

The Correlation between Iranian EFL Learners' Intercultural Sensitivity, Vocabulary Knowledge, and English Language Proficiency

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore any type and level of association between Iranian EFL learners' English language proficiency level and their intercultural sensitivity on the one hand, and the possible relation between vocabulary knowledge and sensitivity to cultural differences on the other. To this end, Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT) was administered to 220 EFL learners. Based on the results of this test, a homogenized sample of 150 EFL learners (70 male and 80 female) at intermediate and upper-intermediate levels was selected. Afterwards, the participants took Vocabulary Levels Test (VLT), developed by Nation (1990), and validated by Webb, Sasao, and Balance (2017). Finally, Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS) was administered. The results of Pearson correlation analyses revealed a statistically significant correlation between the participants' proficiency level and their intercultural sensitivity. The results of regression analyses also indicated that language proficiency contributes as much as 55.4 percent to the prediction of level of intercultural sensitivity. Moreover, a significant positive correlation was identified between EFL learners' L2 vocabulary knowledge and their intercultural sensitivity level. Further, the results indicated that Iranian EFL learners' L2 vocabulary knowledge can offer contributions up to 17.3 percent to the prediction of intercultural sensitivity level. These findings can offer prominent implications for all practitioners, material developers, and EFL instructors who are primarily preoccupied with linguistic competence. The results can motivate them to consider intercultural sensitivity as a complementary element to EFL learners' linguistic knowledge as well as their communicative commands.

Keywords: Iranian EFL learners, intercultural sensitivity, L2 proficiency level, L2 vocabulary knowledge

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INTRODUCTION

Rapid improvements in technology have dramatically shortened the geographical distance between people, giving rise to the idea of global village (Peng, Lu, & Wang, 2009, p. 95). Ubiquitous digital technologies such as the Internet have facilitated real-time communication with anyone irrespective of how distant they are. In the meantime, globalization, tourism, economy, and higher education are constantly bringing people into closer proximity, exposing them to a wide array of individuals with diverse cultural backgrounds (Zhong, 1998). Possibly more influentially, mass media in general, and social networking media in particular, are constantly involving individuals in daily contact with people with a wide variety of cultural and social values and visions, and allow them to experience circumstances they otherwise could not. Although such means of communication fails to provide the authenticity of face-to-face intercultural communication, it still provides great opportunities for people with different social and cultural backgrounds to interact with each other. Yet, language barrier appears to be just the tip of the iceberg, because awareness of the cultural differences and similarities seems to play an equally significant role in establishing effective and meaningful communication. To successfully communicate in cross-cultural encounters, it is crucial to possess a proper knowledge of cultural differences, develop a sense of respect for different others, and appreciate the way these differences influence one's behavior.

Intercultural sensitivity, as one's consciousness of cultural similarities and differences, is considered as a key to successful intercultural communication (Bhawuk & Brislin, 1992; Blue & Kapoor, & Comadena, 1997; Schwartz & Bilsky, 1990). A great number of issues, such as intercultural communicative competence, ethnocentrism, and intercultural effectiveness have been investigated in relation with intercultural sensitivity, all of which have offered remarkable implications for learning and teaching English as a second language. A plethora of studies have attempted to investigate the role and influence of intercultural sensitivity in second and

foreign language learning and communication (e.g., Anderson, Lawton & Rexeisen, 2006; Deardorff, 2009a; Jain, 2013; Teven, Richmond & McCroskey, 2010; Zhang, 2007).

Nevertheless, hardly have any studies directly explored the impact of vocabulary knowledge on participants' level of intercultural sensitivity. Instead, English language proficiency has been the focus of numerous studies (e.g., Hill, Storch, & Lynch, 1999; Krausz, Schiff, Schiff, & Hise, 2005; Light, Xu, & Mossop, 1987; Woodrow, 2006; Stoffelsma & Spooren, 2018). However, no research has explicitly examined the influence of participants' vocabulary knowledge on intercultural sensitivity level. Subsequently, the present study aims at filling the gap in the current literature.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Intercultural Sensitivity

According to Remiers (2008), a globally competent individual tends to have three main characteristics: 1. *Global understanding*: awareness of the current matters in the world and the ability to communicate successfully; 2. *Intercultural sensitivity*: flexibility and regulation toward cultural differences; and 3. *Foreign language proficiency*: ability to speak and comprehend a foreign language.

