Intercultural Communicative Competence of Iranian University Students Studying Abroad: exploring key components

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Abstract

This study was an attempt to examine the intercultural experience of Iranian university students studying abroad and explore variables influencing their success or failure in intercultural interactions. A qualitative method involving semi-structured interviews and retrospective narratives were employed in order to achieve an in-depth understanding of intercultural competence of the international university students which came to light from their reflections and interactions. The findings provided insights into three major components of intercultural communicative competence, i.e. attitude, knowledge and skill featured vigorously on students' reflections. Most significantly, investigation of the data-set revealed several facilitating and debilitating factors contributing to intercultural encounters.

1. Introduction

Globalization and increasing wave of mobility for a variety of purposes like immigration, study abroad, student exchange, and tourism in addition to the accessibility of communication beyond geographical boundaries with the help of advancement in telecommunication devices such as mobile phones, satellites, and the internet necessitate the use of English language as the lingua franca for cross-cultural interactions around the world. Thus, English is used in native to native, native to nonnative and nonnative to nonnative interactions encompassing international and local contexts. As such, communicative competence cannot be responsive to today's requirements due to its focus on native speaker's norms in any communication (Alptekin, 2002). Therefore, intercultural communicative competence (ICC) becomes a response to the needs of today's globalized world (Alaei & Nosrati, 2018; Alptekin, 2002; Byram, 1997; Chen & Starosta, 1997; Deardorff, 2004; Pourakbari, Tabrizi & Chalak, 2017).

Despite the crucial role of ICC in successful intercultural communications (Huang, 2014), which was highlighted by Chen and Starosta (1996) and intercultural contacts' effect on all levels of global community among others, study abroad (Pekerti et al., 2020), nature of ICC and its components have been debatable over decades all around the world (Mirzaei & Forouzandeh, 2013). Albeit, several attempts have been made in the literature to illuminate the concept of ICC and explore factors influencing intercultural interactions (e.g. Al Musaiteer, 2015; Arasaratnam & Doerfel, 2005; Byram, 1997; Deardorff , 2004; Judit, 2013), nonetheless, most of studies in the realm of ICC have been done by native speakers of the English language and consequently, under the effect of the Western culture and perspective (e.g. Deardorff, 2004; Fantini, 2006; Fantini, 2007; Matveev, 2002). Therefore, more research effort is required to explore ICC in different contexts and regarding different countries especially non-Western countries whose cultures are considerably different from Western countries and cultures (Biswalo, 2015; Chong & Moszczynska, 2015).

The participants of the present study come from a non-western country that their political relations with the western world have been disputed after 1979 revolution in Iran. Several post-revolutionary incidents like occupation of the U.S. embassy in Iran led to a dissociation of political relations between Iran and the U.S. This hostility had an impact on all decisions of Iranian policy-makers including EFL curriculum. Since then, it was believed that English language ought to be taught for the sake of instrumental needs such as scientific and economical purposes rather than communicating with others (Mirzaei & Forouzandeh, 2013). This constraint in developing intercultural abilities originated from language teaching method and content is also confirmed by other non-western countries like China (Mu & Yu, 2021). Today, many high-achieving students leave Iran for the USA or other countries to continue their study abroad (Ardavani & Durrant, 2015). In spite of the paramount importance of ICC in today's language education, some studies indicate that Iranian learners have not been suitably prepared for effective intercultural communications (Eslami, 2005; Jalali & Tamimi Sa'd, 2014). This unsatisfying report necessitates further studies to gain a better insight of Iranian students' intercultural experiences so as to help international students over their studying abroad period.

In the context of Iran, Pourakbari, Tabrizi and Chalak (2017) conducted an inquiry on EFL university students in Iran to understand how students behave in intercultural encounters and

explored the factors influencing ICC. Clearly, the context of intercultural interactions is influential on the performance of interlocutors because according to Judit (2016), intercultural communicators are more confident and eager to participate in intercultural interactions while interacting in their home environment rather than in the host one and since all Iranian studies in this realm (e.g. Badrkoohi, 2018; Kurosh & Kuhi, 2018; Mirzaei & Forouzandeh, 2013; Nameni & Dowlatabadi, 2018; Pourakbari, Tabrizi & Chalak, 2017; Vajak, Izadpanah & Naserian, 2021) have examined ICC on Iranian learners who were living inside Iran with a rare opportunity of real intercultural interactions to the best of author's knowledge, the current study is distinctive regarding the context of intercultural interaction which was taken place outside Iran.

To this end, the present study was conducted on Iranian university students whose country is classified in the category of non-Western countries and was an attempt to explore intercultural experience of Iranian university students studying abroad and their understanding of intercultural interactions as well as variables influencing their success or failure in intercultural interactions. **1.1. Culture and Intercultural Communicative Competence**

It has been vastly discussed in the language teaching profession that learners are not required to know just about the vocabulary and grammar of a language, but also the ability of using the language in socially and culturally appropriate ways is essential (Choudhury & Kakati, 2017). But the question then arises around the nature and kind of the culture that must be used during intercultural interactions. Although teaching culture has been an ever-hotly debated issue in foreign language education, it was variously viewed alongside each language teaching method (Piątkowska, 2015). A definition of culture suggest it as an ever-changing, dynamic phenomenon encompassing symbols, knowledge, values, practices, traditions, products of an especial society belonged to a specific time and geography (Byram, 1997). In the current ICC era, language and culture are viewed as inseparable entities and the aim is to prepare learners to communicate cross-culturally (Ho, 2009). One of the unique characteristics of ICC approach is bringing learners' attention to their own culture in addition to the target language culture. Thus, learners are not expected to mimic the native speaker norms and culture during cross-cultural interactions (Marczak, 2010). Instead, they should be an intercultural speaker defined as someone who possesses communicative competence as well as skills, attitudes, and knowledge in conducting intercultural encounters. Intercultural speaker has the ability to create and keep an appropriate relationship to people with different sociocultural background from his/her own and negotiate meanings effectively with others (Byram, 1997).

