

Iraqi EFL Learners' Perceptions of Intercultural Communicative Education Through Online Platforms

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ABSTRACT:

Intercultural communicative competence or intercultural competence (hence ICC or IC) refers to the essential competency or the awareness that EFL learners should have to act effectively and successfully in intercultural situations. However, ICC or IC's integration in EFL classrooms is often a challenge and remains limited in EFL teaching. This is because language instructors usually tend to focus on knowledge especially the linguistic items of target language rather than its cultural aspects. Hence, the current research reports on a triangulated study aim to explore the Iraqi EFL learners' perceptions before and after the integration of the ICC in the online course. The study also attempts to show the learners' attitudes towards the intercultural communicative competence teaching (hence ICCT) model used to improve the learners' ICC competency. The participants were 40 Iraqi EFL students studying English language at the department of English, College of Arts, University of Anbar. Data were collected via two research instruments, namely a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews with the learners. The questionnaire was used for quantitative data collection, while the interviews questions were used for collecting qualitative data. The findings obtained revealed that there was an interesting significant difference in the perceptions of the EFL learners after the ICC's integration course. This is attributed to the increased knowledge and awareness of the learners about ICC's important role in the English culture. Similarly, learners had positive attitudes towards the ICCT model and its steps. Thus, with the obtained results, the study encourages the integration of ICCT in EFL teaching.

Keywords: Intercultural Communicative Competence; Online Learning; Intercultural Communication Education; EFL Learners Perceptions; University EFL Learners.



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1. Introduction

In a new world of the digital era, intercultural communication skills or competencies, especially those related to the intercultural communicative competence (ICC), has become an important and essential element for successful intercultural communication. The cultural diversity has increased through technology-mediated communication (TMC) which, consequently, presses challenges to our education, especially to EFL / L2 learners. Hence, an element of ICC learning is needed to be integrated into education to improve EFL learners' abilities to become intercultural competent speakers to effectively interact and to communicate with others from different cultures and with different linguistic backgrounds (Tran & Seepho, 2016).

Nevertheless, in reality, ICC of EFL learners are not easily taught and developed unless elements of culture-general knowledge are incorporated "through culture-specific examples that are not only coming from the target culture (s)" (Lázár et al, 2007, p. 45; López-Rocha, 2016). EFL teachers are not always aware of or acknowledge the important role of ICC in communication in teaching (Futernick, 2007, Gonen & Saglam, 2012). In fact, in teaching a second or a foreign language (SL/FL), teachers sometimes pay less attention to the importance of teaching the cultural dimension of a language besides its linguistic items: grammar, phonology, and morphology (Risager, 2007). This consequently, results in ignoring an important aspect of language learning and also the difficulty of EFL learners mastering the ICC. Similarly, in English Language Teaching (ELT) classrooms, teachers have also to bring the students' attention to the "cross-cultural communication skills" of the language they teach (Sattar & Chelah, 2011).

However, despite its importance, ICC is still marginalized mostly in L2 learning in many EFL classrooms, such as in Iraq. Iraqi EFL teachers are not fully aware of the ICC importance for their students in the learning process (Hindi, 2012). ICC's overlook is sometimes justified for the reason of time constraint and the inability to incorporate cultural aspects of the taught language in the teaching process. Moreover, in the Iraqi context, for example, cultural milieus are almost rare or not found because Iraqi EFL learners have no opportunities to interact in real-life communication with native speakers for multiple reasons. That is being the case; the focus of the pedagogical theorists and instructions then is shifted mainly on grammar, phonology, and morphology items of the language in face-to-face classes. This is quite evident in the syllabi of most Iraqi EFL curriculums. As a result, competence in social factors is not developed that plays a key role in communication. Consequently, this would affect the performance of students in communication in real-life situations. Although, researchers in this field emphasized the important role of cultural aspects of the language in the EFL classroom (Byram, 1997 & Chun, 2011).

Moreover, in face-to-face instruction or "traditional lecture-based technique" (Bhuiyan and Mahmud, 2015, p.1), teachers often spend lesson time explaining the class' materials to the students while they are taking notes from the teacher and the board (Egbert et al, 2015). This in general fails to "create real-life opportunities" (Ekici, 2018, p.24) to their learners, especially to develop ICC. Teachers, normally, are the leader of the classroom and responsible for the flow of knowledge without students' engagement with their colleagues or an opportunity to interact with students of different cultures. Consequently, this creates passive learners that have no part in lesson design or using the language for communicative purposes and having intercultural milieus (Shimamoto, 2012).

As such, there is no time left for introducing the cultural aspects of the taught language and this phenomenon regrettably is evident and observed in Iraqi EFL classrooms. However, there are some calls for avoiding the misconception the EFL teachers have about the difficulty of incorporating the ICC in teaching. Time constraint, for instance, can be overcome by allocating extra time for the students to have activities for developing ICC and reflect on their learning by sharing their experience with other students from different cultures, for instance, native English speakers, UK students and nonnative speakers, such as Chinese or Indian students as well as observe how other students progress in learning cultural aspects beside language.

