Innovation in Language Testing and Teaching (ILTT)
Volume 1 Issue 1 Year 2025 Pages 1 - 20
E–ISSN : 3110-5483 | DOI: 10.61227
E-mail : iltt.pusmedia@gmail.com
https://journal.pusmedia.com/index.php/ILTT/index

Understanding Language as a Key to Enhancing Intercultural Competence: Insights from Cultural Psychology

Vahid Ghorbani [1*]

[1] Instructor at Arak University, Iran

Correspondence e-mail * : S39611171003@phd.araku.ac.ir

Abstract: In today's interconnected world, intercultural communication has become essential across educational, business, and social contexts. While language proficiency is often viewed as the foundation of successful cross-cultural communication, empirical studies frequently focus on language skills in isolation, underemphasizing emotional and cultural factors, particularly in non-Western contexts. This study examined the relationships between language proficiency, cultural identity, and language barriers in shaping intercultural communication competence. A quantitative, cross-sectional survey design was employed using four standardized instruments: Language Experience and Proficiency Questionnaire (LEAP-Q), Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM), Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS), and a researcher-developed Language Barriers Scale. 150 international students and professionals from over 15 countries (54% female, 46% male, aged 22-48) with functional second language proficiency and intercultural communication experience participated through convenience sampling via professional networking platforms. Data were collected over four weeks via online survey platform with anonymous responses following informed consent procedures. IBM SPSS Statistics version 22 was used for descriptive statistics, Pearson correlations, and multiple linear regression analyses ($p < .05$). The study systematically progressed from participant recruitment through professional networks to online data collection using validated instruments, concluding with comprehensive statistical analysis. Significant relationships emerged among all variables. Language proficiency showed strong positive correlation with intercultural communication competence ($r = 0.65$, $p < .001$), explaining 42% of variance. Cultural identity demonstrated moderately strong positive relationship with language use ($r = 0.58$, $p < .001$), accounting for 34% of variance. Language barriers exhibited strong negative correlation with communication effectiveness ($r = -0.61$, $p < .001$), explaining 37% of variance. Findings suggest effective intercultural communication requires integration of linguistic, cultural, and emotional competencies. Educational institutions should develop curricula incorporating cultural awareness and emotional intelligence alongside language instruction. Teacher training programs need to address both cognitive and affective dimensions of intercultural interaction, supporting development of intercultural training workshops and comprehensive language support services..

Keyword : language proficiency, cultural identity, language barriers, intercultural communication competence, cultural psychology

Article info: Submitted : 2025-04-07 | Accepted : 2025-06-05 | Published : 2025-07-10

Copyright © 2025, Authors.

This is an open-access article under the CC BY 4.0

INTRODUCTION

In today's interconnected world, intercultural communication has become an essential skill in education, business, and social interaction. As global mobility and

multilingual environments increase, individuals are required not only to communicate across linguistic boundaries but also to navigate diverse cultural norms and emotional expressions. While language proficiency is often seen as the foundation of successful communication, research increasingly highlights the importance of cultural identity and emotional adaptability in fostering effective intercultural interactions (Lyu, 2024).

Cultural psychology provides a useful lens for understanding this complexity, emphasizing that cognitive and emotional processes are deeply shaped by cultural contexts (Cole, 2019). Language, as a cultural tool, does more than transmit information; it carries values, identities, and behavioral expectations. However, many empirical studies still focus on language skills in isolation, underemphasizing the emotional and cultural factors that influence communication outcomes. Furthermore, research in this area has predominantly emerged from Western settings, leaving a gap in understanding how these dynamics function in other cultural contexts, such as Iran.

In Iranian applied linguistics, recent studies have begun to explore intercultural competence, highlighting issues such as the lack of cultural content in ELT materials (Mozaffarzadeh & Ajideh, 2019: Aliakbari & Sadeghi, 2023) and the role of emotional factors in communication (Ghorbani & Dowlatabadi, 2023b). However, few studies have examined how language proficiency, cultural identity, and language barriers interact to shape intercultural communication competence, especially using empirical, quantitative approaches. This constitutes a critical gap given the increasing global engagement of Iranian learners and professionals.

By integrating linguistic, cultural, and affective dimensions, this research contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of intercultural competence. It also offers practical insights for language education, suggesting the need for curricula and teacher training programs that foster not just language skills but also cultural awareness and emotional resilience. The findings aim to inform both global scholarship and local educational reform, particularly within Iranian EFL contexts.

The Review of the Literature

1. Theoretical Foundations

Byram (1997) argues that language education must move beyond grammar and vocabulary to include intercultural communicative competence. His model outlines key components such as attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, and critical cultural awareness. Integrating these elements into language curricula ensures that learners are not only linguistically competent but also culturally responsive and empathetic communicators. Language plays a crucial role in shaping intercultural communication. It not only serves as the primary medium for expressing ideas and emotions but also acts as a bridge between cultures, enabling individuals to understand and navigate cultural differences. Several studies, both in Iranian and

Western contexts, have explored the significance of language proficiency in enhancing intercultural competence. This review synthesizes findings from various research studies, shedding light on the role of language and cultural psychology in intercultural communication.

