

Intercultural Communicators: The Case of Lebanese University Students

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Abstract

In this globalized world, graduating students with intercultural communicative competence (ICC) becomes essential (Saba 'Ayon & Harb, 2022; Winstead, 2021). Concerned about the Lebanese graduates, the researchers in this follow-up study aimed to investigate the extent to which Lebanese private university students have the knowledge, attitudes, skills and critical cultural awareness of an intercultural speaker as per Byram's (1997) multidimensional model of ICC. Using a mixed-methods design, the researchers employed an online self-completion questionnaire emailed to 190 conveniently selected private university students in Lebanon and three focus groups to collect their quantitative and qualitative data. The researchers analyzed the collected data quantitatively and qualitatively. Conclusions of both types of analyses were triangulated. Major findings reveal that most of the respondents rank high on four components, namely knowledge, attitude, skills of interpreting and relating and critical cultural awareness, and moderate on one component of Byram's ICC model, which is the skills of discovery and interaction. Major recommendations were made, among which was incorporating ICC within the Lebanese educational system.

Keywords

Cross-Cultural Awareness, Foreign Language Learning, Higher Education, Intercultural Communicative Competence, Intercultural Speaker, Lebanon, Middle East

1. Introduction

With globalization, speakers do not use foreign language only with the people of the target language or even in the country where this language is spoken. Instead, learners are turning into global speakers in which they have become "me-

diators between different languages and cultures, and where they interpret the world from different points of view” (Coperias-Aguilar, 2002: p. 87). Thus, having the linguistic accuracy in communicating oral and written messages in one’s own language and in a foreign one is not enough anymore. For learners to become global speakers, they need to optimize their socialization process in a sense that they overcome prejudices and expand their interpersonal relationships, tolerant attitudes as well as their intercultural understanding of the open world surrounding them (Coperias-Aguilar, 2002; Deardorff, 2015).

Unfortunately, it has been globally realized that foreign language courses emphasize the linguistic competence of learners without giving much space for developing their Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) (Reid, 2015; Tumen-Akyildiz et al., 2021; Saba 'Ayon & Harb, 2022). This fact accentuates the new needs imposed on us as educators. In this globalized era, “learning can no longer be categorized as domestic or international, rather than there is much overlap between the two in which the importance of effective intercultural communication becomes evident” (Shah-Gordon, 2016: p. 3). From here rises the importance of graduating global citizens with an adequate understanding of the complexities of Otherness. To do so, they need to have a developed cross-cultural awareness, a solid understanding of the similarities and differences among cultures, and the competence of thinking and acting properly with people from different cultures (Northouse, 2010 as cited in Shah-Gordon, 2016).

Foreign language learning in Lebanon seems to be not any different from other parts in the globe. Though the latest national educational reforms plan dated in 1997 involved cultural awareness, it was “not stated as an explicit objective... but was embedded in foreign language learning” (Saba 'Ayon, 2013: p. 54). In addition, Houssari (2008), who investigated the implementation of this cultural component in a Lebanese public high school, found that this cultural component was hardly present in the foreign language classroom because the policy guidelines related to cultural awareness were not translated and included as aims in the national textbook which teachers used to closely follow. Hence, linguistic competence and, at its best, communicative competence were the focus of the foreign language classroom in Lebanese schools.

Lebanon, a country in the Middle East, is multilingual. Though Arabic is the official language, other languages namely English, French, German, Kurdish and Armenian are also “used in educational institutions, basic communicative functions or at home” (Shaaban and Ghaith, 1999 cited in Saba 'Ayon, 2013: p. 85). Throughout history, Lebanon has witnessed multicultural and multi-linguistic influences through invasions, mandates and displacement among others. Moreover, Lebanon was known for the coexistence among the different religions and sects before the civil war (1975-1990). However, this coexistence was mostly replaced by a huge divide among the 18 different sects post the war. In Lebanon, there are many private higher educational institutions but only one public university of different majors and campuses spread all over the country.

Following up on their earlier study, the researchers, who found that Lebanese

private university students consider themselves intercultural competent speakers (Saba 'Ayon & Harb, 2022), aimed to investigate the extent to which these students have the required knowledge, attitude, skills and critical cultural awareness of an intercultural speaker as per Byram's (1997) multidimensional component ICC.