Previous studies on intercultural sensitivity have defined the term from different theoretical perspectives. However, two of these perspectives are predominantly discussed and practiced. First, Chen and Starosta's affective perspective (1998), and second, the developmental model of intercultural sensitivity proposed by Bennett (1986). In Chen and Starosta's (1997) point of view, intercultural communication involves three main elements; intercultural awareness (cognition), intercultural sensitivity (affection), and intercultural competence (behavior). To them, intercultural awareness is the basis for intercultural sensitivity, which, in turn, results in

greater level of intercultural competence. Therefore, they conceptualize intercultural sensitivity as “an individual’s ability to develop a positive emotion towards understanding and appreciating cultural differences that promote appropriate and effective behavior in intercultural communication.” (Chen & Starosta, 1997, p. 5). Regarding this definition, Chen and Starosta (2000, p. 4) characterize interculturally sensitive people as follows:

Interculturally sensitive persons are able to reach the level of dual identity and enjoy cultural difference by gradually overcoming the problem of denying or concealing the existence of cultural differences and attempting to defend their own world views, and moving to develop empathetic ability to accept and adapt cultural differences.

Unlike Chen and Starosta, whose work was mainly reliant on the affective aspect of intercultural communication, Bennett (1986) proposed a theoretical framework based on developmental stages for intercultural sensitivity in terms of cognition. According to his model, individuals go through various stages to raise their awareness of differing cultures and acquire the ability to regulate their established cultural rules and norms to deal with these differences. In other words, the developmental process of intercultural sensitivity enables individuals to transform their affection, cognition, and behavior through numerous stages to become intercultural communicators (Bennett, 1984). This transformation involves moving from ethnocentric stages to ethno-relative stages. In ethnocentric point of worldview, solely one culture exists and is central to all contexts, whereas, in ethno-relative perspective there is a possibility for the existence of other cultural varieties, and therefore dissimilarities and mismatches are inevitable.

The existing literature is replete with a plethora of research on intercultural sensitivity and its correlation with multitudinous concepts and constructs (Anderson, Lawton & Rexeisen, 2006; Chen & Starosta, 2000;

Deardorff, 2009b; Jain, 2013; Reed, 2008; Teven, et al., 2010). These studies have investigated the role played by intercultural sensitivity in assisting communication in intercultural encounters and multicultural setting. For instance, Mahon (2006) evaluated the relationship between the time spent abroad and reduced ethnocentric attitudes. Similarly, Lai (2006) investigated the correlation between complexity of orientation and the experience of living abroad among Taiwanese teachers. Despite these findings, Helmer (2007) reported that ethnocentric attitudes tend to increase as a result of living abroad beyond a certain limit.

Considering the relationship between intercultural sensitivity and language use, Wu (2013) reported that intercultural sensitivity and speaking with native speakers of English are significantly correlated. She suggested that learners tend to enhance their intercultural sensitivity as a result of communicating with foreigners. This was in line with the findings of McMurray (2007) who confirmed in their studies that students who used English frequently outside class represented higher levels of intercultural sensitivity. Similarly, others reported that the ability to speak a second or foreign language gives way to increasing level of intercultural sensitivity (Iskat, Plank & Serrie, 2004).

Among the studies focusing on the correlation between intercultural sensitivity and language proficiency, Peng (2006) tested the relationship between proficiency level and intercultural sensitivity among 200 college students. She concluded that English language proficiency has an impact on intercultural sensitivity and can be considered as a predictor of sensitivity in cross-cultural encounters. Furthermore, higher English language proficiency was reported to correspond with higher interaction enjoyment and vice versa.