Cultural psychology, as defined by Cole (2019), emphasizes that psychological processes such as cognition, perception, and emotion are deeply embedded in cultural contexts. According to recent studies, culture plays a significant role in shaping individuals' behaviors and communication styles, as it provides a framework for understanding how individuals process social cues, emotions, and social norms. Cultural psychology examines how culture influences psychological processes, including cognition, emotion, perception, and behavior (Shweder et al., 2006). A central tenet of cultural psychology is that psychological processes cannot be understood outside of their cultural context. According to Vygotsky (1978), culture shapes cognitive development through social interaction, particularly through language. This view suggests that communication, as a cultural practice, plays a central role in shaping cognitive and emotional experiences. Cultural psychologists argue that individuals' worldviews, communication styles, and interpersonal behaviors are deeply embedded in cultural norms and values, which vary significantly across societies.

Intercultural communication, on the other hand, focuses on the study of how people from different cultural backgrounds communicate with each other. This field examines the challenges and strategies involved in effective communication across cultural boundaries. Gudykunst (2004) defines intercultural communication as the process of sending and receiving messages between people from different cultures in ways that are influenced by their cultural backgrounds. The goal of intercultural communication research is to understand the factors that contribute to effective or ineffective communication, such as cultural differences in language, non-verbal behavior, values, and social norms.

Cultural psychology and intercultural communication are closely intertwined fields that explore how cultural contexts shape individuals' cognitive processes, behaviors, and communication styles. The integration of these two fields provides valuable insights into how culture influences communication patterns and intercultural interactions. The connection between cultural psychology and intercultural communication lies in the recognition that communication is a culturally bound process. Communication behaviors, such as greetings, expressions of emotions, or the use of silence, can vary across cultures, and these differences often lead to misunderstandings or conflicts in intercultural exchanges (Hall, 1976). Understanding the psychological underpinnings of these cultural differences is crucial for improving intercultural communication.

Cultural frameworks such as individualism-collectivism (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) explain why communication styles differ across cultural groups. In individualistic cultures, communication tends to be explicit and direct, reflecting a focus on clarity and personal agency. In contrast, collectivist or high-context cultures rely more on non-verbal cues, shared understanding, and implicit messaging, making communication more context-dependent. These culturally shaped patterns can lead to misunderstandings in intercultural interactions if communicators are unaware of these deep-rooted differences.

Understanding high-context and low-context communication is critical for analyzing intercultural exchanges. Hall (1976) introduced these terms to describe how cultures differ in the degree to which communication relies on implicit contextual cues versus explicit verbal information. High-context cultures, such as those in East Asia, depend heavily on shared background and indirect messaging, whereas low-context cultures, like the U.S. or Germany, value clarity and directness. These distinctions often result in misunderstanding in intercultural encounters, particularly when interlocutors are unaware of these fundamental communication styles.

Research consistently demonstrates that language proficiency significantly contributes to intercultural competence, particularly when coupled with cultural intelligence. Ang et al. (2007) found that individuals with higher cultural intelligence (CQ) and greater language skills demonstrated superior judgment and decision-making in intercultural contexts. Their findings emphasize that while CQ enables individuals to navigate cultural nuances, language proficiency supports explicit communication, thereby jointly enhancing intercultural effectiveness.

Emotional expression norms vary widely across cultures, influencing how individuals interpret others' affective states. Matsumoto et al. (2008) mapped global differences in emotional display rules and found that individualistic cultures, such as the U.S., encourage more expressive emotional communication, while collectivist cultures, such as Japan or Korea, promote emotional restraint. These cultural rules impact interpersonal communication, particularly in intercultural contexts where mismatches in expressiveness may lead to misinterpretation or perceived insensitivity.

From the view of cultural psychology, Cultural scripts are cognitive blueprints that guide behavior and communication within cultural groups. Ting-Toomey (1999) emphasized that these scripts shape expectations about politeness, emotional regulation, and conflict management. In intercultural interactions, conflicting scripts may result in miscommunication unless participants develop meta-cultural awareness. This highlights the need for intercultural training that incorporates an understanding of these deep-seated communicative frameworks.

2. Empirical Foundations

Numerous scholars have conducted empirical research on intercultural communication. The followings reveal some of the Iranian and Western studies about the role of language and culture in enhancing intercultural communication. Empirical studies further validate these theoretical assumptions.

A study by Long & Lin (2022) examined the impact of language proficiency on college students' intercultural communicative competence. The findings indicated a significant positive correlation, suggesting that higher language proficiency enhances students' ability to communicate effectively across cultures. Ghorbani and Dowlatabadi (2023a) conducted a study to assess the impact of culturally-laden texts instruction on Iranian language teachers' intercultural communicative competence (ICC). The researchers found that cultural instruction significantly enhanced teachers' skills, attitudes, knowledge, and awareness regarding intercultural communication. This suggests that language proficiency, when coupled with focused intercultural training, can lead to improved intercultural competence.

Aliakbari and Sadeghi (2023) analyzed the inclusion of cultural content in Iranian English language teaching textbooks. Their research revealed a significant deficiency in the representation of intercultural elements, highlighting the need for curriculum reforms that integrate cultural understanding to foster intercultural competence among learners. Another study by Dimitrov and Haque (2016) proposed a framework for intercultural teaching competence, emphasizing the importance of instructors' ability to bridge cultural and linguistic differences in the classroom. The framework highlights the role of language proficiency in facilitating meaningful intercultural interactions and fostering an inclusive learning environment.

