

Raising Undergraduate Students' Level of Academic Readiness through Teaching Intercultural Communication

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Abstract

In this qualitative action research study, the purpose was to explore if the integration of an intercultural communication (ICC) module into an undergraduate English course in Kuwait could improve the preparation of students for their future studies and jobs. The study focused on the insufficient acceptance of cultural diversity and its influence on university students. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, and field notes, where content and thematic analysis was conducted. Four themes were yielded: 1) pre-intervention: culture and ICC as interpersonal conflict without holistic contextualization; 2) post-intervention: enhanced perspective-taking and attitude; 3) post-intervention: better engagement with cultural out-groups; and 4) increased inquisitiveness about other cultures.

Keywords

Communication, Intercultural Communication, Cross-Cultural Communication, Culture, Learning, Interaction

1. Introduction

As an expat instructor for chiefly Kuwaiti students, I have witnessed a general lack of intercultural competence among many students in situations and encounters involving multi-cultural dimensions. The limited literature on IC conducted in the context of Kuwait shows the importance of developing IC in Kuwait due to its diverse culture and focus on developing English language literacy (Chaney, 2018). Additionally, the necessity of developing IC in the context of Kuwait highlighted in the previous research rests on the deficiency resulting from a reliance on traditional teaching methods prevalent in the region, with a focus

on memorization and repetition, rather than skills that are more desirable in the current workplace environment, such as collaboration and intercultural competence (Erguvan, 2015). Students and society could benefit from new approaches to cross-cultural learning; however, steps have not been taken to create better conditions (inside and outside) in the classroom as argued by Harper (2008). As a researcher, it became my role to examine what adjustments should be made to facilitate cross-cultural learning. The curriculum of the English Foundation Program Unit (FPU), was a teacher-book-centered program that stressed language learning through the improvement of reading, writing, listening, speaking, and grammar and vocabulary skills. Regular meetings of the Program Review Advisory Committee members scrutinized a selection of the most appropriate resources to meet the FPU students' English needs. The consensus was that the ICC concept could be defined as the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations to shift frames of reference appropriately and adapt behaviours to cultural context (Deardorff & Hunter, 2006).

2. Theoretical Background and Previous Research

Deardorff's (2011) model of intercultural competence was used to guide the research. Deardorff developed a model based on extensive research consisting of four components, **Figure 1**: 1) intercultural competence development is an ongoing process, individuals must be given chances to reflect on and assess their

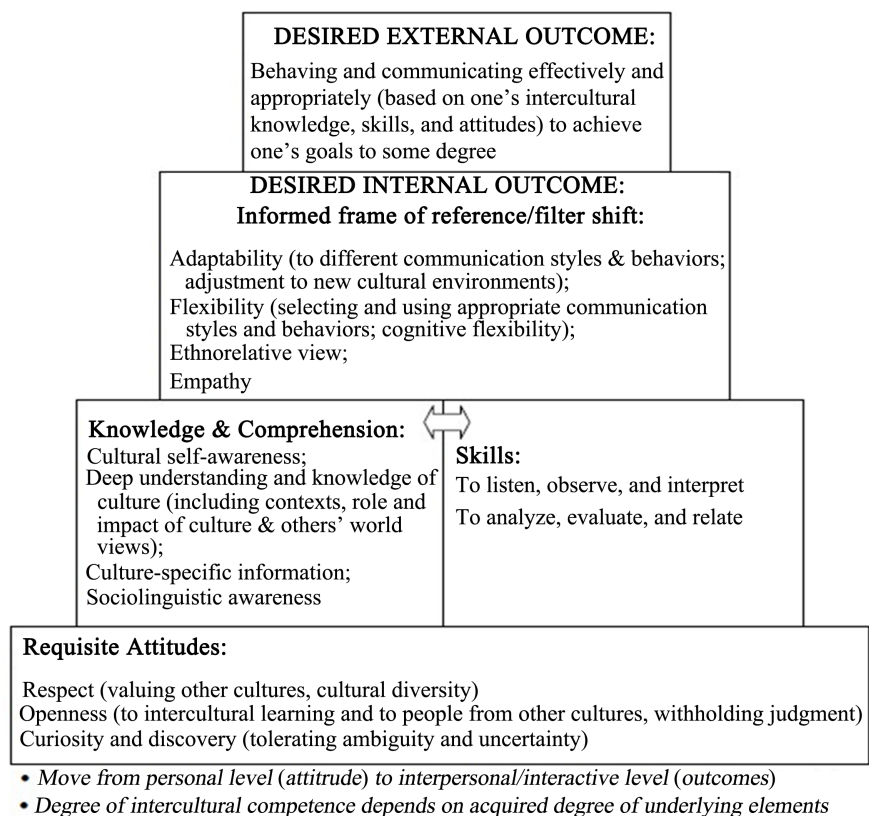


Figure 1. Deardorff's model of intercultural competence.

own intercultural competence development over time; 2) critical-thinking skills play a crucial role in a person's ability to acquire and evaluate knowledge needed to improve their level of cultural competence; 3) attitudes act as the basis of the model and impact on all other aspects of ICC competence, specifically respect, which is demonstrated differently in cultures, in addition to openness and curiosity, which are essential to the process; and 4) the ability to take others' perspectives is essential, with one having a more inclusive, contextual understanding of culture, including in particular historical, political, and social contexts. Deardorff (2011) argued that developing intercultural competence has become increasingly important based on the diversity and multicultural nature of modern society.

Intercultural competence was defined by Deardorff & Jones (2009) as an individual's ability to appropriately and effectively interact in intercultural situations on the basis of their intercultural comprehension, knowledge, and attitudes. Deardorff's model of intercultural competence is circular, indicating an individual's intersections between comprehension and knowledge, attitudes, external outcomes, and internal outcomes associated with intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2011). Deardorff viewed intercultural competence as a process that involved the awareness of existing in a specific cultural context, the generation of general strategies for cultural adaptation, and appreciation of differences along the cultural lines as argued by Paige & Goode (2009). Deardorff agreed with previous researchers that cultural competence involved possessing the ability to be sensitive with respect to systems of culture and the capacity to approach those from other cultural groups without threat or insecurity (Knight, 2012). Thus, Deardorff's work is situated within existing research while expanding it.

