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Developing Intercultural Awareness and Skills in English Majors: A Constructivist Approach

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Abstract

In the fast-changing modern world of today, learners need global skills for life-long learning and effective communication. Among these skills are intercultural competence and critical thinking. Although teachers have acknowledged the importance of the inclusion of global skills in their actual teaching procedures, they still need more concrete methodology and tangible pedagogical frameworks to incorporate these skills into their teachings. This study has been an attempt to propose a framework based on the constructivist approach to activate critical thinking and, in turn, develop critical cultural awareness and intercultural skills in EFL learners. To achieve this aim, a qualitative study was designed; an intercultural syllabus was developed and implemented through the constructivist approach in an academic semester. The related data were then collected through the participants' reflective worksheets and interviews. The content analysis of the data indicated that the constructivist approach and the intercultural syllabus were effective in assisting the participants in applying critical thinking strategies and developing critical cultural awareness and intercultural skills of discovery and interaction, interpreting and relating, and evaluation. Meanwhile, the results of the self-report evaluation survey indicated that the participants

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evaluated most of the aspects of the intercultural experience positively. The findings of the current study have implications for instructors, materials developers, and educational stakeholders who support developing intercultural awareness and skills in learners.

Keywords: Intercultural Awareness, Intercultural Skills, Constructivist Approach, Critical Thinking, Global Skills

Globalization and rapid changes in communication and information technology have prompted the need for developing global skills in learners of the 21st century. Intercultural skills, critical thinking, and cultural awareness are among the most essential global skills that need to be developed in classroom practice. The 21st-century learners need to think, analyze, evaluate, and communicate in culturally diverse settings.

Matsuda (2016), Mackey (2012) & Galloway and Rose (2015) argue that ELT should be given a new perspective to accommodate the needs and objectives of modern learners and propose changes be implemented to ELT. However, despite plenty of theoretical frameworks having explored new trends in ELT, including cultural and intercultural competencies, few of them have been tested empirically. Compared to other teaching methods, intercultural teaching has not received much attention in practice, and few studies have investigated the applicability of intercultural approaches in classroom practice (Young & Sachdev, 2011).

As a result, this gap has caused confusion and frustration in many teachers. Although many instructors may feel the need for inclusion of a new pedagogical perspective to address the global needs of learners; they often have difficulty integrating these skills and competencies in their teaching (Driscoll, Earl & Cable, 2013; Sercu et al. 2005; Young & Sachdev, 2011). This can be attributed to the lack of focus on intercultural aspects of language learning and teaching in teacher education, materials development and ELT curricula (Baker, 2012). So as Matsuda (2012) stated when teachers cannot

come up with a choice, they find themselves doing what they were doing before.

Addressing this gap, the current study was an attempt to propose a pedagogical approach to include intercultural teaching in ELT that may meet the needs and objectives of modern learners more efficiently. Meanwhile, the study aimed at scrutinizing Byram's model of intercultural development to find out the practicality of this model. By developing an intercultural course and implementing it, the researchers purported to make intercultural teaching part of classroom practice. The study focused on developing intercultural awareness and skills in the participants drawing on the constructivist approach. Accordingly, the following research questions were formulated and explored:

Q1. To what extent does intercultural teaching through the constructivist approach develop cultural awareness of English majors?

Q2. To what extent does intercultural teaching through the constructivist approach develop skills dimension of ICC in English majors?

Q3. What are the attitudes of the participants towards the constructivist learning and teaching methodology?

Critical Cultural Awareness and Intercultural Skills

In recent decades, the notion of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) as an integrated dimension of linguistic competence has been raised by several scholars (e.g., Byram, 2000; Canagarajah, 2006; Kramsch, 2008; Sharifian, 2011). The conceptualization of the construct has led to the development of several models of intercultural competence; Among them Byram's model of intercultural communicative competence (1997), Dearsorff's pyramid model of ICC (2004) and Fantini's model of intercultural competence (2000) have been referred to as the most credible frameworks for developing and assessing ICC in an educational context. These models have

specified intercultural awareness and intercultural skills as the core components of ICC.

One of the integrated dimensions of ICC is intercultural awareness. Baker (2012) believes that in international uses of English, there is not any definite correlation between language and the culture of a nation. He maintains that intercultural awareness moves beyond the boundaries of native cultures and focuses on “the INTER or TRANS” cultural dimension. This dimension has been divided into self-culture awareness and critical cultural awareness. According to Byram (1997), critical cultural awareness enables the individuals to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices, and products of their own and their interlocutors’ cultures. Accordingly, an interlocutor with critical cultural awareness can identify ideological perspectives and values in cultural products, e.g. a newspaper/magazine article or a TV program. He is also aware of his own ideological perspectives and values, and how these might affect his judgment and evaluation of other people’s values and beliefs.