Ghorbani and Dowlatabadi (2023b) conducted a study on Iranian language teachers' perspectives regarding the role of language, emotion, and culture in intercultural communication. They explored how these teachers perceive language as a tool for facilitating intercultural dialogue. The study revealed that language is perceived as the most critical element in successful intercultural communication, followed by culture and emotion. The researchers used a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative interviews with quantitative surveys, to analyze the data. Their findings emphasize the interdependency of language, emotion, and culture, where emotion acts as a mediator between language and cultural understanding. The study suggests that language proficiency alone is insufficient for effective intercultural communication; emotional intelligence and cultural awareness also play crucial roles in achieving mutual understanding between individuals from different cultural backgrounds.

Seregina et al. (2019) conducted a study in Russia that explored the relationship between second language acquisition and intercultural competence. The researchers focused on students learning English as a second language and found that proficiency in a second language not only improved students' linguistic abilities but also enhanced

their ability to engage with people from different cultural backgrounds. The study concluded that second language learning plays a pivotal role in fostering intercultural communication by promoting greater understanding of cultural nuances, social practices, and global perspectives. Seregina et al. (2019) further noted that language learning encourages empathy and adaptability, key elements in navigating intercultural contexts effectively.

Mozaffarzadeh and Ajideh (2019) analyzed the inclusion of cultural content in Iranian English Language Teaching (ELT) textbooks. Their findings revealed a significant gap in the representation of intercultural elements, suggesting that the lack of cultural exposure in textbooks hinders the development of intercultural competence among Iranian learners. The study advocates for the integration of cultural content in language curricula to foster a more holistic understanding of intercultural communication.

Ghorbani and Dowlatabadi (2023c) examined Iranian EFL teachers' perspectives on the causes of failure in intercultural communication using a mixed-methods approach. Data from questionnaires and interviews revealed that most failures stemmed from linguistic limitations, cultural misunderstandings, and emotional mismanagement, often influenced by contextual and interpersonal factors. The study underscores the need for balanced attention to language, culture, and affective skills in intercultural communication training.

Ghorbani and Dowlatabadi (2024) conducted a mixed-methods study to examine the relative importance of linguistic, affective, and cultural needs in effective intercultural communication. Drawing on data from 100 English language teachers in Iran, the quantitative phase utilized the Oxford Placement Test and a 52-item intercultural communication questionnaire, while the qualitative phase involved interviews with 20 volunteers. The findings revealed a hierarchical structure of needs: linguistic needs were most critical, followed by cultural needs, with affective needs serving as a mediating factor between the two. Participants emphasized that language proficiency is foundational for navigating intercultural contexts, but cultural understanding and emotional regulation also play essential complementary roles.

Ghorbani and Kianifard (2024) explored the relative impact of linguistic versus cultural knowledge on the development of intercultural competence among Iranian EFL learners. Using qualitative methods, including interviews, classroom observations, and reflective journals, they found that participants viewed both knowledge types as equally essential. Linguistic proficiency enabled effective verbal communication, while cultural understanding facilitated contextual interpretation, trust-building, and conflict resolution. The study concluded that intercultural competence requires a balanced integration of language skills and cultural awareness, recommending that EFL curricula and teacher training address both dimensions concurrently.

Ghorbani and Dowlatabadi (2025) introduced the ICN model, which marks a significant evolution in ICC theory by foregrounding three interrelated and hierarchical needs: linguistic, affective, and cultural needs. The model presents intercultural communication as a layered and dynamic process shaped by both individual (e.g., power status, personality) and contextual (e.g., formality of interaction) variables. Complemented by the Triple Needs Theory, the ICN model not only delineates the core needs in communication but also explains how they are prioritized and activated based on situational demands. This represents a shift from competence as a static trait or developmental trajectory to a functional and adaptive response system. In light of the aforementioned findings, this study seeks to explore the following research questions:

1. How does language proficiency influence communication effectiveness in intercultural interactions?
2. How does cultural identity influence language use in intercultural communication among international students?
3. How do language barriers affect communication in intercultural contexts?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to examine the relationships between language proficiency, cultural identity, and intercultural communication competence among individuals engaged in multilingual and multicultural environments. The cross-sectional approach facilitated the collection of data at a single point in time, allowing for the analysis of correlational patterns without manipulating variables (Creswell, 2014). This design was selected due to its practicality in large-scale, self-report studies and its effectiveness in exploring psychological and communicative constructs within naturally occurring settings.

Participants and Sampling

The participants in this study consisted of 150 international students and professionals actively engaged in intercultural communication within academic or professional contexts. To ensure diversity in linguistic and cultural experiences, individuals from over 15 national backgrounds were included, with a gender distribution of 54% female and 46% male and an age range of 22 to 48 years. All participants reported proficiency in at least one second language and had direct experience with communication across cultural boundaries. A non-probability convenience sampling strategy was employed, consistent with common practice in applied linguistics and intercultural research where access to randomized populations is limited (Dörnyei, 2007). Recruitment was conducted via professional networking platforms such as LinkedIn and ResearchGate, where invitations and study links were

distributed through direct messages. Inclusion criteria required participants to: (1) possess functional proficiency in a second language, and (2) have prior engagement in intercultural interactions in either academic or occupational settings. Although convenience sampling limits generalizability, it is appropriate for exploratory and correlational studies of this nature (Etikan et al., 2016) and allows for efficient access to a sample with relevant multilingual and multicultural experience.