In the context of this study, the model is applied within the characteristic of a collectivistic non-western society undergoing a transformation in the contemporary globalized world. The process of globalization involves cross-cultural encounters and those who are able to interact in such situations effectively have an advantage over those who are not (King et al., 2011). Specifically, multinational companies operating across different cultural contexts must be able to generate strategies that help them adapt to these different cultures in order to attain competitiveness (Knight, 2012). Further, individual employees working in a multicultural and multi-ethnic work environment must be able to collaborate with those from other cultures, which can be done effectively through the development of an appreciation of cultural differences (King et al., 2011). The awareness of existing within a specific cultural context helps both those employees who are from cultural majority groups and those from cultural minority groups collaborate with each other effectively. As such, Deardorff's model of cultural competence is especially relevant to the needs of the globalized world of which Kuwait is an important part.

3. The Significance of the Theoretical Background

I chose Deardorff's (2011) model of intercultural competence for the current

study because it was found to be more comprehensive than the other theories that were considered, while also being more suitable to the research purpose. The intercultural adaptation model developed by Cai & Rodríguez (1997) and Yoshikawa's (1987) double-swing model of intercultural communication was found to be too specific for the purposes of the current study, given their focus on perceptions of individuals and communication centered around dialogue, respectively. Additionally, the identity management theory developed by Cupach & Imahori (1993) was found to be too broad, given its focus on the development of personal cultural identities in the long term. In contrast, Deardorff's (2011) model of intercultural competence was found to be neither too specific nor too broad in relation to the present study's focus. Furthermore, two of the three factors that Deardorff & Jones (2009) found to comprise intercultural competency included skills, knowledge and comprehension. These factors were relevant to the current study as the focus in the present study was on better preparing students for their future studies and jobs through refining their intercultural communication skills and knowledge. The ICC component syllabus developed in the current study was focused on enhancing students' comprehension. The third factor, attitudes, was relevant to the current study's methodology, since the researcher focused on the attitudes of the students both in the first and the last stage, in the form of pre-intervention and post-intervention interviews in which the students shared their experiences. Finally, the original study in which Deardorff's model was developed was conducted in the context of education (Deardorff & Jones, 2009), similar to the current study.

4. The Proposal for the Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative action research study was to explore whether the integration of an intercultural communication (ICC) component into an undergraduate English course in Kuwait could better prepare students for their future studies and jobs through refining their intercultural communications skills and knowledge. Currently, the field of intercultural communication is deep-rooted and taught to graduate and undergraduate students in several countries. Training is given in some countries to employees who work in multinational companies to improve their intercultural communication competence. As such, the students would not only learn the traditional essential and basic skills of communication but also ways to interact in their future intercultural encounters effectively. The targeted number of participants was anticipated to be from 10 to 15 students but could be, depending on the enrolment in each course. This sample size was considered appropriate for the design of this research. Eleven students participated in spring 2017, and another 16 students took part in fall 2017. Data were collected through semistructured, pre-and-post-interviews, as well as direct observational notes of the researcher.

The results of this study might provide educators in Kuwait and the Gulf Region with a better understanding of how enhancing students' intercultural com-

munication skills, values, and knowledge could improve their levels of academic and professional preparation. Moreover, the results contributed to the existing knowledge about intercultural communication by adding a new dimension to the literature—a focus on Kuwaiti students. This contribution might aid in spreading intercultural communication awareness and competence among educators and students through determining to what extent the integration of an ICC component into an undergraduate English course would better prepare students for their future studies and jobs.

Research Questions

The following research questions helped in exploring whether the integration of an ICC component into an undergraduate English course would refine the participants' level of intercultural communication competence:

RQ1. How did the level of intercultural communication knowledge, skills, and values of the participants improve from the pre-interviews until the post-interviews?

RQ2. How did the participants perceive the concept of integrating the intercultural communication component into their English course?

RQ3. How can the intervention techniques used in the intervention be improved to ensure results?

RQ4. What impact, if any, did participants perceive the intercultural communication component as having on their attitudes and behaviours toward other ethnic groups?

5. The Significance of Choosing This Research Context

While teaching undergraduate university students for the last 13 years, I have encountered various situations where students and faculty members were known by their nationalities, instead of their names. Lately, I have witnessed how some students chose their undergraduate courses based on the faculty members' nationalities, instead of their academic profiles, which has been observed by some Foundation Program Unit faculty members. A few faculty members noticed and discussed these issues informally in faculty gatherings. During the last eight semesters, I have observed that in most of the introductory classes, students were interested in knowing their fellow students' nationalities/origins before knowing their names. Observing Kuwaiti schools and universities, a growing number of expatriates have joined the multi-cultural educational environment in Kuwait, creating a high level of diversity in the classrooms. Kuwaiti and expat students have reflected both national and international cultural diversity. Previous studies in China and Lebanon have shown that students enter college with a lack of intercultural awareness and understanding of what it takes to engage diversity further heightened in highly diverse contexts, such as those found in Kuwait and the rest of the Arabian Gulf, where expatriates represented significant portions of the workforce (Tariq et al., 2013). Overhearing students' discussions in the hallway, in which they referred to faculty members and students by their ethnic origins, was alarming, as it showed the lack of basic intercultural competence.

Students identified each other primarily on culture or race, indicating that they did not necessarily know the other students or their attributes well. This can also be described as prejudice. Prejudice is prejudging other out-group without having adequate knowledge or available information. It is a baseless attitude toward outgroups based on a comparison with one's in-group (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2010). Unfortunately, not enough researchers have documented this reflection in Kuwaiti academic institutions. However, when I shared this observation with some of my students, I found that the majority of them did not even realise how this ethno-classifying and ethno-labelling could be offensive and insensitive, which indicated a clear lack of intercultural sensitivity and competence.

