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Examining Kurd EFL learners' perceptions towards intercultural communicative competence in an English as a lingua franca context

Effective intercultural communication requires more than linguistic knowledge; a high level of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is also essential. This study explores EFL learners' perceptions of their own ICC in the Iraqi Kurdish EFL context. Data were collected through a self-report questionnaire designed to assess two core dimensions of ICC: knowledge and attitude. Responses from 72 EFL learners were analysed quantitatively. The overall results show that Kurdish EFL learners performed slightly better in the attitude dimension than in the knowledge dimension of ICC. While they recognise the status of English as a lingua franca, they demonstrate a preference for native English varieties over non-native ones. No significant differences emerged by gender. However, multilingualism, length of English learning experience, and travel history were all significantly associated with higher ICC knowledge and more positive attitudes. These findings underscore the importance of multilingualism and intercultural experiences in shaping the knowledge and attitude dimensions of ICC among EFL learners. To prepare learners for intercultural engagement in ELF settings, this study emphasises the importance of adopting an intercultural approach to teaching English and increasing exposure to different English varieties to enhance both the knowledge and attitude dimensions of ICC.

Keywords: ICC, Kurd EFL learners, intercultural competence, communicative competence, ELF

1. Introduction

That linguistic proficiency alone cannot establish successful interaction and communication in a foreign language communication is not a debatable argument. Successful communicators need to be knowledgeable about the norms, values, and practices that might be embodied in a language and body language since they are as important as linguistic knowledge in conveying various verbal and non-verbal messages (Baker, 2009; Chao, 2013; Larsen-Freeman, 2008; McKay, 2002; Nault, 2006). Competent language users, therefore, in addition to linguistic knowledge, must adhere to explicit and implicit cultural expectations and develop an intuitive understanding of others (Shaules, 2016).

For language learners, this might seem practical and not very complicated when they aim to communicate with one target community: for example, Learners of English as a Second Language (ESL) or as a Foreign Language (EFL) communicating with native speakers. However, the situation gets more complicated and requires much more effort when considering learners from diverse cultural backgrounds operating in English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) context. In EFL contexts, since the objective is still to communicate with native speakers, accuracy and adherence to native-speaker norms are heavily emphasised (Jenkins, 2014). However, intelligibility and effective communication are prioritised in ELF settings, as English is used among both native and non-native speakers across various cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Seidlhofer, 2011). Additionally, given that EFL learners, or users, are more likely to communicate with other non-native speakers from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds in ELF settings (Dombi, 2013), the cultural dimensions of language and communication become even more intricate. Consequently, intercultural communication, which focuses on how individuals from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds use language, emerges as a core component of language learning and use across various contexts. As far as EFL and ELF contexts are concerned, various inconsistencies can be observed in the literature on intercultural competence; for example, the lack of a consistent term to refer to the concept of intercultural competence (Dombi, 2013), and inconsistent empirical findings that suggest significant variations across different contexts, as I will demonstrate in the sections below.

Although many studies and remarks regarding intercultural competence exist, there is no consensus on the term. This is related to the various models and frameworks that the researchers use to study the construct. Most of the researchers, as Mai (2018) also notes, start by differentiating Intercultural Competence (IC) from Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). Deardorff (2006, p.178) defines IC as "the skill to communicate effectively and accordingly in an intercultural environment, based on certain attitudes, abilities, perceptions, and intercultural knowledge." This concept is related to the ability of an individual to communicate in their own language with people from other countries or cultural backgrounds (López-Rocha, 2016). On the other hand, Byram (1997, p.34) defines ICC as "knowledge of others; knowledge of self; skills to interpret and relate; skills to discover and/or to interact; valuing others' values, beliefs, and behaviours; and relativising oneself. Linguistic competence plays a key role." He further asserts that there is an interwoven relationship between communicative competence, comprising linguistic, sociolinguistic, and discourse competencies, and IC. Byram's (1997, 2021) definition, which led to his multidimensional model of ICC, is considered more comprehensive and influential. This might explain why his definition and model are

the most cited in the literature (Cong-Lem, 2025). Despite these differences between IC and ICC, some researchers have used these terms interchangeably to refer to the same concept, ICC (Dombi, 2013).

