Often Used to Less Often

Activity	Percentage
Teach culture based on textbook	88.33%
Compare own and foreign cultures	86.66%
Role-play activities	83.33%
Recite dialogues	81.66%
Use audio tapes	79.16%
Focus on culture-loaded vocabulary	77.5%
Describe cultural phenomena	74.16%
Additional culture-loaded materials	71.66%
Show film videos	67.5%
Share personal cultural knowledge	58.33%
Teach songs or poems	52.5%

Less frequently used were additional materials (71.66%), film videos (67.5%), sharing personal cultural knowledge (58.33%), and teaching songs/poems (52.5%). These patterns suggest that while teachers employ some interactive techniques (comparison, role-play), instruction remains largely teacher-centered and textbook-dependent, with limited use of authentic materials that could enhance ICC development.

Learner Perspectives on Implementation

Learners' perceptions partly diverged from teachers. While 57% believed cultural teaching was as important as language teaching (Q7), opinions were mixed regarding textbook cultural content meeting expectations (Q10): 33% agreed, 10% were neutral, and 57% disagreed. Regarding learning methods (Q13-Q20), 67% appreciated teachers sharing cultural knowledge, and 71% valued teachers bringing additional materials (Q15). Students expressed interest in identifying cultural aspects (63%, Q16), learning through songs/poems (61%, Q17), and participating in role-plays (60%, Q20). However, 56% found current textbook-based instruction insufficient (Q14), and only 29% felt satisfied with acting out cultural content (Q19).

Table 4.13: Frequencies and Percentages for Teachers and Learners' Perception of Culture & Culture Learning

	Very Interested	Interested	Undecided	Less Interested	Not Interested	Total
Teachers	516 (43.0%)	301 (25.1%)	178 (14.8%)	149 (12.4%)	56 (4.7%)	1200 (100%)
Learners	116 (19.3%)	255 (42.5%)	138 (23.0%)	64 (10.7%)	27 (4.5%)	600 (100%)
Total	632 (35.1%)	556 (30.9%)	316 (17.6%)	213 (11.8%)	83 (4.6%)	1800 (100%)

These results reveal a gap between students' desire for varied, engaging cultural learning experiences and the predominantly textbook-centered, examination-driven instruction they receive. While both groups value culture, implementation falls short of aspirations.

Perceptions of Intercultural Competence

Understanding ICC

Teachers' understanding of ICC varied considerably. When asked to define intercultural competence in interviews, responses ranged from superficial to sophisticated. Some participants had never encountered the term, while others articulated comprehensive understandings. Teacher 12 described ICC as "what can be seen or noticed between people in different cultures, religious groups, and ethnicities, e.g., their festivals or celebrations," emphasizing observable differences. Teacher 1 defined it as "the [process] where all the cultural gaps are filled once one becomes

aware and alert about both cultures," highlighting awareness. More developed conceptualizations emerged from Teachers 10 and 16, who respectively described ICC as "the ability to function effectively across cultures, to think and act appropriately, and to communicate and work with people from different cultural backgrounds" and "the ability to interact and work with people from various cultural backgrounds." These definitions align with scholarly conceptualizations emphasizing functional competence in intercultural situations (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006). However, few teachers elaborated on specific ICC components (attitudes, knowledge, skills, critical awareness), suggesting that while they grasp ICC's general importance, detailed understanding of its dimensions remains limited.

Perceived Importance of ICC

Quantitative data revealed strong endorsement of ICC's importance. Items addressing ICC-related beliefs (Q10) showed:

- 74.16% agreed culture teaching is important in language education (Q10-1)
- 62.49% agreed misunderstandings arise equally from linguistic and cultural differences (Q10-8)
- 65.83% agreed foreign language teaching should deepen students' understanding of their own culture and identity (Q10-9)
- 74.16% agreed all subjects, not just language, should promote ICC (Q10-11)
- 65.83% agreed teachers should present realistic images of foreign cultures, including negative aspects (Q10-12)

Table 4.14: Frequencies and Percentages for Teachers and Learners' Perception Towards Intercultural Competence