Almost the absence of research on the intercultural communicative competence of learners in the Lebanese context adds to the significance of the current research study. Also, the empirical findings of the study enrich the literature on intercultural communicative competence, a discipline which is still being explored and under continuous development in terms of exploring learners' current competence as well as designing the future classrooms of ICC. The participants' voices in the current study can help shape the pedagogy of Intercultural Communication Education (ICE).

Intercultural Communicative Competence: Description and Adopted Model

During the last decade, the perspective of communication in a foreign language has developed beyond the communicative competence to include the "Intercultural Competence" (IC). Then the term Intercultural Competence (IC) was reintroduced as Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) for the significant influence it had on foreign language (FL) teaching (Lopez-Rocha, 2016). Though in some contexts IC and ICC could mean the same, Byram (1997) differentiates between both as the former term means people's "ability to interact in their own language with people from another country and culture," while ICC focuses on the speaker's ability "to interact with people from another country and culture in a foreign language" (p. 71).

For a considerable period of time, ICC has been fashionable in foreign language teaching, yet few people understood its components and pedagogical implications (Lund, 2008). Such a situation necessitated the fact of having a precise definition that describes the relationship between the new concept and foreign language teaching. However, no single agreement on one definition of ICC has been reached among interculturalists (Lund, 2008; Deardorff, 2006; Saba 'Ayon & Harb, 2022), nor has been an agreement on a single term for ICC (Deardorff, 2006; Saba 'Ayon & Harb, 2022). However, this research paper adopts the ICC term and uses Byram's (1997) definition of ICC, "an individual's ability to communicate and interact across cultural boundaries" (p. 7). As in their previous research, the researchers adopted a non-essentialist definition of ICC (Saba 'Ayon & Harb, 2022).

Attempting to realize the ICC in foreign language classrooms, Byram (1997) developed a model of ICC and revised in 2020, which consisted of five main components, labeled as "saviors". This model, which has been widely adopted in foreign language teaching, raised the awareness of foreign language teachers and students on the importance of developing an appreciation for the similarities and differences between theirs and the other's culture. In addition, it emphasized the existing relationship between language and culture, in which it becomes es-

essential not to focus only on linguistic acquisition but also to consider the beliefs and attitudes underlying the culture of the other (Feeney & Gajaseeni, 2020). Byram's qualities of an intercultural speaker are described in terms of a set of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and motivation. More details about the dimensions of the model are discussed under **Figure 1**.

Figure 1 shows the interrelationship between the savoirs of the model. Starting with the knowledge *savoir*, it is related to the speakers' awareness of their own culture as well as the other's (social groups and their products, practices, interaction). Another type of knowledge to be developed is social interaction, which is related to perceiving the other interlocutor coming from another group. Intercultural communicative learners need also to relativise their own self and develop *savoir être*, a curious attitude towards knowing the others and valuing them in an objective way. Unlike "Savoir comprendre", which is mostly based on general knowledge structure that helps learners discover existing connotations in a certain discourse or event, "Savoir apprendre" is essential when the speaker lacks knowledge about the targeted culture or social situation. The skills of discovery and interaction help speakers to identify related phenomena in a different culture, try to understand them, and relate these phenomena to others (Coperias-Aguilar, 2002). "Savoir engager" is based on intercultural citizenship education, which emphasizes political education, values of democracy as well as human rights and rejects racism, xenophobia, intolerance, and extremism. This type of knowledge helps the interlocutor to evaluate critically one's and others'