Even though there have been various studies that aimed to provide intercultural subject material in language education, it can be found that the focus of these studies was the use of communication tools and the application of communication technology such as the internet and its various applications and other new technologies and inventions to facilitate the development of ICC (Tran & Seepho, 2016; Gómez, 2012). However, not much work and empirical research have been conducted and reported to explore and examine EFL learners' perceptions of intercultural teaching and education in the Iraqi context. To the researchers' knowledge, the ICC concept is still unfamiliar to the Iraqi education and context, where no or not many studies have been found in the literature on the ICC's implementation and promotion or learners' perceptions. Therefore, the current study tries to fill this gap in knowledge about learners' perception of the ICC course that is conducted online.

1.1. The Purpose of the Study

The current study aims to explore the Iraqi EFL students' perceptions of ICC's integration in online course. Moreover, the study intends to reveal the students' attitudes of the ICCT model used in the online course to increase their awareness about the ICC importance role in EFL learning in EFL learning.

1.2. Questions of the Study

1. What are the Iraqi EFL students' perceptions of the ICC integration in their learning process?
2. What is Iraqi EFL students' attitude of the online learning steps of the ICCT model used in this study?

2. Literature Review

2.1. What is ICC?

ICC is generally "the ability to have effective and appropriate communication in intercultural situations. Consequently, there is a necessity to teach ICC besides the linguistic items of a language. The focus of the theories of teaching ICC is on the "comparing and contrasting" between culture 1 and culture 2 (Chun, 2011, p. 23). As such, EFL learners need to have the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of the target language culture (Lázár et al, 2007). These elements need EFL teachers' assessment to make sure that their students have acquired the knowledge of ICC. Lázár et al (2007) focused on three main dimensions of ICC assessment, they are:

- Knowledge

- Know-how

- Being

These concepts which the teachers can make use of to assess the students' ICC, and subsequently, the EFL student understands how elements of one's own culture are viewed from the cultural perspective of the other, and how the connection between the two cultures is viewed.

2.2. Online Technological Tools for ICC in Education

Traditionally, learning the cultural aspects of a language in the classroom has been decontextualized and become similar to actual communication scenarios. Through technology, "the limitations of the classroom can be overcome through the use of web-based tools to bring authentic texts and real intercultural communication experiences into the classroom" (Cheng and Yang, 2017, P.45). Online tools are used for many studies in language learning and ICC developments (Tafazoli et al, 2018). Nowadays, there are many online tools for learning a new language with its ICC in EFL classrooms. These tools vary according to the objective and purpose they are used for. Researchers used both quantitative and qualitative analyses in the application of these tools. Specifically, they are divided mainly into two main domains. First, the synchronous exchange, and secondly asynchronous exchanges. Some of the tools are used for synchronous exchanges and interactions for developing EFL learners'. For instance, in Peters' study (2009), he used Web 2.0 technologies (Moodle, Skype, video conferencing, and social networking sites) to facilitate instant online practices and allow classroom students to connect with the world. On the other hand, asynchronous tools were quietly used in many previous studies for ICC improvement integration in EFL classrooms. Furstenberg et al. (2001) used asynchronous tools such as discussion forums, MOO, wikis, website publication, blogs, podcast, and weblogsto make the students write in the English language with students of different cultures and exchange their self-reflections about how cultures are vital in learning a second or foreign language.

2.3 Previous Studies and Theoretical Consideration

Despite its complexity in investigation and analysis, and requires longitudinal study observation to be measured and assessed, ICC is at the core of interest of some studies as an important aspect L2 learning. The wealth of the currently available studies of ICC portrays that there is an interest in intercultural competence (communication) as an important aspect of L2 learning (O'Dowd, 2016a, b; Turula, 2017; Oskoz & Gimeno-Sanz, 2020).

These studies on ICC are usually centered on one aspect of the teaching paradigm or circle. Studies conducted by (Ryshina-Pankova, 2014, 2018; Oskoz et al. 2018; Vinagre & Corral, 2018) are focused on the linguistic analysis of the intercultural communication to explore, evaluate, and explain the doped structures and the textual construct by the participants to "manage interpersonal positionings and relationships" (White, 2015, n.p.). Henceforth, these studies examined the participants' linguistic competence as a means of their ability to effective intercultural communication in a diverse learning community. However, they relied only on linguistic models to measure each participants' ability of ICC, without looking into the suitability of the TMC kind or whether this applies to all levels of EFL/ L2 learners.

