

## A MIXED METHOD STUDY OF INTERNATIONAL ENGLISH MAJOR STUDENTS' SUCCESS IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION ENCOUNTERS

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**Abstract.** *This study seeks to recognize the International English major students' success in intercultural communicative encounters, and investigates the factors influencing it. Accordingly, the study employs the paradigm of mixed-method research, in which it comprises a qualitative phase followed by a quantitative phase, in which the design of the study draws on findings of the first phase of the study. The participants of the two studies were 30 undergraduate English major students in their third year at Khorasgan University in Isfahan, Iran, and 30 international ESL students in their first year at Gonzaga University, in Washington, U.S.A. The studies were conducted in September- December 2016. The analysis of the data includes qualitative content analysis for the first phase of the study, and descriptive statistics, correlation and regression analyses for the second phase. The results reveal that participants have diverse ideas on how to define an intercultural encounter, but they indicate similar signs of intercultural awareness in the situations they describe. Most significantly, the analysis of the narrative accounts reveals that students' intercultural performance is greatly influenced by cognitive, affective and contextual factors. The findings of the statistical analysis indicate that the most important individual difference variables directly influencing students' intercultural communicative competence are their communication apprehension and their perceived communicative competence.*

**Key words:** *Communicative, Competence, Encounters, International, Intercultural, Mixed- Method Research, Perceived*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Worldwide integration has brought enormous advances to humanity at economic, financial, and societal levels, and the advancement in information and communication technologies has magnified these effects. However, the challenges imposed by our changed world are also enormous. Individuals all over the world have to find their place in new, diversified societies that comprise people of different cultural and language backgrounds, representing various color, nations and religions.

The supposedly easy task to coexist, interact and communicate with people from other cultures is an ever more frequent phenomenon, eventually an everyday requirement. Progress in doing so guarantees useful cooperation and cultural interactions, whereas failure might induce unwanted consequences. Avoiding failure, thus, is a priority, which

can partly be achieved by changing our preconceptions about other cultures and by having tolerance, understanding and openness.

The above introduction may raise some questions. How do language learners cope in situations in which people of different cultural and linguistic backgrounds are involved? What ideas and feelings do they associate with such encounters? What helps and what hinders their success in such situations? What skills and what attitudes do they need? How is cultural knowledge integrated in their daily practices? How do they perform as language learners in such situations? What are the factors influencing their performance as foreign language learners?

### **1.1. Theoretical background**

#### *1.1.1. Chomsky's 1964, 1965 view of competence*

The idea of competence was introduced by the American generative linguist Noam Chomsky; he differentiated between *competence* and *performance* (1965). This distinction, in fact, echoes the Saussurean idea of *langue and parole*. In which, the former denoting the whole system of language that makes speech possible, the latter referring to the concrete use of language, the actual speech act. However, Chomsky states that the structuralist notion of language as a mere systematic inventory is not appropriate, as it is static and does not include linguistic creativity (Chomsky 1964, 1965).

In the Chomskyan (1964, 1965, 1968, and 1975) taxonomy competence, the knowledge of the language is distinguished from performance, the use of the language. Chomsky (1965) defines competence as intrinsic linguistic knowledge of a language possessed by its native speakers that enables them to produce and understand an indefinite number of utterances, and to judge the grammaticality of utterances intuitively. Thus, in this sense competence is the underlying knowledge of the language that the speaker has internalized. However, as Chomsky notes, natural speech shows deviations from rules, and thus competence can be directly reflected in actual performance only in idealized circumstances. This assumption gave rise to far reaching debates on competence in linguistics.

#### *1.1.2. Hymes' 2001 sociocultural view*

In 1972 the American sociolinguist Dell Hymes challenged Chomsky's abstract notion of linguistic competence, arguing that 'such a theory of competence posits ideal objects in an abstraction from sociocultural features that might enter into their description' (Hymes 2001). Hymes argues that Chomsky's distinction of competence and performance is too narrow to describe contextualized human behavior adequately. Hymes shows that the rules of usage are dominant over the rules of grammar, and thus social life not only affects outward performance but inner competence as well. Hymes proposes a distinction between two competences: *linguistic competence* which allows speakers to produce and understand grammatically correct sentences and to intuitively judge utterances either correct or incorrect, and *communicative competence* which deals with producing and understanding utterances that are appropriate in a given context. Hymes call to recognize the sociability of language has been a catalyst in applied linguistics, as it has expanded the scope of competence and has triggered an abundance of research leaning towards a more functional approach.

## 1.2. Statement of the problem

A comprehensive review of the literature on intercultural communication competence reveals that there are some inconsistencies in how the construct itself is being labeled. Various scholars have used different terms to refer to the same or very similar construct. This, unfortunately, makes research in this field somewhat difficult. The diversity of terms used can be attributed to different factors: terms either vary according to how culture is defined, or may be attributed to the academic tradition the author comes from (Kramsch 1998a). It is for the above inconsistencies, or using interchangeable terms that the researcher believes this could create problems in learning or teaching a second language. For this reason, it is the intention of the researcher to tackle and dissect this issue.