Instruments

The study used standardized self-report questionnaires to measure the variables of interest, along with a set of custom items tailored to assess the specific challenges of language barriers in intercultural communication. The instruments used were:

1. **Language Proficiency Scale:** Participants' language proficiency was measured using an adapted version of the Language Experience and Proficiency Questionnaire (LEAP-Q) developed by Marian, Blumenfeld, and Kaushanskaya (2007). This self-report instrument evaluates perceived proficiency across four domains: speaking, listening, reading, and writing, using 5-point Likert scales. In addition, it captures participants' language exposure, usage frequency, age of acquisition, and context of use. The LEAP-Q provides a comprehensive and psycholinguistically validated measure of second language proficiency, well-suited for examining language competence in intercultural communication contexts. The LEAP-Q has demonstrated high internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.85 to 0.95 across different language domains (Marian et al., 2007). Validity evidence includes strong correlations with behavioral measures of language use and dominance (Appendix A).
2. **Cultural Identity Scale:** Cultural identity was measured using the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) developed by Roberts et al. (1999). This 12-item scale is a widely validated instrument designed to assess two core dimensions of ethnic identity: exploration (e.g., seeking information about one's ethnic group) and affirmation/commitment (e.g., positive feelings and sense of belonging toward one's ethnic group). Participants rated their agreement with each statement on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 4 (Strongly agree). The MEIM has demonstrated strong reliability and construct validity across diverse cultural populations, making it well-suited for examining cultural identity in multicultural and intercultural contexts. The MEIM has shown good internal consistency across diverse samples, with Cronbach's alpha values typically ranging from 0.80 to 0.90. Construct validity has been supported through factor analysis and its correlation with related constructs such as cultural engagement and self-concept clarity (Appendix B).

3. **Intercultural Communication Competence Scale:** Intercultural communication competence was assessed using the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS) developed by Chen and Starosta (2000). This 24-item self-report instrument measures individuals' affective and behavioral readiness to engage effectively in intercultural interactions. The scale comprises five subdimensions: Interaction Engagement, Respect for Cultural Differences, Interaction Confidence, Interaction Enjoyment, and Interaction Attentiveness. Participants responded on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). The ISS has demonstrated high internal consistency, with reported Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.72 to 0.86 across subscales. Its construct validity has been confirmed through factor analysis, and it has been widely used in intercultural studies involving diverse populations and international student contexts (Appendix C).
4. **Language Barriers and Communication Effectiveness Scale:** A 10-item scale was developed by the researcher to assess the perceived impact of language-related challenges on communication effectiveness in intercultural settings. The items were designed to capture various aspects of communication barriers, including difficulty in expressing ideas, interpreting meaning, managing anxiety, and building interpersonal relationships across languages. Participants rated each item on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Never) to 5 (Always), reflecting the frequency with which they experienced each situation. The instrument was reviewed by two experts in applied linguistics and intercultural communication to ensure content validity. A pilot study with 30 participants was conducted to assess internal consistency, yielding a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.87, indicating acceptable reliability (Appendix D).

It should be noted that several instruments were adapted by the researcher to better suit the context of this study. Minor formatting and contextual adjustments were made while preserving the original structure and intent of the items.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was conducted over a period of four weeks using an online survey platform. Participants were invited to complete the questionnaire via personalized messages distributed through professional networking platforms, including LinkedIn and ResearchGate. Before beginning the survey, participants were provided with an informed consent form that outlined the study's objectives, the voluntary nature of participation, the confidentiality of responses, and the right to withdraw at any time without penalty. The survey was administered in English and structured in four sequential sections, each corresponding to one of the study's core constructs. The order of instruments was carefully arranged to optimize cognitive flow and minimize response bias. Participants first completed the Language

Experience and Proficiency Questionnaire (LEAP-Q) to assess their linguistic background. This was followed by the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM), which evaluated the strength and clarity of their cultural identity. The third section comprised the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS), capturing participants' affective and behavioral readiness for intercultural interaction. Finally, participants completed the Language Barriers and Communication Effectiveness Scale, a researcher-developed instrument designed to assess perceived challenges in intercultural communication contexts. The estimated completion time for the full survey was approximately 15 to 20 minutes. Responses were submitted anonymously, and participants were instructed to answer all questions based on their most recent experiences in intercultural academic or professional environments. No financial or academic incentives were offered for participation.

Data Analysis Procedure

The quantitative data collected from participants were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 22. Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages, were computed to summarize participants' general response patterns for each instrument. To address the study's research questions, a series of correlational and inferential statistical analyses were performed. Specifically, Pearson's correlation coefficient (r) was used to examine the linear relationships among key variables: language proficiency, cultural identity, intercultural sensitivity, and perceived language barriers. Before analysis, the assumptions of normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity were assessed to ensure the appropriateness of parametric tests. In addition, multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to determine the predictive power of language proficiency and cultural identity on intercultural communication competence, as measured by the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale. Regression diagnostics were performed to evaluate multicollinearity, residual patterns, and the overall model fit (e.g., adjusted R^2, significance levels). All statistical tests were conducted using a 95% confidence level, and a p-value of $< .05$ was considered statistically significant.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to established ethical standards for research involving human participants. Before data collection, participants were provided with an informed consent statement outlining the study's objectives, procedures, voluntary nature, and the confidentiality of their responses. Consent was obtained electronically before the survey could be accessed. Participants were informed of their right to decline participation or withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty. No identifying information was collected, and all responses were submitted anonymously. Data were stored securely on a password-protected device accessible

only to the researcher and used exclusively for academic purposes. As the study involved minimal risk and utilized an anonymous, non-invasive online survey format, it was exempt from formal institutional ethical review.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

This section presents the quantitative findings of the study, which aimed to explore the relationships between language proficiency, cultural identity, language barriers, and intercultural communication effectiveness among international participants. The results are organized according to the three research questions, each of which is addressed through descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and multiple linear regression. These analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics software (version 22), and a significance threshold of $p < .05$ was used for all inferential tests. The findings are detailed below about each specific research question.