As Dombi (2013) asserts, some of these discrepancies might be related to the fact that the concept has been studied by researchers from various fields using different models. Several models of ICC can be found in the literature, but the most prominent ones are Fantini's (1997), Chen and Starosta's (2005), Deardorff's (2006), and Byram's (1997, 2021) models. Some other models that address interculturality and almost all the components of ICC are often referred to by researchers. However, they are not ICC models per se, such as Bennett's (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity. Additionally, there are some other models, but they are mostly structural models and deal with what psychological and/or demographical factors in practice can better characterise different ICC levels (Arasaratnam & Banerjee, 2011; Dombi, 2021; Munezane, 2021; Nadeem, 2022). Although these models differ, they are not inherently contradictory. Fantini (2019) argues that all the models emphasise that ICC is a sum of competencies and includes certain attitudes, knowledge, and skills that enable an individual to communicate appropriately in intercultural settings. Researchers from various disciplines, therefore, acknowledge the significance of ICC, but they prefer and use these models differently. For example, in communication and business studies, Bennett's (1993) model is preferable, while in applied linguistics, Byram's (1997, 2021) model is the most used in the literature (Cong-Lem, 2025; Dombi, 2013; Driscoll & Mondaca-Rojas, 2024).

Despite inconsistencies in terminology and theoretical models, scholars widely agree that language users with higher ICC can manage complex communication and interactions more effectively in intercultural environments (Duff, 2012; Wilberschied, 2015), and that the development of ICC is a lifelong, continuous process (Fantini, 2019). Thus, it is essential to address ICC development at educational institutions through both curricular and co-curricular activities related to language learning (Byram, 2021; Deardorff, 2006; Moeller & Nugent, 2014; Nguyen, 2017; Wilberschied, 2015). In addition to improving linguistic knowledge, ICC is recognised as one of the most important elements of language proficiency that should be adequately developed for EFL learners. This ensures that individuals from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds can communicate appropriately and effectively in intercultural settings (Byram, 2021; Hoa, 2011; Shaules, 2016; Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009). Accordingly, drawing on Byram's (1997, 2021) model of ICC, this study aims to explore Iraqi Kurdish EFL learners' perceptions of their own knowledge and attitude dimensions of ICC, and to examine how demographic variables might impact these ICC aspects in ELF environments. The

findings are expected to provide insights into these two crucial aspects of ICC and guide key stakeholders in promoting the intercultural dimensions of EFL instruction. The study addresses the following research questions:

A. To what extent are Iraqi Kurdish EFL learners aware of their own intercultural communicative competence (ICC)?
B. What are the attitudes of Iraqi Kurdish EFL learners towards intercultural communicative competence in an English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) context?
C. Is there a significant correlation between the demographic characteristics of the participants (gender, years of English language study, number of spoken languages, and travel history) and their knowledge of and attitudes towards ICC?

2. Literature review

Due to its significant role in cross-cultural communication, ICC has become a central focus of applied linguistics studies, particularly since the 1990s in various EFL contexts (Cong-Lem, 2025). Empirical studies on ICC can be categorised based on their emphasis on the main stakeholders in different EFL contexts, mainly language instructors and learners, investigating either performance outcomes or perceptions. However, despite the growing body of research, findings across different contexts remain inconsistent. For example, despite EFL instructors' positive attitudes towards ICC in various contexts, it is not addressed adequately in the Turkish context for logistical reasons (Çirpan & Sabuncuoğlu, 2020), while the reasons are more institutional in the Iranian EFL context (Ahamdpour & Kuhi, 2019; Azizpour, 2021). This review aims to analyse several empirical studies to identify recurring patterns and gaps in the existing literature.

Several studies have examined ICC from the view of language instructors. Lázár (2011) studied Hungarian pre-service English teachers' beliefs about their role in the development of ICC. She concluded that the pre-service teachers lacked appropriate training on incorporating intercultural elements in their language classes. Similarly, Chao (2016) studied Taiwanese non-native English Teachers (NNETs) using a self-assessment inventory and interviews. The findings showed inconsistencies among Taiwanese NNETs regarding ICC in their personal capabilities, perspectives, and teaching practices. Mawlood and Abass (2019) investigated the instructors' perception of ICC in the Iraqi Kurdish EFL context. They found that despite having a high level of awareness towards English-speaking cultures, the instructors were not competent enough when taboos and non-verbal communication were involved. However, the emphasis of these studies was heavily on the English culture rather than having a broader intercultural perspective, showing a potential gap in ICC research.