	Very Interested	Interested	Undecided	Less Interested	Not Interested	Total
Teachers	36 (30.0%)	26 (21.7%)	28 (23.3%)	23 (19.2%)	7 (5.8%)	120 (100%)
Learners	40 (20.0%)	64 (32.0%)	65 (32.5%)	27 (13.5%)	4 (2.0%)	200 (100%)
Total	76 (23.8%)	90 (28.1%)	93 (29.1%)	50 (15.6%)	11 (3.4%)	320 (100%)

Results showed teachers (30% "very interested") expressed greater intensity of interest in ICC than learners (20%), though learners showed broader moderate interest (32% "interested" vs. teachers' 21.7%). Notably, substantial proportions remained undecided (teachers 23.3%, learners 32.5%), suggesting ambivalence or uncertainty about ICC's practical relevance. Learners similarly valued ICC: 63% agreed cultural teaching could improve ICC (Q12), and 41% agreed ICC could be acquired at school (Q11). However, 40% were uncertain whether ICC could be developed in educational settings, reflecting skepticism about schools' capacity to foster intercultural competence.

Barriers to ICC Implementation

Despite positive attitudes, teachers identified significant obstacles hindering ICC integration. Interview data revealed four primary barriers:

Time Constraints: The most frequently cited challenge involved insufficient time. Teacher 6 explained: "The learners' ultimate goal is to score on their exam. They don't want to waste time on topics that won't be included in the exam, and they often complain that our course only meets twice a week." Examination pressures and curriculum demands left little room for cultural exploration beyond prescribed content.

Examination Pressures: Related to time constraints, the examination system's linguistic focus discouraged cultural teaching. As quantitative data indicated, cultural content comprised only 1-20% of assessments (Table 4.17), signaling to teachers that culture was peripheral rather than central. Teacher 5 noted students' divergent priorities: "Many want me to focus on explaining how the exam runs... while others desire to master the four skills."

Lack of Training: Teachers repeatedly emphasized inadequate preparation for culture teaching. Questionnaire results showed that 35.83% felt their initial teacher training provided no help with cultural dimensions (Q10-17),

while 29.16% were uncertain. Only 37.49% believed training had been helpful. Additionally, 58.33% expressed desire for textbook sections on "how to teach culture" (Q10-18), indicating awareness of their pedagogical gaps.

Student Language Proficiency: Some teachers believed learners needed higher language proficiency before engaging with cultural content effectively. Teacher 7 stated: "I believe you must possess a wide vocabulary in order to appreciate the variations between cultures. When learners seem to be more progressed, they are much more motivated and capable." This perspective aligns with quantitative findings showing 51.16% disagreed that high proficiency was prerequisite (Q10-2), while others remained uncertain (25%) or agreed (23.83%).

Cultural Sensitivity: Teachers expressed caution about addressing sensitive topics. Teacher 15 observed: "There may be some learners who lack an understanding of how things differ between cultures. Those who don't believe it are likely to say, that doesn't make sense." Concerns about student discomfort, defensive reactions, or classroom tension led some teachers to avoid topics related to religion, politics, or gender roles.

Gender Differences in Culture Learning Perceptions

Teacher Gender Differences

Table 4.15: Chi-Square Tests for EFL Teachers' Perceptions Towards Culture Learning by Gender

Test	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	156.619	4	.000
Likelihood Ratio	161.613	4	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	118.792	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	1920		
Cramer's V	.286		.000

Examination of standardized residuals revealed specific patterns of gender differences (Table 4.16). Female teachers demonstrated significantly higher proportions of strong interest: 54% were "very interested" in teaching culture (Std. Residual = 4.0 > 1.96) compared to 36.8% of male teachers (Std. Residual = -4.0 < -1.96). This 17.2 percentage point difference indicates substantially greater enthusiasm among female educators.

Table 4.16: Frequencies, Percentages, and Standardized Residuals for EFL Teachers' Perceptions Towards Culture Learning by Gender

	Very Interested	Interested	Undecided	Less Interested	Not Interested	Total
Males	353 (36.8%) [SR: -4.0]	186 (19.4%) [SR: -2.8]	211 (22.0%) [SR: 5.6]	144 (15.0%) [SR: 3.1]	66 (6.9%) [SR: 3.8]	960 (100%)
Females	518 (54.0%) [SR: 4.0]	269 (28.0%) [SR: 2.8]	77 (8.0%) [SR: -5.6]	79 (8.2%) [SR: -3.1]	17 (1.8%) [SR: -3.8]	960 (100%)
Total	871 (45.4%)	455 (23.7%)	288 (15.0%)	223 (11.6%)	83 (4.3%)	1920 (100%)