The educational system in Kuwait is represented by numerous government and private academic institutions. Therefore, there has been an increasing number of students with different origins and backgrounds, all of whom were communicating with one another constantly inside and or outside of the classroom. This validated the notion of introducing the concept of intercultural communication to sharpen certain skills necessary to communicate effectively and successfully in their daily intercultural encounters, which would have a direct positive impact on the quality of their learning experiences and their future successes in a multicultural working environment.

Kuwaiti students will eventually encounter cross-cultural situations and circumstances, in a social as well as a working environment. When interacting with people from cultures that involve rituals and practices different from those practiced in the Kuwaiti community (Rahimi & Smith, 2017), students must employ proper intercultural communication skills to make effectively relate with people from other cultures. Over the years and amidst globalization, intercultural communication has gained widespread attention and gone through dynamism regarding conceptualization. However, little is known about how students perceived and experienced intercultural communication regarding its impact on future studies and jobs in Kuwait.

Researchers have conducted previous studies in China and Lebanon to document that students enter college with a lack of intercultural awareness and understanding of what it takes to engage diversity effectively (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Volet & Ang, 2012). This condition was further heightened in highly diverse contexts, such as those found in Kuwait and the rest of the Arabian Gulf, where expatriates represented significant portions of the workforce (Tariq, Goddard, & Elkum, 2013). Therefore, one must start cultivating intercultural communication competency as early as possible and continue this development during university to improve students' levels of preparation for the workforce, and life after university.

Researchers have viewed ethnocentrism as one lacking the acceptance of cultural diversity and intolerance for out-groups (Berry & Kalin, 1995). This lack of acceptance of cultural diversity resulted in negative labelling and stereotyping between students and the teaching staff, thereby affecting schools and universities, which I observed while teaching for more than 19 years in Kuwait. I even

discussed the issue with faculty members, who were concerned, sensing a certain level of racism and ethnocentrism among students and staff members. As such, the problem explored by this study was the lack of acceptance of cultural diversity and its influence on university students. This goes side by side with the main purpose of this qualitative action research study is to explore whether the integration of an intercultural communication component into an undergraduate English course would better prepare the students for their future studies and careers by refining their intercultural communication competence level.

6. Methodology

A qualitative methodology was deemed as the most appropriate methodology for the purpose of this study, to explore the influence of the self-designed intervention on the students' intercultural communication competence. An action research design was used to meet the purpose of this study. In-depth data were collected to meet expectations to 1) increase the level of acknowledgment among the participants using self-evaluation to, 2) improve their intercultural communication competence levels, and 3) to be exposed to cultural topics that are presented in the course that would be an eye-opening to areas that they may have experienced but possibly had difficulty articulating clearly.

The intervention course was intended to be conducted in the spring and fall of 2017. Course content included 1) exploring the notion of culture, 2) the association between culture and language, 3) cultural and nonverbal communication, 4) culture and identity, 5) culture shock and cross-cultural adaptation, and 6) looking at movies about different cultures. The six stages of the action research included: identifying the problem, collecting data, reflecting, and analysis, taking action, and re-identify the problem. The action research required two revision cycles. After the reflection on the first cycle, I had to revise the plan to refine the research methodology for the second cycle.

7. Participants and Context

The Kuwaiti Gulf University for Science and Technology (GUST) aims to provide the knowledge, skills, and resources necessary to earn a degree to students. The sample for this study included GUST undergraduate students. The average number of the Foundation Program Unit (FPU) students per semester 360, according to the registration department. The average foundation class size usually included 18 students. Research cycle one was surveyed in spring 2017, and cycle two was surveyed in fall 2017.

8. Pedagogical Approach and Procedures

The students enrolled in my English courses participated in this study. Participation in the IC module was voluntary, and nonparticipation did not influence the students' academic performance or grades. The students' ages varied from 17 to 25 years of age because students entered university after completing high school,

while some of the students only enrolled in the Gulf University for Science and Technology after the completion of other studies. The spring class consisted of 11 females while the fall class consisted of 15 male students. Both cycles included a pre-and post-assessment of ICC skills through face-to-face interviews with participants. The two cycles were identical regarding instructional methods and materials. Conducting the classes over two semesters enabled me to include both females and males in the sample since the genders attend classes separately.

I designed the course to raise participants' levels of intercultural communication competence. Intercultural communicative competence refers to one's ability to understand cultures, including an individual's own culture, and using this understanding to successfully communicate with people from other cultures. This course aimed to develop the participants' communicative skills, as it equipped them with the essential skills, values, and knowledge to function successfully in multi-cultural encounters. I delivered the course three times a week for 9 weeks, classes each lasted one hour. The evaluation of the success of the course did not count toward the students' overall grades.

Classes were structured informally to allow for maximum interaction between students. Questionnaires to elicit opinions and YouTube videos introducing culture, norms, and customs were implemented to create awareness and stimulate interaction. During class, groups of students discussed and introduced the material and related it to their own experiences. A summary of the discussions was presented to the class by the groups. An innovative mixture of instructional material and approaches ensured that classes were interactive and communicative. Each of the nine themes covered in the syllabus was introduced using different techniques, ensuring variety, and eliciting reactions and comments from the students. All the sessions provided discussion and feedback time as well as opportunities to relate the new information to the students' personal experiences. The intercultural communication syllabus targeted the development of the following skills in the students:

- 1) Comprehend the basic concepts of intercultural communication;
 - 2) Scrutinise the differences between Kuwaiti culture and other cultural behaviours and values of different countries;
 - 3) Study different ideas about relationships and other customs;
 - 4) Learn useful cross-cultural communication techniques;
 - 5) Develop a deep awareness of experiences to increase intercultural competency;
 - 6) Determine own level of cultural self-awareness, other culture awareness, and the dynamics that arise in interactions between two cultures;
 - 7) Understand the correlation between communication processes belonging to different cultures;
 - 8) Identify challenges arising because of cross-cultural situations encounters;
- and

9) Acknowledge the impact this course could possibly have on our own intercultural.