Since the beginning of the ICC era, various models of intercultural competence have been proposed in different fields of study among which three models have risen up in education field including, Byram's (1997) intercultural communicative competence model, Deardorff's (2006) process model and Bennett's (1986) developmental model (Alvarez Valencia & Fernandez Benavides, 2018). Byram's (1997) model of ICC became the most frequently quoted model of intercultural communicative competence in language education (Judit, 2013) and was adopted as the theoretical framework of the present study. This framework was opted due to its comprehensiveness and impact in education field. Theoretically, ICC is defined as "the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (Deardorff, 2004, p. 184). This definition was

derived from Byram's (1997) work on ICC. Further, attitude, knowledge, and skill are three main components of ICC in Byram's (1997) model explained more below.

1.1.1. Attitude

According to Byram (1997), attitude means having curiosity, openness, interest and willingness to acquire about other cultures. An acceptable level of attitude means having the ability to decenter which is the capability to look from others' point of view, not to assume that our own beliefs, values and behaviors are the only correct ones (Byram, 1997; Byram, Gribkova & Starkey, 2002). Satisfactory attitude denotes open-mindedness, flexibility, respect to differences, patience, motivation to seek competence, empathy and friendly behavior towards others from different cultures (Alvarez Valencia & Fernandez Benavides, 2018; Barker, 2016).

1.1.2. Knowledge

Knowledge is defined as having two major components: the knowledge of your own cultural products and practices and that of your interlocutor's country, as well as the knowledge of individual and social processes of interaction between native and target cultures. An intercultural speaker is required to become aware of the target language and culture as their own language and culture. In this regard, knowledge of social processes, institutions of socialization, national, regional or ethnic culture and identity, history, geography, politics, social conventions and the contemporary and current relationships between their own and their interlocutor's country are recommended to be learnt (Byram, 1997).

1.1.3. Skill

The third component of ICC is skill acting on operational level and divided into two types: skill of interpreting and relating, which refers to the capability to interpret, analyze and reflect on L2 documents or events by the help of their previous knowledge to elucidate probable misunderstandings or presuppositions stated in the documents in order to relate them into their L1 culture. This ability illuminate the genesis of previously occurred events in L2 culture to decrease dysfunctions taking place cross cultures.

The second type refers to the skill of discovery and interaction that is the ability to establish an understanding of L2 culture while discovering underlying thoughts and reasons behind communication processes and events. This skill enable intercultural speakers to apply knowledge and attitude in real intercultural interactions. An intercultural speaker is able to identify values and processes of negotiation whether verbal or non-verbal in both L1 and L2 culture in order to operate appropriately and effectively in intercultural encounters (Byram, 1997).

1.2. Research Questions

1. How can intercultural experience of Iranian university students studying abroad be characterized?

2. What components of the intercultural communicative competence of Iranian university students studying abroad are observed in their interactions or reflections?

3. How has the intercultural experience of Iranian university students studying abroad affected their success and failure in the process of intercultural communication?

2. Methodology

A qualitative method was used to gain an in-depth understanding of the intercultural experience of Iranian university students studying abroad. The grounded theory design was applied for the study as grounded theory design enables researchers to generate a qualitative theory grounded in the data taken from participants and explains the intended process (Dornyei, 2007; Mackey & Gass, 2005), that is, intercultural experience. The intercultural experience of Iranian university students studying abroad regarding the success or failure of their previous intercultural communications was discovered via some qualitative instruments. The methods of data collection within the study were semi-structured interview and retrospection. Retrospection is a type of phenomenological study using live experiences of intended participants to elicit self-reflections from respondents. Likewise, to ensure the credibility of the results, a senior expert was asked to read the data. The senior expert's views and opinions or peer checking in Dornyei's (2007) term pertaining to themes and focal points were taken into account.

2.1. Participants

Participants of the study were selected through a purposive sampling strategy. Participants were non-EFL Iranian university students who were studying abroad. They were born, grew up and finished their primary or secondary education or both in Iran, but have decided to continue their higher education abroad. At least one parent of the participants was Iranian. These students were studying at different universities of the United States, England, Canada, Belgium, Sweden and Denmark in varieties of non-EFL majors (such as immunology, health technology, counseling psychology, marine engineering, biological sciences, public health, sociology, applied physics, electrical engineering, secondary education, biochemistry and health care) and various levels of education (master and PhD), both male (= 3) and female (= 9) with the average age of 31.5 and the 13-year average time of residency in a foreign country at the time of data collection. Three participants had moved back to Iran. Some participants were familiar with each other, but the sample included just two siblings and two close friends. The sample represented short-term international students. The sample had a variety of religious, political ideas and socioeconomic backgrounds. Participants had taken part in some intercultural programs arranged by the host university or the host municipality to promote their intercultural competence.