Note: SR = Standardized Residual

Conversely, male teachers showed significantly higher proportions of negative responses. Males were substantially more likely to be "undecided" (22.0%, SR = 5.6) compared to females (8.0%, SR = -5.6), suggesting greater ambivalence or uncertainty. Male teachers also demonstrated higher rates of disinterest: 15.0% "less interested" (SR = 3.1 vs. females' 8.2%, SR = -3.1) and 6.9% "not interested" (SR = 3.8 vs. females' 1.8%, SR = -3.8).

These patterns indicate that female teachers in Kurdish EFL contexts possess more positive and committed attitudes toward culture teaching, while male teachers exhibit greater hesitancy and resistance. The moderate effect size (Cramer's V = .286) suggests these differences are not merely statistical artifacts but represent meaningful variations in professional orientation.

Learner Gender Differences

Gender differences among learners proved even more pronounced, with chi-square analysis revealing a large effect size ($\chi^2(4) = 520.160$, $p < .001$, Cramer's V = .510) (Table 4.17).

Table 4.17: Chi-Square Tests for EFL Learners' Perceptions Towards Culture Learning by Gender

Test	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	520.160	4	.000
Likelihood Ratio	594.696	4	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	222.025	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	2000		
Cramer's V	.510		.000

Standardized residuals revealed dramatic gender disparities (Table 4.18). Female learners expressed substantially greater strong interest: 32.1% were "very interested" (SR = 10.2) compared to only 3.8% of male learners (SR = -10.6) an extraordinary 28.3 percentage point difference. This represents the most striking finding in the gender analysis, indicating fundamentally different orientations toward cultural learning between male and female students.

Table 4.18: Frequencies, Percentages, and Standardized Residuals for EFL Learners' Perceptions Towards Culture Learning by Gender

	Very Interested	Interested	Undecided	Less Interested	Not Interested	Total
Males	36 (3.8%) [SR: -10.6]	453 (47.2%) [SR: 5.2]	152 (15.8%) [SR: -5.6]	215 (22.4%) [SR: 6.5]	104 (10.8%) [SR: 7.6]	960 (100%)
Females	334 (32.1%) [SR: 10.2]	286 (27.5%) [SR: -5.0]	345 (33.2%) [SR: 5.4]	74 (7.1%) [SR: -6.2]	1 (0.1%) [SR: -7.3]	1040 (100%)
Total	370 (18.5%)	739 (37.0%)	497 (24.9%)	289 (14.5%)	105 (5.3%)	2000 (100%)

Note: SR = Standardized Residual

Male learners showed higher moderate interest (47.2% "interested," SR = 5.2 vs. females' 27.5%, SR = -5.0) but also significantly greater disinterest. Males were substantially more likely to be "less interested" (22.4%, SR = 6.5 vs. females' 7.1%, SR = -6.2) and "not interested" (10.8%, SR = 7.6 vs. females' 0.1%, SR = -7.3). The near-absence of female learners expressing complete disinterest (0.1%) contrasts starkly with males' 10.8%. Interestingly, female learners exhibited higher uncertainty (33.2% "undecided," SR = 5.4) compared to males (15.8%, SR = -5.6), suggesting that while generally more positive, female students also experience greater ambivalence about specific cultural content or approaches. The large effect size (Cramer's V = .510) indicates that gender constitutes a major factor differentiating learners' cultural learning orientations. These differences likely reflect broader sociocultural patterns in Kurdish society regarding gender roles, educational expectations, and cultural openness.

Gender Differences in Cultural Adoption Preferences

Analysis of preferences for adopting target language cultural aspects revealed additional gender patterns (Table 4.19). Female teachers showed significantly greater strong interest (56.7% vs. males' 19.6%), while male learners demonstrated higher moderate interest but also greater disinterest.