In the review of previous and existing research and studies on the use of online tools in language and intercultural learning especially developing ICC, it can be observed that "success cannot be taken for granted in telecollaborative exchanges" (Barbara, 2011, p. 394). Studies' results show both successful

and unsuccessful exchanges. For instance, studies use asynchronous online tools to improve ICC of the L2 learners as (Belz, 2006; Diez-Bedmar, 2012; GarciaSanches, 2012) show a disparity of results on the ICC developments of the EFL learners under investigation. Furthermore, studies that use synchronous exchanges practice to develop EFL learners' ICC as in Coperias-Aguilar (2002), Belz (2003), Belz & Vyatikana (2008), Guth & Helm (2010), Dooly & O'Dowd (2012), Chen & Yang (2014). The results obtained from these studies show that the EFL learners' ICC had both failed and successful exchanges. As such, it is believed that to document various and different voices of the ICC learning paradigm, learners' perceptions investigation gives a deeper understanding and improve results.

On the whole, it can be quite apparent that although "there have been different studies which attempted to include intercultural content into language education" (Tran & Seepho, 2016, p. 47), it can be noted that the most frequent focus of the studies was the application of technology mediated communication tools such as smartphone, computer, video, the Internet, and other technologies to encourage the acquisition of as in (Garretts- Rucks, 2013). Similarly, other studies were on the using of new models and approaches in ICC improvement as in (Gómez,

2012; Nakano et al., 2011), the contexts of ICC promotion as in (Ottoson, 2013), and the challenges, difficulties, factors, and characteristics in ICC as in (Alexandru, 2012; Moloney, 2007). However, not many research studies have been reported on EFL learners' perceptions, especially in the Iraqi context. In previous studies, learner's perceptions are investigated in monolingual and one nationality environment studies, for instance, Vietnamese EFL learners (e.g. Tran & Seepho, 2016). Thus, their results cannot be generalized for other learners in different educational milieus such as the Iraqi EFL learners. For this reason, the researcher was motivated to conduct the current study.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The participants were 40 male and female undergraduate students from the Department of English, College of Arts at the University of Anbar. They were Iraqi EFL learners in the second college year and considered at an intermediate level in learning English and with the same educational background. Their ages are between 20-22 years old. They were selected upon their verbal consensus and passing a language proficiency test to make sure that they had a good command of English and strong language skills.

3.2. Instructional Design

The instructional course lasted for eight weeks and was taught by an Iraqi instructor from the University of Anbar. The class sessions were divided into 3 classes each week with 32 in total over the whole course period plus two sessions for assessment and feedback from the students. Thus, the total number of sessions was 34. The sessions focused on the ICC teaching model (ICLT) inspired and adapted from Tran and Seepho (2016). This model focuses on the integration of language culture acquisition that is the foundation of (ICCT) in a continuum and scaffolding process to assist in learners' ICC improvement and development. The main four pillars of the model include; "input, notice, practice, output" Tran and Seepho (2016, p. 48).

The sessions were conducted online through Google classroom set and Google hangout meet application. The instructor created the google classroom and invited the students to join in. The sessions were conducted live with the students on Google hangout meet for 50 minutes. The textbook used for the instruction was the New Headway pre-intermediate level which is a series of English language four skills learning by Oxford University Press (John Soars and Liz Soars, 2018). The book contains 14 units. For the current study, the first 10 units were used with a focus on intercultural themes, for instance, themes related to daily routines, customs, food, and drinks in different cultures and countries.

3.3. Data Collection Instruments

For the current study, data were collected through two main tools for quantitative and qualitative analysis. Firstly, the quantitative data come from a questionnaire that was inspired by previous studies as in Seepho, 2016; Ergün's, 2016; and Byram's (2000, 2008) for collecting perceptions of EFL learners towards an ICC intervention. The questionnaire has five dimensions, the attitudes, the knowledge, the skills, the reactions (action), and the learning online about ICC. It was a Likert scale type with 1 (strongly disagree) and 5 (strongly agree). It was employed before and after the intervention to obtain information and any statistical differences for the students' perceptions about the ICCT before and after course which was developed and inspired based on previous studies by (Gunes & Mede, 2019; Estaji & Rahimi, 2018; Tran and Seepho, 2016; Ergün's, 2016; and Byram's (2000, 2008) for collecting perceptions about EFL learners towards an ICC intervention. The questionnaire has five subscales, attitudes, knowledge, skills, reactions (action), and learning online about ICC. It was a Likert scale type with 1 (strongly disagree) and 5 (strongly agree). It was employed before and after the intervention to obtain information and any statistical differences for the students' perceptions about the ICCT before and after course.

Moreover, to support the findings of the quantitative data analysis, semi-structured interviews with 15 randomly selected students were carried out to explore the students' perceptions and attitudes about the ICCT. The questions of the interviews were derived from the main five subscales of the questionnaire and the previous studies that the questionnaire was inspired and adapted from. Besides, the interviews were conducted before and after the intervention, individually with each student in English and each interview lasted between 15-30 minutes. Moreover, the questions of the interviews were five questions addressing the questions of the current study and focusing on the perceptions, and attitudes of the students towards the ICCT driven approach. Finally, the teacher used a reflective journal to document his challenges and experiences about the ICCT model.