Rahimi and Soltani (2011) sought to find out the relationship between proficiency level and intercultural sensitivity. They conducted a study with 36 Iranian EFL learners using Chen and Starosta's Intercultural

Sensitivity Scale. Their findings revealed a significant relationship between intercultural sensitivity and English language proficiency level.

Another research project was undertaken by Chen (2008), who attempted to bring to light the relationship between intercultural sensitivity and foreign language ability. He argued that there was not an important relationship between the variables of the study. In line with this issue, Wu (2013) investigated the relationship between intercultural sensitivity and language proficiency in a study with 87 adults, and reported that no significant relation existed between the variables.

Vocabulary Knowledge

Words convey the main information in communication (Vermeer, 2001) and a sound knowledge of vocabulary not only is crucial to success in foreign language learning, but also is central to communicative competence. In this regard, Nation (2001) argues that the relation between language learning and vocabulary is complementary; vocabulary facilitates language use, and language use, in turn, gives way to cultivating vocabulary knowledge. In the same vein, Wilkins (1972) maintains that “without grammar very little can be conveyed, however, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed” (p. 97).

Vocabulary can be tentatively defined as “the words one needs to know to communicate effectively; words in speaking and listening” (Neuman & Dwyer, 2009). Vocabulary knowledge, however, involves two main aspects; namely breadth and depth. Vocabulary knowledge breadth refers to the size or number of the words an individual learner knows at a specific level of second or foreign language (Nation, 2001, p. 28). In other words, breadth is known as a learner’s size of vocabulary. Milton (2009) postulates that vocabulary breadth may solely indicate a learners’ recognition vocabulary; that is the ability to recognize the form of a real word from an artificial non-word.

Vocabulary depth, on the other hand, is defined as “the quality of the learner’s vocabulary knowledge” (Read, 1993, p. 357). Simply put, it deals with how well the learner knows the words. Learners need to understand and know the words to be able to apply them in different contexts. However, knowing a word implies knowing beyond its single meaning, which involves spelling, pronunciation, collocations, and semantic relations such as antonyms, synonyms, and hyponyms (Chapelle, 1998). Therefore, vocabulary knowledge renders itself as a multidimensional concept, rather than a single dimensional structure. Depth of vocabulary knowledge can be considered as a system of links between the words of a language. It determines how the words of a given language interact with each other, and what restrictions are imposed on them in terms of tense use, context of use, and register issues. In this sense, vocabulary depth refers to the characteristics of words such as collocational features, connotations and denotations, hyponymy (i.e., shades of meaning a word carries), and links they tend to create in the minds of language users (Milton, 2009). This suggests that unless these links and associations are created appropriately and correctly, learners will not be able to get their meaning across.

Nassaji (2004) sought to explore the facilitating role of vocabulary depth in inferencing in reading. He concluded that inferencing while reading can improve vocabulary learning. Similarly, it is suggested that vocabulary size had a strong relation with skills of reading and writing (0.83 and 0.73, respectively).

In an experimental study, Fathi, Alipour, and Saeedian (2018) investigated the influence of using Memrise (i.e., a flashcard application for learning vocabulary) on the vocabulary learning process of 59 Iranian EFL learners preparing for M.A. entrance examination. Their findings indicated that learners in the experimental group outperformed the control group in terms of improving their L2 vocabulary knowledge. Furthermore, their study indicated that self-regulating capacity of the experimental group was higher in comparison to the control group. Their study, and other similar

works (e.g., Heidari Tabrizi & Onvani, 2017), accentuate the facilitating role played by state-of-the-art technologies in inspiring vocabulary learning.