Table 4.19: Frequencies and Percentages Towards Adopting Cultural Aspects of Target Language

	Very Interested	Interested	Undecided	Less Interested	Not Interested	Total
Teachers	68 (56.7%)	20 (16.7%)	17 (14.2%)	13 (10.8%)	2 (1.6%)	120 (100%)
Learners	157 (19.6%)	283 (35.4%)	232 (29.0%)	96 (12.0%)	32 (4.0%)	800 (100%)
Total	225 (24.5%)	300 (32.9%)	249 (27.1%)	109 (11.8%)	34 (3.7%)	920 (100%)

These findings collectively indicate that female EFL stakeholders both teachers and learners demonstrate systematically more positive attitudes toward culture learning and greater willingness to engage with target culture elements. Male participants show more mixed responses, combining moderate interest with greater uncertainty and resistance.

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

Convergence emerged across three dimensions: positive attitudes coupled with implementation gaps (92.49% willing to promote ICC; 60% wanting more time, yet reporting sporadic practice); emphasis on small-c culture with both data sources prioritizing observable practices (daily life, customs, food) over deeper value systems or big-C content; and widespread recognition of ICC's importance (74.16% equating culture teaching with language teaching importance), consistently articulated across methodologies. **Complementarity** occurred as qualitative data explained quantitative patterns. Interviews specified concrete implementation barriers—examination pressures, insufficient training, textbook constraints, large class sizes, cultural sensitivity concerns—underlying limited time allocation. Conceptual ambiguity (23.3% teachers, 32.5% learner's undecided about ICC) found explanation in varied ICC understandings ranging from sophisticated to fragmentary. Gender differences documented statistically gained contextual meaning through interviews revealing females emphasizing social dimensions and cultural responsiveness while males focused on practical applications, reflecting broader Kurdish sociocultural gender role expectations. **Divergence** appeared in textbook evaluation: quantitative satisfaction (44.16% acceptable) contrasted with qualitative critiques describing cultural imbalance, Anglo-American dominance, and inadequacy for genuine intercultural awareness, suggesting Likert-scale responses understated dissatisfaction while qualitative probes revealed nuanced critiques.

DISCUSSION

The ICC Implementation Paradox

This study's central finding reveals a paradox: Kurdish EFL teachers and learners recognize ICC's importance and express commitment to cultural integration, yet actual classroom implementation remains limited and sporadic. This pattern echoes international research documenting gaps between teachers' stated beliefs and instructional practices (Byram & Risager, 1999; Sercu et al., 2005; Larzén-Östermark, 2008). Several factors explain this paradox. First, institutional structures—centralized curricula, standardized examinations emphasizing linguistic competence, and limited teacher autonomy in material selection create systemic barriers. As Phasha et al. (2016) noted, curriculum coherence requires addressing transitional challenges, yet Kurdish EFL education maintains traditional, examination-driven structures that marginalize cultural content. Second, teacher preparation gaps perpetuate the paradox. Only 37.49% of participants felt their initial training addressed cultural teaching, while 58.33% desired textbook guidance on culture pedagogy. Third, conceptual ambiguity about culture and ICC undermines implementation. Teachers' predominantly "small-c" conceptualizations, while valuable for addressing everyday cultural practices, miss deeper dimensions of intercultural competence particularly critical cultural awareness (Byram, 1997) and the capacity to navigate value systems, power dynamics, and ideological differences. Without robust conceptual frameworks, teachers struggle to design systematic ICC-focused instruction.

The "Small-c" Culture Emphasis

Both teachers and learners prioritized "small-c" cultural content: daily life, customs, food, festivals. This preference aligns with some ICC frameworks emphasizing culturally based practices (Liddicoat et al., 2003) but also reflects limitations. Focusing exclusively on observable practices risks superficiality, treating culture as exotic or entertaining rather than as complex systems of meaning-making (Kramsch, 2014). As Byram (1997) emphasized, critical cultural awareness—the capacity to evaluate cultural practices using explicit criteria and to mediate between cultures—represents ICC's highest dimension. Developing this capacity requires engaging with values, beliefs, ideologies, and power relations, not just surface-level customs. The relative neglect of "big-C" culture (literature, history, arts) also represents a missed opportunity. Literary and artistic works provide rich contexts for exploring cultural values, historical experiences, and identity formation. Bennett et al. (2003) argued that cultural understanding progresses developmentally; exposure to diverse cultural expressions can facilitate movement from ethnocentric to ethnorelative stages. The Kurdish EFL context presents unique challenges and opportunities for cultural balance. Students expressed desire to understand their own Kurdish culture alongside target cultures (82% valued understanding own culture). This aligns with intercultural approaches emphasizing reflection on one's cultural positioning as foundational (Byram, 1997; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). However, imported textbooks

inadequately represent Kurdish culture (Hassan, 2014; Sofi-Karim, 2015), creating disconnection between learners' lived experiences and instructional content.