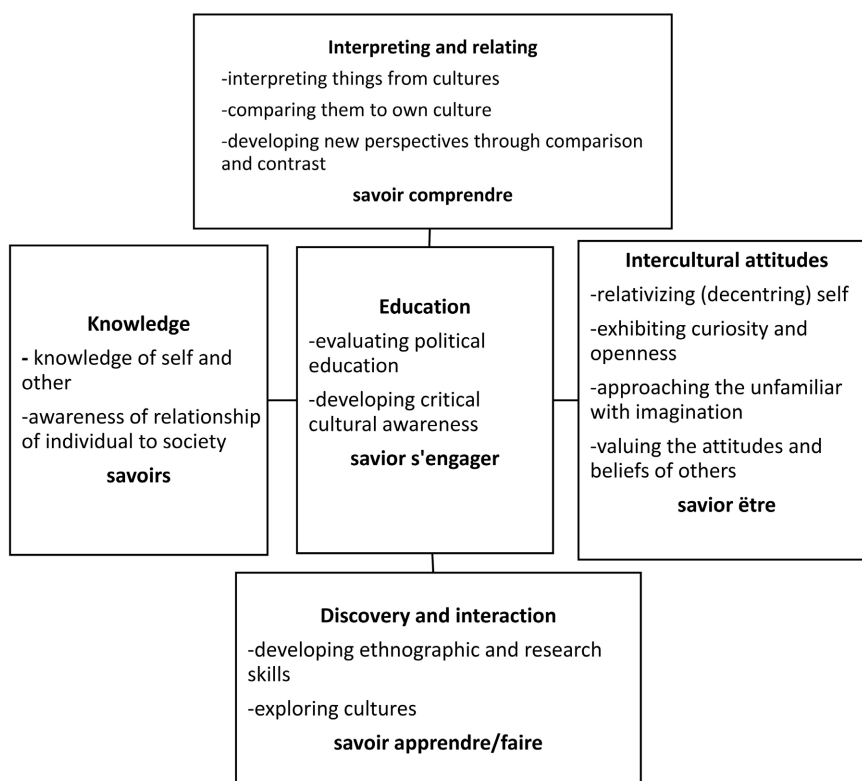


Figure 1. Byram's 1997 model of ICC (adapted from Byram, 1997).

practices while maintaining interpersonal relationships based on respect and understanding (Byram, 1997).

Byram's (1997) ICC model has been widely adopted in foreign language teaching. The success of the model was also realized in the development of new theories on ICC and in forming the basis of developing projects like the Intercultural Competence Assessment (INCA), the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR), and the 2018 *Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture* (RFCDC) conceptual model (Hoff, 2020). Hence, the significance of the model reinforces the choice of the researchers for adopting it as the theoretical framework of their investigation despite the criticism the model has received by recent C21st voices, who adopt a new perspective of ICC understanding in academic discourse related to multiple group identities and multicultural subgroups within one culture (Hoff, 2020).

The following theme explores how the different dimensions of the model were identified in learners' perception. This is quite significant as the findings help us as educators to form new principles for the design of our future ICC classrooms.

Learners' Perceptions of their Intercultural Communicative Competence

Several studies have investigated learners' perceptions of their ICC. For example, Mu and Yu (2021) investigated the perceptions of 33 English major Chinese students towards their ICC and the challenges they faced in developing such a competence. The questionnaire and interview findings showed that participants were not satisfied with their ICC nor with their intercultural interactions experience. The qualitative findings revealed that students have vague perceptions of ICC, especially that they haven't explored it in previous courses. They knew little about the traits of an intercultural speaker and the skills needed when communicating in intercultural situations. Moreover, most students did not have much experience interacting with foreigners either because of lack of opportunity, confidence, lexical competence or because of anxiety. Other challenges reported had to do with students' inability to deal with misunderstandings or difficulties that might arise in communication.

The findings of Mu and Yu's (2021) study are also in alignment with those of Liu's (2016) study, which was conducted for the same purpose on 100 Chinese non-English majors in West Normal University. The questionnaire and interview data indicated that although most participants were able to conceptualize intercultural communication, acknowledged the importance of culture learning, and showed interest in learning about western cultures, they lacked the necessary knowledge about the intercultural competence as a result of overemphasis on linguistic competence in their English courses. Interestingly, most of the students believed that grammar knowledge does not play an effective role in communication while the rest had an ambiguous attitude about it. Furthermore, the participants had a misunderstanding about culture and the features that embody it such as daily life patterns, work and entertainment routines.

Halim et al. (2022) investigated the perceptions of 165 participants on ICC in one of the Islamic higher education institutions in South East Sulawesi. The

analysis of the participants' reflective journals revealed that the majority believed in the importance of ICC in helping them widen their horizon and better understand the world and its events. They also highlighted that developing ICC helps them build better relationships and develop a more respectful, tolerant and non-judgmental attitude.

Allen (2021) investigated the perceptions of 42 Japanese participants who were taught an elective introductory intercultural communication course over one semester in their 3rd or 4th year of study. Data collected from online surveys and participants' responses on open-ended questions revealed that almost half of the participants (45%) were interested in intercultural communication and in exploring how communication exchange differs across cultures. Most participants assumed that ICC has become an economic imperative, and all agreed on the importance of ICC for their future career, residences, or education. The participants also indicated how developing their intercultural communication skills help them understand the world from different perspectives, and how it makes the communication with people from different cultures less challenging. Equally important, the participants showed an awareness of the constant changes their own local community is going through as a result of shifts in demographics and an increase in tourism.