RQ1: How does language proficiency influence communication effectiveness in intercultural interactions?

Table 1.

Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Matrix for Language Proficiency and Intercultural Communication Competence

Index	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum	Language Proficiency	Intercultural Communication Competence	Sig. (2-tailed)
Language Proficiency	150	4.1	0.6	2.5	5.0	1.0	0.65	-
Intercultural Communication Competence	150	3.85	0.7	2.0	5.0	0.65	1.0	<.001

Participants reported high levels of language proficiency ($M = 4.10$) and moderately high levels of intercultural communication competence ($M = 3.85$). A Pearson correlation of $r = 0.65$ ($p < .001$) indicates a strong and statistically significant positive relationship between these two variables, suggesting that higher language proficiency is associated with more effective intercultural communication.

Table 2.

Regression Model Summary and Coefficients Predicting Intercultural Communication Competence from Language Proficiency

Model	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
(Constant)	1.2	0.3	-	4.0	0.0	0.65	0.42	0.41	0.45
Language Proficiency	0.65	0.1	0.65	6.5	0.0				

The regression model indicates that language proficiency significantly predicts intercultural communication competence (B = 0.65, t = 6.50, p < .001), explaining 42% of the variance in communication competence (R^2 = 0.42). This demonstrates that language proficiency plays a substantial role in shaping one's effectiveness in intercultural contexts. In other words, Descriptive analysis revealed that participants reported high levels of language proficiency (M = 4.10, SD = 0.60) and moderately high intercultural communication competence (M = 3.85, SD = 0.70). This suggests that the sample had a solid linguistic foundation when engaging in intercultural settings. Pearson correlation results showed a strong and statistically significant positive relationship between language proficiency and intercultural communication competence (r = 0.65, p < .001), indicating that higher language proficiency is associated with more effective communication across cultures. Furthermore, regression analysis confirmed that language proficiency significantly predicted intercultural communication competence (B = 0.65, t = 6.50, p < .001), accounting for 42% of the variance (R^2 = 0.42). These findings highlight the foundational role of language skills in fostering effective intercultural communication.

RQ2: How does cultural identity influence language use in intercultural communication among international students?

Table 3.
Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Matrix for Cultural Identity and Language Use in Intercultural Communication

Index	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum	Cultural Identity	Language Use in Intercultural Communication	Sig. (2-tailed)
Cultural Identity	150	3.95	0.65	2.2	5.0	1.0	0.58	-
Language Use in Intercultural Communication	150	3.75	0.68	2.0	5.0	0.58	1.0	<.001

Participants exhibited strong cultural identity (M = 3.95) and frequent language use in intercultural settings (M = 3.75). A statistically significant Pearson correlation (r = 0.58, p < .001) reveals a moderately strong positive relationship, indicating that those with stronger cultural identity tend to use language more actively in intercultural communication.

Table 4.
Regression Model Summary and Coefficients Predicting Language Use from Cultural Identity

Model	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
(Constant)	1.1	0.28	-	3.93	0.0	0.58	0.34	0.33	0.52
Cultural Identity	0.67	0.09	0.58	7.44	0.0				

Regression analysis confirmed cultural identity as a significant predictor of language use in intercultural contexts ($B = 0.67$, $t = 7.44$, $p < .001$), accounting for 34% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.34$). These results emphasize the important role that a strong sense of cultural identity plays in shaping effective intercultural language use. In other words, the results showed that participants had a strong cultural identity ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 0.65$) and reported frequent language use in intercultural contexts ($M = 3.75$, $SD = 0.68$). A Pearson correlation analysis indicated a moderately strong, statistically significant positive relationship between cultural identity and language use ($r = 0.58$, $p < .001$). This implies that individuals with a stronger sense of cultural identity are more likely to engage in effective language use during intercultural interactions. Regression results further supported this relationship, with cultural identity emerging as a significant predictor of language use ($B = 0.67$, $t = 7.44$, $p < .001$), explaining 34% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.34$). These findings suggest that a well-developed cultural identity positively influences how individuals utilize language when interacting across cultures.

RQ 3: How do language barriers affect communication in intercultural contexts?

Table 5.
Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Matrix for Language Barriers and Communication Effectiveness

Index	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum	Language Barriers	Communication Effectiveness	Sig. (2-tailed)
Language Barriers	150	3.2	0.75	1.8	5.0	1.0	-0.61	-
Communication Effectiveness	150	3.6	0.65	2.0	5.0	-0.61	1.0	<.001

Participants reported moderate language barriers ($M = 3.20$) and relatively effective communication ($M = 3.60$). A strong negative Pearson correlation ($r = -0.61$, $p < .001$) was observed, indicating that higher language barriers are associated with lower communication effectiveness in intercultural contexts.