The skills dimension of ICC has been defined as behavioral components that may lead to an external outcome, i.e. appropriate interaction. In his model of ICC, Byram (1997) proposed three main skills of *discovery and interaction; interpreting and relating; and evaluating* as fundamental requisites for effective intercultural communication. He defines *Skills of discovery and interaction* as the ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the capacity to manage communication and intercultural interactions through operating knowledge, attitudes, and skills. The skills of *interpreting and relating* refer to the cognitive ability to interpret information from one’s own and from another culture and establish the potential relationships between them. These skills include the capacity “to interpret a document or event from another culture, [and] to explain it and relate it to documents and events from one’s own event” (Byram, 1997, p. 61).

In other words, through a range of questioning strategies, a successful intercultural speaker can analyze and interpret a document or event by eliciting the allusions, connotations and presuppositions, and exploring their origins/sources from the informants and make generalizations based on shared meanings and values and establish links and relationships among them (logical relationships of hierarchy, of cause and effect, of conditions and consequence, etc.). He can recognize and analyze different interpretations and connotations and set relationships of similarity and difference between them.

However, as stated by Deardorff (2009), it must be taken into account that these models consider affective factors, such as positive attitude, openness, respect and curiosity as the foundation of the development of skills needed for effective intercultural interactions. The degree of the individual's intercultural competence depends on the acquired degree of these underlying dimensions. Obviously, as Barrett et al.,(2013) emphasized intercultural awareness and skills along with the positive attitude function as the core ground that an individual can deploy and put into practice through appropriate interaction, what has been defined earlier by Deardorff (2009) as the external outcome.

It can be argued that these skills are in line with a sequence of seven specific critical thinking activities put forward by Numrich (2006): *Observing, making assumptions, understanding, interpreting, inquiring further, evaluating, and making decision tasks*. Thus, when learners are engaged in doing activities and tasks related to intercultural issues through the constructivist approach, they are actually employing critical thinking strategies.

Constructivist Teaching and Learning

Conventional teaching approaches with emphasis on the role of teachers as transmitters of knowledge and learners as passive recipients of that knowledge cannot address the need for developing fundamental global skills.

As Cunningham and Duffy (1996) stated instruction should support the active construction of knowledge and skills in learners rather than communicating knowledge. Similarly, Orszag (2015) and Moir (2013) emphasize the role of teachers in making their students aware of these skills and dispositions with explicit reference to them. Thus, it seems that educators should adopt more effective pedagogical approaches to address such needs. Emphasizing the construction of knowledge in a learner-centered setting, the constructivist approach can be an alternative that teachers can employ to pursue more recent objectives of modern education.

Rooted in Cognitive Development Theory (Piaget, 1966), Vygotsky's theory of ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978) and Bruner's concept of Discovery Learning (Bruner, 1983), constructivist theory puts forward several teaching approaches and models, including Random Access Instruction, Scaffolding Instruction, Situated or Anchored Instruction, and Top-down Instruction. Yang and Jia (2011) consider the four principles of constructivist theory, namely situation, collaboration, communication, and meaning construction as the most effective approaches to integrate intercultural concepts in actual teaching in the classroom. By providing meaningful situations that promote learners' interaction with their peers and teachers, and employing effective learning tools and resources, instructors can assist learners in constructing their cognitive schemata that in turn, would lead to meaning construction, which represents an improvement in learners' cognitive ability as a result of the instruction. Meaningful teaching is supposed to improve learners' cognitive schemata. Otherwise, it is meaningless.

Considering learning as a social and collaborative activity, the theory suggests that learners should be encouraged to interact with others and take primary responsibility in the information-processing and meaning-constructing process. Wang (2012) states that the conventional role of teachers as transmitters of knowledge should be changed. They need to act as facilitators, counselors, and organizers who help students construct and

assimilate new knowledge. Constructivism stresses that in-class learning is closely related to real situations and social communication activities. Thus, authentic activities should be set in meaningful and relevant contexts to motivate learners to take the initiative in constructing knowledge and skills through problem-solving tasks.

Collaborative learning is of great importance (Herrington, Oliver, & Herrington, 2007). In other words, cooperation and interaction among learners can enhance a profound and comprehensive understanding of knowledge. The constructivist approach advocates interaction between teachers and learners as well as among learners. Being involved in doing interactive tasks can help learners to develop problem-solving strategies. Additionally, Liu (2003) highlights the importance of the inclusion of the authentic contexts and materials to reflect the way knowledge can be used in real-life communication and suggests that authentic activities should be provided so that students can make use of a variety of information to gain a comprehensive and incisive understanding of knowledge.