Saba 'Ayon (2016) investigated the impact of telecollaboration on the participants' ICC as well as their attitudes towards this telecollaborative experience. The participants were 60 students enrolled in a Peace Communication: Media and Conflict Resolution course in three different universities in three different countries namely the USA, Jordan and Lebanon. Using Byram's (1997) model as the theoretical framework, the researcher used a qualitative, interpretive research design and collected data from multiple sources namely, a short-answer question survey, a reflection essay, participants' posts on Facebook, the participants' face-to-face, mediated interactions, a focus group interview, and an unstructured interview with a teacher participant. The findings revealed that the telecollaborative experience seemed to impact both the participants' ICC as instances of Byram's five learning objectives (namely curiosity and openness, knowledge of social groups and their products, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, & critical cultural awareness) were evident in their interactions and their attitudes to telecollaboration.

These findings project significant implications on what students seek from ICC courses and hence on the strategies and approaches chosen to optimize ICC in our courses. In fact, a myriad of research studies give an account to raising the awareness of ICC and enhancing it in language classes. The majority of researchers agree that the integration of ICC within the education system is essential for the vital role ICC plays in improving the learners' communication with people of different cultures (Lopez-Rocha, 2016). According to Tumen-Akyildiz et al. (2021), ICC is a "variable, progressive, and continuing issue that mentally, cognitively, and affectively affects students". However, despite the considerable attention that has been given to ICC as an essential competence, it is still neg-

lected in the education system of many countries including Lebanon, hence the need of adequately addressing it (Tumen-Akyildiz et al., 2021).

2. Research Questions

Concerned with intercultural education in Lebanon and following up on their previous research, the researchers attempted to answer the following question and sub-question in this study:

How do the Lebanese university students assess themselves on Byram's (1997) multi-dimensional components of ICC?

To what extent do they believe they have the required knowledge, attitude, skills, and critical cultural awareness of an intercultural communicator/speaker?

3. Methodology and Methods

According to Deardorff (2006: p. 250), "The best way to assess intercultural competence is through a mix of qualitative and quantitative measures" such as interviews and self-report instruments among others. That is why the researchers used mixed-methods design, which involves the use of both quantitative and qualitative data-collection methods. Specifically, the researchers employed a self-completion questionnaire which consisted of 52 5-point Likert scale items which were adapted from Saka and Asma (2020) and Kempen and Engel (2017). In addition, the researchers conducted three focus-groups consisting of 21 participants who expressed their willingness to be interviewed.

4. Data Analysis

Quantitative and qualitative analysis was applied to the collected data. As for the quantitative data, the SPSS (version 23) was used to run descriptive analysis of the data for overall patterns. Cronbach's alpha was 0.82, which indicates a good reliability of the findings. In addition, the mean scores were calculated to determine both the overall level of ICC and those of its components. The researchers adopted the cut-off points developed by Saricoban and Oz (2014) to categorize the calculated means as high, moderate, and low. The researchers considered the participants' scores within "the upper third of the normative distribution" as high, moderate when they are within "the middle third", and low when the scores are within "the lower third" (see Table 1) (ibid, p. 526).

Table 1. Criteria of intercultural communicative competence level (Adapted from Saricoban & Oz, 2014: p. 526).

ICC Level	Mean	Options
High	4.5 - 5.0	Completely Agree
	3.5 - 4.4	Agree
Moderate	2.5 - 3.4	Not Sure
Low	1.5 - 2.4	Disagree
	1.0 - 1.4	Completely Disagree

As to the qualitative data, thematic analysis was applied to the transcribed data, which rendered themes very similar to the conclusions derived from the quantitative data when both were triangulated. This contributes to the trustworthiness of the findings.

5. Participants

Following up on their previous research (Saba 'Ayon & Harb, 2022), the researchers contacted the same sample of participants through emails and asked these participants to fill out the ICC questionnaire. All of them, 190 participants, were responsive and returned the self-completed questionnaires.

These participants were students in private Lebanese universities. They were native speakers of Arabic and fluent at least in one foreign language (English or French). They were coming from different regional and socio-economic backgrounds, and they were of different genders and academic statuses as seen in **Table 2**.

Table 2. Crosstabs of participants' gender and academic status (Adopted from Saba 'Ayon & Harb, 2022).