The highly compound nature of ICC together with obvious inconsistencies in published research requires further studies on ICC. Despite the abundance of intercultural communication studies, all scholars have underlined the importance of further studies due to the complexity of intercultural interactions. Besides providing a description of students' ICC, the study will show pedagogical implications, as by highlighting problematic subject areas, they also will suggest ways of developing students' ICC.

## 1.3. Objectives of the study

The objectives of the study are:

1. To understand how students behave in intercultural situations.
2. To evaluate and characterize the students intercultural communicative competence in relation to their success, motivation, attitudes, anxiety and willingness to communicate.

## 1.4. Research Questions

The researcher has formulated the following research questions to explore, survey, and investigate the complex nature of the international English major students ICC:

1. What characterizes the students' intercultural communication competence?
2. What characterizes the students' perceived intercultural communication competence?
3. What is the relationship between ICC and PICC?
4. What contributes to the students' success or failure in intercultural communicative encounters?

## 1.5. Significance of the study

At the macro level, the main findings of this study will carry pedagogical messages to instructors at institutes, colleges and universities. At the micro level, the retrospective design of the task will help them reflect on their and their interlocutors' behavior in light of what they had studied in their courses. In this study students will be requested to think about a previous intercultural encounter and analyze it to see how they had benefited from the course. This study will prove that it would be crucial to reduce learners' nervousness about speaking in English, as their anxiety will have negative effects on their development: it debilitates their performance, and most often will stop them in interacting with others in English.

This study will also show that students' self-image as communicators (their perceived communicative competence and their perceived L2 competence) are of utmost importance:

if students believe they are good communicators in English, they are more likely to be self-confident and are more likely to take part in intercultural encounters. Thus, instructors should help students achieve a realistic self-image about their performance in English and support them if they lack self-confidence.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In Scarino's (2010) argumentation, the cultural knowledge students acquire does indeed broaden their understanding of the target language, however, the acquired body of knowledge remains separated from their knowledge and understanding of their first language and culture. This means that the cultural information students get about the target language does not influence their own identities and the ways in which they formulate ideas about their own language and their own culture.

Scarino also claims that an intercultural orientation in FLT seeks to transform students' identities in the process of language learning so that they would understand that culture is not merely information about different people, but a framework which these people use to exchange ideas, negotiate meanings and understand social reality.

Kearney (2010) states, that a major problem FLT has to face in connection with the cultural/intercultural dimension of teaching stems from the common and persisting belief that authentic cultural forms may only be acquired through direct contact with native speakers of the target language while residing in their country. Kearney cites research confirming that study abroad is not the sole source of cultural knowledge, arguing that the classroom environment is just as suitable in providing students with opportunities to understand frameworks through which physically distant communities regulate their practices.

An intercultural approach in FLT not only helps students to better understand other cultures, but it also makes them aware of the distinctness of their own. Constant and conscious reflections on culture and cultural differences make students think about their own culture, and view it in relation to different cultures, thus broadening their scope of understanding. It is clear that intercultural approach helps not only in reaching the desired goals of making students broad-minded and sensitive to cultural differences, but, also helps them cope with intercultural situations in particular language use, through emphasizing the importance of meaning making in communication.

As described above, the emphasis of culture learning in foreign language teaching has shifted from intracultural (among foreign language learners) to intercultural (between foreign language learners and native speakers) (Belz 2005). A so-called "third place" by Kramsch (1993) reflects this intercultural learning movement. The "third place" is the intersection where learners' home culture and target culture meet and they are able to form a sophisticated understanding of their new cultural identities (Kramsch 1993).

## 3. METHODOLOGY

### 3.1. Design

Mixed-method studies integrate the two approaches, that is, qualitative and quantitative at one or more stages of the research process with the aim of achieving a fuller understanding of a target phenomenon Dörnyei's (2007, pp. 163-164). With the development and perceived

legitimacy of both qualitative and quantitative research in the social and human sciences, mixed method research, employing the data collection associated with both forms of data, is expanding' (Cresswell 2003, p. 208). By employing approaches associated with both paradigms, researchers can increase the strength while eliminating the weaknesses of each (Dörnyei 2007, p. 45).

### **3.2. The qualitative study (Phase I)**

As a first step, a qualitative study was carried out to uncover the factors contributing to students' success or failure in intercultural communication encounters. The researcher's intention was to get a holistic view on students' evaluation of their previous intercultural encounters, to be able to determine what factors influence their performances, and to gain an in-depth understanding of their experiences. Qualitative studies on ICC mostly employ interviews, diaries, narratives or observation for data collection.