9. Data Collection and Instrumentation

Data were collected through semi-structured pre-and post-intervention interviews which were conducted through the participation of English FPU students before and after the intervention, field notes, focus group discussions, and the researcher's reflective self-critical notes.

I used face-to-face semi-structured interviews, conducted in English, in the implementation of the first and second cycles of the research. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. The pre-interviews focused on establishing students' background knowledge of intercultural communication. The post-interviews were focused on obtaining feedback and perspectives of students about their general experiences and impressions after the addition of an integrated intercultural communication module in their foundation program course. Semi-structured questionnaires were designed for class discussions held after each lesson.

Conducting pre- and post-group-focused discussions was effective to enable the researcher to determine the students' overall opinions regarding the intervention designed to improve their intercultural skills. Class discussions invited the participants to express their opinions freely and spontaneously. Methodologically, the pre-and post-intervention interviews, in combination with the researcher's self-reflective notes and represented by the responses of the focus group discussion, were ideal for obtaining reliable data and achieving the most efficient results (Fontana & Frey, 1994).

Other data collection methods included field notes and reflective notes. My main role as a researcher was to document the students' feedback and to be a keen observer of the participants' views to record their feedback diligently. I also encouraged inactive contributors to reflect on their experiences critically. If needed, I rephrased questions to give participants a chance to reflect thoroughly to facilitate collecting accurate data. Building rapport with the participants was an essential factor to ensure proceeding smoothly. The classroom atmosphere had to be comfortable enough to ensure the semi-structured interviews were conducted smoothly.

The observational notes contained careful reflection of the students' verbal and nonverbal cues, as suggested by researchers (Hall & Hall, 1959; Solomon & Schell, 2009, Thomas & Stephens, 2015, Peterson et al., 2015). These notes benefited me in conducting the data analysis thoroughly and determining whether the students met the objectives of the course, learned the material, and whether their IC skills improved within the duration of the course. I documented the observational notes after each session, highlighting ways in which participants might have benefited from the intervention. I underlined the level of their understanding of the subject matter in these notes.

10. Data Collection Tools

In the present study, two forms of data collection sources were used, namely pre-and post-intervention interviews and the researcher's self-reflective observational notes (Edwards-Groves & Kemmis, 2015). I used semi-structured interviews in the implementation of the first and second cycles of the research. The observations were documented and recorded after the completion of the study in both spring 2017 and fall 2017.

11. Semi-Structured Interviews

I used semistructured interviews in the implementation of the first and second cycle of the research. Pre-and post-intervention semistructured interviews were administered to the participants using closed and open-ended questions. The pre-intervention interviews specifically focused on determining the students' background knowledge of intercultural communication. The responses to the questions determined the level of intercultural communication knowledge of the students before undergoing the intervention. The post-intervention interviews were focused on eliciting feedback and perspectives of students about their overall experiences and impressions after the addition of an integrated ICC component into their Foundation Program course. After conducting the first cycle of the research following the semistructured interviews, I incorporated the method of unstructured interviews in fall 2017.

Building rapport with the participants was one of the most essential factors to ensure proceeding smoothly prior to conducting the study. The atmosphere of the classroom needed to be comfortable enough to ensure smooth sessions for the semistructured interviews. During the interviews, I encouraged the participants to reflect on their experiences critically. During the interviews, if needed, I rephrased questions to give the participants a chance to think thoroughly to facilitate the collection of accurate data. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in English with The Foundation Program Unit participants. The semistructured pre-and post-intervention interviews were each 45 to 60 minutes long.

12. Observational Notes

I used qualitative data collection tools exclusively, as they provided the in-depth data about students' reflections and attitudes that were necessary to address the research questions. Although quantitative data collection tools, such as a questionnaire measuring intercultural communication competence, would have added more diverse data, such data were ultimately considered not necessary, as the focus of the study was on the attitudes of the students before and after the implementation of an ICC component, and quantitative tools would not have provided sufficient depth or open-ended responses to understand students' views.

I made self-reflective observational notes in the form of a field journal to record the improvement in the level of intercultural communication competence, the body language that the students used to express their ideas, and the behaviour of

the participants toward the topics discussed during conducting the intercultural class sessions. The notes described the participants' feedback before and after the pre-planned integration of the ICC component to the traditionally taught Foundation Program Unit. Specifically, the students' attentiveness, enthusiasm, and willingness to participate during the delivery of the prescheduled intercultural topics that I designed were observed. I focused on the nature of the communication taking place between the participants. These observations were documented and recorded after the completion of the study in both spring 2017 and fall 2017. I evaluated the level of awareness and ability of students regarding intercultural communication toward the end of the study utilizing thematic analysis as the data analysis technique. I ensured that I documented the observational notes after each session. I also highlighted the ways in which the participants might have benefited from the intervention. I underlined the level of their understanding of the subject matter in my notes. The observational notes included attentive reflection of the students' verbal and nonverbal cues, as suggested by researchers. I used these notes as an additional source of data for conducting data analysis and determining whether the students met the objectives of the course, learned the material, and improved their intercultural communication skills within the duration of the course based on my observations.

Data Collection Procedures.

The research was conducted in two cycles. Eleven female students participated in the first cycle of the study, which was taught in spring 2017. Sixteen male students participated in the second cycle of the study, which was taught in the fall of 2017. I introduced the cycle one intervention in the spring 2017 FPU course, which occurred in January 2017. I delivered the Foundation English course for 4 hours from 1:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m., and I introduced the intercultural communication module for 1 hour, three times a week. The content of the participation information sheet was explained in a class discussion to female students that consisted of 11 students on January 17, 2017. I asked ENGL 09805 students to sign the consent form on January 17, 2017. The content of the consent form was explained thoroughly to the students before they signed. In January 2017, all students signed the consent form.