Purpose of the Study

The existing literature is replete with studies on the correlation between intercultural sensitivity and proficiency level. Nevertheless, none have touched on the association between sensitivity to cultural differences and participants' vocabulary knowledge. Thus, the main objective of the present study is to investigate any type and degree of the potential relationship between Iranian EFL language learners' intercultural sensitivity and their proficiency at two levels (i.e., intermediate and upper-intermediate). Also, exploring the correlation between participants' level of sensitivity to cultural differences and their vocabulary knowledge is another concern of the study. However, the overall goal is to raise language practitioners' awareness of the correlation between English language proficiency, intercultural sensitivity, and vocabulary knowledge. Pursuing the objectives of the current study, the following major questions are put forward:

1. Is there any significant relationship between Iranian EFL learners' proficiency command and their intercultural sensitivity?
2. Is there any pattern of relationship between L2 vocabulary knowledge and learners' intercultural sensitivity level?

METHOD

Participants

The participants of the present study were 150 male and female EFL learners at Intermediate and Upper-intermediate levels, learning English at three private language institutes in Zanjan, Iran. All participants attended their English classes three sessions a week in the spring of 2018. Initially, to ascertain that participants were at the same proficiency level, Oxford Quick Placement Test was administered. The proficiency test was administered

with 220 potential candidates in fifteen classes (i.e., 8 classes of females and 7 classes of males). A total of 150 learners (i.e., 80 females, 70 males) with intermediate and upper-intermediate proficiency levels (i.e., 67 intermediate, 83 upper-intermediate) were selected as the finalized research sample. It is worth mentioning that learners with other proficiency levels, including elementary, pre-intermediate, and advanced (i.e., 70 participants) were excluded from the statistical calculations without being informed.

Considering the demographic information of the participants, their age ranged from 15 to 29, and the majority of them had more than two years of experience in learning English as a foreign language. The participants' first language was primarily Turkish, and very few of them had the experience of traveling abroad (i.e., less than three percent). Table 1 demonstrates a demographic summary of the participants.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of the Participants

Demographic Variables		N	Percentage
Gender	Female	80	53.33
	Male	70	46.66
	Total	150	45.33
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Age			
	15-19 Years	68	32
	20-23 Years	48	22.66
	24-28 Years	34	Write the percentage
	Total	150	
Experience of Learning English			
	Under 2 Years	44	29.33
	More than 3 Years	74	49.33
	More than 4 Years	32	21.33
	Total	150	

Instrumentation

Initially, a proficiency test was administered to make certain of the homogeneity of the participants and determine their English language proficiency level. To this end, Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT) was employed (2001). The test consists of 60 multiple-choice (i.e., four choices) centering around grammatical and vocabulary items. An outstanding feature of the test is that a considerable number of its items are in the cloze test format. Therefore, it could be inferred that the test tends to measure the participants' current language abilities in an integrative manner, rather than a discrete point scheme. It is also worth noting that this standardized test of English language proficiency is developed jointly by Oxford University Press and Cambridge ESOL, and it has been pretested and validated by 6000 learners in 20 countries with an internal consistency of 0.9. To measure internal consistency of the proficiency test in this study, the Internal Consistency method of Kuder-Richardson (KR-21) was employed. Table 3.2 represents the reliability account of the proficiency test.

Table 2: Reliability Account of the Proficiency Test

	Mean	Mode	Smallest Score	Largest Score	Variance	Standard Deviation	N of Items	KR-21
Vocabulary Test	36.3	30 (32 times)	23	47	36.33	6.02	60	0.61

The second test was the Updated Vocabulary Levels Test (2017), which aimed at measuring the participants' vocabulary knowledge. The test was initially designed by Paul Nation (1990) and later revised and validated by Schmitt, Schmitt, and Clapham (2001), and its new version was designed and validated by Web, Sasao, and Balance (2017). Vocabulary Levels Test consisted of 150 items in matching format with 10 clusters in each level measuring the participants' knowledge of verbs, adjectives, and nouns. The test-takers were asked to match the provided definitions with the target words in each cluster. The participants' overall vocabulary knowledge

scores were calculated between the ranges of 0 to 150, because each true answer was given 1 point. It is worth mentioning that the test levels (i.e., 1000, 2000, 3000, 4000, and 5000) are designed in ascending difficulty level and frequency.