2.2. Data Collection and Instrumentation

All of the interviews were administered in Iran and in face to face format except one online interview using audio call application, WhatsApp depending upon the participants' availability. They were given sufficient time to reflect on the questions. The interview session was recorded on the participant's permission. The interviews were transcribed anonymously and just coded by number. The interviews lasted from 1 to 2 hours. The language of four interviews was in English except one interview conducted in Persian for the sake of participant's desirability then, it was translated into English. All five interviews were recorded and transcribed word for word. After finishing the interview or during the interview process, any feedback on the side of the interviewees was welcomed.

A demographic information form in hard copy and online format was used to collect the data on field of study, age and gender of the respondents, name of the university studying there, birthplace (city name), number of years studying English, length of time living abroad (by

years) and level of education, native language of the respondents, nationality of the participants' parents, and foreign language abilities as a means to check the homogeneity of all intended participants. Several questions were asked in the interview to assess their intercultural experience and the influential factors on their success or failure which are presented in appendix 2. Some of the questions were planned to amass the data for further research.

The electronic format of demographic information form in addition to a writing task was sent to other participants who were not willing to take part in the interview to suit the purposes of the research using application WhatsApp. The interviews were transcribed and three of the most evocative narrations on a successful, unsuccessful intercultural experience and surprising differences in lifestyle were selected as tangible reminders of intercultural events to fulfill the purpose of eliciting previous similar intercultural experiences of other participants who were not involved in the interviews. They were supposed to write some narrative accounts similar to the provoking narrations collected from the interviews' data which were written and audio recorded by the researcher in each of the three topics, i.e. successful, unsuccessful intercultural experience and surprising differences in lifestyle. The written narratives were required to be written in English, each of which around 250 words and became available to the researcher via application WhatsApp. The purpose of the research was announced to the participants in all steps of the research and they were assured of the confidentiality of their responses. A sample of narrative instrument applied for data collection is provided in the appendix 1, but only a provoking successful intercultural narrative is provided here in appendix 1 in the interest of space.

3. Data Analysis

An inductive thematic analysis was applied to ponder critically on the data-set. Narrative accounts and interview reports of students came under scrutiny using a three-level coding system, that is, open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Dornyei, 2007). To this end, after repetitive readings of the data-set and moving back and forth among the entire data-set, it was broken into chunks and segments. By clustering conceptual categories and assigning a label to each one, open coding step was finished. Axial (theoretical) coding as the next stage of qualitative coding was carried out to make out interrelationships among the recognized categories, thereby integrating them into more incorporating concepts based on Byram's framework of ICC. At the final level called selective coding, these interrelationships with a high level of abstraction were explained (Dornyei, 2007). The emerged themes were coded manually with the help of computer software to categorize and index the data systematically. Later, the themes were peer-checked by a senior expert to ensure credibility of the data-set. Several excerpts were opted from the data-set and subsumed in the findings to hand out some evidence for claimed interpretations (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). A number in the middle of parenthesis at the end of each excerpt illustrates the participant number. This method of addressing was applied to observe the principles of confidentiality and anonymity. Moreover, the demographic data, narrations and interviews' transcriptions were examined through descriptive statistics to come up with the overall characteristics of participants and their intercultural experiences. Furthermore, qualitative content analysis was run to count frequency and percentage of the descriptors of specific categories across respondents' reflections and

transcriptions (Dornyei, 2007). The statistical results were depicted graphically to demonstrate the most salient variables influencing ICC.

4. Findings

Through data analysis, a variety of themes, topics and basic codes emerged and then were applied to develop two categories of intercultural experiences' characteristics and components of intercultural communicative competence. Table 4.1 and Table 4.2 highlight these themes, topics and basic codes under the two mentioned categories. One example for each code is represented as an excerpt while discussing the related topic.

Table 4.1. Intercultural experiences' characteristics of Iranian university students

category	theme	topic	Basic codes
Intercultural experiences' characteristics	Topic	Successful intercultural encounters	
		Unsuccessful intercultural encounters	
		Surprising differences in lifestyles	
	Context	Public setting	Mall, Park, Airport, Office, University, etc.
		Private setting	Home, Party
	Interlocutors' role	Active participant	
		Passive observer role	
		Describing surprising differences	
	Social status	Equal	Colleague – colleague
			Student – student
			Guest – guest
		Lower	Friend – friend
			Department dean-student
			Teacher - student
	Language	English	
		Non-English	

4.1. Intercultural Experiences' Characteristics

To shed light upon the characteristics of respondents' intercultural experiences, the entire data-set was examined and these themes were revealed: the topic and the context of encounters, interlocutors' role and their social status as well as the language used in communications. Knowledge, attitude and skill components of ICC were also emerged as the noteworthy factors on the intercultural experiences and were reported with an attention to their frequency of occurrence. The entire memories uttered in the interviews and self-reflections appeared in three major topics, including successful intercultural encounters (22), unsuccessful intercultural encounters (11) and surprising differences in lifestyles between participants' home country and their host counterparts (26).