I delivered the course three times a week for 9 weeks. Each class was designed to take 1 hour. The evaluation of the success of the course did not count toward the students' overall grades. On January 24, 2017, I conducted the pre-interview at 1:00 p.m. in W5-203 at the Gulf University for Science and Technology. I guided the participants with questions to give detailed information about their understanding of the word "culture". All participants' ages were 17. The pre-interview part of the research was held in a form of a class discussion.

For this cycle, I kept a journal to make self-reflective observational notes in the spring of 2017. In the second week of the course, the topic of exploring culture was covered in three different sessions for an hour three times a week. In Week 3 of the course, I introduced students to the relationship between culture

and language and discussed this subject for 3 hours. In Week 4 of the course, the students were introduced to the topic of culture and nonverbal communication in three 1-hour sessions. In Week 5 of the course, the students were introduced to the topic of culture and identity in three 1-hour sessions. In Week 6 of the course, the students were introduced to the topic of cultural shock and cross-cultural adjustment in three 1-hour sessions. In Week 7 of the course, the students were introduced to the topic of communication in three 1-hour sessions. In Week 8 of the course, the students were introduced to the topic of communication skills in three 1-hour sessions. In Week 9 of the course, the students were introduced to intercultural communication video in three 1-hour sessions. In Week 10 of the course, I conducted question and answers sessions on how to be more intercultural. Next, I conducted the post-interview protocol on April 26, 2017 and gave clear recommendations to guide the students to give detailed answers to the questions and support their answers by giving detailed examples.

I introduced the cycle two intervention in the fall 2017 Foundation Program Unit course in September 2017. The Foundation English course was intended to be taught in 4 hours from 1:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m., and the ICC component was scheduled to be presented in an additional hour three times a week. The Participation Information sheet was clarified at the beginning of the course. Sixteen male students enrolled in ENGL 09853 cohort when it commenced on September 14, 2017. I explained the important details related to this study by underlining the main aims of intercultural communication integration. This course introduced students to the field of intercultural communication. The course was designed to be delivered three times a week for 9 weeks. Each class was designed to take 1 hour. On September 18, 2017, the students were briefed that they would be interviewed the next day to make sure that their attendance was complete. On September 19, 2017, all 16 students were present and ready to be interviewed. Students were encouraged to answer the questions thoroughly and in detail to support the data analysis process. Students were guided to comment on their classmates' answers and to reflect by sharing their own experiences. On September 19, 2017, the pre-interview was conducted at 1:00 p.m. in W5-204 at the Gulf University for Science and Technology in Kuwait.

For this cycle, I kept a journal to make self-reflective observational notes in the fall of 2017. The following subsections contain discussions of the topics discussed. In the second week of the course, the topic of exploring culture was covered in three different sessions for an hour three times a week. In Week 3 of the course, I introduced students to the relationship between culture and language and discussed this subject for 3 hours. In Week 4 of the course, the students were introduced to the topic of culture and nonverbal communication in three 1-hour sessions. In Week 5 of the course, the students were introduced to the topic of culture and identity in three 1-hour sessions. In Week 6 of the course, the students were introduced to the topic of cultural shock and cross-cultural adjustment in three 1-hour sessions. In Week 7 of the course, the students were intro-

duced to the topic of communication in three 1-hour sessions. In Week 8 of the course, the students were introduced to the topic of communication skills in three 1-hour sessions. In Week 9 of the course, the students were introduced to intercultural communication videos in three 1-hour sessions. In Week 10 of the course, I conducted question and answers sessions on how to be more intercultural. Next, I conducted the post-interview protocol on December 3, 2017, and I provided clear guidelines to the students to answer in detail and support their answers by reflecting on personal examples and previous experiences.

13. Trustworthiness of Data

The semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and the researcher's field notes based on self-critical classroom observations facilitated the triangulation needed to ensure data validity for qualitative studies (Denzin, 2012; Mulhall, 2003). I observed several aspects of ICC during classroom activities which were noted in the self-evaluative observational notes. These include students' body language while participating in discussions and their management of topics that addressed cultural differences. Furthermore, I noted the level of students' enthusiasm, participation in-class activities, and willingness to deliver opinions on prescheduled intercultural topics. These observations focused on the nature of the communicative interaction between the participants. Documented observations were made to support the accuracy of the data analysis that followed, as suggested by Yin (2014). Using data triangulation, I trusted that analysing interview data and the field notes for supporting and contradicting information would result in a more objective and consistent reflection of reality (Cho & Trent, 2006).

14. Data Analysis

Data collected was subjected to content analysis using NVivo 10 software and thematic analysis. The thematic analysis focused on identifying themes and patterns of behaviour from transcribed data (Aronson, 1995) and was conducted in three rounds (Krippendorff, 2013). First, transcribed data from interviews, and observational notes, were analysed, one line at a time, and were coded as emerging patterns arose. The interview data were coded first, where after, all the other data were classified. Data were marked that was related to all the patterns that emerged, and these patterns were expanded on to gather themes (Aronson, 1995). Any phrases or sentences suited for a specific pattern were identified and linked with the correct pattern (Aronson, 1995). Constant comparisons were conducted with the other coded data to establish similarities or differences with already existing codes (Patarathipakorn, 2016; Snyder, 2012).

Open coding was used in round two, entailing a close examination of the data, breaking the data down into sections, making comparisons, and questioning these data (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). Thereafter I commenced collecting indicators and developing a coding scheme. Indicators were coded using a coding scheme developed using small amounts of data and from that coded data, groups were developed. From the groups, themes, and possible affinity between and among the

themes were established. Relationships between coded categories or patterns were linked to developing a larger picture of the themes (Patarathipakorn, 2016; Snyder, 2012) derived from the participants' perspectives. Themes were combined to form an idea of the collective experience (Aronson, 1995); and patterns were further extrapolated, combined, and categorised to produce subthemes (Aronson, 1995). In round three, invariant elements were grouped under thematic categories, which aligned with the research questions of the study. Once themes were specified and finalized according to the literature, theme statements were developed for a storyline that had merit (Aronson, 1995).