Using a mixed-method approach, Çirpan and Sabuncuoğlu (2020) explored EFL teachers' ICC awareness in the Turkish EFL context. They found discrepancies between the instructor's perceptions and their pedagogic practices. Although teachers recognised the importance of ICC, they failed to integrate ICC as a skill in their classes. EFL teachers did not address cultural aspects in their classes unless they appeared in the textbooks. Even then, Turkish EFL instructors had opposing views about whether to teach the culture of English-speaking countries or various cultures. Most instructors still view culture as the culture of English-speaking countries and teach it accordingly. Likewise, Barebzi (2021) studied the beliefs of Moroccan EFL teachers towards ICC. He found that Moroccan EFL teachers have positive attitudes towards English and other non-English cultures, although they do not usually teach culture as a core curriculum component. Barebzi's (2021) results contrasted with those of Çirpan and Sabuncuoğlu (2020). While Barebzi (2021) discovered a moderate to significant positive relationship between teachers and teaching ICC, Çirpan and Sabuncuoğlu (2020) found no significant correlation between Turkish EFL instructors' beliefs and their classroom practices. This discrepancy might be related to contextual factors, such as instructor experience, curriculum emphasis, or methodological differences, making further exploration worthwhile.

A similar pattern emerges in learner-focused ICC research, with studies primarily assessing ICC awareness or perceptions. Candel-Mora (2015) examined the attitudes of ESP students towards ICC. The findings suggested that although the participants were not able to identify the dimensions of ICC, they acknowledged that linguistic knowledge alone was insufficient for effective international communication. Candel-Mora also found that for some participants, ICC was, in fact, a means to learn other languages. Mirzaei and Forouzandeh (2013) explored the relationship between ICC and motivation in second language acquisition. They discovered that students with more developed ICC levels were more likely to be motivated to learn a second language than those with lower levels. Similarly, Mutlu and Dollar (2017) examined Turkish EFL university students' perceptions of ICC. They specifically explored the learners' perceptions of their courses regarding intercultural awareness and competence and discovered that Turkish EFL learners' perceptions of ICC were narrowly confined to English-speaking cultures.

This is a pattern that has also been observed among Kurdish EFL learners. Hassan (2019) assessed Kurdish university students' ICC awareness using a questionnaire. He found that although studying English increased their cultural and self-awareness, they struggled with intercultural communication, especially with native English speakers. Nevertheless, most questionnaire items focused on communication with native English speakers. In another related study, Sevimel-Sahin (2020) reported

similar trends among Turkish EFL students, suggesting the narrow scope of ICC perception in non-native English-speaking settings.

These studies demonstrate that Alptekin's (2002) and Holliday's (2006) observations regarding a monolithic perception of native-speaker language and culture are still relevant in these contexts. Despite the growing emphasis on ICC, some researchers and learners still associate communication exclusively with native English-speaking cultures rather than with diverse cultural perspectives. This stands in contrast to the reality that there are proportionately more chances for EFL learners to engage with other non-native speakers of the language who come from diverse cultural backgrounds. In fact, in these ELF contexts, interaction typically occurs between non-native speakers of English, but English language pedagogy often lacks an ELF-informed perspective (Seidlhofer, 2011). As these studies also suggest, it seems not only pedagogy but also some researchers studying ICC struggle to move beyond a monolithic view of culture in the context of English language teaching and learning.

To address some of these gaps, a subset of research studies explores the impact of interventions or ICC-focused curricular changes in different contexts. For example, Mai (2018) conducted a quantitative study on how Vietnamese EFL learners' ICC, particularly focusing on the knowledge and attitude dimensions, was improved after taking a course in which the emphasis was on learning English as an international language. The findings indicated significant differences in the participants' knowledge and attitudes related to ICC. Similarly, Chen (2023) conducted a longitudinal study on the effects of a self-designed innovative course on improving students' awareness of ELF and intercultural communication. In this study, English speakers from diverse cultural backgrounds provided insights on assigned discussion topics from their cultures' perspectives. Questionnaire results and classroom observations indicated that this instructional approach successfully improved learners' attitudes towards intercultural communication and ELF. Although the long-term effects of these interventions are questionable, these studies are more in line with the reality of the English as a global language and seem to respond to the calls made by Seidlhofer (2011) and Alptekin (2002) to prepare EFL learners to communicate with interlocutors from various cultural backgrounds, not just native speakers.