Gender Dimensions of Cultural Learning

The substantial gender differences documented in this study particularly among learners (Cramer's $V = .510$)—merit careful interpretation. Female participants' significantly greater interest in culture learning and openness to target culture adoption may reflect multiple factors. First, sociocultural gender expectations in Kurdish society may position cultural knowledge and interpersonal understanding as more aligned with feminine roles, while practical, instrumental language skills align with masculine orientations. This pattern resonates with Deardorff's (2006) findings that females often demonstrate higher cultural empathy. Second, educational contexts may differentially socialize males and females regarding cultural openness. If female students receive more encouragement to develop interpersonal sensitivity and cultural awareness, this could explain attitudinal differences. Third, the specific cultural content emphasized small-c topics like daily life, food, customs may appeal more to female learners if these topics connect to gendered domains of social activity. Conversely, male learners' greater disinterest might reflect perceptions that cultural topics distract from "serious" language study or career preparation. These gender patterns have important pedagogical implications. Curriculum designers and teachers should consider how to engage male learners more effectively with cultural content, perhaps by emphasizing its professional relevance, analytical dimensions, or connections to their interests. Simultaneously, recognizing female learners' greater openness creates opportunities to leverage their engagement as cultural mediators within classrooms.

Barriers to ICC Integration

Teachers identified four interrelated, mutually reinforcing barriers: time constraints, examination pressures, inadequate training, and cultural sensitivity concerns. The time-examination nexus reveals that cultural content comprising only 1-20% of assessments signals institutional priorities, making "teaching to the test" rational behavior (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). This reflects broader tensions between skills-based approaches prioritizing measurable linguistic competencies amenable to standardized testing and competency-based models valuing ICC's complex, context-dependent dimensions—attitudes, interpretive skills, critical awareness—that resist quantification (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006). Addressing this requires systemic changes: revising examination formats, providing ICC assessment tools, and shifting accountability systems to value cultural competence alongside linguistic proficiency. Training deficits represent critical gaps where initial teacher education emphasizes linguistic and methodological knowledge over cultural pedagogy. Following Freeman and Johnson (1998), teacher education must address sociocultural contexts shaping practice. Professional development requires deepening cultural knowledge (target and source), developing pedagogical strategies, practicing intercultural communication, and cultivating reflective capacities for examining cultural biases through ethnographic projects, intercultural encounters, authentic material analysis, and pedagogical dialogue (Byram et al., 2002). Cultural sensitivity navigation reflects legitimate concerns in conservative contexts, yet avoiding sensitive topics (religion, politics, gender) limits ICC development. Following Suchánková (2014), educators should encourage dialogue on taboos through sophisticated approaches: framing discussions around multiple perspectives, comparative analysis without judgment, safe spaces for respectful disagreement, and emphasizing understanding over agreement. Critical cultural awareness requires engaging complexity and controversy, not avoidance (Byram, 1997).

Textbook Dominance and Material Constraints

Teachers' heavy reliance on textbooks (88.33% primarily used textbooks for culture teaching) and limited autonomy in textbook selection (only 22.5% self-selected) exemplify how centralized educational systems constrain pedagogical innovation. When provincial administrations choose textbooks emphasizing linguistic content, teachers inherit materials ill-suited for robust ICC instruction. The finding that textbook cultural content focuses predominantly on Anglo-American cultures (Sofi-Karim, 2015) while neglecting Kurdish culture creates particular problems. Students cannot develop intercultural competence—understanding how to mediate between cultures—without firm grounding in their own cultural frameworks (Byram, 1997). This imbalance may promote cultural imperialism, positioning target cultures as superior and learners' cultures as deficient or invisible. "Glocalization" (Gray, 2002)—integrating global and local cultural content—offers one solution. Textbooks and materials should represent diverse English-speaking cultures (not just UK/US), acknowledge English as a lingua franca used globally (Kachru, 2005), and explicitly include learners' source cultures. Such materials enable comparative analysis central to intercultural learning (Liddicoat et al., 2003). Teachers' freedom to supplement textbooks with additional materials (57.5% reported freedom) provides partial mitigation. However, teacher workloads, resource limitations,

and lack of guidance on selecting appropriate materials constrain this autonomy. Providing teachers with curated repositories of authentic cultural materials, lesson plan templates for ICC activities, and examples of effective cultural teaching would support more diverse instruction.