4. Data Analysis

The quantitative data collected for the current study were analyzed statistically using SPSS. Descriptive analysis comparing, frequencies, the standard deviation, t-sample test and mean scores were all employed to analyze the data obtained from the questionnaire before and after the intervention. The t-sample test was used to compare the pre and post –ICC scale and mean scores to see if there were any statistical differences between the students' perception before and after the intervention. The significance level was set at 0.5 for the statistical analyses. On the other hand, a content analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994) was employed to the qualitative data obtained from the 15 semi-structured interviews conducted with the students. The interviewees were given the codes P1, P2, and so on for

their anonymity. The research instruments used in this study were all piloted with double coding to increase and ensure their reliability and validity.

Furthermore, two experts were used as inter-coder to recode the obtained data from the interviews. The main themes and sub-themes were identified under the labels of the implemented ICC lessons. Then, to increase reliability, the same two experts also identified the main themes and sub-themes from the codes. The agreement level of reliability between the researcher and experts on the main themes and the subthemes found in students' responses was 93%.

4.1. Findings

This study aimed to explore the Iraqi EFL students' perceptions before and after engaging in an eight-week online ICC based course. Thus, two research questions were raised. The first question is related to the students' perceptions of the ICC based course (ICCT). Hence, the results obtained from the distributed questionnaire to answer the first question are presented below.

4.1.1. The Learners' Perceptions of The ICC Before the Intervention

The students' perceptions were taken before and after the intervention of the ICC scale. As such, the questionnaire was distributed to the students on the first session with the students conducted online where they responded to it without having started the course yet. The data collected were statistically analyzed and a T-sample test was conducted to produce descriptive statistics. Table (1) below is used to present the mean score of the Learners' perceptions towards the ICCT intervention before it was conducted.

Table (1). T-Sample test results of the EFL learners' perceptions before the ICCT course

Items Outcomes (n=40)		Pre-test	
Questionnaire subscales	No. of items	M	SD
Attitude	5	3.19	0.41
Knowledge	5	2.89	0.75
Skill	5	3.22	0.69
Action	5	4.11	0.54
Online learning	5	4.33	0.48
Total	25	Average 3.58	
$p < .05$			

With relation to the quantitative data obtained from the distributed questionnaire, it can be observed from. Table 1 shows that the mean score in each subscale of the questionnaire is given and the average score of all the means out of 5. The average score of all the means is 3.58 (out of 5) which indicates that the Iraqi EFL learners' students' perception was positive although they had never been involved in the ICCT course before. This means that the students had believed in the importance, usefulness, and necessity of the ICCT course and the important role of studying the culture of the English language.

This realization encouraged the researcher to pursue the conduction of the ICCT because of the necessity of acquiring a foreign culture of English besides learning its linguistic items.

Table (1) also illustrates that the mean score of knowledge was 2.89 and the standard deviation was 0.75, which is the least one of questionnaire subscales (reflecting the students' primitive knowledge of ICC integration in the ICCT course). This substantial percentage of the knowledge subscale could reflect that the learners' had primitive knowledge about ICC integration in the ICCT course. Besides, the percentage represents almost half the participants which indicate that a large number although they believed in its' importance role of foreign language learning, however, the EFL learners were normally unaware and uncertain of ICC's role in developing curiosity, readiness, and openness to understand about foreign cultures, and most importantly, to learn how effectively be able to communicate with people of different countries (Tran & Seepho, 2016). This finding supports the discussed concept that ICC is usually overlooked in EFL classrooms by teachers, especially in Iraq for its time-consuming nature as well as the little attention drawn to it by the educational system.

While the highest mean value among the subscales was online learning and was 4.33 out of 5. The learners' attitude towards learning online and through technological mediated learning platforms seemed very positive although they did not begin the course yet. Also, the mean value of the subscale action was 4.11 with a standard deviation of 0.54, following the online learning subscale in terms of value. Finally, the rest two subscales' mean difference was very little where skill followed the action with 3.22 and a standard deviation of 0.69. The attitude subscale was a little higher than the knowledge subscale, the least one in terms of value.