	Sophomore	Junior	Senior	Graduate	Total
Female	24	25	31	9	89
Male	27	16	41	13	97
Other	2	1	1	0	4
Total	53	42	73	22	190

6. Findings and Discussion

When the means of the overall ICC level and its components were calculated, it was found that the overall mean score was high ($M = 3.782$). In addition, the mean scores of its components were also high except for one component, which was that of the skills of discovery and interaction; it was moderate. In more detail, the mean scores for knowledge, attitude, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness were $M = 3.950$, $M = 3.7886$, $M = 3.870$, $M = 3.448$, and $M = 3.856$ respectively (see **Table 3** below).

Table 3. The means of the ICC level and its components.

ICC Components	Means
Knowledge	3.950
Attitude	3.7886
Skills of interpreting & relating	3.870
Skills of discovery & interaction	3.448
Critical cultural awareness	3.856
Total	3.782

The categorical distribution of the ICC levels among the sample showed that only one participant ranked low on ICC, and 20 participants had an ICC within the moderate level. However, the majority of the participants ranked within the high level of ICC as indicated in **Table 4**.

Table 4. Categorical distribution of the ICC level of the sample.

	Participants	
	Number	Percentage
High	169	88.9473
Moderate	20	10.5263
Low	1	0.5263
Total	190	100%

Knowledge Component

Not only did the researchers calculate the mean scores of the participants' multidimensional components of ICC, but they also examined the responses of the participants on each item to better understand the perceptions of the participants and find out what areas in the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and critical cultural awareness the participants still need to work on to improve their inter-cultural communicative competence.

As can be seen in **Table 5**, the participants' responses on most of the knowledge items are high except for two items, namely "I know the rules to use non-verbal ways to communicate in other cultures", and "I am not always aware of the differences among different cultures", which rank within the moderate level. Though the adverb "always" in the previous item could have impacted most of the participants' responses, it is possible that the participants still need to learn about the differences as well as the non-verbal ways to communicate in other cultures.

Table 5. Percentages of participants' responses & means on the knowledge dimension.

Knowledge	CA-A	Not Sure	CD-D	Mean
It is important to learn about different cultures	97.8	1.6	0.5	4.552
I am aware of differences in the characteristics of different cultures.	88.7	9.7	1.6	4.242
Learning about new cultures helps me improve my communication.	93	5.8	1.1	4.384
I detect the similarities between my own culture and other cultures.	86	11.8	2.1	4.068
If I evaluate people in terms of my own culture, I may reach the wrong conclusions.	76.9	15.6	7.5	3.978
I distinguish differences between my own culture and other cultures.	89.8	8.1	2.2	4.136

Continued

I explain both similarities and differences between my own culture and other cultures.	82.3	15.6	2.2	3.994
I know the cultural values and the religious beliefs of other cultures.	65.6	29.6	4.8	3.705
I know the rules to use nonverbal ways to communicate in other cultures.	53.2	36.6	10.3	3.489
I am not always aware of the differences among different cultures.	60.8	18.8	20.5	3.484
I think my beliefs and attitudes are influenced by my culture.	67.8	17.7	14.6	3.667
I think my behaviors are influenced by my culture.	71.5	15.1	13.4	3.705

The qualitative data came in line with the quantitative data. The participants' testimonies reinforced their knowledge about similarities and differences between cultures and their awareness of not judging others from their own perspectives.

For example, one participant said, "*When we talk to people from different cultures, we have something in common, but we also have differences. For example, how we greet each other in Beirut is different from how we do it in my village in the South. I can kiss my female friend in Beirut, but I cannot do the same thing in the village.*"

Another stated, "*All of us have prejudices towards others, we are raised with this, but we need to keep these under control in order to interact with others.*"

Trying to explain how words could be interpreted differently in different regions within the same country, one participant said, "*The same word might have different meanings in different regions in Lebanon, for example when you call someone a 'brain' in Tripoli (Northern city) it is considered an insult, but in Beirut it is a compliment indicating that someone is smart.*"

Another respondent gave an example of how different non-verbal language could lead to misunderstandings, "*In terms of voice tone, some cultures are louder... if one is not aware of this, he/she might think that the other is shouting.*"

As it was shown that the Lebanese participants demonstrated most of the knowledge savior of Byram's (1997) model in terms of being aware of the similarities and differences between cultures, refraining from prejudgments or showing prejudices towards among others, they need still to develop awareness about the differences that exist among cultures and to attend to non-verbal language in different cultures. This could be done when intercultural education becomes part of the curriculum.