Table 6.
Regression Model Summary and Coefficients Predicting Communication Effectiveness from Language Barriers

Model	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
(Constant)	4.85	0.32	-	15.16	0.0	0.61	0.37	0.36	0.51
Language Barriers	-0.39	0.05	-0.61	-7.8	0.0				

Regression results demonstrated that language barriers significantly predict communication effectiveness (B = -0.39, t = -7.80, $p < .001$), accounting for 37% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.37$). This reinforces the conclusion that language barriers negatively impact the ability to communicate successfully in intercultural settings. In other words, the descriptive results indicated that participants experienced moderate language barriers (M = 3.20, SD = 0.75), yet still perceived themselves as relatively effective communicators (M = 3.60, SD = 0.65). A Pearson correlation analysis revealed a strong, statistically significant negative relationship between language barriers and communication effectiveness ($r = -0.61$, $p < .001$), suggesting that as language barriers increase, the effectiveness of communication decreases. Regression analysis confirmed that language barriers significantly predicted communication effectiveness (B = -0.39, t = -7.80, $p < .001$), accounting for 37% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.37$). These results emphasize the detrimental impact of language challenges on successful intercultural communication, underscoring the need to reduce such barriers in multilingual environments.

Discussion

This study set out to examine how language proficiency, cultural identity, and language barriers influence intercultural communication competence. Using a sample of 150 international participants, the results offer strong empirical evidence supporting the interconnection between these variables. The discussion that follows presents each main finding and compares it with the literature reviewed earlier, highlighting areas of alignment, expansion, and nuance. The first major finding indicated a strong and statistically significant relationship between language proficiency and intercultural communication competence ($r = .65$, $p < .001$). Regression analysis further showed that language proficiency alone explained 42% of the variance in intercultural effectiveness. This finding reinforces previous research that has consistently highlighted the central role of language proficiency in shaping successful intercultural interactions.

For example, Long and Lin (2022) similarly found that university students with higher language proficiency demonstrated significantly stronger intercultural

communicative competence. Their study emphasized that language fluency supports confidence and clarity in multicultural contexts, a point also confirmed by the present findings. Vygotsky (1978) viewed language as the primary mediating tool in cognitive and social development. In intercultural settings, this mediating role becomes even more critical, as language enables individuals to interpret unfamiliar cues, adjust to differing social norms, and negotiate meaning.

Among the Iranian studies, most notably, the positive link observed between language proficiency and intercultural communication competence supports Ghorbani and Dowlatabadi's (2023a) findings, where culturally integrated language instruction was shown to enhance teachers' intercultural sensitivity and communicative skills. While their work emphasized curriculum design, the current study offers broader generalizability, showing that regardless of context, language proficiency remains a strong predictor of intercultural competence. This also affirms the structure proposed in their later ICN model (2025), which frames language as the foundational layer in a hierarchy of intercultural needs, followed by affective and cultural dimensions. The statistical weight of language proficiency in this study mirrors the theoretical priority it is given in their model.

Ang et al. (2007) highlighted the complementary roles of language skills and cultural intelligence in promoting effective cross-cultural interactions. While Ang and colleagues stressed the interaction between these variables, the present findings emphasize that language proficiency, even on its own, substantially enhances one's ability to engage across cultures. The significance of language as a mediating tool in intercultural settings is further supported by Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which conceptualizes language as central to cognitive and social development. Within multicultural environments, this mediating function becomes particularly salient, as individuals must navigate diverse communicative expectations, linguistic norms, and sociocultural frameworks.

The second key finding revealed a moderately strong correlation between cultural identity and language use in intercultural communication ($r = .58$, $p < .001$). Participants with a stronger sense of cultural identity were more active and effective in using language across cultures. This finding aligns with the work of Ghorbani and Dowlatabadi (2023b), who observed that Iranian language teachers perceived language as a bridge between cultures, but emphasized that cultural identity and emotional awareness must accompany linguistic skill for communication to succeed.

Our findings add quantitative weight to their qualitative conclusions, showing that cultural identity is not a passive background variable but a significant predictor of communicative behavior. Ghorbani and Kianifard (2024) also reported that both linguistic and cultural knowledge were seen by learners as equally important for interpreting meaning, building trust, and resolving conflict.

The current study's data affirm this perceived balance and reinforce the need to understand identity as an active force in language use. This idea is further supported by Markus and Kitayama's (1991) theory of independent and interdependent self-construal also helps explain these findings. Individuals with a clearer sense of identity, whether individualistic or collectivist, are more capable of navigating language choices and expectations across cultures. This study supports that view, offering empirical evidence that cultural identity influences not only attitudes or values but also communicative performance.

Byram's (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence identifies cultural attitudes, including identity, as integral components of effective language use. The current findings empirically validate this model by demonstrating that cultural identity not only influences how individuals view themselves but also significantly predicts their linguistic engagement in intercultural contexts. Ting-Toomey (1999) further emphasized that cultural scripts, shared, culturally rooted expectations, shape behavior and communication. These scripts are closely tied to identity and help individuals interpret and produce culturally appropriate responses. Thus, a stronger sense of cultural identity equips individuals to navigate such scripts more effectively, promoting clearer, more intentional language use.