#### *3.2.1. Participants*

Participants of this phase of the study were 30 English major students in their third year at Khorasgan University, Isfahan, Iran. All of them had completed introductory courses on a wide range of topics from different fields, such as linguistics, applied linguistics, communication studies, socio and psycho linguistics. As a result, students became familiar with the basic theories underlying intercultural interactions during their studies. The age of students ranged from the youngest being 23 and the oldest 28. There were 22 female and 13 male participants. All participants were native speakers of Iranian language (Farsi), and considered English their first foreign language. All of them had been studying English for a minimum of six years at the time data were collected.

#### *3.2.2. Instruments*

To initiate this phase of the study the researcher first had to design a specific data collection instrument. The researcher asked six international students at GU (1 Spanish, 1 Japanese, 1 Arab, 2 Iranians, and 1 Korean) who did not participate in the study, to write one page of retrospective narrative about their experiences, opinions, expectations, and learning with different culture in all aspects they could think of. Then, the retrospective narratives were collected from those students. After that the texts were analyzed and three narratives were selected to be part of the research instrument. A senior researcher's opinion was also considered in selecting the final narratives. These narratives were interesting enough to provoke participants' ideas about similar experiences: one narrative was an account of a successful intercultural communication encounter, one was an unsuccessful one, and one was about differences in lifestyles in different countries.

#### *3.2.3. Procedures*

The third year BA English major students at Khorasgan University were invited to participate in this phase of the study. The participants were asked to read the three narratives as a guide and to write a short narrative in English of about 200-300 words of their own encounters, experiences, opinions, expectations, and learning with different cultures describing an event in which they felt similarly to one of the sample narratives. Furthermore, the participants were also asked to fill in a questionnaire on their background:

their age, gender, mother tongue, number of years studying English, and number of IC courses completed.

Data collection of all 30 participants took place in a classroom and was administered by the researcher being present in which took 60 minutes. To analyze the participants' narratives, they were read many times to obtain general understanding of the type of information in the text. Then, two senior literature professors were asked to read the narratives and to identify themes and focal points; their inputs were also considered. After that, the students' defined intercultural encounters were categorized. Followings are the identified patterns of the students' narratives analysis:

Table 1 Patterns in students' narratives

Knowledge factors:	IC Knowledge	Ignorance	Language	Proficiency	Awareness
Affective factors:	Motivation	Anxiety	Attitudes	Anger	WTC
Context:	Country	Setting	Interlocutor		
Focus:	Language use		Differences		
	English, Farsi		Life style, Meals, Tradition, Religion		
Topic:	Successful		Unsuccessful		Surprise

Participants' narratives were characterized according to the following categories:

- 1) The topics of the narratives (participants' definitions of intercultural encounters).
- 2) Differences in students' narrative accounts.
- 3) Analysis of the context of interaction.
- 4) Analysis of Participants' role in IC encounters.

The participants' narratives were analyzed on the basis of what kind of memory they wrote about: Successful communication encounters 14 students; Unsuccessful communication encounters 5 students, and Surprise in lifestyles 11 students. With the exceptions of three students, almost all participants' narratives presented situations in which actual interactions of individuals were involved, in which they talked in English with either a native speaker (NS) of English, or a non-native speaker (NNS) such as people from European countries, or Asians; the other three participants' narratives described surprises at the differences of lifestyle when they visited other countries or observing people from other cultures in Iran (Table 2).

Table 2 The interlocutors' origin

(NS)s of English		(NNS)s of English		English	
GB	US	European	Asian	Others	
3	2	17	6	2	

### 3.2.3.1. Participants' diverse experiences

To summarize, the students described their intercultural encounters in terms of Successful, Unsuccessful, and Surprise, and mostly defined intercultural communication as situations in which English was used as a common medium. In most narratives, the participants stated that they perceived the encounters influential in their lives. Followings are some of their quotes:

*"This was an important event in my life." (Participant 22)*

*"This was so embarrassing not to know the differences in cultures." (Participant 3)*

However, some participants indicated events in which they neither had communication act nor the language use, but they specified the surprise they had at observing other cultures; and for two students intercultural interactions did not even mean interacting in a foreign language.

Out of Thirty students that participated in this phase of the study 14 students had visited foreign countries, eight wrote about European countries, like France, England or Germany, and two students described their trips to far east like India and Malaysia, one student to the US and one to Antalya. We should keep in mind that not all students have the luxury of being blessed with wealthy families who could afford these kinds of trips to get to know a broad range of cultures and people. One of these blessed students stated:

*"Thank god I have a family that is fortunate enough to be financially well off and enjoys travelling all over the world. Because of this, I have visited many countries and have learned about different cultures in my life." (Participant 10)*

Never the less, those students who were not lucky enough to have been abroad they showed their emotions in not very favorable terms. Some pointed out not having the financial feasibilities and other lack of possibilities, and some did not state any reasons.