It is reported the reliability value of .92 for the updated vocabulary levels test. However, to evaluate the internal consistency of the test in the current study, Kuder-Richardson coefficient (KR-21) was employed. The obtained results indicated that the reliability index turned out to be quite satisfactory, ($r=.97$). Table 3.3 presents the reliability index for the vocabulary test.

Table 3: Reliability Index of the Vocabulary Test

	Mean	Mode	Smallest Score	Largest Score	Variance	Standard Deviation	N of Items	KR-21
Vocabulary Test	87.93	101,132,74,92 (5 times)	20	150	994.69	31.53	150	0.97

Finally, Chen and Starosta’s (2000) Intercultural Sensitivity Scale was employed to measure the participants’ level of sensitivity to cultural and social differences. The questionnaire is originally developed to measure EFL learners’ level of sensitivity to cultural and social differences. It involves 24 items based on five-point Likert scale, ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”.

Several studies have inquired the reliability of intercultural sensitivity scale. Chen and Starosta (2000) calculated the alpha reliability coefficient of .86 in a study in the United States. Furthermore, the internal consistency for five subscales of the questionnaire was reported to range from .58 to .79 (Fritz, Mollenberg, & Chen, 2001). Internal consistency of the scale was calculated using Cronbach’s alpha reliability coefficient yielding a value between .79 and .89 (Chen & Starosta, 2000).

As for the reliability of the sensitivity scale in the present study, Cronbach’s Alpha Coefficient was employed, because normally it is viewed

as the most appropriate measure of reliability for Likert scale measurement (Whitley, 2002). Considering the results obtained from the calculations, the reliability index turned out to be satisfactory, (i.e., $r=.82$), indicating that the scale enjoys a high degree of reliability. Table 4 summarizes the reliability index for intercultural sensitivity scale.

Table 4: Reliability Index of Intercultural Sensitivity Scale

	Mean	Mode	Smallest Score	Largest Score	Variance	Standard Deviation	N of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Vocabulary Test	82.42	90 (7 times)	24	120	928.47	30.47	24	0.82

Data Collection Procedure

In an attempt to select a homogenized sample in terms of language proficiency, Oxford Quick Placement Test (Version 1) was administered for 220 EFL learners from fifteen classes. A total of 150 learners, whose scores were between 30-39 (i.e., intermediate) and 40-47 (i.e., upper-intermediate), were nominated as the participants of the study, and those with other proficiency levels were eliminated from the study without being informed.

Having been ascertained of the participant homogeneity based on the proficiency test results, the Updated Vocabulary Levels Test (2017) was administered. To this end, research objectives and principles, along with the purpose of the test and the allocated time (i.e., 40 minutes) were explained to the teachers who agreed to administer the test to their students. On the basis of the test administration procedure, each item was assigned one point. In this sense, higher scores indicated higher vocabulary knowledge.

Finally, intercultural sensitivity self-report questionnaire was used, on a separate session, to measure the participants' intercultural sensitivity level. It is worth noting that nine negatively-keyed items were reverse-coded, so that the participants' overall intercultural sensitivity score tend to vary from 24 to 120.

Data Analysis

In line with the purpose of the study, both descriptive and inferential statistics were utilized. The inferential analyses included Cronbach's Alpha, Kuder-Richardson coefficient, Pearson correlation, and regression analysis, were employed to seek answers to the research questions. Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 21 was employed to perform the analyses. Data analyses and results are represented in the upcoming section.

RESULTS

The first question of the current study was meant to discover whether there is any possible relationship between Iranian EFL learners' English language proficiency level and their intercultural sensitivity level. To answer this question, firstly, basic descriptive features of the variables, including the mean, standard deviation, highest and lowest scores, and the like were calculated. Subsequently, Pearson Correlation Coefficient analysis was carried out to determine the kind and strength of the relationship between the variables in the question at hand. Table 5 displays the descriptive statistics for language proficiency test and intercultural sensitivity.