The third finding identified a strong, negative correlation between language barriers and communication effectiveness ($r = -.61$, $p < .001$). Regression analysis confirmed that perceived language barriers explained 37% of the variance in communication outcomes, emphasizing how limitations in vocabulary, pronunciation, or comprehension can significantly impair intercultural interaction. This result strongly echoes the findings of Ghorbani and Dowlatabadi (2024b), who found that linguistic limitations, alongside emotional and cultural misunderstandings, were central causes of communication breakdown among Iranian teachers. The current study adds further support by offering statistical evidence of the direct link between barriers and reduced effectiveness. These results are also consistent with the Intercultural Communication Needs (ICN) model introduced by Ghorbani and Dowlatabadi (2025), which outlines three interrelated needs, linguistic, affective, and cultural, that must be addressed for successful communication. The model views language barriers not just as a technical hurdle but as a catalyst for anxiety, misinterpretation, and emotional disconnect. Our findings confirm this theoretical claim by showing that language-related difficulties substantially lower perceived communication success.

The third finding showed a strong negative relationship between language barriers and communication effectiveness ($r = -.61$, $p < .001$), with barriers accounting for 37% of the variance in communication outcomes. This outcome is consistent with research conducted by Seregina et al. (2019), who found that second language acquisition enhances not only linguistic ability but also intercultural empathy and

flexibility. While their research focused on the positive effects of language learning, the present study complements this perspective by illustrating the inverse: when individuals face linguistic barriers, their ability to build rapport, understand cultural nuances, and express themselves clearly is significantly diminished.

This finding also resonates with Hall's (1976) theory of high-context and low-context cultures, which posits that communication styles differ drastically across cultures based on implicit or explicit information exchange. In high-context cultures, where meaning is often derived from contextual cues and shared understandings, language barriers can severely impair communication by disrupting the interpretation of nuanced signals. Furthermore, Matsumoto, Yoo, and Fontaine (2008) emphasized that emotion display rules vary widely across cultures, meaning that language limitations can also interfere with the accurate decoding of emotional expressions, potentially leading to misinterpretations or relational breakdowns.

From a cultural psychology perspective, Cole (2019) and Shweder et al. (2006) argue that language is deeply embedded within cognitive and cultural systems. When linguistic challenges arise, they do not merely affect verbal communication; they interrupt cognitive and emotional processes critical to cross-cultural understanding. The present study substantiates this claim by statistically demonstrating that language barriers are not peripheral obstacles but central inhibitors of intercultural competence.

In sum, this study reinforces the idea that intercultural communication is shaped by a constellation of linguistic, cultural, and psychological variables. It empirically confirms that language proficiency enhances communication effectiveness, cultural identity fosters more intentional language use, and language barriers substantially undermine communicative success. These results contribute to a deeper understanding of intercultural competence and offer practical implications for language education and intercultural training in diverse academic and professional settings.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how language proficiency, cultural identity, and language barriers influence intercultural communication competence among international participants. The findings confirm that language proficiency significantly enhances communication effectiveness, while cultural identity promotes more engaged and purposeful language use in intercultural settings. Conversely, language barriers were found to negatively impact communication outcomes. These results align with prior research (e.g., Long & Lin, 2022; Ghorbani & Dowlatabadi, 2024b) and support theoretical frameworks such as the Intercultural Communication Needs (ICN) model and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, emphasizing the intertwined roles of linguistic, cultural, and emotional factors in shaping intercultural communication.

Language education programs should integrate cultural awareness and emotional competence into their curricula to move beyond surface-level language instruction. Teacher training should equip educators with the skills to address both cognitive and affective dimensions of intercultural interaction. Institutions serving diverse populations may benefit from developing intercultural training workshops and language support services. Additionally, future research should explore how these dynamics evolve over time and across different communicative platforms, including digital contexts, to further illuminate the complex nature of intercultural competence in a globalized world.

Based on the research findings, several important implications emerge for educational practice and intercultural training. The strong positive correlation between language proficiency and intercultural communication competence ($r = .65$) suggests that language education programs must prioritize not only grammatical accuracy and vocabulary acquisition but also communicative fluency that enables effective cross-cultural interaction. The significant relationship between cultural identity and language use ($r = .58$) indicates that educational curricula should incorporate identity exploration and cultural self-awareness components, helping learners understand how their cultural background influences their communication patterns and enabling them to leverage this awareness for more effective intercultural engagement. The detrimental impact of language barriers on communication effectiveness ($r = -.61$) underscores the need for targeted support systems that address linguistic challenges before they impair intercultural relationships. These findings collectively suggest that institutions serving diverse populations should adopt holistic approaches to intercultural competence development, integrating language skills training with cultural identity work and barrier-reduction strategies, while also providing ongoing professional development for educators to effectively facilitate these multidimensional learning experiences in increasingly globalized academic and professional environments.

REFERENCES

Aliakbari, M., Yasini, A., & Sadeghi, S. (2023). Iranian EFL teachers' classroom assessment practices: Discrepancy between theory and practice. *International Journal of Language Testing, 13*(2), 149–169. https://doi.org/10.22034/ijlt.2023.394374.1252

Ang, S., Van Dyne, L., Koh, C., Ng, K. Y., Templer, K. J., Tay, C., & Chandrasekar, N. A. (2007). Cultural intelligence: Its measurement and effects on cultural judgment and decision making, cultural adaptation, and task performance. *Management and Organization Review, 3*(3), 335–371. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1740-8784.2007.00082.x

Byram, M. (1997). *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence*. Multilingual Matters.