Out of 59 narratives, 32 narratives described verbal intercultural encounters in English with around 28 native speakers (NS) of English or non-native (7) speakers (NNS) of English whereas 27 narratives described nonverbal intercultural encounters in which respondents acted as an observer. Regarding the participants' role, some participants were actively involved in the intercultural encounters whether verbal (N=24) or nonverbal (N=2), in one case, the participant had a passive observer role and just narrating an intercultural encounter taking place for other people (N=1) and in other cases they just described surprising differences in lifestyle between participants' home country and the host country (N=32). All reported verbal intercultural interactions took place in English. The diversity of the nationality of the interlocutors proves the status of English language as the lingua Franca in today's world.

Likewise, the analysis revealed that university students experienced a considerably successful interaction with interlocutors of equal social status compared with their lower counterparts which clarifies the significance of social status of communication partners in the interactions' outcome as stated by Wardhaugh (2006). Furthermore, out of 59 narratives, just 32 narratives mentioned the setting of the encounter out of which 29 encounters took place in public places even though, just 3 of them happened in private places. So, the interactions were experienced more in public settings than private ones.

Moreover, several readings of participants' accounts in either interviews or narrations revealed several prominent themes relating to attitude, knowledge and skill aspects of the broad concept of ICC. They addressed real intercultural experiences of participants and far-reaching variables on their intercultural experiences. Figure 4.1 depicts three main elements of ICC, which emerged from the data-set. Attitude appeared 243 times (60%) followed by knowledge scored 139 times (34%) and the least frequent one, i.e. skill scored 24 times (6%). Thus, attitude appeared as the most frequent emerged substantial factor followed by knowledge, then skill component in their real intercultural communications. Similar trend was observed in the study of Alvarez Valencia and Fernandez Benavides (2018) whereas the study of Cots et al. (2016) reported knowledge as the most frequent one, followed by skill then, attitude as the least frequent element.
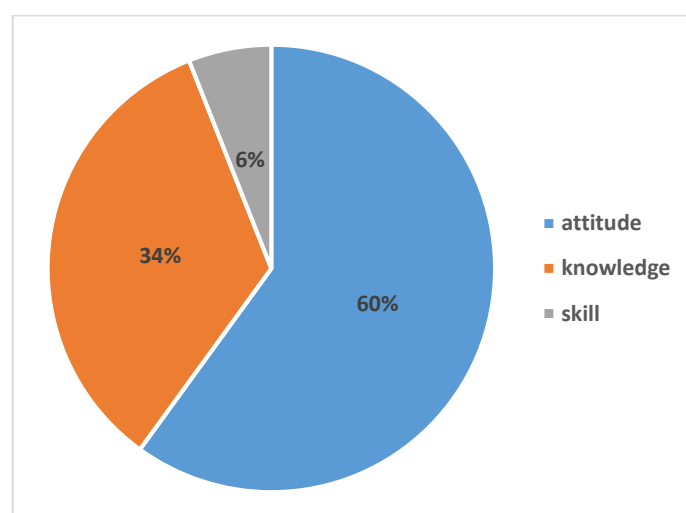

Figure 4.1. Aspects of ICC in the data-set

4.2. Components of Intercultural Communicative Competence in students' reflections

Table 4.2. Components of intercultural communicative competence (ICC)

category	theme	topic	Basic codes
Components of ICC	Attitude	Global attitude	Curiosity, Open mind, Respect, Flexibility, Patience, Friendship, Stereotypes, Differences
		Empathy Intercultural willingness to communicate Communication apprehension	State anxiety, Trait anxiety
		Self-efficacy Motivation	Instrumental, Intrinsic, Integrative, Extrinsic
	Knowledge	Verbal communication knowledge	English proficiency
		Non-verbal communication knowledge	Cultural knowledge Knowledge of socialization Prior cross-cultural experience
	Skill	Skills of discovery and interaction	Interaction abilities Identity maintenance
		Skills of interpreting and relating	Ability to listen well

4.2.1. Attitude

Several themes related to this aspect of ICC including global attitude, empathy, intercultural willingness to communicate, motivation, communication apprehension and self-efficacy emerged out of narrations and interviews.

4.2.1.1. Global attitude

An interest or positive attitude toward learning about other cultures and perspectives or in other words, global attitude was the theme reported abundantly (147 times) by several participants. According to Arasaratnam (2004), global attitude is defined as the acceptance of other people and their views, without having an ethnocentric perspective. People with global attitude have the curiosity, open mind and positive attitude toward people of other cultures. Participants stated the way this global attitude helped them in all types of intercultural interactions, as the next excerpt shows:

> When you have this global attitude, it helps you to interact with other better. And as I said you I wanna see people from other cultures more than Iranians because I had this global attitude…it's like kind of curiosity to see what other people like, what other people do and believe. It's a kind of global attitude… (5)

Respectful behavior, flexibility, patience, appreciation of the diversities and understanding were other mentioned appropriate characteristics resulting in successful intercultural interactions, as illustrated in the following excerpt:

> You have to be welcomed towards new behaviors. They are culturally different. You need to appreciate the differences. Try to get on well with people. You don't

need to change necessarily but you need to learn to tolerate differences. I would say you have to be flexible towards any types of differences that you would face. (4)

Curiosity, tolerance, respect to differences and being friendly, empathetic and caring were also observed in people of the host country. Tolerance for diversity was observed in Iranian students' accounts and at the same time they experienced this tolerance with their American counterparts. They related this American tolerance to the context of the U.S in which lots of cultures are encountering each other and called it a multi pot of different cultures. This result is in contrast with Barker's (2016) study in which Americans resisted cultural adaptions.