Furthermore, in the social constructivist learning theory, knowledge and learning are considered as a social product, as well as an active process sustained by social processes (Burr, 1995) and the pivotal role of cultural artifacts and, or more knowledgeable others (teachers, peers) who serve as facilitators or models has been highly emphasized (Lantolf, 2000; Pritchard & Woollard, 2010). The current study was grounded on the principles of the constructivist approach and was an attempt to scrutinize how employing these principles can develop intercultural awareness and skills in learners.

Method

Participants

The participants in this study were 25 BA English majors studying at Azad University, Central Branch. Their levels of English proficiency were intermediate and upper-intermediate, which were confirmed based on the

Oxford placement test. There were seven male and 18 female students who ranged from 20 to 32 years old. They were studying in their third educational year and participated in a “Topic Discussion” course. The course is a compulsory module in English majors’ educational curriculum; however, there is not any predetermined syllabus proposed by the university, so the content of the course can be designed by the instructor.

Materials and Tools

While some scholars argue that people can best develop their intercultural skills in real intercultural encounters, several others believe that classrooms are ideal places to promote these skills in learners. They unanimously emphasized the role of materials and explicit teaching in fostering intercultural competence (Alptekin, 2002; McKay, 2002; Nault, 2006, 2011). On the other hand, Baker (2012) and Kumaravadivelu (2001) argue that ELT materials rarely reflect intercultural concepts and the need for developing more effective and interculturally-oriented materials is felt. They add that materials often project simplistic, stereotypical understanding of other cultures and people, which are more likely to prevent rather than promote effective intercultural interaction and collaboration.

Considering the critical role of materials, designing the course syllabus was the most demanding part of the study. To design the syllabus, the researchers explored intercultural issues and controversial themes and topics that are usually approached critically in different cultures. The themes were meant to motivate the participants to reflect and discuss their viewpoints and face their hidden biases and their own system of values and judgment. The themes were also supposed to encourage participants to reconsider and reinterpret some of their mental schemata. The researchers finally came to the following themes: Intercultural awareness; Earth Identity; We and They; Respect and Tolerance; Living with diversity; Perception of the Self and Others; Discrimination and Cultural stereotypes. In the next stage, the themes

were developed into critical thinking tasks and activities drawing on a variety of resources or mediating artifacts such as newspaper articles, web pages, reading texts, poems, games, radio broadcasts, images, and movies. All these artifacts were found useful in developing ICC in a classroom.

The primary goal of tasks and activities was to stimulate the participants to apply some critical thinking strategies on top of them, reflection, along with other strategies such as noticing, discovery, analysis, and evaluation. This meant that the materials and resources required as well as motivated the participants to employ compare and contrast strategies, participate in discussions and debates, conduct their own investigation, critically analyze intercultural concepts in textual and audio-visual form, reflect on their own experiences, suspend their judgment and even question their assumptions. These strategies were supposed to promote intercultural awareness and skills in the participants (Deardorff, 2009). The course syllabus including the themes and topics; specified aims and objectives; tasks and activities; methods and techniques; materials and resources are provided in Appendix A. In the following section the syllabus for one session is presented in details:

Table1.

The Syllabus for One Session of the Course

Theme	Aims/ Objectives	Tasks/Activities	Methods/Techniques	Resources
Earth Identity	To recognize the earth's diversity as a value and a resource to protect (biodiversity, cultural diversity...) To promote a sense of interdependence	Learning about interdependence (a game) What do we mean by Earth Identity	Pair work, discussion	"One hundred percent American," a reading by Ralph Linton Extracts from "Earth Charter"

Reflective Worksheets

Journal entries, diaries, logs, and reflective worksheets are considered as valuable introspective tools for collecting data (Rezaei, 2017). In the current study, part of the data was collected through reflective worksheets. The worksheets were designed to motivate the participants to use reflection and critical thinking strategies to develop intercultural skills of discovery and interaction, interpreting and relating, and evaluation. The worksheets provided the participants with some prompts to write about their feelings, attitudes, ideas, thoughts, and experiences related to the materials and resources they were exposed to every session. The worksheets were purported to make the participants more conscious of their hidden biases, presuppositions, and values system. Since the enhancement of intercultural skills and awareness is ongoing and developmental in nature, worksheets can provide valuable insight to the gradual development of the construct in the participants; meanwhile, they can give feedback to the learners about their actual progress.