ICC Conceptual Clarity

The varied sophistication of teachers' ICC definitions—from superficial observations of cultural differences to comprehensive understandings of functional competence—highlights needs for conceptual development. Without clear frameworks, teachers cannot design systematic ICC instruction or assess students' intercultural development. Byram's (1997) five-savours model provides one valuable framework distinguishing ICC components: attitudes (curiosity, openness), knowledge (self and other), interpretive skills (relating cultures), discovery skills (acquiring new cultural knowledge), and critical awareness (evaluating cultural practices). Teachers' familiar with this framework can design activities targeting specific competencies: perspective-taking exercises for attitudes, ethnographic projects for knowledge, comparison activities for interpretive skills, and critical discussions for awareness. Similarly, Liddicoat's (2002) cyclical model—input, noticing, reflection, output—offers pedagogical guidance. Teachers can structure lessons to expose learners to cultural content (input through texts, videos, authentic materials), facilitate explicit attention to cultural features (noticing through guided observation and comparison), encourage metacognitive processing (reflection through discussion and journaling), and provide opportunities for cultural production (output through role-plays, presentations, creative projects). Professional development introducing these frameworks, exemplifying their classroom application, and supporting teachers in adapting them to Kurdish contexts would enhance conceptual clarity and instructional effectiveness.

Positioning Kurdish EFL in Global ICC Discourse

Kurdish EFL education exhibits both universal patterns and distinctive contextual features within global ICC discourse. While Kurdish educators share internationally documented challenges—recognizing culture's importance yet struggling with implementation (Byram & Risager, 1999; Sercu et al., 2005)—unique factors distinguish this context: post-conflict educational reconstruction, linguistic minority status, imported curricula inadequately representing local culture, and conservative sociocultural norms navigating cultural sensitivity. These particularities foreground postcolonial and critical pedagogy insights. Following Kramsch (2014), culture teaching must avoid imposing dominant frameworks while marginalizing learners' identities. Kurdish learners require ICC not for assimilation into Anglo-American cultures but for navigating multilingual, multicultural realities as agents asserting Kurdish identities while engaging respectfully with diverse others. This perspective necessitates reconceptualizing ICC objectives beyond target culture transmission or native-speaker norm adoption toward cultivating: **(1) cultural self-awareness** grounding intercultural engagement in Kurdish values, communicative practices, and identity dimensions; **(2) comparative analysis** recognizing cross-cultural similarities and differences without hierarchical judgment; **(3) communicative flexibility** adapting language use across contexts while maintaining authenticity; **(4) critical consciousness** examining how power, ideology, and history shape cultural practices and intercultural relations; and **(5) mediation skills** facilitating understanding between cultural groups and resolving miscommunications. Positioning Kurdish learners as intercultural mediators rather than deficient approximations of native speakers empowers them as multilingual, multicultural individuals navigating complex identities (Byram, 1997; Kramsch, 1993), transforming ICC education from cultural imperialism to critical intercultural agency.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Summary of Key Findings

This mixed-methods investigation revealed six principal findings:

First, despite positive attitudes toward ICC among teachers (73.8% interested) and learners (62% valuing cultural learning), implementation remained sporadic rather than systematic, revealing significant attitude-practice gaps. **Second**, participants prioritized small-c culture (daily life, customs, food) over deeper value systems or big-C culture, risking superficiality and neglecting critical cultural awareness. **Third**, teachers' ICC conceptualizations varied considerably from superficial to sophisticated, with many lacking clear frameworks for designing systematic instruction. **Fourth**, substantial gender differences emerged, with females demonstrating significantly more positive attitudes and openness to target culture adoption (moderate effect for teachers, large effect for learners,

Cramer's $V = .510$), reflecting broader sociocultural gender dynamics. **Fifth**, multiple implementation barriers—time constraints, examination pressures prioritizing linguistic content, inadequate training, textbook limitations, cultural sensitivity concerns—systematically hindered ICC integration despite positive attitudes. **Sixth**, heavy reliance on centrally selected textbooks emphasizing Anglo-American cultures with inadequate Kurdish representation constrained culturally responsive pedagogy and comparative intercultural analysis.