Attitude Component

Examining the means of the different items on the attitude component, the researchers found that although the means of most of the items are high, two are low and three are moderate as can be seen in **Table 6**.

Table 6. Percentages of participants' responses & means on the attitude dimension.

Attitude	CA-A	Not Sure	CD-D	Mean
I am open to learning about different cultures.	96.8	2.2	1	4.478
It is enjoyable to have friends with different cultural backgrounds.	95.2	3.8	1	4.473
I believe in the mutual understanding of different cultures.	90.9	7	2.2	4.331
I respect other cultures (values, traditions, beliefs, etc.).	93.6	4.3	2.1	4.51
I believe cultural activities are great opportunities to learn about other cultures.	94.7	4.3	1	4.431
I can tolerate different ways of behavior of people from the other cultures.	84.4	14	1.6	4.089
I feel confident when interacting with people from different countries.	81.2	15.1	3.7	4.084
I wouldn't accept the opinions of people from different countries.	19.4	9.7	71	2.3
I'm open to the ideas of people coming from different countries.	92	7.5	0.5	4.31
I feel anxious while interacting with people coming from different cultures.	32.2	22	45.7	2.821
I accept that there are differences between my culture and other cultures.	95.1	4.3	0.5	4.526
When I am uncertain about cultural differences, I take a tolerant attitude.	61.8	33.3	4.8	3.726
I am eager to read articles on foreign cultures.	58.6	28.5	12.9	3.615
I believe that marriage between different cultures is wrong.	19.3	17.7	62.9	2.252
I am often curious to know how my own culture is perceived by others.	85	9.7	5.4	4.131
I watch more national news than international news on TV.	37.7	24.2	38.2	3.01
I take pleasure in listening to music from another culture.	85	9.1	5.9	4.231
I typically feel somewhat uncomfortable when I am in the company of people from cultural or ethnic backgrounds different from my own.	23.1	25.3	51.6	2.573
I feel comfortable discussing cultural issues in the classroom.	81.2	15.1	3.7	4.057

Even though the item related to accepting the opinion of people from different countries had a low mean, participants in the focus group seemed to be more understanding and tolerant as shown in the following testimonies:

“I don't have a problem dealing with people who are different. Even if we have a different opinion about a certain topic, we learn from each other, we can benefit. We might reach nowhere, but at least we learned how I perceived the topic and how the other did. I like to discuss topics with people who have different opinions and perspectives, I will learn about his point of view, and he might convince me with his point of view”.

“Concerning intercultural communication, we should show open-mindedness, willingness to interact, be sociable, should not judge based on any historical conflicts, religious beliefs, whatever. We need to be mutually respectful and avoid stereotyping and prejudice, which is found in everyone of us, but we need to know how to deal with our prejudice. We need to keep them under check. We need to treat individuals as individuals and not as representatives of their social groups or culture.”

Another participant explained why she might feel anxious in intercultural encounters, *“Sometimes I feel anxious because I do not want to say anything offensive or to discuss a sensitive topic.”*

In an attempt to clarify why he believes marriage between different cultures is wrong, one participant referred to interreligious marriages and the problems that might arise between the couples about *“what religion to follow at home...to expose children to...”*.

From what was presented, the quantitative results provide evidence that most of the participants have acquired Byram's attitudes of curiosity and openness. They illustrate what [Byram \(1997\)](#) describes as decentralization and readiness to suspend their beliefs, their own culture, and their disbelief about other cultures. In fact, this is promising as the findings unveil a new tolerant identity of the Lebanese generation that is to a moderate extent detached from the sectarian, ideological, and political conflicts of the previous generations. That's why other some participants in the focus groups showed that they haven't developed the right attitude, savoir être, that makes them tolerant of differences, accepting different perceptions, and feeling comfortable in the presence of people from diverse cultures. This indicates that some Lebanese youth are still getting their way off their own comfort zone and moving towards adaptability and change of perspectives as per [Byram \(1997, 2020\)](#).

Skills of Interpreting and Relating

Though the participants ranked high on this skill ($M = 3.87$), examining the participants responses on each item, the researchers found that the participants rank moderate on one item only which is “I read about rules for expressing non-verbal behavior in other cultures” (see [Table 7](#)). This could be explained in terms of reading as an activity is generally not very common in the Lebanese culture. This was even echoed in the participants' testimonies in the focus groups. *“I don't read about it... Instead, I would ask people from my cycle who*

have experiences and knowledge about that culture". Another participant said, *"If I know I would be traveling or dealing with people from a certain culture, I will learn about that culture/language etc. If I know someone there, I will ask him/her about his/her experiences, because having a direct experience is richer than getting information from Google"*.