Semi-Structured Interview

Interviews, according to Richards (2003), are the mainstay of qualitative research. They can provide an effective way to draw in-depth information about the participants' motivations, attitudes, and personal perspectives in a way that is difficult to achieve through surveys, or observation (Saville-Troike, 1989; Scollon & Scollon, 2001). The study employed a semi-structured interview by means of a set of pre-determined questions to motivate the interviewees to elaborate on the issues raised in an exploratory manner (Dornyei, 2007). As McDonough and McDonough (1997) argue, the use of a semi-structured interview allows for effective interactions and more personalized interpretations of the issues. In line with these assumptions, Five participants were volunteered to take part in the interviews, which were conducted a week after the course had finished. The questions were

formulated based on the aims and objectives of the course. Some of the questions are presented in this section:

1. What do you feel you have gained from this class?
2. Have your ideas changed about culture? If so, what events/experiences prompted this change?
3. Do you think it is important to reflect on your culture?
4. Do you think you could apply some critical thinking strategies while you were doing the tasks?
5. What did you like the most and the least about the course?

Procedure

At the beginning of the course, an informal interview was conducted to find out the participants' viewpoints in terms of intercultural issues and their attitudes toward an intercultural course. The designed syllabus was then implemented through an academic semester. The participants were practicing with a variety of tasks and activities which were developed based on the intercultural themes. The teacher followed the principles of constructivist teaching by scaffolding the procedure. According to this approach, the participants were supposed to construct knowledge of intercultural competence and critical cultural awareness through doing critical thinking tasks and activities.

A detailed explanation of the procedure taken during one session of the course is presented as an overview to shed light on the constructivist teaching and learning approach employed in this study. "The earth identity" is one of the themes developed to make the participants recognize the earth's diversity as a value and a resource to protect (biodiversity, cultural diversity...) and to promote a sense of interdependence in learners. At the beginning of the session, the participants discussed their viewpoints about the earth's identity in groups of five. Meanwhile, the instructor did not hesitate to intervene occasionally to unfold different dimensions of the issue and to usher the

discussion (scaffolding). The next activity related to the same theme was reading a text titled “One Hundred Percent American” (Appendix B). In this situated learning experience, after the awareness-raising stage through the new input, the participants were supposed to apply strategies such as noticing, discovery, analysis, and evaluation to discuss the text. In the next stage, the participants were interpreting their observations and experiences regarding the importance of interconnectedness and interdependence in the modern world and they tried to evaluate their viewpoints in collaborative learning groups. Finally, at the end of the session, they were asked to complete a reflective worksheet. The questions in the worksheet were formulated based on the targeted strategies to track the participants’ progressive ICC development.

At the end of the semester, the course evaluation survey was administered. Five participants were randomly selected for the post-course interviews. The interviews were conducted and recorded a week after the course. During the last phase of the study, the collected data through worksheets, interviews, and evaluation surveys were analyzed. The results are presented in the following section.

Results

To analyze the data obtained from the worksheets and interviews, qualitative content analysis was employed. Hsieh and Shannon (2007) have defined qualitative content analysis as a research method that allows for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes of a pattern. According to this approach, there are three main types of qualitative content analysis, namely conventional, directed, and summative.

In this study, the analysis of the collected data was reflective and deductive. Directed approach, as stated by Hsieh and Shannon (2007), draws on a pre-existing theory, in this study, Byram’s theory of ICC. According to Hsieh and Shannon, this approach is practical when supporting or extending a

theory. Thus, the content of the worksheets and interviews were transcribed, organized and coded deductively. The codes were grouped based on their relevance to each other or their meaningfulness together to come up with themes. The themes were pre-determined and classified based on the skills components proposed by Byram's model of ICC. The themes were then classified into four skills: skills of discovery and interaction, skills of interpreting and relating, the skill of analyzing, and the skill of evaluating, and two components of awareness: self-cultural awareness and critical cultural awareness. Furthermore, a summative approach to content analysis was employed. The summative approach, as defined by Hsieh and Shannon (2007), is more quantitative and is used when the frequency of the codes and themes is counted. To conduct a thorough analysis, the researchers implemented both descriptive and summative approaches to content analysis of the data.

A total number of 180 worksheets were read, and five interviews were transcribed and analyzed. The number and occurrence frequency for skills dimension (1-4) and the components of intercultural awareness (5-6) are presented in table 2.

Table 2.

The Occurrence Frequency of Components of ICC

Intercultural skills and Awareness	Number of instances	Percentage
1.Skills of discovery and interaction	65	26%
2.Skill of analyzing	43	17.2%
3.Skills of interpreting and relating	46	18.4%
4. Skill of evaluating	32	12.2%
5. Self-cultural awareness	18	7.2%
6. critical cultural awareness	46	18.4%

As it is evident, instances related to skills of discovery and interaction and interpreting and relating are slightly more than those of skills of analyzing

and evaluating. As it was previously discussed, skills of discovery and interaction refer to the ability to achieve new knowledge about different cultures. The participants' instances showed plenty of references to this skill. Nevertheless, few instances referred to perceived interaction skill. The leading cause might be the fact that participants did not have any real interaction with English speakers; however, there are some instances of participants' feedback about how they would react in an intercultural setting. The instances also reflect some development in skills of interpreting and relating. The participants could recognize ethnocentric documents and events and explained ethnocentric perspectives. Since the participants could not experience real interactions, they identified different cultural perspectives through artifacts such as texts, movies, and other media.