15. Results

Data analysis produced four themes: 1) Pre-intervention: Culture and ICC as an interpersonal conflict without holistic contextualization; 2) Post-intervention: Improved perspective-taking and attitude; 3) Post-intervention: Better engagement with cultural out-groups; and 4) Increased interest in other cultures. Subthemes that emerged include the following. Theme 1: Defining cultural differences in personal terms, defining cultural differences in interpersonal terms, defining culture without contextualization, cross-cultural communication without contextualization, ICC defined in terms of nonverbal communications, and level of confidence. Theme 2: Improvement in perspective-taking, attitudes, and enhanced reflectiveness on the concept of culture. Theme 3: Increased engagement in ICC, increased confidence, increased cross-cultural comfort level, and increased nonverbal ICC competence. Theme 4: Cuisine, language, micro-expressions, other cultures' textures, religion and values, and social relationships and interactions.

Theme 1: Pre-intervention: Culture and ICC as an interpersonal conflict without holistic contextualization; please see **Table 1** for more information.

Theme 2: Post-intervention: Improved perspective-taking and attitude; please see **Table 2** for more information.

Theme 3: Post-intervention: Increased engagement with cultural out-groups; please see **Table 3** for more information.

Theme 4: Increased curiosity about other cultures; please see **Table 4** for more information.

Table 1. Pre-intervention: Culture and ICC as an interpersonal conflict without holistic contextualization.

	Theme 1	Example (direct quotations)
	Pre-intervention: Culture and ICC as an interpersonal conflict without holistic conceptualisation	
1a	Defining cultural differences in personal terms	The word culture was mentioned in our Islamic studies. Islam taught us how to respect other religions and cultures. Kuwaiti education cares about Islamic studies which represent the culture of Kuwait (cycle two student).
1b	Defining cultural differences in interpersonal terms	I used to work in groups with students who come from England; these students were looking at me in a strange way despite speaking with them in English. I felt they were so judgmental and judging me because I am an Arab. (cycle one student)

Continued

1c	Defining culture without contextualization	Culture... shows us how the country itself is... how they lived and what they ate and how their soul was (cycle two student)
1c	Cross-cultural communication without contextualization	I could not deal with Germans because of their language. It was so difficult for me to learn German, and they do not speak English (cycle one student).
1d	Intercultural communication in terms of nonverbal communication	I had a situation with a Saudi Arabian guy. He was staring at me I think because I was not fully covered like Saudi Arabian ladies. I did not like it, and it was very negative (cycle one student).
1e	Level of confidence	I (a lady student) do not deal with people but my family when I travel outside Kuwait. My brothers deal with them if there is a need (cycle one student)

Summary Analysis of Theme 1

- Overall, students had a skewed image of ICC before the intervention. They often conflated culture with cultural manifestations (e.g., cuisine, language, and religion).
- In the same way, they conflated ICC with interpersonal incompatibility and conflicts (e.g., language barriers and verbal or nonverbal communication interpreted as offensive).
- Some struggled to see culture apart from religion.
- Students comprehended ICC in relation to their reactions in situations where ICC was required. However, there was no perception that negotiation or compromise was required. Rather, the expectation was that the out-group would compromise and adopt the culture of the in-group.
- In general, students were not able to define culture or ICC in any specific way.

Analysis of Theme 1.

Table 2. Post-intervention; Improved perspective-taking and attitude.

Theme 2		Example (direct quotations)
Post-intervention: Improved perspective-taking and attitude		
2a	Improved perspective-taking (non-judgmentally understanding cultural differences)	I understand now that dealing with people from other cultures is different from dealing with people from the same culture; they think differently and see the world differently (cycle one student).
2b	Improved attitudes	I liked one video about how to say hi in different languages. It made me like to learn about other languages, instead of wishing everyone could speak English (cycle two student).
2c	Enhanced reflectiveness on the concept of culture	I know I have to understand how other people think if I want to communicate well with them (cycle one student)

Summary Analysis of Theme 2

- Post-intervention students improved their competence in terms of ICC in line with [Deardorff \(2011\)](#).
- Students often added the qualifier that the other person should be able to speak English.
- Students exhibited a more positive attitude toward and respect for other cultures.
- Students showed a newfound interest in other cultures.
- Students displayed improved perspective-taking and realized that those from cultural out-groups may have different perceptions.
- Students recognized that the assumptions of their own culture were not universally held nor valid.
- Students indicated an improved ability to understand their own ICC competence. According to [Deardorff \(2011\)](#) this ability to reflect is crucial for improving ICC competence.

Analysis of Theme 2.

Table 3. Post-intervention: Increased engagement with cultural out-groups.

Theme 3		Example (direct quotations)
Post-intervention: Increased engagement with cultural out-groups		
3a	Increased engagement in ICC	I become friendlier with people who come from different cultures. I like to talk to them online, and I do not get offended so easily (cycle one student).
3b	Increased confidence	I did not want to talk in class, but now I see that I can say things if other people can say things (cycle two student).
3c	Increased ICC comfort level	After I took the intercultural communication course, I know how to deal with people from different cultures (cycle two student).
3d	Increased nonverbal ICC competence	The course helped me to understand the facial expressions of people from other cultures and helped me communicate with them (cycle one student).
Summary Analysis of Theme 3		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students reported an increased willingness and ability to engage with cultural out-groups positively and non-judgmentally. • A number of students noted being offended less often than before. • Students were more confident in ICC situations. • Students' own use of nonverbal communication in ICC situations had improved. • Students noted that their ability to interpret verbal and nonverbal communication had improved. • This willingness stemmed from greater confidence in ICC competence. 		

Analysis of Theme 3.

Table 4. Increased curiosity about other cultures.