Table (2). T-Sample test results of the EFL learners' perceptions after the ICCT course

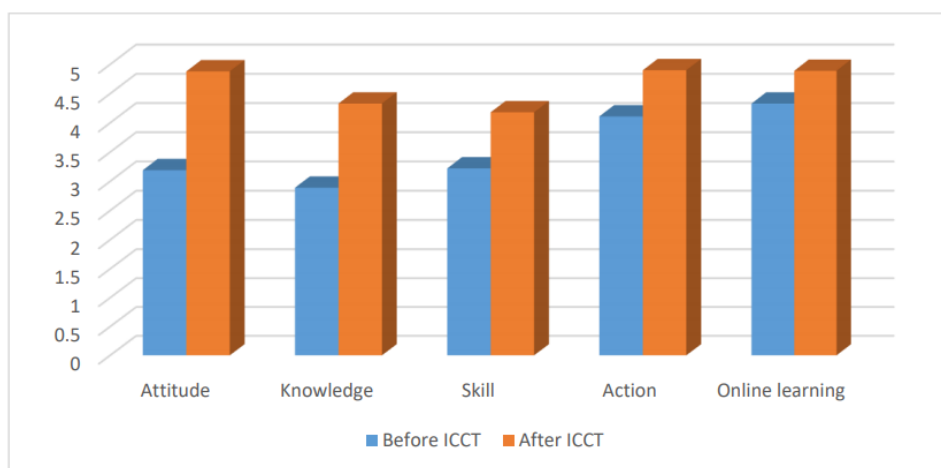
Items Outcomes (n=40)		Post-test	
Questionnaire subscales	No. of items	M	SD
Attitude	5	4.88	0.38
Knowledge	5	4.33	0.40
Skill	5	4.18	0.44
Action	5	4.90	0.37
Online learning	5	4.89	0.39
Total	25	Average 4.63	
$p < .05$			

Table 2 above illustrates some interesting and important facts about the statistical differences between the EFL learners' perceptions after the intervention. It allows the comparison between the means' score of the questionnaire's overall average and subscales before and after the ICCT course, and shows how the EFL learners' perceptions changed and increased as a reason for the intervention.

After the eight-week course, there was a remarkable change in the learners' perspectives and perceptions about the ICCT course. Some students expressed their unawareness in the ICCT course before the intervention and were unsure about the effectiveness of learning ICC with the English language. Thus, low mean scores of knowledge and other subscales of the questionnaire were evident

in the descriptive analysis of the students' responses before the intervention. However, after the intervention, the students have reflected their increased knowledge about the ICCT with a clear difference between the means scores of knowledge subscales before and after the intervention with 1.44 increase out of 5. Besides, other subscales' mean also increased staggeringly with emphasis on the changed perceptions towards positivity of ICCT by the Iraqi EFL learners (students) as in attitude, action, and skill. However, even though the learners' perception is noticeably changed, there was a small number of students who unsure and remained unaware whether they ICCT's integration in the English language teaching course is necessary and important or not. Consequently, this means that the ICCT course was unsuccessful to change those learners' perceptions. Figure (1) below is used to compare the mean scores' differences between the learners' perceptions before and after the intervention.

Fig (1) Comparing the Mean Scores of Iraqi EFL learners' Perception before and after the ICCT



With regards to the post-semi-structures interviews that were conducted after the intervention, the data obtained from these interviews were grouped into main themes based on the questions derived from the five subscales of the questionnaire. The purpose of the interviews, as mentioned in the methodology section of this study, was to find out the learners' perceptions about the ICCT after the intervention and to complete the findings obtained from the quantitative data. Thus, a content analysis was conducted to the obtained data and the findings were classified under the four questions of the interview, as shown in Table 3 below:

Table (3) Interviewees' Responses to the Semi-Structured Interviews about Learners' Perception of ICC.

Interview Questions:	Themes	Frequency	Out of 100 %
• A. Do you think that ICC is important for language learning?	A. Yes - It is very important for communication	12	85

B. Are you positive towards learning ICC? (attitude) desire for interaction	- It helps for better interaction with people of different cultures - Language learning and ICC are inseparable B. No - Takes the time of the class sessions - only a few parts of L2 requires ICC knowledge	10	66.6
		11	73.3
		1	6.6
		3	13
• How do you evaluate your perception of ICC and different cultures? (knowledge) students awareness	• After the course, I learned about ICC and its importance, necessity in EFL classrooms	13	89
	• Before the course, we thought that learning the linguistic items and mastering them would make us proficient in the different cultures	11	73.3
	• We need to know how, what, when to say something	12	85
• Do you think that you are able to interpret and interact in intercultural situations? (skill) Interacting with speakers of different cultures	• Yes, as we have learned the basics of ICC and its effective role in intercultural situations.	10	66.6
	• After taking the course, we now know that our attention should not only be taken to linguistic items of language we learn but instead to its culture	11	73.3
	• This can be developed through watching movies, reading books of the new culture	9	6
		13	89
• What is your perception of learning ICC through online platforms? (online learning)	• The internet is a good venue for learning about ICC	14	93.3
	• Learning about new cultures on the internet speeds up the process of ICC learning.	12	85.6
	• Having enough and multiple channels for learning ICC	13	89.3

It can be observed from. Table 3 that the themes obtained from the interviews conducted with the randomly selected 15 students of the current study have divulged some interesting information regarding the learners' perceptions towards ICC. The themes collected from the students' answers were supporting the findings obtained from the quantitative data. It is obvious that a major proportion of the students have positive perceptions of ICCT. The findings of the interviews remarkably showed that the students, after the course, believed more in the necessity of the foreign cultures into English language learning, considering it necessary for prosperous and successful cross-cultural communication. In addition to that, table 3 illustrates that almost 85 % percent of the learners expressed their positive attitude towards ICCT model. However, 15 percent of the students were not complacent with the course even though they experienced a different kind of teaching with an emphasis on the cultural aspects of the language they learned. They attributed their dissatisfaction to the idea that languages can

be learned stripped from their culture, and cultural aspects can be subconsciously learned through language exposure.