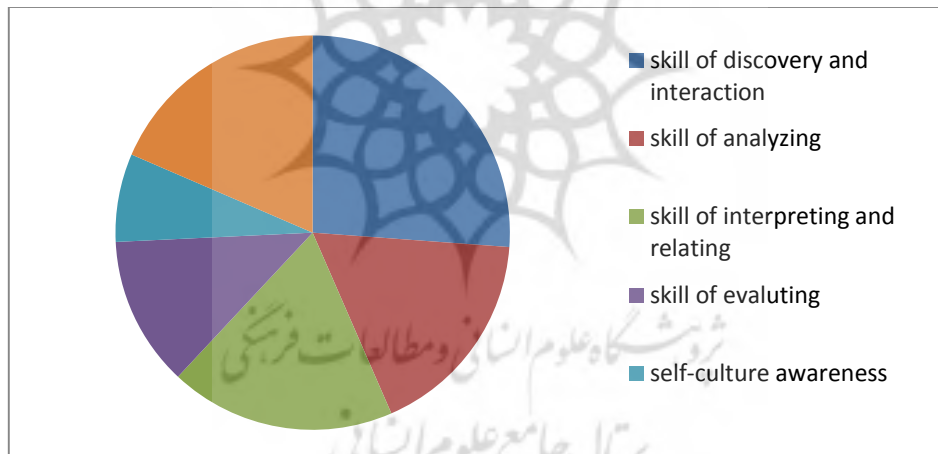


Figure1. The comparison of Different Components of ICC

Regarding cultural awareness, more instances were found related to critical cultural awareness compared to those of self-culture awareness. Several participants reported that they achieved significant changes in their intercultural views by modifying their preconceived stereotypes and biased

perspectives through opportunities they had for constant self-reflection provided by the course.

However, regarding self-culture awareness as it is illustrated in the table (2), this dimension is one of the less frequently addressed one. The participants were more likely to point out the differences and negative aspects of their own culture by belittling or considering it backward, especially in comparison with western cultures. They rarely referred to similarities and universal concepts that bind all cultures together. A more detailed explanation of the results will be presented in the discussion section. Some of the extracted instances from the participants' worksheets and interviews related to different target components are presented as follows:

Skill of discovery

Extract 1

Watching the video about discrimination was very interesting. When I think about it, I see I have been discriminated a lot in my life, and I sometimes discriminated against my friends and family. It is cultural. I think people in my country are very biased.

Extract 2

Stereotypes are everywhere. Now that I think about myself, I can see I had some beliefs about foreign people like Arabs, Afghan, and religious groups like Jewish. I learned a lot about the origin of stereotypes. Something interesting about this course was making us think about things that are part of life, but we never think about them.

Skills of discovery and interpretation

Extract

Reading the text about "one hundred percent American" was very interesting. I think no one can live independently. We are social, and our identity is not individual. We belong to a group, and communities are important in shaping our life.

Skills of analyzing and evaluating**Extract 1**

I know that people have different values, but the problem is that everyone thinks their values are right or the best. Values are part of the culture they are inherent. This is the reason we are biased about them. I think we need to be more tolerant of other people. I feel embarrassed to say that I am very biased about my own values.

Extract 2

I think all the problems we have in the world are because of cultural and religious differences. We need to learn to live in harmony with people. We should love others and change our views.

Skill of analysis**Extract 1**

In our classes, teachers and books do not say anything about these topics. We should learn these skills to be more successful and happy. We do not know the Iranian culture. I think immigrants have a very bad life because people do not respect them.

Extract 2

You had had to analyze something and think.”

This topic teaches us to be more reflective and think about ourselves, and it's a good lesson. “I could analyze my experiences and think about them in a different way.”

Skills of discovery and interpretation and relating**Extract**

I have understood that the world is made of varieties; I can see the world from different perspectives. Multiple perspectives, to see the same thing differently, so fun.

Cultural self-awareness**Extract 1**

Now I think my values and ideologies are important. Biases about religion, family are everywhere.

Now I think my culture is important to me. I like to introduce my culture to the world.

I have learned to reflect and compare my culture to other culture.

I learned that values are important but different.

Extract 2

Some customs in our culture are foolish. I feel shy to say I am Iranian. It is better to get the culture of others like in the west. Culture means bias.