Theoretical Contributions

This study advances ICC scholarship through four substantive contributions:

Empirical evidence from underrepresented contexts addresses literature's Eurocentric, North American, and East Asian dominance by foregrounding Kurdish EFL stakeholders' perspectives. Findings reveal both universal patterns—attitude-practice gaps and implementation barriers documented internationally—and context-specific factors including post-conflict reconstruction, linguistic minority status, and imported curricula inadequately representing local culture, thereby enriching global understanding of ICC education's contextual variability and challenging assumptions of universal applicability.

Gender as critical ICC variable emerges through documented substantial differences with large effect sizes (Cramer's $V = .510$ for learners), establishing gender as essential for disaggregation in future research. This contribution necessitates routine examination of gender dynamics in ICC perceptions and systematic investigation of mechanisms—sociocultural positioning, educational socialization, content alignment with gendered domains—producing observed differences.

Mixed-methods integration demonstrates convergence between quantitative attitude measures and qualitative interview data, strengthening confidence in findings while exemplifying how qualitative insights explain quantitative patterns. The complementarity achieved—qualitative data illuminating barriers underlying statistical trends, contextualizing ambiguities, and explicating gender differences—validates mixed-methods approaches for investigating multifaceted phenomena like ICC where attitudes, beliefs, and practices intersect.

Implementation paradox explication extends beyond documenting attitude-practice gaps to systematically investigating causality through multilevel analysis: institutional factors (centralized curricula, examination systems, limited autonomy), pedagogical deficits (inadequate training, conceptual ambiguity), and contextual constraints (cultural sensitivity, resource limitations). This explanatory framework elucidating why positive attitudes fail to translate into consistent practices informs theoretically grounded, contextually responsive intervention design addressing root causes rather than symptoms.

Practical Implications

Curriculum Development

Curricula must position ICC as a core learning objective rather than peripheral content, with explicit learning outcomes guiding design, materials, and assessment. Cultural content balance should incorporate source culture (Kurdish practices, values, communication patterns, identity dimensions), target cultures (diverse English-speaking contexts beyond UK/US), and international culture (global issues, intercultural challenges, multilingual scenarios), enabling comparative analysis while validating learners' identities. Assessment revision should increase cultural content from current 1-20% to 30-40% through interpretive tasks requiring cultural analysis, comparative essays, reflective portfolios, and performance assessments simulating intercultural communication, thereby signaling ICC's importance and incentivizing implementation.

Teacher Education

Pre-service preparation requires courses addressing culture-language relationships, ICC frameworks, and intercultural pedagogy, supplemented by ethnographic projects developing cultural observation skills, simulations providing intercultural communication practice, and critical reflection on personal cultural identities and biases. In-service professional development should provide workshops introducing ICC frameworks (Byram's *savoirs*, Liddicoat's cycle) with practical applications, collaborative lesson study groups designing ICC activities, curated repositories of cultural materials and lesson plans, and coaching supporting implementation challenges. Communities of practice focused on culture teaching would facilitate peer support, resource sharing, and collaborative problem-solving for context-specific challenges.

Teaching Practice

Teachers should adopt intercultural approaches facilitating learning through noticing activities (guiding attention to cultural features), comparison exercises (analyzing cross-cultural similarities/differences), ethnographic projects (systematic cultural investigation), critical discussions (examining power, history, ideology in cultural practices), and reflective journaling (encouraging metacognitive awareness). Authentic materials—films, music, news media, social media, literature, advertisements—should supplement textbooks, exposing learners to diverse representations and contemporary language use. Gender-responsive pedagogy requires designing activities appealing to diverse interests, explicitly discussing ICC's professional relevance, creating inclusive environments, and leveraging female learners' openness as discussion facilitators. Thoughtful navigation of sensitivity involves developing skills for respectful dialogue about religion, politics, gender, and values through multiple perspectives, comparative analysis, and understanding (not agreement), creating learning opportunities while maintaining respect.