*"If I had better financial situations, I would travel around the world." (Participant 13)*

*"I like to meet people from different countries and learn about different cultures, but I don't have the money." (Participant 2)*

Iranian students are deprived of many opportunities; they don't have as many options as other students from other countries have like European students. Iranian students are deprived of the privilege of extensive traveling; they don't have chances to acquaint themselves with other cultures either at the university, in the neighborhood where they live, or during leisure activities like European students do. European students have none of these limitations. There is the host family program or *ERASMUS* for the US, Canada, and all European countries, Iranian students are deprived of that and deprived of hundreds of other privileges. Followings are what some students wrote:

*"We don't have any foreign students at our university like the US and European universities; therefore to meet and have communicative encounters with people from other cultures will be next to nothing." (Participant 1)*

*"There are not any foreign students or instructors in our universities or English institutes like other countries. And, we don't have host family program in Iran. So, you see we are very limited to have English communications with people of other cultures in Iran. I personally go out and try to start conversations with tourists. Isfahan is a tourist attraction city which is full of tourists." (Participant 17)*

*"Iranian students have extreme limitations to have communicative encounters with people of other cultures; when I have the chance to meet people from other cultures, which are often the tourists, I usually take it." (Participant 7)*

Out of 30 students participated in this phase of the study only one student visited an English-speaking country. What keeps the Iranian students from visiting these countries are mostly two factors, visa and lack of financial means. Not only do I confirm this reality, since I have spent more than 25 years of my life in the US, GB, and other countries, but also I asked all the participants this question personally, and with the exception of one very wealthy girl among the students they all confirmed the above reality.

Results revealed that students had limited contacts with NSs of English; only four narratives described situations in which a NS of English was involved. As a result,

participants used English in intercultural encounters mostly with other members for whom English was also a foreign language.

The intercultural experiences participants noted in their narratives with NSs of English were very pleasant and memorable. The positive memories participants wrote about in connection with their NS contacts are very important, as they play a key role in attitude formation. These attitudes are most easily formed if the participant has had pleasant experiences with members of other cultures. According to Dörnyei & Csizér (2005) attitudes towards speakers of a language most often determine attitudes towards the target language, and thus it also has an impact on motivation to learn the language.

With regards to the NNSs interlocutors, the remaining twenty six narratives comprised a substantial variety of people with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, both from Europe (16) and from Asia (10). Table 3 presents the nationality of the interlocutors who were NNSs of English.

Table 3 *The Nationality of Interlocutors who were NNSs of English*

Europe	Belgian 1, Denmark 2, French 2, Hungarians 4, Italian 1, Nederland 2, Turkish 2, Norwegian 2,
Asia	Arab 1, Chinese 3, Japanese 1, Korean 3, Thai 2

The students were asked to describe their most memorable experiences, and it is assumed that for many participants the encounter described was not the only contact they had with people of other languages and cultures. Therefore, Table 3 does not imply that more students had contact with Hungarians or Chinese interlocutors than with for example Arabs, it rather suggests that students tended to find their encounters for some reasons more memorable with those people.

With regards to the specific setting of the encounter, in 25 narratives, participants provided a detailed description of the setting of the encounter (Table 4).

Table 4 *The categories of the specific settings of students' interaction*

Public places		Private places	
Open settings	Closed settings	Open settings	Closed settings
15	5	3	2
5		5	

In 95% of the narratives the students themselves were directly involved as communication partners. In other cases, the participants wrote about events in which they had an observer's role. These encounters mostly accounted for the surprise they felt at becoming familiar with others' lifestyles. The students' narratives indicated that an intercultural encounter does not necessarily have to involve verbal communication acts; observing other cultures attentively is also stimulating for students and such opportunities raise their awareness towards differences across cultures.

The more participants' narratives were read, the more it helped to identify emerging patterns in the writings such as: *Differences among cultures*, *Knowledge of other cultures*, *Language proficiency*, *Attitudes towards other cultures*, *Anxiety*, *Willingness to communicate (WTC)*, and *Motivation*.



### 3.2.3.2. Cultural difference

Cultural differences or lifestyles were pointed out by participants in most narratives. This shows that participants tend to perceive intercultural encounters in terms of difference. They frequently emphasized the difference in a variety of aspects of foreign cultures, such as social behavior, everyday life, meals, traditions and religion.

Culture shock happens as a result of feeling of anxiety because of losing our familiar signs and symbols of social interaction (Samovar & Porter 2004, p. 295). A vast collection of empirical research confirms this stating that when speaking about their intercultural experiences participants tend to highlight difference across cultures, be that difference in eating habits, food, clothing, social practices, conventions of interactions or any basic aspects of everyday life (Nagy 2003; Callahan 2010).

### 3.2.3.3. Cognitive aspects

Cognitive aspects, such as knowledge of other cultures and language proficiency had strong effects in students' narratives on their intercultural experiences. Almost every student wrote about these categories; they either described how their knowledge or language proficiency facilitated their intercultural encounters, or wrote about how their lack of knowledge and their limited language proficiency hindered their success.