Critical cultural awareness

Extract

It is very important to be able to see other people and the situation from a different perspective.

I am less biased now. Since I know, biases are rooted in ignorance.

Now I think my values and ideologies are important.

Biases about religion, family are everywhere. It is important to find the roots.

The study also explored the attitudes of the participants' towards the course through an opinion survey. The descriptive results are shown in the following table. As the table represents, almost all the participants found different aspects of the course useful. They referred to the materials and the content of the course as reasons why they liked the course. 52% of the participants evaluated the class discussions, tasks, and activities absolutely useful, followed by (40%) "Mostly useful." In terms of the themes and topics, the majority of the participants believed they were interesting; however, they found some topics beyond their minds and really challenging, such as "We and They" and "Cultural stereotypes."

Table 3.

Descriptive Results of the Evaluation Survey

The extent I found the following themes and activities useful	Not at all	Not really	Mostly	Absolutely	I do not remember the item
1) class discussion, tasks, and activities	4%	4%	40%	52%	0
2) intercultural awareness: reading / powerpoint presentation	0	4%	60%	36%	0
3) Earth Identity: Reading "One hundred percent American"/ discussion/ pair work	0	8%	52%	40%	0
4) We and They: Cultural values (handout) / compartment mates (handout)	0	0	28%	72%	0
5) Respect and tolerance : Group and plenary discussion	8%	4%	40%	48%	4%
6) Living with diversity : identity cards, friendly schools (handout)	12%	0	40%	44%	4%
7) perception of self and others : reflection and discussion on images/ quotes and optical illusion pictures	0	12%	56%	32%	0
8) video and class discussion: parts of the film <i>A Separation</i> ; differences in values and cultural practices in Iran	0	12%	20%	68%	0
9) Discrimination : Watching the video and discussion/ Role cards	0	12%	20%	56%	12%
10) pair discussion: cultural stereotypes and the importance of "otherness"	0	16%	44%	28%	12%
11) class discussion: ideology / identity	4%	0	32%	44%	20%
12) Teaching methodology	0	10%	24%	64%	0
13) Worksheets	0	24%	40%	36%	0

68% of the participants enjoyed watching part of the movie "Separation" to a very large extent, and the group discussion following that. In respect to teaching methodology, 64% of the participants found it absolutely useful, followed by (24%) "Mostly useful." Worksheets as the primary instrument for data collection were evaluated absolutely and mostly useful by (36%) and

(40%) of the participants, respectively. (24%) of the participants believed that the worksheets were not very useful.

Discussion

As Sharifian (2013) stated, the cultural construction of conceptualizations is a cognitive process, and cultural conceptualizations serve as a foundation for semantic and pragmatic components of language. Therefore, the study devised practical and logical steps to support learners' employment of cognitive strategies. The content analysis of the data indicated that the course was effective in promoting intercultural awareness and skills including skills of discovery and identification and interpretation of cultural meaning, comparison of similar cultural circumstances through socio-cultural concepts, evaluation of the interpretations using critical thinking strategies and intercultural competence, clarification, and transfer of logical perspectives to similar or new situations, finding practical solutions, and finally, evaluation of the resolution through reflection on contradictions and consequences.

The study also explored if the inclusion of intercultural teaching could enhance the critical cultural awareness of the participants. As it was discussed earlier, part of intercultural awareness is "self-culture awareness", which emphasizes the importance of the culture of the interlocutors. This awareness binds cultures and is the essence of intercultural competence. Part of this acceptance and understanding, according to Hall (1976), is a 'glimpse of the strengths and weaknesses of one's own system.' Kramsch (1993) refers to this component as finding a "third space," a common ground from which to view culture objectively. Similarly, Baker (2011) believes that developing self-cultural awareness can help learners to develop an understanding of cultural space as transitional and emergent.

However, in the current study, the participants did not address this component a lot. Similarly, in a study conducted by Shuoqian Qin (2014), the participants showed limited self-culture awareness of their own values.

Theoretically, intercultural teaching should have the most impact on this component. Since self-awareness is possibly the most important change that takes place (Fantini, 2006), it would lead to personal growth. On the contrary, Gyogi (2016) argued that the categorization of 'own' and 'other' cultures could cause problems and results in reproducing fixed categories of 'own' and 'other' cultures. In fact, this categorization might pose the risk that interlocutors develop stereotypes and cultural biases rather than viewing culture objectively.

Generally, most of the tasks and activities designed for this study encouraged learners to think about their hidden biases, values, cultural rules and norms and find the differences and try to compare and contrast them with their own culture. In fact, the course content was meant to motivate the learners to bring their own culture into the classroom by reflecting, comparing and contrasting strategies. The feedback shows that the course could develop an awareness component of ICC significantly in learners. However, since the development of these dimensions is not linear, if any change happened, its documentation would be even more challenging.