Further, Iranian students valued speakers of other cultures and taking an intercultural perspective, used English language as a lingua franca (Byram, 1997) and communicated with speakers of other countries either native speakers of English or non-natives. They positioned themselves as the intercultural speakers using English to build close relationship with people from other cultures:

> I guess one advantage that U.S. has is there is a lot of people who are by diverse background that live there and we were just visiting so I had a lot of friends that were Sunni, Muslims and a lot of friends who were Chinese, Russians, everything and so, even a lot of Iranian friends that I had over there that I was expecting to learn from them. I think I gained more than what I was expecting. (3)

Familiarity and shared understanding were the main reasons of friendship stated by several respondents and endorsed by certain scholars (Colaka, Praag & Nicaise, 2019; Kormos, Csizér & Iwaniec, 2014) as narrated below:

> …my intimate friend is Pakistani. Also, I have friend from Bangladesh. The reason of our friendship was due to cultural similarities like in our foods and etc. It takes time to make friendship with non-Iranians due to different languages unlike Iranians whom makes friend with them quickly and easily. (1)

Continually, global attitude appeared as the most frequent affective contributor to students' intercultural competence. Global attitude incorporated several subthemes which well-represented attitude component of Byram's ICC model and all features noted above described attitude component completely. The findings suggested that global attitude is required for both expatriates and host nationals to experience a successful intercultural interaction.

Although students tried to be open towards others and valued them, some prejudices, negative stereotypes or clichés they were subject to, resulted not to communicate well enough, and came up with communication barrier and unsuccessful interactions, maintained by some scholars (Al Musaiteer, 2015; Byram, 1997; Hagar, 2018). One of them said, "…stereotype makes this communication very inefficient. You have to fight something that you wouldn't have had to otherwise." (3)

Through negotiating on differences, prejudices were transformed into a good intercultural experience. One of the respondents residing in the U.S. traced back the genesis of some cliches to significat events such as 9/11 which opened the door of negative stereotypes towards foreigners. Besides, limited information and narrow-mindedness supposed to be the origin of

prejudice formation. Albeit, fortunately, negative stereotypes were not harshly felt in academic places.

Likewise, differences observed in dressing code, socialization, religion, language, eating habits, traditions and beliefs made respondents feel negative, discriminated, shocked and offended. Therefore, differences acted as a barrier to interact with foreigners in parallel with Xiao and Petraki's (2007) findings. In addition to negative impact of differences, they sometimes stimulated intercultural interactions. One of the respondents studying in Canada expressed that,

> People did not share food! As a Persian, you always advised to share your food with others or at least "taarof" with them. In Iranian culture, it means that you are a nice person. Apparently, it did not mean the same thing in our school! I wanted to share my food a couple of times and people was kind of weirded out by me and kept asking me why I wanted to share my food?! Pretty shocking! (8)

4.2.1.2. Empathy

Additionally, empathy (15 times) towards interlocutors of other cultures spelled out as "putting yourself into someone else's shoes, reaching beyond the self to understand what another person is thinking or feeling" (Brown, 2007, p. 381) was also observed in several narrations:

> …you really need to see how everyone has become who they are and what path they take to become who they are and if you see that then you have more empathy to them you might think ok if I was in their shoes maybe I would be exactly who they are as well. (3)

Empathy as a positive, influential quality in intercultural communications was advocated by some scholares (Alvarez Valencia & Fernandez Benavides, 2018; Arasaratnam & Doerfel, 2005; Hagar, 2018) and emerged the third among all affective factors in the current study. It was given the least priority of significance by some respondents while scored alongside global attitude by others.

4.2.1.3. Intercultural willingness to communicate

Intercultural willingness to communicate (IWTC) with others (28 times) was the second theme which emerged out of affective factors. Several participants pointed out that "Willingness to communicate could take you a couple of selves higher but if your interlocutor have that then that communication can still happen regardless of the fact that you may not be competent." (2)

IWTC encouraged them to talk with foreigners and had a positive impact on their intercultural interactions. Commonalities, differences or the extrovert personality of the interlocutors were the stimulators of IWTC and announced by participants as: "…when I go to the class I feel that we have like a common thing. So, we can start communication…." (5) Conversely, a few of the respondents preferred not to talk due to their willingness to communicate in Persian or foreigners' guard to talk or lack of trust to the host people or their introvert personality. Other studies in this respect such as Nagy's (2009) study proved no effect for WTC in actual intercultural communications and Xiao and Petraki (2007) suggested the existence of a big gap between cultures as the reason of interlocutors' unwillingness to communicate with foreigners.