### 3.2.3.4. Affective variables

Affective variables are related to feelings, as they are emotional characteristics influencing how individuals react to certain situations (Dörnyei 2005). Motivation and attitude are commonly considered the two major affective variables (Dörnyei 2005; Ellis 1994). These two were shown in 22 narratives. Other affective variables like, anger, anxiety and willingness to communicate (WTC) were also reflected in students' writings. Overall 28 patterns related to affective variables were identified in the narratives; their distributions were: *Attitude* (35%), *Motivation* (28%), *Willingness to communicate* (WTC), (25%), and *Anxiety* (12%).

### 3.2.4. Conclusions

The essential objective of the qualitative phase of this study was to find out what characterizes participants' intercultural encounters, and to identify what helps or hinders them in succeeding in intercultural situations. The narratives provided by participants gave rich data on individual experiences, and enabled the researcher to provide a thick description of diverse cases. Qualitative analysis of the students' narratives revealed the following characteristics of their previous intercultural encounters: 1) Students described their intercultural encounters in terms of *success*, *failure* and *surprise*. 2) Participants described intercultural encounter as a communication act in which English was a medium for communication. 3) Despite the fact that the participants in this study had many things in common, yet, there were numerous differences between the amount and quality of their intercultural encounters. 4) Setting of the encounter, the native language and social status of the interlocutor also influenced students' performance in intercultural situations. 5) Participants' differences among cultures in different aspects such as *accepted social behavior*, *everyday life*, *traditions*, *meals*, and *religion* were highlighted in participants' narratives. 6) Knowledge of other cultures and language proficiency seem to be influential in students' intercultural experiences. 7) Affective variables, such as *attitudes*, *willingness to communicate*, *motivation*, and *anxiety* had a pivotal role in students'

*success* or *failure* in intercultural encounters. A further affective aspect, *anger* or *frustration* was also mentioned in some narratives.

This phase of the study served as an initial inquiry prior to phase 2 of the study. The objective was to reveal which factors contribute to students' success or failure in intercultural encounters. Findings are essential for phase two of the study to map the relationship between these variables and students' ICC. The major findings of this study indicate that the most important factors actually contributing to students' ICC are their *language proficiency*, *intercultural knowledge*, *willingness to communicate*, *attitudes*, *motivation*, and *anxiety*.

### 3.3. The quantitative study (Phase II)

The second phase of the study consists of analysis and calculations of factors, relationships, variance, affective variables and all the data obtained from the first phase of the study. In this quantitative phase of the study a questionnaire was employed to explore how these variables are related to ICC.

Descriptive statistics was also implemented to summarize numerical data on different characteristics of participants, i.e., their ICC, their willingness to communicate (WTC), their motivation, anxiety, language proficiency, etc. To examine the relationship between these variables, correlation analysis was performed, aiming to uncover the strength and direction of the relationship between variables (Dörnyei 2007). Thus, apart from correlation, multiple regressions were also performed to get a more precise picture on participants' ICC. Regression analysis is a frequently used statistical technique that aims to explain variance in the level of one variable on the basis of the level of other variables. Regression analysis makes it possible to assess the strength of the relationship between each predictor variable to the criterion variable (Cohen, West & Alken 2003).

#### 3.3.1. Participants

Thirty international ESL students male and female in their first year with different nationalities and their L1 being languages other than English at Gonzaga University took part in this phase of the study. The fundamental elements driven the researcher to select the participants for this phase of the study from Gonzaga University were: (1) The fact that the researcher lived in the United States for more than 25 years and completed his BSc and MA at Gonzaga University; hence, he was familiar with the university, the regulations, and its different schools. (2) It was not possible for the researcher to obtain such group of international students as participants for this study in any universities or English institutes in Iran. Gonzaga University is founded in September 17, 1887. Since 1978, the university ESL Program has been successfully helping students from all over the world achieve their English language goals.

#### 3.3.2. Instruments

This phase of the study draws on the findings of the first phase. The first phase revealed that students' behavior in intercultural situations was affected by *situational aspects*, *knowledge aspects*, and *affective aspects*. In order to better understand how these aspects actually influence students' ICC, the researcher designed, validated, piloted and implemented a questionnaire in a second phase of the study.

The data collection instrument was the final questionnaire (FQ). As a result of the changes subsequent to the pilot study, FQ was composed of the final selected items. The variables the questionnaires measured were *Motivation*, *Willingness to Communicate*, *Perceived ICC*, *Perceived Communicative Competence*, *Frequency of Intercultural Contact*, *Communication Apprehension* and *Perceived Language Proficiency*. The last section of the questionnaire consisted of the participants (age, gender, number and level of foreign languages spoken) and the amount of time they had spent in foreign countries. These items were mostly open-ended.