The overall effectiveness of Byram's model in developing intercultural skills and awareness was established in this study; however, it should be noted that some findings are indefinite and, in some ways, even contrary. The discrepancies in the results can be partly attributed to Byram's categorizations of the components of ICC. It seems that the skills of interpreting and relating overlap the skills of analysis and evaluation, and critical cultural awareness cannot be separated from self-culture awareness. Theoretically, outlining the components of ICC looks proper, while in practice, all these components are interrelated, and it is very difficult, if not impossible to address them individually.

Moreover, considering the fact that the construct in question is highly complex and many-faceted, and the time frame for its development was limited to one academic semester, drawing definitive conclusions about the

extent to which the course could achieve its aims and objectives is not possible relying on these comments alone.

Then, in order to help learners gain competent self-cultural awareness, it is proposed to develop and employ appropriate teaching materials and authentic resources with sufficiently informative socio-cultural values that can actively promote reflection in learners and provoke their curiosity to explore the comparable aspects of their own culture. The appropriately selected cultural themes and materials can act as the starting point at which learners are most likely to begin a self-cultural reflection process and relate similar aspects to their own culture.

In general, the present study supports that intercultural teaching can benefit a lot from the constructivist approach and Byram's model of ICC. While acknowledging the pedagogical contribution of Byram's model, the researchers believe that some modification is needed within the context of this study. In other words, the model can be supplemented with some context-sensitive dimensions to fit the Iranian context more appropriately.

Given the method of delivery and teaching methodology, it seems to be a superiority of the constructivist approach over traditional methods. The constructivist approach offers creative and innovative teaching and learning strategies. Almost all the participants found the teaching methodology absolutely useful. However, regarding the efficacy of the approaches in developing ICC, the literature shows mixed results (Kalfadellis, 2005; Knutson, 2003; Littrell & Salas, 2005; Takkula et al., 2008; Taras et al., 2013). Regarding the participants' views, they reported strong personal preferences of experiential learning and intercultural approaches over the conventional ones. This result corresponds to the findings of studies conducted by Pruegger and Rogers (1994). In their research, learners found the experience novel, inspiring, and supportive in assisting them in extending their intercultural horizons.

Conclusion

Drawing on the constructivist approach and a variety of teaching resources, including the use of critical incidents, reading texts, electronic technology, and visual or auditory information the present study aimed at developing learners' intercultural skills and awareness.

The results of the study suggest that intercultural teaching through a constructivist approach can be effective in developing learners' intercultural awareness and skills. Through constructivist teaching and learning, learners can better use critical thinking strategies to promote their overall ICC. However, the participants addressed some components more frequently, with the skills of discovery and interpreting at the top. On the contrary, the participants showed limited in-depth knowledge of their own culture. Theoretically, one of the primary purposes of intercultural training is to bring different cultures together. Learners are supposed to bring their culture to class as an asset and develop their intercultural awareness and skills drawing on that foundation. Therefore, knowledge about one's own cultural system should be considered as an indispensable component of any intercultural teaching. Reflecting on similarities between cultures as highlighted can encourage learners "to look for others in themselves." The study recommends that materials developers and syllabus designers incorporate appropriate levels of deep self- culture knowledge in materials, and resources to support learners in developing their intercultural perspectives and promoting reflection about their own cultural values.

The participants evaluated the constructivist approach, the syllabus and resources very instrumental in engaging them in the cognitive process of developing their intercultural awareness and skills. Therefore, the study has clear implications for teachers who are interested in incorporating intercultural teaching in ELT. The findings suggest that a constructive developmental teaching method which embodies effective learning and teaching strategies can be more efficient in developing complicated, many-faceted ICC construct.

Teaching culture as a developmental process enables teachers to fulfill recent objectives of ELT better and to equip learners with more appropriate global skills and knowledge to deal with interculturally-diverse settings.

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Appendix A. Course Syllabus

Theme	Aims/ objectives	Tasks/activities	Methods/techniques	Resources
1.Intercultural awareness	To identify the competences – knowledge, attitudes and skills – needed to communicate and interact positively in diverse contexts, namely educational ones	Intercultural pedagogy/culture shock	Discussion, small group work	Powerpoint presentation/ reading texts
2.Earth Identity	To recognize the earth’s diversity as a value and a resource to protect (biodiversity, cultural diversity...) To promote a sense of interdependence	Learning about interdependence (a game) What do we mean by Earth Identity	Pair work, discussion	“One hundred per cent American”, a reading by Ralph Linton Extracts from “Earth Charter”
3.We and they	To develop a common understanding of the concepts of world views and world knowledge; To discuss the effects of world views and stereotypes on ourselves and our pupils; To promote positive attitudes towards the diversity of world views and world knowledge.	In-group and out-group mentality The origins of stereotypes Compartment Cultural continuum	Individual and group work; Collaborative work and cooperative learning; Debate and discussion; Problem solving; Discussion based on case studies.	Cultural values continuum document from Peace Corps (Handout). Compartment mates (Handout)