Theme 4		Example (direct quotations)
Post-intervention: Increased curiosity about other cultures		
4a	Cuisine	I would like to learn about the food of the other countries and how it is cooked (cycle one student).
4b	Language	It would help to be able to talk to people from other countries if I knew more words in their languages. I like talking to people from other places now, so I think this would be useful (cycle one student).
4c	Microexpressions	I need to learn how to understand facial microexpressions better as I am still confused as it is difficult to understand what people mean by facial microexpressions (cycle one student).
4d	Other cultures' textures	It is very important to experience cultures regularly, as this would enhance his intercultural communication experience. Traveling is the best way to inspire curiosity about other cultures, but you can also have exposure to different cultures by visiting different kinds of restaurants or districts in another city.
4e	Religion and values	I like to learn about the values and the beliefs of different cultures. This would help me to talk more with people from other countries, and to be more confident when I talked to them (cycle one student).
4f	Social relationships and interactions	I want to know what families are like in other cultures, such as who live together, and how they treat their families. I would also like to know how students talk to their teachers and each other at school (cycle two student).

Continued

Summary Analysis of Theme 4

- Students noted an increased curiosity and enthusiasm about other cultures without being completely satisfied. This is as researched by [Deardorff \(2011\)](#).
- This curiosity was spread over a wide array of topics.
- This curiosity contrasted with the pre-intervention attitudes where students were superficial in their manifestations and responses were overtly pejorative.
- The curiosity displayed by students may point to future improvements to the ICC intervention.

Analysis of Theme 4.

16. Discussion

The discussion is represented through the interpretation of the findings of the study, and it is based on the research questions:

RQ1. How did the level of intercultural communication knowledge, skills, and values of the participants improve from the pre-interviews until the post-interviews? Two themes emerged during data analysis to answer the research question, these were 1) students displayed limited knowledge of intercultural communication at the beginning of the course, and 2) students testified to greater expertise in ICC at the end of the course. Interpretation of these themes indicated that the intervention was effective in dealing with expanding participants' knowledge in line with the findings of [Adler \(2015\)](#), who noted the importance of focusing on intercultural communication studies to discuss the complexity of intercultural interactions due to positionality.

RQ2. How did the participants perceive the concept of integrating the intercultural communication component into their English course? With regards to the second research question, the participants perceived the ICC component as interesting, fascinating, and useful. In the same way, they understood ICC as a useful contribution to skills development, as suggested by researchers [Belhiah & Elhami \(2015\)](#). Resulting from these themes, the participants in this study now appreciated the significance of learning how to interact with people from other cultures. This finding aligns with the theory put forward by [Hall & Hall \(1959\)](#) and with the research conducted by authorities such as [Rothlauf \(2014a\)](#), who concluded that understanding ICC requires an accurate perception of what one has communicated in the nonverbal mode. Post-intervention, students cited nonverbal communication most frequently as exciting and useful, with some students in both cycles reporting that they now enjoyed and benefited from the topic. In addition, participants welcomed the nonverbal learnings because they understood that one could never assume that a familiar gesture in one culture meant the same thing in another culture. For instance, in Kuwait and the Arabian Gulf, Kuwaitis use a set of locally cultivated gestures that people could interpret differently when coming from other cultures ([Hackney et al., 2014](#); [Mwesigye & Muhangi 2015](#); [Rothlauf, 2014b](#)). I used this intervention for participants to comprehend how their culture might be similar or different from the culture of other nations.

RQ3. How can the intervention techniques used in the intervention be improved to ensure results? When focusing on the third research question, it became apparent that the positive social impacts of the intervention had to be properly analysed to ensure future interventions would be effective. One theme showed how one could improve the results in future interventions. The participants already felt that the current topics were helpful but learning more would aid in developing an increased understanding of the matter. The findings here align with the theory developed by [Hall & Hall \(1959\)](#) and with those of [Leavitt et al. \(2016\)](#), for example. These theorists recognized that cross-cultural communication included both verbal and nonverbal communication and that participants had to focus on building more skills in interpreting the nonverbal aspect of ICC. They believed that the results of the ICC component would be improved if an intervention included more information about micro-expressions. This notion is supported by others such as [Solomon & Schell \(2009\)](#).

RQ4. What impact, if any, did participants perceive the intercultural communication component as having on their attitudes and behaviour toward other ethnic groups? Overall, the participants perceived an impact of ICC on their attitudes. With regards to their behaviour, the participants pointed to increased curiosity about the cuisine and customs of other cultures. These findings could be said to align with the theory of in-groups and out-groups developed by [Sumner \(2010\)](#) and with work that focused on ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism was arguably present amongst the students before the intervention. For instance, [Neuliep & McCroskey \(1997\)](#) explained that the tenets of ethnocentrism were typified by behaviours and attitudes toward in-groups versus out-groups. The reality is that the characteristics of the behaviour and attitudes of both the in-group and the out-group are biased in a positive manner toward the in-group at the expense of the out-group ([Neuliep & McCroskey, 1997](#)).

As indicated in Theme 2, above, the data indicated that the intervention assisted students to expand their ICC competence in ways described by [Deardorff \(2011\)](#). Participants displayed an enhanced ability to realise that members of cultural out-groups may approach interactions with a different set of assumptions. Constructive relationships that transcend the differences and focus on how to deal with other cultures effectively are possible in a culturally heterogeneous environment ([Ferdenzi et al., 2017](#)). Therefore, when dealing with ICC, one should consider attitudes and beliefs as influenced by an individual's unique upbringing ([Hackney et al., 2014](#)). Students indicated an improved ability to reflect on their own levels of ICC competence, with reflectiveness being a capacity that Deardorff identified as crucial to the development of ICC competence.