### 3.3.3. Procedures

In the questionnaire developmental phase, first an item-pool was drawn up (Dörnyei 2003, 2007). Then the following sources were used to help create as many potential items as the researcher could think of: *findings of the first phase of the study*, *findings of previous qualitative studies*, and *items borrowed from published questionnaires* (Dörnyei 2007). This indicated how the item-pool was created and resulted in the pilot questionnaires (PQ1 and PQ2) and the final questionnaire (FQ).

In order to find out how the participants will interpret the questionnaire items, two think-aloud sessions were administered with three participants who were similar to the sample participants, but were not in the study. The aim of the think-aloud study was to explore how participants would comprehend and interpret the items as well as to detect possible shortcomings in item wording, vocabulary use or layout.

In November 2016, the participants who were the first year international ESL students completed the final questionnaire (FQ), in which it took 30 minutes. Finally, the results were digitalized and for the statistical analysis, SPSS 14.0 for windows was used.

## 4. DATA ANALYSIS & RESULTS

The primary aim behind this study was to find out about participants' ICC. The FQ comprised two scales to elicit data on students' ICC: (1) items on the PICC-scale (Alpha=0.75) in which the participants had to indicate in percentage how competent they believed they were in those described situations; (2) items on the ICC scale (Alpha=0.85) that followed the basis of Byram's content specification of ICC (Byram 1997), in which case participants indicated how true each statement was for them using a 5-point Likert scale (1=absolutely not true, 5=absolutely true). The items of the ICC scale fell into the principal components of *knowledge*, *skills* and *attitudes*. Using descriptive statistics, the results revealed that the average students scored 2.97 on the ICC scale (SD=0.28). In addition, the sub-scales of ICC on *knowledge*, *skills* and *attitudes* displayed roughly similar results, with somewhat higher SDs, though. To find out more about students' ICC, the researcher created categories of *low*, *average* and *high* ICC establishing the categories based on cores one standard deviation below and above the mean of the ICC scale. The majority of the students (66.6%) achieved an average score on the ICC scale. Over 13 percent of the sample can be classified as low ICC, whereas 20 percent scored above the average level, indicating high ICC. The second measure on students' ICC included in the instrument was the PICC scale, to which students were requested to reply by giving percentage values. Participants' answers to the PICC scale indicated 0 for the lowest value and 100 for the highest. The PICC mean score of the sample was 72.8 (SD=12.12). The

PICC categories were established similarly to the ICC categories: students scoring within one standard deviation below and above the mean score were considered having average PICC. The majority of students fall within the average category (70.1%), whereas over 16 percent can be classified as having low PICC, and over 13 percent as having high PICC.

The correlation coefficient for the principal components of the ICC scale indicated strong relationship ( $p < .01$ ) between the *knowledge* component of ICC (ICCK) and the *skill* component of ICC (ICCS) ( $r = .617$ ). The obtained results showed no significant relationship between ICCK and attitude component of ICC (ICCA), and between ICCS and ICCA. As for the PICC scale, significant correlations ( $p < .01$ ) were found with the ICC scale ( $r = .312$ ), and with two principal components of the ICC scale: ICCK ( $r = .201$ ) and ICCS ( $r = .291$ ). Results revealed a significant relationship between the ICC scale and the PICC scale, thus, there was evidence that the results of the respective scales can be merged. On average, students' combined ICC score was 62.21 ( $SD=8.21$ ).

To find out about participants' affective profiles, results of the WTC scale ( $\text{Alpha}=.75$ ), the CA scale ( $\text{Alpha}=.85$ ) and the motivational scale ( $\text{Alpha}=.70$ ) were analyzed. Results show that on average, participants scored 73.16 on the WTC scale ( $SD=14.34$ ), where they had to indicate their answers in percentages; 2.11 on the CA and 3.79 on the MOT scales, which required answers on a 5-point Likert scale, 1 meaning low CA and low MOT, and 5 meaning high CA and high MOT. However, SD for the CA scale was much higher (.64 as opposed to .32 of the MOT scale) indicating that participants' answers for this scale were more varied. As a next step, categories of high, average and low WTC, CA and MOT were established. Somewhat more than half of the students (56.7%) can be characterized by average WTC, over 16 percent by low WTC, whereas 26.7 percent by high WTC.

As for CA, a majority falls within the average category (66.7%), whereas more than 23.3 percent of participants have low CA and 10 percent are highly anxious about communication in English.

Results for motivation fit the best the normal distribution curve: 70 percent of students have average motivation, and participants at each end of the scale are more even (16.7% for low scores on MOT and 13.3% for high scores on MOT).