4.2.1.4. Communication apprehension

Communication apprehension or anxiety (11 times) was also reported as the source of reluctance to communicate for several respondents and turned out the least frequent variable out of affective factors. According to the ELT literature, a distinction is drawn between state and trait anxiety. The trait anxiety is to do with the personality of the one who is permanently anxious whereas the state anxiety is experienced only in specific situations (Brown, 2007). Both types of anxiety were mentioned in the accounts, but state anxiety was observed more due to situation-based nature of intercultural communications. One respondent referred to this distinction as,

> …There is a difference between those whose personality is being shy and those who are unwilling to communicate in that specific situation…You don't feel you can trust... In that situation you are shy to express yourself. So, this situation-based shyness can be a barrier... (2)

Anxiety has both facilitating and debilitating effect (Brown, 2007). Nevertheless, respondents regarded anxiety as a preventive factor for an effective intercultural communication so as to a debilitating effect was assumed rather than a facilitating one. Participants put two incentives to feel anxious firstly, fear of communication breakdowns reported also by Al Musaiteer (2015) and Kormos, Csizér and Iwaniec (2014) and secondly, losing their family ties and supportive system stated also in Samovar and Porter's (2004) study which thereupon, prohibited international students from communicating with host nationals and as such decreased intercultural contact.

4.2.1.5. Self-efficacy

As noted above, some assumed anxiety synonymous with shyness. Contrarily, feeling confident or not being shy, that's, self-efficacy (28 times) defined as confidence in one's own abilities to successfully perform a specific activity (Brown, 2007), was the genesis of inclination to communicate with others, announced by several participants as: "I would say shyness comes when you think that you might be wrong. So, you have this confidence that ok that's how I am and that's how I believe and so, if they want to communicate with me they have to accept it." (4)

The first priority of importance in any successful intercultural interaction was given to self-efficacy and self-efficient participants commanded respect from the host people whereas low self-efficacy out of inappropriate informal language proficiency, caused unsuccessful intercultural communications.

4.2.1.6. Motivation

Those having this willingness to get involved with others had more inclination to be adjusted to new situations and thereupon, motivated to interact and seek competence (14 times) in the host country. Motivation is defined as "the desire to engage in intercultural interactions for the purpose of understanding and learning about other cultures" (Arasaratnam, 2006, p. 94) and as the third frequent affective factor in the present study was also recognized as an influential contributor to ICC process in previous inquiries (e.g. Arasaratnam & Doerfel, 2005; Mirzaei & Forouzandeh, 2013). The most recurring types of motivation identified in the data-set were instrumental, then intrinsic and the least one was integrative without extrinsic one. It's not

surprising that instrumental motivation stood out the most frequent motivation in the findings due to the fact that English language is a foreign language for Iranian students and their immediate needs are met in a foreign country through English as an international language. Thus, as a student with temporary residence in a foreign country, conformation to the host culture was not felt necessary as long as their needs were met albeit, they considered individuals possessing integrative motivation as more competent in establishing intercultural interactions. One of them articulated that, "At first, the motivation for communication is for success then, you should become familiar with the host culture and language to be integrated to the society, but it takes time." (1)

Although some respondents expressed the importance of being integrated to the host culture, assimilation to the L2 culture was not highly called for others as one of them said,

> …I guess one thing that I had also there was a kind of barrier for me. I didn't want to be an American. So, I didn't want to be seen just like an American and that stop me from or that giving me the motivation to go on there, to speak a language like them, to try to remove my accent. I talked just when I was forced to speak…(3)

Similar tendency has also been recognized in the study of Cots et al. (2016). What's more, the percentage of all affective factors identified in the data-set is represented in the figure 4.2.

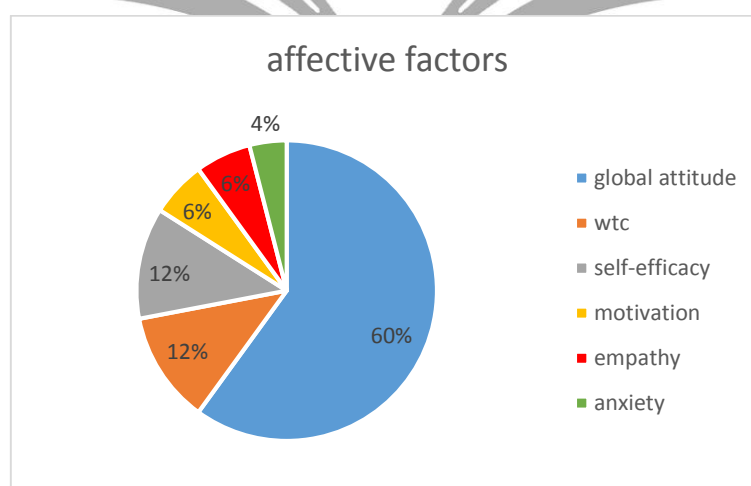Figure 4.2. Affective factors in the data-set

4.2.2. Knowledge
Verbal communication knowledge, (i.e. language proficiency) and non-verbal communication knowledge turned out to be the general layers of knowledge aspect in the data-set.