Likewise, the defining features of inter-culturally competent students for the interviewees were related to their abilities to know how, when and what to say in different intercultural contexts and also be able to interact with people from different cultures speaking about culturally related topics. To get better apprehension, samples of the interviews' responses given by the students, focusing on the prominent sayings and themes of the subscales, are presented as follow:

1. Attitude

The students showed a high desire for learning ICC through online platforms. This was presented through their positive answers to the question related to their attitude about the ICCT course and towards the ICC role for better and successful communication. Moreover, the students emphasized in their answers that English classes should include learning the English cultures of its speakers regarding the different dialects and accents. One of the participants (P6) added that the world in the digital era is just like a small village, so, there is a chance to meet people from different parts of the world so easily using social apps. For example, the students made the following comment:

When I log into my Facebook account, I receive different messages from people who want to make friendships with me, mostly native English speakers. Thus, sometimes I stumble not knowing the right culturally accepted expressions to respond since we focus on our study to learn about (P6)

Through the course, I learned about ICC and the role of culture in language learning. I believe that ICCT integration is important and essential for EFL learners (P12)

Furthermore, some students mentioned that integrating ICC in EFL teaching and learning also helps improve and increase the students' learning attitude and mood as the topics of cultures draw the learners' attention and increase learns' motivation to know and learn about different cultures. The following examples are comments made by the students with regards to this matter:

We feel more interested once the subject of the class is focused on the culture of English. (P2)

The lessons actually are more interesting and enjoying when the teachers talk about other cultures through explanations of the subjects in the classroom (P4).

We usually feel bored and sleepy when the topics of the class are only about linguistic items such as grammar, pronunciation (P9)

2. Knowledge

Students' knowledge about ICC before the intervention (the course) was limited to knowing that there are different cultures others from their native one. Specifically, this was evident through the qualitative data gathered before the intervention, the students' did not have much knowledge about ICC and English cultures. Therefore, after the course, they had a different view of ICC and ICCT. This is being collected from the quantitative data as well as the qualitative data of the interviews. Hence, most of the learners' answers agreed that the ICCT course had increased their knowledge about the importance of culture's role in language learning. Moreover, the students also commented that learning about culture

widens our learning capacity and broaden our knowledge about English. The following are some examples of students' comments about knowledge:

In fact, before the course, I did not know anything about ICC or ICCT except the basic skills of language learning that we need to focus on to become competent in English. I think that knowledge in ICC is important because it teaches not only about the culture of English but also about the slang of the language besides paralinguistic features, for instance, the body language of English people. (P5)

Needless to say, learning about cultures helps us to deeply understand my own culture and the differences between them (P11)

3. Skill

Part of the aim of ICCT is to improve the intercultural competence of learners and make them able to act effectively in intercultural situations. The skills of ICC are not something integrated with language four skills like listening or speaking. However, they are methods that assist the speakers to have appropriate tools to act in different situations. When the students asked about the skill for ICC learning, they all have one common answer which that before the intervention, they all knew about language learning skills without any knowledge about ICC. They mentioned that although some of their instructors give them notes about certain vocabulary usage but never talked about ICC. They mostly agreed that this skill is vital for successful language communication multi-cultural communication. Here are some examples from the students' comments:

We know about language skills but never heard of ICC skills (P1)

I think that this skill helps us to communicate effectively in multiple cultural situations especially with native speakers (P5)

Never heard of it, only after the course, I learned about ICC and ICCT from the teacher (P14)

From the course, I have acquired some ICC skills such as looking into national holidays of different cultures how they are celebrated and the right English expressions use for each celebration and festival. (P2)

4. Online learning

It is very interesting to bring something new to the students to facilitate learning, especially if it is something close to their interests. The use of online learning to the students was a really very stimulus to them. They were motivated to engage in multiple situations and act out many roleplay activities they were embarrassed to do them while in the classroom. Online learning made the students free of the classroom restrictions, for instance, time, place, kind of activities each student can do especially before their colleagues. The online environment, however, was fruitful to some students who feel afraid to stand in front of the class and practice real-life situations with emphasis on ICC.