The qualitative phase of this study revealed that affective factors contribute to how students act in intercultural situations. However, the researcher wanted to obtain quantitative evidence on the relationships between affective variables and ICC. To find out more about these relationships, the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was computed for participants' combined ICC scores, their WTC, CA and MOT. The analysis revealed a significant ( $p < .01$ ) correlation between the affective variables WTC ( $r = .428$ ), CA ( $r = -.512$ ) and MOT ( $r = .216$ ). Thus, correlation analysis confirmed findings of the qualitative study, as sound relationships were detected between WTC, CA and ICC, and somewhat more modest, yet still significant relationships between MOT and ICC.

To get a clearer picture on the relationships among these variables, regression analysis was performed. In this case, the analysis was meant to find out how much variance in individuals' ICC scores can be explained by the affective variables WTC, CA and MOT. Therefore, ICC was entered as the dependent variable, and WTC, CA and MOT were entered as independent variables (predictors). The variables were entered in the following order: CA, WTC, and MOT.

As a next step, further individual difference variables were analyzed, such as PCC, ICO and PL2. The mean value for participants' PCC was 80 ( $SD=13.12$ ), somewhat

higher than the mean scores computed for the PICC scale, with lower SD value, though. As for ICO, students scored 3.13 on average (SD=.41); whereas for PL2 the mean value is 2.87 (SD=.54). Results show that students self-perceived communicative competence and L2 proficiency display similarities: 19 students had average scores on the PCC scale, and 21 had average scores on the PL2 scales. 4 respondents had low PCC scores, whereas 7 had high; as for the PL2 scores, 4 students scored low, and 5 scored high.

In case of the ICO scale, 22 students fell in the average category, 5 students scored high on this scale, indicating very frequent intercultural contact; whereas 3 scored low. Correlation analysis was performed to find out whether the above individual difference variables are related to ICC. The analysis revealed significant ( $p < .01$ ) relationships between each of the individual differences and ICC. PCC had the highest correlation ( $r = .638$ ) with ICC, and PL2 had a similarly high value ( $r = .512$ ). The ICO variable had somewhat more modest, yet still significant correlation with ICC. An additional finding is the correlation between the individual difference variables: PL2 and PCC were significant ( $r = .574$ ;  $p < .01$ ); and the coefficient obtained for ICO in relation to both PCC and PL2 was significant, too ( $p < .01$ ), however, somewhat lower ( $r = .321$  for PCC; and  $r = .385$  for PL2).

## 5. DISCUSSION

The primary goal that initiated this study was to explore about students' ICC. The study indicated that an objective data on competence could be attained by ICC scale and PICC scale. Correlation analysis revealed that these two scales could be merged; hence, a consistently well founded measure of participants' ICC was obtained. Previous research has shown that time spent in an English speaking country (Nagy, 2008) significantly enhances students' attitudes and openness towards other cultures, thus fostering ICC. However, bio data of students revealed that they had spent relatively little time in English-speaking or foreign countries; moreover, enormous individual differences were found: almost half of the students (48%) had not been to English speaking countries before, and out of them, 25 students had never been abroad. Therefore, their relatively high average ICC scores may result from their studies and other experiences.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The first phase of the study revealed that students' behavior in intercultural situations is influenced by *Situational, Cognitive and Affective aspects*. Using the findings of these areas, the data collection instrument of the second phase of study comprised 60 items on students' *Intercultural Knowledge, Attitudes and Skills, Perceived Intercultural Communicative competence, Motivation, Willingness to Communicate, Perceived L2 Competence, Anxiety Perceived Communicative Competence*, and the *Frequency of their Intercultural Contacts*.

In this study, descriptive statistics, correlation analysis and regression analysis were performed on the dataset. The statistical analysis revealed that:

- 1) The average combined ICC score of students was 20 (0-100). Almost 66.6 percent of the students had average ICC scores, whereas 4 scored higher than the average. However, (21.1%) of the student were characterized by low ICC.

2) On the affective variable scales (WTC, CA and MOT) results displayed normal distribution. The majority of students fell in the average categories regarding their willingness to communicate in English, their apprehension about it, and their motivation in doing so. In all cases there were slightly more students with high WTC, CA and MOT than with low, which seems to be the result of the fact that these students are English language majors and thus more willing, more motivated and less anxious to talk in English than an average language learner. Findings concerning the relationship between affective variables revealed the strongest negative relationship between CA and ICC, indicating that anxiety is most likely to affect performance in intercultural situations. Willingness to communicate in English was also found to significantly correlate with ICC.

3) Both students' perceived communicative competence and perceived L2 competence are strongly related to ICC. However, regression analysis proved that PCC explained almost 50 percent in the variance of students' ICC scores, thus revealing PCC to be a very important predictor of ICC.

4) Although students had a high frequency of intercultural contact, only a surprisingly weak link was found between the students' ICC and the frequency of their intercultural contact. Moreover, stepwise regression analysis excluded the ICO variable, and concluded that it does not explain variance in students' ICC scores. These results were rather unexpected as one would assume that students' exposure to foreign cultures through contact contributes to their ICC to a great extent.