Table 5: Descriptive Statistics for the Proficiency Test and Intercultural Sensitivity

Parametric Tests	Mean	Standard Deviation	Highest Score	Lowest score
Proficiency Test	36.3	6.02	47	23
Intercultural Sensitivity scale	82.42	30.47	120	24

Pearson Product-Moment Correlation (Pearson Correlation, for short) was applied next. It is worth noting that this correlational measure is applied when variables are interval or continuous type, there is a linear relationship between them, and the data concerning the variables are normally

distributed (Mackey & Gass, 2005). Furthermore, the results of the tests used to measure them are interpreted based on predefined intervals (i.e. classification of levels base on the obtained scores; 0-17 Beginner, 18-29 Elementary, etc.).

Table 6 demonstrates the results for Pearson correlation coefficient regarding the relationship between EFL learners' proficiency score and their intercultural sensitivity level.

Table 6: Pearson Correlation Results for EFL learners' proficiency Level and their Intercultural Sensitivity

Proficiency Test	Pearson Correlation Coefficient Sig. (2-tailed) N	Intercultural Sensitivity Scale
		0.700 0.000 150

As indicated in Table 6, the results obtained from correlational analysis reveal that there is a robust positive correlation between Iranian EFL learners' proficiency level and their intercultural sensitivity level ($r = 0.70$, $N = 150$, $p < 0.000$). According to Cohen (1988), r value of 0.1 is small, 0.3 is medium, and 0.5 is significant.

The significant level for the correlation between the variables was 0.000, which is less than 0.05 and signifies a statistically significant correlation. As for the correlation coefficient (i.e., $r = 0.70$), it indicates a relatively high correspondence in the range of 0.00 to 1.00.

The subsequent point to consider was whether English language proficiency can function as a predictor for intercultural sensitivity of the participants. Therefore, a number of regression analyses were applied. Table 7 demonstrates the results of regression analysis.

Table 7: Regression Results for Proficiency Command and Intercultural Sensitivity

Regression	R	R Squared	Adjusted R Squared	Std. Coefficient Beta	Sig.	t
Proficiency Command	0.22	0.048	0.03	0.554	0.000	6.257

As evident from Table 7, the adjusted R square indicates that 3 percent of the variance in intercultural sensitivity can be predicted from the predictive variable, namely English language proficiency. Moreover, the Beta value demonstrates that English language proficiency contributes as much as 55.4 percent to the prediction of level of intercultural sensitivity. This prediction is statistically significant at 0.000 level.

Considering the results obtained from Pearson Correlation Coefficient and regression analyses, it was concluded that a strong, positive, and substantial correlation exists between language proficiency score and the level of intercultural sensitivity.

The second research question deals with whether there is a possible relationship between Iranian EFL learners' L2 vocabulary knowledge and their intercultural sensitivity level. Firstly, descriptive statistics were considered for the parametric tests used to gather data for the question. Table 8 illustrates the descriptive statistics for vocabulary level test and intercultural sensitivity.

Table 8: Descriptive Statistics for Vocabulary Test and Intercultural Sensitivity

Parametric Tests	Mean	Standard Deviation	Highest Score	Lowest score
Vocabulary Test	87.93	31.53	150	20
Intercultural Sensitivity scale	82.42	30.47	120	24

Considering the descriptive statistics, Pearson Correlation Coefficient was employed to examine the correlation between the Iranian EFL learners' L2 vocabulary knowledge and their intercultural sensitivity level. Table 9 represents the results of Pearson Correlation Coefficient.

Table 9: Pearson Correlation Results for L2 Vocabulary Knowledge and Intercultural Sensitivity

Vocabulary Knowledge	Intercultural Sensitivity	
	Correlation Coefficient	0.582*
Significance	0.000	
N	150	

*Correlations is significant at the 0.05 level.

As indicated in Table 9 above, there is a strong, positive correlation between the subjects L2 vocabulary knowledge and intercultural sensitivity, which appears to be statistically significant ($r=0.582$, $p=0.582$, $n=150$). The obtained data suggests that the significance level was 0.000, which is less than 0.05 ($p<0.05$), and the value of correlation coefficient was 0.582. Therefore, it could be stated that L2 vocabulary knowledge and intercultural sensitivity were significantly correlated.