This finding aligns with what was obtained through the quantitative data where almost 90% of the students had a positive tendency towards online learning, it is supported by the information obtained from the interviews, 93 % of the interviewees' answers, after the intervention, were in favor of online learning and supported it. The following are sample examples of students' comments:

Online learning allows us to be more engaged with the classes and the teachers. There are no restrictions of place, methods of interaction, no slips and everyone happy to participate because during the classroom setting, some of the students feel embarrassed to get engaged or afraid to answer. (P10)

Through online learning, classes are more flexible and enjoyable. We do not have restrictions on dressing up and ride to the university. However, with online learning, it is more convenient and ore beneficial. (P12)

4.1.2 Iraqi EFL Learners' Attitude of The ICCT's Online Learning Steps

The qualitative data for this question was obtained through the semi-structured interviews' answers to the following sub-questions:

1. What is your attitude about the input devices used in the teaching steps of online learning?
2. What is your attitude about the notice devices used in the online learning teaching steps? (Notice devices: connecting previous knowledge of culture and language with current new knowledge as we as making comparisons between known features with a new one)
3. What is your attitude towards the practice tasks conducted through the course?
4. What is your attitude about the output practices that each one of the students had during each session?

For the first question, the input devices aimed to provide the students with knowledge of the ICC in the ICCT model. The input devices used were audio clips, videos, pictures, and realia. Generally, the students' attitudes were almost 85% positive where 13 out of 15 students reflected their positive feedback with their comments about these devices to understand ICC concepts, new English vocabularies, and any difficult ideas and concepts during learning. the following are selected examples of students' answers for the first question:

I liked the video clips used in the course. In fact, they helped me learn about kinds of gestures, body language used with speaking in different contexts about the different culture (P8)

The pictures helped me in teaching me about the new vocabularies especially the ones about intercultural concepts (P15)

Well, in our traditional classrooms, there are limited uses of input devices similar to the one of the ICCT. These devices help to learn more easily as well as feel more engaged in the lesson because they create suspense in how to answer intercultural related issues. (P7)

On the other hand, the other two students who were negative about the input devices, complained, mainly about the use of these devices in an online platform. P (9) said that "For me, using these devices to someone novice with technology is not help and also I do not find the themes shared through it are easy to remember".

Learners' answers to the second question, concerning the second component of the teaching step Notice, almost all the students believed in its important role in improving intercultural awareness as well as knowledge. The reflection of previous knowledge and connecting them to newly learned concepts are essential components to "learning English and its culture" according to the learners (e.g. P5, P10, P12, P8). Similarly, one student (P15) commented on the notice component in this way:

This step is necessary for comparing the kind of knowledge we have with the new knowledge we learn. Cultural aspects of any language need to learn with integrated through the learning process where students can reflect on their learning (P11).

Although none of the respondents complained about this step, however, they commented (e.g. P1, P9, and P3) that the input step was more enjoyable and more engaging than this step in terms of activities and difficulty.

With relation to the Practice step that aims to improve learners' ICC competence, nearly all the respondents were very positive and expressed their satisfaction with this step for the reason of its various benefits. The learners commented that without this step nothing could see lights. The step, as the students added, helped them to understand and learn concepts of ICC more efficiently, quickly, and easily. The following are selected responses of the students with relation to Practice step:

Apart from the time constraint of each session, the amount of practice that we had during the course was very interactive, engaging, and very beneficial. We learned from practice and new concepts stuck in our brains. More practice-oriented classes are enjoying and allow us to reflect on the things we learned in theory. (P5)

The practice is very important to learn ICC. It is not easy to learn about ICC without having real-life opportunity scenarios practiced with my colleagues. (P2)

Answering questions related to the output step in teaching ICC, the learners seemed to like it most, more the other steps. The output step aims to allow learners to produce and reflect the input features or what they have learned. The learners talked about the output step as an active step where they had the opportunity to practice, with fun the cultural content of the classes. In addition to that, the students mention that the output step helps learners to engage in practice about cultural content with the rest of the students in the class. The following are some examples of the learners' comments related to output:

The output step is showing our ability to perform what we have learned from the course. It is the best step to measure the kind of progress we have about ICC. (P1)

I like this step because it shows me the way we need to act on our learned materials. So, everything is checked if any more practice is required we can go back and do it. (P11)

This step is the result of the previous three steps, so it is very important and essential to becoming aware of the success in the earlier steps. (P6)

5. Discussion of the Findings

The students' responses to both the questionnaire and the interviews were positive towards and validated the pedagogical benefits of using the online learning platform over the traditional classroom teaching and learning to develop the ICC. Interestingly, the current findings of this study consistent and align with the findings of previous studies, conducted in different contexts and with different learners, about the perceptions of conducting ICCT and its necessity for language teaching and learning (e.g. Mede & Gunes, 2019; Estaji & Rahimi, 2018).