It must be noted that although this study presented a carefully designed method to map the relationship between individual variables and ICC, caution must be taken when interpreting the results. As all the variables measured by the data collection instrument are embedded in context, the results must be viewed in context, as well. Some variables (attitudes, motivation, anxiety) measured by the instrument are very difficult to describe in numbers, as these experiences can best be understood in contextualized human experiences. Moreover, the results of the correlation analyses revealed that almost all variables were connected with one-another, which brings it to the fact that the complex and multi-faceted construct of intercultural communicative competence is very difficult to adequately survey. This may also be supported by recent trends in research methodology viewing constructs in complex systems (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008). This complexity and embedded nature of the construct were the very reasons for choosing a mixed-method design in this dissertation, hoping to achieve a better, more complex understanding of students' experiences.

### 6.1. Main findings

The main findings of the first phase of study show that participants described their previous intercultural encounters in terms of *Success*, *Failure* and *Surprise*, in verbal communication acts in which English was used as the medium of communication. A further finding of the study shed light on the enormous differences between the amount and quality of participants' intercultural encounters, reflecting students' various socioeconomic backgrounds as a crucial factor in their opportunity to develop their ICC in real-life contexts. This phase of the study, also revealed that students' behavior in intercultural situations was mostly influenced by *Contextual Aspects*, such as the specific setting of the encounter, the native language and social status of the interlocutor; *Cognitive Aspects*, such as knowledge of other cultures and language proficiency; and

*Affective Aspects*, such as attitudes, motivation, willingness to communicate, anxiety, frustration and anger.

The main findings of the second phase of the study revealed that participants' combined ICC score as measured by the data collection instrument was rather high, almost 67 on a scale ranging from 0 to 100. The majority of students could be characterized by average ICC; however, results also showed that every seventh student had low ICC scores, which is an alarming figure given the amount of time the ELS students spend with native speakers of English on and off campus. As for the affective variables measured by the questionnaire, the majority of students fell in the average categories regarding their willingness to communicate in English, their apprehension about it, and their motivation to do so. In all cases there were slightly more students with high WTC, CA and MOT than with low, which could be the result of the fact that the participants were ESL students and therefore, more willing, more motivated and less anxious to talk in English than average language learners.

Findings concerning the relationship between affective variables revealed the strongest negative relationship between CA and ICC, indicating that anxiety is most likely to affect performance in intercultural situations. Willingness to communicate in English was also found to correlate with ICC significantly. Findings of the regression analysis proved that PCC explained almost 50 percent in the variance of students' ICC scores, thus revealing PCC to be a very important predictor of ICC, whereas PL2 was found to be of much less importance.

Astonishingly, it was found that the frequency of intercultural contact did not explain any variance in students' ICC scores. Therefore, students' exposure to foreign cultures through direct or indirect contacts did not significantly affect their ICC.

## **6.2. Pedagogical implications**

Although the first phase of the study lacked an in-class focus, its findings are beneficial for teachers, as the narratives provided by participants proved that revisiting previous intercultural experiences is a task students find interesting, useful and entertaining. The retrospective design of the task helped them to reflect on their and their interlocutors' behavior in light of what they had studied in their courses. Findings of both studies showed that students' ICC was affected by their anxiety. This result echoed findings of previous studies conducted with similar English language majors (Nagy 2009; Tóth 2007, 2011). Instructors should pay special attention to reducing learners' anxiety in classrooms, which can be achieved by creating a relaxed and friendly atmosphere free of competition. Raising students' awareness about the negative effects of anxiety is also crucial, as it may induce more conscious actions.

Findings also suggest that students' self-image as communicators (their perceived communicative competence and their perceived L2 competence) are of utmost importance: if students believe they are good communicators in English, they are more likely to be self-confident and are more likely to take part in intercultural encounters. Therefore, instructors should help students achieve a realistic self-image about their performance in English and support them if they lack self-confidence.

### 6.3. Future direction for research

The study raised certain questions that need to be addressed in further empirical studies in four areas. First, a series of semi-structured interviews with students could provide more specific data on their experiences and would provide a possibility to ask for more information about issues that were not addressed in the narratives. More specific inquiries into the exact contexts and settings would help us draw a more realistic picture about the contextual factors that influence students' behavior in IC encounters. Second, as the privileged position of English as a lingua franca is thought to affect students' attitude to the language and its speakers, and their motivation to learn and use it, it would be interesting to conduct studies with majors of other foreign languages and by understanding their experiences, it would be possible to find out more about the impact of English as a lingua franca. Third, as presented earlier, the variables measured only accounted for about 60-70 percent of variation in students' ICC. Thus, almost 40 percent of variance is unexplained, as most probably it is the result of personality traits and other factors beyond the scope of this study. Further studies on personality traits, their role in intercultural encounters and their relationship to ICC are needed to explore this issue further.

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