4.2.2.1. Verbal communication knowledge
Prominence of English language knowledge as a prerequisite for successful intercultural interactions was well received by almost every participant (33 times) and lack of this competence was perceived as a hindrance to communication. Knowing English was sufficient even though, the dominant language of some of the host countries of the study was not English such as Denmark and Sweden. Nonetheless, high levels of fluency was not required for intercultural interactions. However, one of them referred to the necessity of non-English language proficiency in non-English host countries for the sake of job vacancies and put it in

this way: "English is only required for academic purposes. But for job purposes, Swedish language is required." (1)

Likewise, students' vocabulary repertoire was unevenly developed due to limited societal contexts they were contacting with as one said:

> Even people who are personally educated in the U.S. and were studying in the U.S. in very good, top-ranking universities some of them couldn't speak English very well…The vocabularies were only limited to scientific words…they don't know a lot about the slangs. (5)

4.2.2.2. Non-verbal communication knowledge

Apart from verbal communication fluency, non-verbal communication fluency (106 times) was achieved including curricular objectives of intercultural education introduced by Byram (1997). Curricular objectives within the knowledge component of ICC model put forward familiarity of the learners with knowledge of their own and others' national, regional or ethnic culture and identity, history, geographical features, education system, job conditions, different social classes, different languages and dialects, religious values, social conventions of different groups of people and the past and present relationships between their own and their interlocutor's country (Álvarez Valencia & Fernández Benavides, 2018; Barker, 2016; Byram, 1997). Non-verbal knowledge comprises 76% of the entire accounts in relation to knowledge aspect whereas this figure is 24% for verbal knowledge.

Gaining cultural knowledge of the home and host country was another prominent theme announced by the students. Possessing cultural knowledge created positive attitude towards outer groups whereas lacking this competency gave rise to stereotype-making and acted as a barrier in intercultural interactions. Moreover, several respondents expressed a good command of knowledge on socialization in the host country achieved through cultural programs held at universities or municipalities. This knowledge familiarizes them with culture of other countries and give the chance of promoting their own culture as a required knowledge to an intercultural speaker pointed out by Byram (1997).

Prior cross-cultural experience was also another eminent, facilitating motif in intercultural interactions kept in some participants' mind and called it an absolute help to become more open to accept others' culture and to know how to deal with differences although, two of them believed that going to a country as a tourist is completely different from when you are a resident in a foreign country.

4.2.3. Skill

Emerged themes in this respect presented an understanding of intercultural effectiveness of the participants based on their knowledge and attitude of the host culture supported by Byram (1997). Continuously, they referred to the amalgamation of all three ICC components, that is, attitude, knowledge and skill to operate effectively in the host culture.

4.2.3.1. Skills of discovery and interaction

Achieving ability to interact in miscellaneous circumstances emerged as an indicator of ICC in Byram's (1997) term and posited by a respondent as, "Using humor and ice-breaking techniques are the most important qualities in intercultural interactions." (1)

Aiming to make connection with the host members, respondents set out to find common grounds between both sides. Finding commonalities as a sign of effective interaction was also addressed in Barker (2016).

Furthermore, maintaining one's own identity as an effective way of interaction was recommended, not to lose oneself for the sake of assimilation as a required skill pointed out by Portalla and Chen (2010). One respondent said "…there are red lines and even if you go to be culturally assimilated into the society you should know that there is some boundaries that you shouldn't across…." (2)

Being a good listener was another beneficial capability in intercultural communications due to difficulty of understanding different accents and styles. Several respondents managed to develop this ability though, none of them talked about host interlocutors in this regard.

4.2.3.2. Skills of interpreting and relating

To close the discussion of ICC, ability to reflect, relate and analyze cultural practices was the least frequent motif emerged and afforded interpretations related to different dressing codes, the extent of tolerance for diversity and the origin of racism in the U.S. One of them realized wearing a red sweatshirt and a pair of jeans appropriate and normal to fit in the U.S., whereas his different outfit (i.e. a shirt and khaki pants in a sort of business casual style) sounded too formal for casual settings in the U.S. Likewise, one participant addressed the origin of racism to the events of 9/11 in the U.S. which opened the door of racism towards foreigners. He narrated that,

> …I guess my view has changed in that sense that previously I thought and experienced that Americans are more kind and tolerant, open and friendly and now I see that in fact they are becoming more racist and less tolerant to differences…(3)

Obviously, some intercultural skills emerged, yet not all of them for instance, they could reflect on several cultural patterns of the host country and related them to earlier events occurred there. Nonetheles, they failed to reflect on several other variables of the outer groups such as age and gender which might justify the results of their intercultural communications. What is interesting to notice is that, exposure to the host beings and places led them to establish a deep and nuanced understanding of the new culture confirmed by Hagar (2018). Thus, positive evidences of studying abroad experience regarding ICC development of the international students were yielded.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations for Further Research

The qualitative approach adopted in this inquiery provided a valuable understanding of the intercultural experience of Iranian university students studying abroad and called attention to facilitating and debilitating factors contributing to their ICC.

Drawing on Byram's (1997) ICC components, attitude component was revealed as the most recurrent motif, then knowledge and the least recurring one was skill. This finding shows substantiality of attitude and knowledge to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural encounters. The major findings of this study alluded to the most influential variables of students' success in intercultural encounters including, global attitude, self-efficacy, intercultural willingness to communicate, empathy, motivation, language proficiency,

cultural knowledge, familiarity with institutions of socialization, prior cross-cultural experiences, ability to listen well and interaction abilities in general. On the other hand, stereotypes, differences, anxiety and paucity of lingual and cultural knowledge specified the most impactful factors on students' failure to communicate cross-culturally. These mentioned variables illustrates the prominence of strengthening intercultural competences for international students.