In general, over the twelve-week course, the Iraqi EFL learners' perceptions towards ICCT were dramatically changed positively. Henceforth, it means that the ICC course had a positive influence on the Iraqi EFL learners' perceptions towards acquiring culture besides taking an English language course. The learners seemingly discovered throughout the course the importance of intercultural competence for effective communication with people from a different culture and in multicultural contexts. Thence, learners' perception through the quantitative finding was interesting. The mean scores of the questionnaire components were statistically different before and after the intervention. There was almost (2 out of 5) an increase in the overall average mean score after the ICCT course denoting that the students realized and acknowledged the necessity of studying ICC with an English language course. Thus, the learners' perceived the fact that being competent in the linguistic features of a language does not mean that he can communicate effectively without the intercultural knowledge and competence. However, the results also showed that some learners were either negative or neutral towards the ICCT course. This can be attributed to many reasons. The following are some of the reasons why some students had negative perceptions of the ICCT:

- The less proficient learners think that they are not ready for ICC learning and need more time learning about the linguistic items of the language they are learning.
- Those learners believe that it is not necessary to learn ICC because they only need to learn language apart from its culture.

Furthermore, it was observed from the triangulated analysis of data that what obtained from the quantitative analysis was supported with the qualitative analysis. The Iraqi EFL learners demonstrated in the semi-structured interviews their strong support to the ICCT model expressing their positive feedback and comments about the necessity, important role of culture in learning a language. The learners also talked about the internet medium effective role in fostering learning ICC. Almost, 95 % of the students were positive towards online learning even before the intervention. The only exception students who expressed their negative attitude towards online learning were novice with technology and they wanted a longer period to learn technology.

On the other hand, with regard to the ICCT model implemented in the course, the learners showed high interest in its components especially for input and practice steps and mostly for the output. The learners were mostly interested in output step because they were able to practice different aspects of the culture through what learned from the videos, pictures as well as the realia. Besides, this step made learning more fun and active and also improved learners' creativity of intercultural skills as it was a learner-centered approach. Moreover, the students enjoyed the practice step because it allowed them to have role-played opportunities and made classes more interactive and interesting.

6. Conclusions and Future Work

In summary, this research argued that learners' perceptions towards the ICCT model after the eight-week program were positive and encouraging. The learners' perception was changed positively after the intervention towards the ICC as they become aware of the necessity of ICC in language learning courses. Moreover, the learners had positive comments and feedback for the ICCT model and all its steps. They become fully aware that all steps of the ICCT important and are required to become an intercultural speaker and be able to act effectively in intercultural situations with people of different

cultures. Thus, from the obtained results of this study, it can be concluded that the ICCT model can change the Iraqi EFL learners' perceptions towards learning ICC.

For future studies, further research is needed to explore the Iraqi EFL teachers' perceptions towards the ICCT model and their attitudes towards the importance of ICC in English language courses. The study can assist to learn about the Iraqi EFL teachers' perceptions about the ICCT.

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إدراك متعلمي اللغة الانجليزية العراقيين للتعليم التواصل بين الثقافات من خلال المنصات الالكترونية

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ملخص البحث

تشير الكفاءة التواصلية بين الثقافات أو الكفاءة بين الثقافات (ICC أو IC) إلى الكفاءة الأساسية أو الوعي لدى متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية العراقيين لكي يتواصلوا بشكل فعال في المواقف المتباينة بين الثقافات. لذا فإن تكامل تعليم الكفاءة التواصلية بين الثقافات في فصول تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية باعتبارها لغة أجنبية غالباً ما يمثل تحدياً ويظل محدوداً في تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية، كما هو الحال في السياق التعليمي العراقي. وذلك لأن تدريسي اللغة الانجليزية يميلون عادةً إلى التركيز في تعليمهم حول العناصر اللغوية الأساسية بدلاً من تدريس جوانبها الثقافية. لذا فإن الدراسة الحالية تهدف إلى قراءة تصورات متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية في العراق قبل وبعد دمج تدريس الكفاءة التواصلية بين الثقافات في فصل دراسي عبر الإنترنت. وأظهرت الدراسة مواقف المتعلمين تجاه نموذج تدريس الكفاءة التواصلية بين الثقافات (ICCT) الذي استخدم لتحسين كفاءة الطلاب في التواصل. شارك 40 طالباً عراقياً يدرسون اللغة الإنجليزية في كلية الآداب، جامعة الأنبار. جمعت البيانات من خلال الاستبانة لجمع البيانات الكمية والمقابلات شبه المنظمة مع المتعلمين لجمع البيانات النوعية. اوضحت النتائج بوجود اختلافاً في ادراك متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية بعد التدريب على تحسين كفاءة التواصل بين الثقافات. وذلك لزيادة وعي المتعلمين بالدور المهم الذي تلعبه الكفاءة التواصلية بين الثقافات في الثقافة الإنجليزية. وبالتالي، كان لدى المتعلمين مواقف إيجابية تجاه نموذج التعليم الذي استخدم لتطوير مهارات الطلبة وخطواته.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تواصل الكفاءات، التعلم الالكتروني، معرفة الثقافات، تصورات طلبة الانكليزية.