As can be noticed, not only EFL instructors and learners but also researchers often fail to move beyond the monolithic view of culture. Moreover, empirical findings are not always consistent across different EFL contexts. Many studies suggest that learners and instructors generally hold positive attitudes towards ICC. However, ICC is not adequately addressed due to various contextual factors, such as time

constraints, curriculum limitations, and sociopolitical influences. For instance, although EFL learners and instructors recognise the significance of ICC, it is not adequately addressed in the Iranian EFL context for both religious and political reasons (Ahamdpour & Kuhi, 2019; Azizpour, 2021). Similarly, the perceptions of both learners and instructors vary according to their knowledge as well as psychological and demographic characteristics. Within the Iraqi Kurdish EFL context, few studies have examined learners' perceptions of ICC. Existing ICC research studies in this context have predominantly focused on interactions with native English speakers, overlooking the global, multicultural nature of the speakers of the English language.

3. Methodology

3.1. The Instrument

Since questionnaires can collect large-scale data efficiently and cost-effectively (Brown, 2000; Dörnyei, 2003), this study employed a questionnaire to collect its data. The questionnaire was adapted from Mai's (2018) study (see the Appendix), which focused on English as an international language and operationalised Byram's (1997, 2021) model of ICC. It was limited to assessing the knowledge and attitude dimensions of ICC, which underpin all other dimensions (Deardorff, 2006) and are typically the most practical and common targets in self-assessment ICC questionnaires (Sinicrope et al., 2007).

The questionnaire consisted of two parts. Part 1 obtained informed consent and demographic information; no personally identifiable information was collected to ensure confidentiality. Part 2 contained 32 items, with 16 items related to knowledge and 16 items related to attitudes. Respondents were required to select the most accurate option to show level of agreement (Strongly agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, or Strongly disagree) for each statement. In Mai's (2018) classification, the 32 statements addressed three areas: the changing sociolinguistic reality of English (4 items), exposure to different varieties of English (11 items), and the exploration of cultural diversity (17 items). The same structure was retained, but some statements were revised to suit the Kurdish EFL context and the use of English in lingua franca contexts.

3.2. Procedures

Although the questionnaire was already modified, validated, and piloted in Mai's (2018) study, which reported a reliability score of Cronbach's $\alpha = .947$, the researcher conducted a second reliability test with the new participants. The new test yielded α

= .914, again indicating high internal consistency. The questionnaire was created and administered using Google Forms.

Two university student representatives voluntarily distributed the link to all students at a private university in Sulaimani, Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The questionnaire link was active for a week, and there was no time limit for completing the questionnaire. On average, it took the participants approximately 10 minutes to complete. The participants were already informed in the consent form that they could request feedback on the results; however, no requests were made. After data collection, the responses were converted into numerical values (Strongly agree = 1, Agree = 2, Neutral = 3, Disagree = 4, and Strongly disagree = 5). The data were analysed in SPSS 27 using descriptive statistics and inferential analyses to address the research questions.

3.3. Participants

This study's participants were 72 Iraqi Kurdish EFL learners studying at a private English-medium university. The participants were chosen based on convenience and snowball sampling methods. Among them, 39 were male, and 33 were female. Their ages ranged from 18 to 40 years (M= 25.08, SD = 2.24), with 62 respondents between 21-30, 9 between 18-20, and 1 between 31-40.

All respondents were either bilingual or multilingual; 25 were bilingual, 35 were trilingual, and 12 were quadrilingual. Regarding the length of their experience learning the English language, the results indicated that more than half of the respondents had ten or more years of learning experience. Specifically, 24% had studied English for one to five years, 19% for six to ten years, 28% for eleven to fifteen years, and 29% for sixteen or more years. Since this study focused on ICC, the respondents were also asked about their travel experiences. More than half of respondents (51.4%) reported never having travelled to a country where they had to communicate in English, while 48.6% indicated otherwise. Among those who had used English abroad, 57% had visited a country where English was the main language of communication.