4. Respect and tolerance are born in the classroom	To reflect on the role or our role as teachers, attitudes and typical features of the teacher behavior we prefer to follow.	Teacher similes Insight into Group Dynamics	Group and plenary discussion	Teacher similes Participants' notes on previous sessions
5. Living with diversity	To raise awareness of the necessity of preserving cultural diversity - To raise awareness of responsibilities of all teachers to enhance their own intercultural competence and about the need to tackle the issue of their students' intercultural competence by integrating it into their curricula and learning objectives. To promote acceptance and understanding.	Identity, Friendly school	Small group work, discussions, role play	Identity cards, friendly schools (handouts)
6. Perception of the self and others	To help participants to explore and become more aware of their own multiple identities, values and perspectives, which influence the way they see	Watch your valuables Can you see what I see?	Interpretation and discussion of images in groups Reflection and small group discussion	A selection of quotes on perception A selection of optical illusion pictures

	and interpret the world. To encourage and enable participants to explore sensitive social issues			
7.Discrimination	to experience the feeling of being excluded / different through videos to determine what is excluded as the other / the different to enable trainees to talk about positive and negative feelings to develop multiple perspective	Look behind the mask Being in someone else's shoes Turning black into white	Watching the video and discussion Role play, group work Drawing, group work	Video Role cards Print-outs of pictures

Appendix B. Reading Text

One Hundred Per Cent American By: Ralph Linton

Our solid American citizen awakens in a bed built on a pattern that originated in the Near East but that was modified in Northern Europe before it was transmitted to America. He throws back covers made from cotton, domesticated in India, or linen, domesticated in the Near East, or wool from sheep, also domesticated in the Near East, or silk the use of which was discovered in China. All of these materials have been spun and woven by processes invented in the Near East. He slips into his moccasins, invented by the Indians of the Eastern woodlands, and goes to the bathroom, whose textures are a mixture of European and American inventions, both of recent date. He takes off his pajamas, a garment invented in India, and washes with

soap, invented by the ancient Gaul. He then shaves a masochistic rite that seems to have been derived from either Sumer or ancient Egypt.

Returning to the bedroom, he removes his clothes from a chair of southern European type and proceeds to dress. He puts on garments whose form originally derived from the skin clothing of the nomads of the Asiatic steppes, puts on shoes made from skin tanned by process invented in ancient Egypt and cut to a pattern derived from the classical civilizations of the Mediterranean, and ties around his neck a strip of bright-colored cloth that is a vestigial survival of the shoulder shawls worn by the seventeenth-century Croatians. Before going out for breakfast, he glances through the window made of glass invented in Egypt, and, if it is raining, puts a hat made of felt, a material invented in the Asiatic steppes.

On his way to breakfast, he stops to buy a paper, paying for it with coins, an ancient Lydian invention. At the restaurant, a whole new series of borrowed elements confronts him. His plate is made of a form of pottery invented in China. His knife is of steel, an alloy first made in southern India; his fork, a medieval Italian invention; and his spoon, a derivative of a Roman original. He begins breakfast with an orange, from the eastern Mediterranean, a cantaloupe from Persia, or perhaps a piece of African watermelon. With this he has his coffee, an Abyssinian plant, with cream and sugar. Both the domestication of cows and the idea of milking them originated in the Near East, while sugar was first made in India. After his fruit and first coffee, he goes on to waffles, cakes made by a Scandinavian technique from wheat domesticated in Asia minor. Over these he pours maple syrup, invented by the Indians of the Eastern woodlands. As a side dish, he may have the egg of a species of bird domesticated in Indochina, or thin strips of the flesh of an animal domesticated in Eastern Asia that have been salted and smoked by a process developed in Northern Europe.

When our friend has finished eating, he settles back to smoke, an American Indian habit, consuming a plant domesticated in Brazil in either a

pipe, derived from the Indians of Virginia, or a cigarette, derived from Mexico. If he is hardly enough, he may even attempt a cigar, transmitted to us from the Antilles by way of Spain. While smoking, he reads the news of the day, imprinted in characters invented by the ancient Semites upon a material invented in China by a process invented in Germany. As he absorbs the accounts of foreign troubles, he will, if he is good, conservative citizen, thank a Hebrew deity in an Indo-European language that he is 100 per cent American.