Chen, G.-M., & Starosta, W. J. (2000). The development and validation of the intercultural sensitivity scale. *Human Communication, 3*, 1–15.

Cole, M. (2019). Alexandr Romanovich Luria: Cultural psychologist. In E. Goldberg (Ed.), *Contemporary neuropsychology and the legacy of Luria* (pp. 11–28). Psychology Press.

Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Dimitrov, N., & Haque, A. (2016). Intercultural teaching competence: A multi-disciplinary model for instructor reflection. *Intercultural Education, 27*(5), 437–456. https://doi.org/10.1080/14675986.2016.1240502

Dörnyei, Z. (2007). *Research methods in applied linguistics: Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methodologies*. Oxford University Press.

Etikan, I., Musa, S. A., & Alkassim, R. S. (2016). Comparison of convenience sampling and purposive sampling. *American Journal of Theoretical and Applied Statistics, 5*(1), 1–4. https://doi.org/10.11648/j.ajtas.20160501.11

Ghorbani, V., & Dowlatabadi, H. R. (2023a). Examining the role of language, emotion, and culture as three basic needs in intercultural communication based on Iranian language teachers' viewpoints. *Journal of English Language Teaching and Learning, 15*(32), 104–125. https://doi.org/10.22034/elt.2023.57251.2549

Ghorbani, V., & Dowlatabadi, H. R. (2023b). Pinpointing the miscellaneous causes and reasons of failure in intercultural communications from Iranian teachers' viewpoints. *JELP Journal of English Language and Pedagogy, 16*, 244–268. https://doi.org/10.30495/jal.2023.1995744.1519

Ghorbani, V., & Dowlatabadi, H. R. (2023c). The role of "instruction" in the development of intercultural communication among Iranian language teachers. *Research in English Language Pedagogy, 11*(2), 192–220. https://doi.org/10.30486/relp.2023.1979330.1437

Ghorbani, V., & Dowlatabadi, H. R. (2024). Investigating the role and position of linguistic needs, affective needs, and cultural needs in intercultural communication: A mixed methods study. *JSAL, 7*(2), 139–161. http://jsal.ierf.ir/article-1-128-en.html

Ghorbani, V., & Dowlatabadi, H. R. (2025). An evolution in intercultural studies: Introducing intercultural communication needs model and triple needs theory in English language teaching. *JSAL, 8*(1), 1–27. http://jsal.ierf.ir/article-1-164-en.html

Ghorbani, V., & Kiani Fard, S. (2024). Investigating the effect of linguistic knowledge versus cultural knowledge in the formation of intercultural competence among Iranian EFL learners. *Journal of English Language Pedagogy and Practice, 34*(17), 225–252.

Gudykunst, W. B. (2004). *Bridging differences: Effective intergroup communication* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Hall, E. T. (1976). *Beyond culture*. Anchor.

Long, J., & Lin, J. (2022). An empirical study on cultivating college students' cross-cultural communicative competence based on the artificial-intelligence English-teaching mode. *Frontiers in Psychology, 13*, Article 976310. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.976310

Lyu, J. (2024). Cultivating cross-cultural competence in students. *SHS Web of Conferences, 187*, Article 04006. https://doi.org/10.1051/shsconf/202418704006

Marian, V., Blumenfeld, H. K., & Kaushanskaya, M. (2007). The Language Experience and Proficiency Questionnaire (LEAP-Q): Assessing language profiles in bilinguals and multilinguals. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research, 50*(4), 940–967. https://doi.org/10.1044/1092-4388(2007/067)

Markus, H. R., & Kitayama, S. (1991). Culture and the self: Implications for cognition, emotion, and motivation. *Psychological Review, 98*(2), 224–253. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.98.2.224

Matsumoto, D., Yoo, S. H., & Fontaine, J. (2008). Mapping expressive differences around the world: The relationship between emotional display rules and individualism versus collectivism. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology, 39*(1), 55–74. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022022107311854

Mozaffarzadeh, S., & Ajideh, P. (2019). Intercultural competence: A neglected essential in the Iranian ELT textbooks. *Journal of Applied Linguistics and Applied Literature: Dynamics and Advances, 7*(2), 167–183. https://doi.org/10.22049/jalda.2019.26674.1149

Roberts, R. E., Phinney, J. S., Masse, L. C., Chen, Y. R., Roberts, C. R., & Romero, A. (1999). The structure of ethnic identity of young adolescents from diverse ethnocultural groups. *The Journal of Early Adolescence, 19*(3), 301–322. https://doi.org/10.1177/0272431699019003001

Seregina, T., Zubanova, S., Druzhinin, V., & Shagivaleeva, G. (2019). The role of language in intercultural communication. *Space and Culture, India, 7*(3), 243–253. https://doi.org/10.20896/saci.v7i3.548

Shweder, R. A., Goodnow, J. J., Hatano, G., LeVine, R. A., Markus, H. R., & Miller, P. J. (2006). The cultural psychology of development: One mind, many mentalities. In R. M. Lerner & W. Damon (Eds.), *Handbook of child psychology: Vol. 1. Theoretical models of human development* (6th ed., pp. 716–792). John Wiley & Sons.

Ting-Toomey, S. (1999). *Communicating across cultures*. Guilford Press.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.