Table 7. Percentages of participants' responses & means on the skills of interpreting and relating dimension.

Skills of Interpreting & Relating	CA-A	Not Sure	CD-D	Mean
I can easily handle it when there is a misunderstanding between me and people from different countries.	75.3	19.9	4.8	3.847
I avoid displaying behaviors that may cause misunderstandings while interacting with people coming from different cultures.	86	11.8	2.2	4.136
I can easily interact with people coming from different countries.	74.8	20.4	4.8	3.878
While interacting with people coming from different cultures, I use my knowledge about their cultures.	80.7	14.5	4.8	3.9
I often give positive responses to my culturally different counterpart (conversation partner) during our interaction.	80.1	19.4	0.5	4.024
I often show my culturally-distinct counterpart (conversation partner) my understanding through verbal or nonverbal forms of communication	66.2	29	3.8	3.759
I show understanding towards what my conversation partner who is coming from another culture is saying.	86.5	11.8	1.6	4.068
I change my verbal behavior (accent, topic, words) when an intercultural situation requires it.	67.8	18.8	13.5	3.673
I change my nonverbal behavior (e.g., eye contact, gestures) when a cross-cultural situation requires it.	62.9	26.9	10.2	3.642
I read about rules for expressing nonverbal behaviors in other cultures.	50.5	26.3	23.2	3.326
I accept the different dress customs (such as Sari, kimono, etc.) of people in other countries.	90.8	7.5	1.6	4.326

Thus, the findings in **Table 7** help us conclude that the participants seem to have developed the ability to relate and interpret perspectives and practices from other cultures and that they have acquired such ability beyond their classes. In addition, these findings reveal that most of the participants are able to use what they know about other cultures, adapt their verbal and non-verbal behaviors, and accommodate the cultural differences when interacting with people from

different cultures. This most likely helps them maintain successful communication with the other. Hence, they have what Byram (2020) describes as the “awareness that one is a product of one’s own socialization” (p. 4) which is a precondition for understanding others’ reactions.

Skills of Discovery and Interaction

As presented earlier, the mean score for this component was moderate ($M = 3.448$). Calculating the means of all the items in this component revealed 4 items within the moderate level too as seen in **Table 8**.

Table 8. Percentages of participants’ responses & means on the skills of discovery and interaction dimension.

Skills of Discovery & Interaction	CA-A	Not Sure	CD-D	Mean
I take every opportunity to learn about cultures of different countries.	74.2	17.7	8.1	3.984
While interacting with people coming from different cultures, I try to learn about their cultures.	92.5	4.8	2.7	4.247
I avoid those situations where I will have to deal with culturally-distinct persons.	40.3	26.9	32.8	3.126
In general, I have the ability to act effectively and appropriately in an intercultural situation.	81.7	15.6	2.7	3.984
I cannot easily deal with ambiguities during cross-cultural communication.	36	43	21	3.194
When I meet people from different cultures, I cannot open a conversation in a culturally appropriate manner.	30.2	29	40.9	2.905
When I have an opportunity to help someone, I offer assistance less frequently to individuals of certain cultural backgrounds.	32.3	16.7	51.1	2.7

These items are related to avoiding situations where one has to deal with culturally-distinct people, dealing with ambiguities, opening a conversation appropriately with people from different cultures, and offering assistance to those people.

The qualitative data provided further information about the participants’ responses as revealed in the following testimonies:

One participant, trying to explain why he avoids dealing with others, stated that “*generally speaking I am not a sociable person and I would avoid interacting with people who have a different ideology unless I had to like in the workplace.*” Another said, “*It all depends on the person with whom I’m talking to. If the person is not willing to listen objectively, then I wouldn’t be able to communicate or interact with him/her*”.

Concerning tolerating ambiguities in conversations, one participant explained this by saying “*I usually ask about it...even if sometimes I don’t understand*

what was said, I ask them to repeat.”