Regarding limitations, the present study rendered a partial understanding of a group of Iranian university students' intercultural experiences during a specific point of time, thus, cross-sectional whereas a longitudinal design might have brought up a deeper insight into their ICC development through time. Another limitation was reliance of the findings upon students' self-report so as to the potentiality of the reconstruction or reinterpretation of the accounts is considered albeit, this is the common limitation of numerous intercultural inquiries. Added to this is the complexity of analysis of intercultural accounts in order to classify them into certain defined concepts during which caused confusing overlaps. A further limitation is related to inability of qualitative studies to generalize the results to a greater population due to inadequate number of participants.

In order to draw more solid conclusions of the study abroad (SA) experience and considering limitations of a qualitative study, it is necessary to take into account post-stay international students' suggestions and prepare potential SA students through some intercultural courses in the home university. It is relevant to note some suggestions of the post-stay international students provided in the interviews such as taking part in intercultural programs held in the host university and the host municipality, international dormitories, cultural competency classes as well as getting together with people of the same values. They also recommended to learn about your own resources of the home country and create good networks with diverse people while learning English and the language of the host country before going abroad.

Leaving aside the privileged status of English as an international language called lingua franca, it seems essential to investigate intercultural experience of international students whom are required to apply foreign languages other than English in L2 contexts. Moreover, the present study was conducted on Iranian students studying abroad in non-EFL majors, in consequence, similar study is recommended to replicate on EFL Iranian learners due to high motivation and potentiality of this group in comparison with the rest majors. Further suggestion is offered to replicate this research on university students studying abroad in non-English foreign language majors to explore the impact of the host culture on intercultural development process irrespective of English language position. Lastly, this study can be ideally followed by a quantitative study measuring similar groups of participants' ICC applying an ICC instrument drawing on the influential factors discovered here.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Appendix 1

Writing task protocol

You are invited to take part in a research study to explore intercultural experiences of Iranian university students studying abroad and their understandings of intercultural interactions.

There are no 'right' or 'wrong' answers, I am interested in your personal opinion and intercultural experiences. Three intercultural experiences of Iranian university students studying abroad are presented here as an example of your required task. Please read/ listen to the stories on three topics, then do the intended task.

A sample of stimulating narrative regarding successful intercultural experience

I was in a class we had to create a video for our professor. There was a competition and we made the video in a group, then we created this video. It was so successful that it was actually accepted to global public health film festival that they are gonna air this November in the U.S. And we wanna to kind of celebrate what we have done. So, we wanted to this celebrate in a restaurant in the university and I remembered that the guru (she) asked me do you mind if we actually buy these alcoholic beverages? And I was like quite to be honest, you know religiously I'm not allowed to serve it here because of alcoholic beverages. So, I found it really interesting that we were able to create this communication during class project. So, we saw each other as individuals as friends maybe. And then, she decided not to get that drink because she was like that would be able not to offence to a person who is different from our group. So, I thought that was like a very positive impact on me. I never told them that I cannot drink alcohol as if they knew by default.

Writing task: Please write about your intercultural communication experiences after arriving in the host country. Write each account in about 250-300 words in English. Give an account of

1- a successful intercultural communication

2- an unsuccessful intercultural communication

3- any surprising differences in lifestyles between your home country and the host country.

Thanks for your cooperation!

Appendix 2

Interview Protocol

1. How long have you been in (the U.S./ Sweden/ Belgium/ Denmark)?

2. Was the experience of studying abroad according to your expectations? To what extent?

3. Could you achieve what you hoped to gain out of (American/ Swedish/ Belgian/ Danish) education? Please describe it more.

4. What factors, qualities, characteristics or abilities do you consider as helpful while interacting with foreigners? Please name them.

5. What communication barriers or challenges have you encountered while interacting with foreigners during your study abroad? What reasons do you attribute to these failures in intercultural interactions?

6. How would you define a cross-culturally competent person? Do people in the host culture define it the same as yours? Could you elaborate more on it? Provide some examples?

7. Can you describe your views about the culture of (the U.S./ Sweden/ Belgium/ Denmark) country and (American/ Swedish/ Belgian/ Danish) people before going to (the U.S./ Sweden/ Belgium/ Denmark)? Have your views changed now? In what aspects have them changed?

8. What cultural differences do you consider as influential in intercultural communication?

9. In your opinion, what should Iranian university students learn about (American/ Swedish/ Belgian/ Danish) culture to improve their intercultural communication skills?

10.   Could you remember any positive experience of interacting with (American/ Swedish/ Belgian/ Danish) people? Describe your experience please.

11.   Could you remember any negative or challenging experience of interacting with (American/ Swedish/ Belgian/ Danish) people? Describe your experience please.

12.   How often do you interact with (American/ Swedish/ Belgian/ Danish) people?

13.   Do you have (American/ Swedish/ Belgian/ Danish) friends? Describe your friendship with them.

14.   Has your university set any intercultural program to promote intercultural competence of international university students? If yes, do you consider them as effective? If no, do you consider them as essential?

15.   Do you have any suggestions for Iranian university students who have the intention of pursuing their study abroad?

Thanks for your cooperation!