Having arrived at the results above, the researcher felt a growing interest to explore whether L2 vocabulary knowledge can function as a predictor factor on intercultural sensitivity of the participants. To this end, some regression analyses were carried out. Table 10 demonstrates the results of regression analysis.

Table 10: Regression Results for L2 Vocabulary Knowledge and Intercultural Sensitivity

Regression	R	R Squared	Adjusted R Squared	Std. Coefficient Beta	Sig.	t
Vocabulary Knowledge	0.554	0.31	0.30	0.173	0.047	1.956

As can be observed in Table 10, the adjusted R square reveals that 3 percent of the variance in intercultural sensitivity can be predicted based on the predictive variable, (i.e., L2 vocabulary knowledge). Furthermore, the Beta value illustrates that vocabulary knowledge contributes as much as 17.3 percent to the prediction of level of intercultural sensitivity. This prediction is statistically significant at 0.047 level.

According to the results obtained from the correlational investigations and regression analyses, it could be concluded that there is a positive significant correlation between L2 vocabulary knowledge and level of intercultural sensitivity. Moreover, L2 vocabulary knowledge can contribute as much as 17.3% to the prediction of intercultural sensitivity level.

DISCUSSION

The ultimate focus of the current study was to explore the strength and direction of the relationship between intercultural sensitivity and English language proficiency level. Furthermore, an additional objective of the study was to investigate the correlation between vocabulary knowledge and intercultural sensitivity. To this end, descriptive and inferential statistics were used to demonstrate and interpret the data gathered from the study participants. The results obtained indicated that Iranian EFL learners' proficiency level has a significant positive correlation with their intercultural sensitivity level. Additionally, L2 vocabulary knowledge correlated positively and significantly with the participants' intercultural sensitivity.

Findings regarding the first research question were in agreement with the previous studies that highlighted a significant correlation between level of intercultural sensitivity and English language proficiency (e.g., Dearsorff, 2006; Olson & Kroeger, 2001; Peng, 2006). However, these findings were in contrast with previous studies which reported no significant relationship between intercultural sensitivity and proficiency command (e.g., Bennett, Bennett, & Allen, 2003).

The results of the present study were also in line with Yuan and Shen (2013); demonstrating that English language proficiency had a positive relationship with greater intercultural sensitivity. He further reported that participants with higher proficiency command had a better cultural perception as compared to learners with lower English proficiency.

In the same vein, Rahimi and Soltani (2011) examined the relationship between Iranian EFL learners' proficiency and their level of intercultural sensitivity. The results revealed a significant relationship between the two variables.

In addition, the results of the present study were in contrast with Jackson (2011), investigating the relationship between proficiency of advanced level participants and their intercultural sensitivity. His findings indicated that the variables were not significantly related. Similarly, (i.e., Byram, 1997; Kramsch, 1998; Park, 2006), concluded that intercultural competence and foreign language proficiency do not develop at the same rate.

Moreover, the results of the regression analyses suggested that English language proficiency makes a statistically significant contribution to the prediction of intercultural sensitivity level. These findings are in agreement with previous studies. However, the results of the current study are in contrast with Zhang (2016) in that they found a moderate correlation between the variables in their study with 85 postgraduate non-English participants in Minzu University. Findings of this study indicated that the correlation coefficient between the participants' proficiency scores and intercultural sensitivity was not high. Nevertheless, in the present research there appeared to be a significant positive correlation between English language proficiency and sensitivity to intercultural differences.

The second research question of the present study concerns the relationship between L2 vocabulary knowledge and level of intercultural sensitivity. Findings of the present study suggest that there is a significant correlation between Iranian EFL learners' vocabulary knowledge and their level of intercultural sensitivity. Although almost no research has been dedicated to directly investigating the relationship between the two variables, the existing literature is replete with studies on the relationship between culture and language learning (e.g., Genc & Bada, 2005; Liddicoat, Papademetre, Scarino, & Kohler, 2003). The association between vocabulary knowledge and intercultural issues have scarcely been

addressed. For instance, Aldhahi, Davies, and Fernández-Parra (2017), explored the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and cultural communicative competence. To this end, 35 Arabic professional translators (i.e., 32 from Saudi Arabia, 2 from the UK) were selected. Their findings reported a significant positive relationship between vocabulary knowledge and cultural sensitivity.