Educational Policy

Decentralized material selection allowing greater teacher autonomy in textbook choice would enable context-responsive instruction through approved options rather than prescribed texts. Resource investment in cultural materials, technology enabling virtual intercultural exchanges, and professional development signals institutional ICC commitment. Curriculum coherence ensuring alignment across standards, textbooks, training, and assessments creates systemic support, replacing current contradictory messages about culture's importance. Examination reform revising national and regional assessments to include intercultural dimensions—developed through collaboration between examination boards and ICC experts—would provide powerful incentive for instructional change.

Limitations

Several limitations qualify these findings:

Sample representativeness is constrained by participant recruitment from two universities and schools in Sulaimaniyah province, potentially limiting generalizability across Iraqi Kurdistan regions and unrepresented school levels (primary, preparatory). **Self-report data** captured stated beliefs and perceptions rather than actual classroom practices; observational data would provide more direct evidence of teaching behaviors and student engagement. **Cross-sectional design** at a single time point cannot capture developmental trajectories or assess intervention effects that longitudinal designs would illuminate. **Cultural sensitivity** concerns may have prompted socially desirable responses rather than fully candid perspectives on sensitive topics, despite efforts to build trust and ensure confidentiality. **Researcher positionality** as a Kurdish EFL educator provides insider understanding but introduces potential biases; while systematic analysis procedures and reflexive bracketing enhanced objectivity, complete neutrality remains unattainable in interpretive research.

Directions for Future Research

This study opens multiple avenues for further investigation:

Classroom-based research through observational studies would document actual ICC teaching practices and student engagement, complementing self-report data. **Intervention studies** using experimental or quasi-experimental designs could evaluate ICC-focused teacher training programs, curriculum modules, and assessment innovations. **Longitudinal research** tracking teachers and learners over time would illuminate ICC development trajectories and assess intervention sustainability. **Comparative studies** across Kurdistan regions, Middle Eastern contexts, or school levels would elucidate contextual factors shaping ICC education. **Mechanism research** investigating gender differences, pedagogical approaches' effects on intercultural attitudes, and factors differentiating successful ICC implementers would deepen understanding of implementation processes. **Student outcome assessment** developing validated instruments to examine relationships between instructional approaches and competence development would provide accountability for curriculum improvement. **Material development research** collaborating with curriculum developers to create, pilot, and refine culturally balanced materials representing Kurdish, target, and international cultures would address identified textbook limitations.

Concluding Reflections

This investigation into Kurdish EFL teachers' and learners' perceptions of intercultural communicative competence reveals both encouraging foundations and significant challenges. The widespread recognition that culture is integral to language learning, strong willingness to promote ICC, and learners' expressed interest in cultural content provide solid groundwork for advancing ICC education in Kurdish contexts. However, transforming positive attitudes into systematic, effective practices requires addressing multilevel barriers. At the policy level, examination reform, curriculum revision, and resource investment can signal ICC's importance and provide infrastructural support. At

the institutional level, teacher education programs must prioritize ICC preparation and ongoing professional development. At the classroom level, teachers need conceptual frameworks, pedagogical strategies, and authentic materials to facilitate meaningful intercultural learning. Ultimately, ICC development serves not just linguistic objectives but broader educational and social goals. In the Kurdistan Region's context characterized by multilingual realities, diaspora experiences, and aspirations for international engagement preparing students as intercultural communicators is essential. Learners who understand their own Kurdish cultural identities, appreciate diverse cultural perspectives, communicate effectively across differences, and critically examine cultural practices become empowered agents in local and global contexts. The substantial gender differences documented here underscore that cultural learning intersects with other identity dimensions gender, class, ethnicity, religiosity—shaping engagement and meaning-making. Recognizing this complexity, ICC education should create inclusive spaces where all learners, regardless of gender or background, develop intercultural capacities. As globalization intensifies intercultural encounters while simultaneously prompting assertions of local identities, the need for sophisticated intercultural competence grows ever more urgent. Kurdish EFL education, by thoughtfully integrating cultural dimensions, can prepare learners not merely to use English but to navigate the complex, contested, enriching terrain of intercultural communication—asserting their own voices while listening respectfully to others, maintaining their cultural authenticity while remaining open to transformation, and contributing to more just, equitable, peaceful global relations.

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