17. Limitations of the Study

Some limitations to the study included that in a study conducted over two consecutive semesters, participants might only have represented the level of the students' ICC competence during a specific time of the year. Also, the demographic

characteristics of the sample may not have represented the general population, for instance, the participants were all Kuwaiti. Since this study only focused on a specific number of participants aged from 17 to 25, the sample population might not reflect the views of all FPU students. A more universal analysis of the effects and impacts of ICC would have been apparent if student perceptions encompassed those of students from different cultures. They had to be sensitive to the gender segregation in the region. The study was furthermore limited to the cultural environment surrounding them and was not multi-cultural since the participants all belonged to the same political and ethnic background. Finally, gender representation might also be considered a limitation. This was likely because the number of female participants in the study varied from the number of male participants. This difference in the number of female participants and male participants was because the research

18. Conclusion

As an educator and resident of Kuwait for 38 years, I conducted qualitative action research to concentrate on the importance of ICC to the future studies and careers of students and to discover whether the integration of an ICC component into an undergraduate English course in Kuwait could better prepare students for their future studies and jobs through refining their ICC skills and knowledge. The study's problem focused on the insufficient acceptance of cultural diversity and its influence on university students. Four research questions on ICC guided the study and [Deardorff's \(2011\)](#) model of intercultural competence was used to frame the research. Semi-structured interviews, document reviews, and field notes were used to collect data, which were then analysed using content and thematic analysis. The data analysis revealed four themes: 1) Pre-intervention: Culture and ICC as an interpersonal conflict without holistic contextualization; 2) Post-intervention: Improved perspective-taking and attitude; 3) Post-intervention: Increased engagement with cultural out-groups; and 4) Increased curiosity about other cultures. Based on these findings, the goal of this study was achieved because it successfully explored the influence of the intervention on the ICC knowledge, values, and skills of the students.

The findings of the study made contributions to the existing literature and policy frameworks in multiple ways. I recognized that the context of globalization is central to the future employability of the students. It was not known how the integration of an ICC component into an undergraduate English course could in this regard help better prepare students for their future studies and jobs through refining their intercultural communications skills and knowledge in the context of Kuwait. The findings of the study, therefore, helped understand whether the ICC component affected or did not affect the intercultural competence of individuals in Kuwait, and the results indicated that the understanding of the culture of the participants differed significantly after the coursework and intervention. The findings of the study contributed to theories considered in the literature. For

instance, the findings of the study provided evidence to the claim of conversational constraint theory that in collectivistic societies, such as Kuwait, individuals are more preoccupied with reducing imposition and hurting the feelings of other people, while those from individualistic societies are more likely to place emphasis on clarity (Kim, 2018). The integration of an ICC component into an undergraduate English course in Kuwait led to the students becoming more curious about other cultures. The students accommodated the cultural differences when exposed through videos by appreciating nonverbal communication in some cultures as funny. The appreciation of the students of such nonverbal gestures in a manner defined by positivity and curiosity provided support for the communication accommodation theory.

While various researchers had sought to expand the focus on the literature on intercultural communication from its foundation in American and European experiences by including African and Asian perspectives, there was a lack of research in which intercultural communication has been understood in the context of Arabic cultures. Thus, an important contribution of the present study was to expand the existing trend of a more inclusive understanding of human communication patterns.

The study is also significant because its findings helped educators and other stakeholders in the country's future obtain an understanding of bettering the prospects of students through interventions aimed at intercultural competence. In this regard, I recommended that there be a need for broader integration of intercultural communication within education, which is especially relevant in light of the globalized economy. Another recommendation made was for stakeholders to consider using ICC as a tool for increasing student awareness regarding their own ethnocentrism and increasing tolerance and understanding of cultural diversity, which is necessary not only in the workplace but in general. The study also contributed to the existing literature through recommendations for research methods including using a mixed method or a quantitative study, focusing on students who have enough travel experiences with different cultures, studying the impact of language to intercultural communication, and focusing on the speech acts of participants.

19. Proposal for Practical Recommendations and Measures for the Future Research Studies

While various researchers had sought to expand the focus on the literature on intercultural communication from its foundation in American and European experience by including African and Asian perspectives, there was a lack of research in which intercultural communication has been understood in the context of Arabic cultures. Thus, an important contribution of the present study was to expand the existing trend of a more inclusive understanding of human communication patterns. The study is also significant because its findings helped educators and other stakeholders in the country's future obtain an understanding of

bettering the prospects of students through interventions aimed at intercultural competence.

In this regard, I made recommendations based on the findings of the study that provide an important contribution to the existing literature. For instance, it was recommended that there was a need for broader integration of intercultural communication within education, which is especially relevant considering the globalized economy. The findings could be used by educators and other stakeholders in students as well as Kuwait's future to design projects that can be implemented across universities to make students more competitive in the globalized economy. The results of the study showed the significance of integrating ICC for bettering the skills of the students for working in a diver's environment, as the findings suggested that the integration of an ICC made students more familiar as well as curious about other cultures, strengthening their intercultural competence, which is beneficial for their future employability (Evans & Ringrow, 2017).

Another recommendation made was for stakeholders to consider using ICC as a tool for increasing student awareness regarding their own ethnocentrism and increasing tolerance and understanding of cultural diversity, which is necessary not only in the workplace but in general. The results of the study contributed to positive social change by making students aware of the proper nonverbal approach when dealing with people from different cultures. All students who participated in the study enthusiastically agreed that they would recommend the course to their friends. Because of the findings of the study, future students could learn what benefits can be derived from having strong and foundational coursework focused on intercultural communication skills. The study also contributed to the existing literature through recommendations for research methods including using the mixed method or a quantitative study, focusing on students who have enough travel experiences with different cultures, studying the impact of language on intercultural communication, and focusing on the speech acts of participants.

The purpose of this qualitative action research study was to explore whether the integration of an ICC component into an undergraduate English course in Kuwait could better prepare students for their future studies and jobs through refining their intercultural communication skills and knowledge. The findings indicated the understanding of the culture of the participants differed significantly after the coursework and intervention. Further, based on the specific themes from the analysis, I made recommendations for both theories and future research as well as policy. I promoted positive social change because I focused on the importance of intercultural communication, which was an important topic in the current borderless world. I also provided directions for future studies, including different methodologies and focus points. Implications included that leaders could become more familiar with students' perceptions of the kinds of intercultural communication interventions that were beneficial.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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