Despite the paucity of studies concerning the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and intercultural communicative competence in general, and intercultural sensitivity in particular, the correlation between vocabulary knowledge and other variables such as proficiency level (e.g., Grabe, 1991; Hermann, 2003; Zareva, Schwanenflugel, & Nikolova, 2005), reading comprehension (Reed, 2008), strategy use (Gu & Johnson, 1996; Rafik-Galea & Wong, 2006; Schmitt, 1998) have been comprehensively investigated. Furthermore, the results obtained from regression analyses suggested that L2 vocabulary knowledge can offer a statistically significant contribution to the prediction of intercultural sensitivity.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The fundamental focus of the current study was to explore the strength and direction of the relationship between intercultural sensitivity and English language proficiency level. Furthermore, an additional objective of the study was to explore the correlation between vocabulary knowledge and intercultural sensitivity. Based on the results of the present study summarized above, some theoretical hints can be delineated. Statistical analyses led to the conclusion that proficiency and intercultural sensitivity were significantly correlated and proficiency was a predictive factor in participants' intercultural sensitivity level. That is, the higher the proficiency, the more sensitive an individual becomes. This leads to the notion that English language proficiency directs the intercultural sensitivity level in the population of the present study.

One significant point concerning the correlation between proficiency and intercultural sensitivity can be attributed to materials and textbooks utilized in English language centers. Today, textbooks aim at exposing learners to varying shades of cultural issues in the target language, in addition to improving four skills of language (i.e., reading, writing, speaking, and listening). Therefore, the duration and extent of immersion in English language materials and textbooks rich in the target language may lead to differences in intercultural sensitivity level of subjects across different proficiency levels.

Numerous scholars have highlighted the importance of culture as an essential ingredient of language teaching. Mitchel and Myles (2004) believe that “language and culture are not separate but acquired together, with each providing support for the development of the other” (p. 235). The findings of the current study, also, signify the need to consider relationship between culture and language as irrefragible. These findings can potentially influence EFL instructors’ mindset regarding the importance of dealing with cultural issues, and assist them in adopting a productive approach to address differences and mismatches between learners’ local culture and the target language culture. Additionally, EFL instructors can increase the motivation of their learners by involving them in cultural issues and lifestyle of the people whose language they are learning (Mavi, 1996; Tavares & Cavalcanti, 1996).

By and large, EFL instructors can turn the classroom into a locus of interest by providing their language learners with precious information about the target culture and cultural differences. As Steiner (2001) puts it, a smart teacher will always provide a cultural lesson when the eyes drop.

One significant finding of the present study, which can be of utmost importance to syllabus designers and material developers, is the positive correlation between EFL learners’ proficiency level and their intercultural sensitivity. This finding can benefit material developers and syllabus designers in that they can make an attempt to subtly incorporate the target

culture in situational and contextual settings, to expose learners to a large array of target language culture.

However, the present status is indicative of the fact that the culture of the target language is neglected at the existing educational textbooks, which could have served, at least, as a source of motivation for Iranian school students. This, in turn, has led to an inauthentic and unnatural experience of learning English as a foreign language. In the case of private language institutes, efforts are being made to introduce different cultural issues in meaningful contexts. School students who participate in general English courses in private language institutes are familiarized with culture and lifestyle of native speakers of English to some extent, whereas students with no access to such courses have little, if any, perception of the differences between their own local culture and the target language culture.

Accordingly, based on the findings of this study, it is suggested that cultural issues of the target language, which bear no sharp contrast with culture and belief system of the country, could, or in fact should be incorporated in the textbooks compiled for English courses.

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