As to opening up a conversation appropriately, one participant said, *“If their sexual orientation is different, I’d rather not open up a conversation with them because I am not interested in talking to them. I’d rather stay away from them. But if I have to deal with them in the work place, I will do.”*

However, another participant in the same focus group had a totally different opinion in this regard. He clearly stated that *“These people, LGBTQ+ I mean, are found in our society. They exist whether we like it or not. They are not inflicting any harm on us, so why should I take a stance against them. Why not take a neutral position or even a positive one?”*

Another participant denied the possibility of offering assistance less frequently to people from other cultures *“after all, we are all brothers in humanity”*.

The fact that the “Not Sure” value on some items was considerably high is pertained to some of the participants’ lack of social communication experience and interaction with the “others”, which is, according to Byram (2020: p. 57), a condition to “live into” the different social practices and apply the skills of discovery and interaction. Within the absenteeism of this condition, some participants with the “Not Sure” answer doubted their abilities of ICC. On the other hand, the items with high means reflect a promising and tolerant profile of Lebanese youths who have the willingness to embrace cultural differences and show cultural understanding while interacting with different social groups and in inclusive workplace environments. They are ready to go through an adaptation process in order to embrace different values systems (Byram, 1997, 2020). However, it is worth mentioning that the items with moderate results reflect that some Lebanese youth still show bias towards differences as a result of the complex socio-political system of the Lebanese society. That’s why there is a crucial need to help these participants develop the discovery and interaction skill of ICC.

Critical Cultural Awareness Component

The means of the items are high as shown in **Table 9**.

Table 9. Percentages of participants’ responses & means on the critical cultural awareness dimension.

Critical Cultural Awareness	CA-A	Not Sure	CD-D	Mean
I often reflect on how culture affects beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors.	78	15.6	6.5	3.873
I question and challenge stereotypes (my own and others).	68.8	23.1	8.1	3.8
I tend to wait before forming an impression of culturally-distinct counterparts (conversation partners).	72	25.3	2.7	3.894

The qualitative data was in line with the quantitative, and the participants’ testimonies reflect their being critical and away from stereotyping and judging.

“When dealing with people from different cultures, I tend to wait and avoid being judgmental. I listen objectively to them.”

“All of us have prejudices towards others, we are raised with this but we need to keep these under control in order to be able to interact with others.”

“I avoid stereotyping (such as associating certain cultures with certain professions).”

That the participants ranked high in this component draws our attention to an interesting fact that despite the multi-sectarian and political problems in Lebanon, the youth sample seems to be more self-reflecting and have the capacity to judge and critique as well as show maturity and independence (Byram, 1997, 2020). In other words, the participants seem to have the awareness of contrasting the underlying value systems between them and the others for the sake of the well-being of everyone. That's why they appreciate the rights of others, value democracy and citizenship as well as lifestyle differences. Their critical cultural lens gives hope of a more tolerant Lebanese community with developed ICC.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

Although most of the participants are intercultural communicators as they have the required knowledge, attitudes, skills and critical cultural awareness, they still need to work on some areas in each of these components. They need to learn about the differences between cultures and the nonverbal ways of communication. They also need to be more accepting of others' opinions, sexual orientations and beliefs. To this end, the researchers recommend that ICC become a part of the high education learning outcomes and that the cultural components in the school curriculum be implemented in the foreign language classrooms. Thus, the objective behind teaching a foreign language should be changed from linguistic or communicative competence to intercultural communicative competence. To realize this objective, the researchers suggest the following:

First, the course content should be based on the fundamental components of CEFR: 1) Socio-cultural knowledge (everyday living patterns, history, values, taboos, conventions, food, holidays, among others), 2) Socio-linguistic competences (greetings, dialect, positive-negative politeness, register, idioms, among others), 3) Pragmatic competence (advising, urging, persuading, interaction patterns, among others) and 4) non-verbal communication (eyes contact, body language, proxemics, among others) (Reid, 2015).

Second, teachers should be provided with sufficient training and resources. They should be urged to encourage students to share their culture specific knowledge and their experience with cross-cultural interaction while avoiding stereotyping, to consider a diversity of tools for interculturally interactive class, to celebrate every student's identity and to provide equal learning opportunities for all.

Third, the design and assessment of the course should be based on the cognitive, affective, and behavioral learning outcomes underlying the ICC.

Though the majority of the participants ranked high on the ICC model, a few were moderate and only 1 participant ranked low, these findings cannot be generalized to all the Lebanese due to the non-probability sample. That is why the researchers recommend that future research investigates ICC among a representative sample of Lebanese students to get a better idea about how interculturally competent these students are.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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