4. Results
4.1. Overall knowledge and attitudes towards

First, the questionnaire items (see the Appendix) were divided based on their focus into ICC knowledge and attitudes, and the mean scores for each dimension were calculated. The overall mean score for the knowledge dimension was 2.17, while the overall mean score for the attitude dimension was 2.02 (both on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 indicates "strongly agree" and 5 indicates "strongly disagree"; lower scores indicate greater agreement). These results indicate that, on average, participants

demonstrated a relatively high level of knowledge about ICC-related items and held generally positive attitudes towards intercultural communication. Notably, the mean scores suggest that participants agreed slightly more strongly with the attitude statements than with the knowledge statements, reflecting a positive disposition towards ICC in addition to knowledge. Table 1 presents the mean scores for all 32 items of the questionnaire, 16 of which were related to knowledge, while the other 16 targeted attitudes.

Table 1. Overall mean scores of participants' ICC knowledge and attitudes

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
Knowledge	72	2.17	0.98	0.97
Attitude	72	2.02	0.97	0.94
Valid N (listwise)	72			

4.2. Knowledge and attitudes towards the changing sociolinguistic reality of the English language

The first three items of the questionnaire (see the Appendix) targeted knowledge, while the fourth one targeted the participants' attitudes towards ICC. The mean scores indicate that the participants were aware of the spread of the English language worldwide and had learned enough about the new roles and functions of English as an international language. They were also aware that intercultural skills were as important as linguistic competence when communicating in English with people from other cultural backgrounds in intercultural settings.

Regarding their attitudes, the mean result of the item showed that the participants had a positive inclination towards improving their knowledge and skills for better communication during their intercultural encounters. However, a standard deviation of 1.03 shows a relatively high variability compared to the mean of the knowledge score. Arguably, this implies that while they were more knowledgeable, they did not necessarily hold consistently positive attitudes towards these changes. Table 2 presents the mean scores for the first four questionnaire items that targeted the participants' knowledge and attitudes regarding the changing sociolinguistic reality of the English language.

Table 2: Knowledge and attitudes mean scores towards the changing sociolinguistic reality of English

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
Knowledge	72	2	.88	.79
Attitude	72	2.03	1.03	1.07
Valid N (listwise)	72			

Note. 1= strongly agree; 2 = agree; 3 = neutral; 4 = disagree; 5 = strongly disagree

4.3. Knowledge and attitudes towards English language varieties

To investigate knowledge and attitudes towards native and non-native varieties of the English language, six items of the questionnaire targeted knowledge and five targeted attitudes. Although the mean scores indicate that most of the participants are familiar with both the native and various non-native varieties of the language, they do not actively attempt to learn non-native vocabulary or other linguistic features of English. That is to say, they still preferred to learn the vocabulary and the accents of the native speakers, for example. They also tended to acknowledge that they were more likely to communicate with non-native speakers of the English language than with native speakers. Regarding intercultural communications, the participants reported learning and practising other languages primarily for meaning-negotiation purposes in intercultural exchanges but not for joining communication or avoiding breakdowns.

Regarding attitudes, they reported a positive attitude towards English accents no matter where the speaker is from and would like their own accents to be respected when they speak in English. For Kurdish EFL learners, intelligibility is the primary concern. They did not feel pressured to adopt a native-like accent as long as they were understood. Nevertheless, they were generally neutral about enriching their knowledge of other English varieties to enhance their ICC. As shown in Table 3, they tended to be more knowledgeable compared to having a positive attitude towards the different language varieties. Table 3 shows the participants' mean scores for knowledge and attitudes about their exposure to the different varieties of English.

Table 3: Knowledge and attitudes mean scores towards the different varieties of the English language

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
Knowledge	72	2.19	.97	.95
Attitude	72	1.92	.97	.95
Valid N (listwise)	72			

Note. 1= strongly agree; 2 = agree; 3 = neutral; 4 = disagree; 5 = strongly disagree

4.4. Knowledge and attitudes towards cultural diversity in ELF settings

The mean scores indicate that the participants are aware of other cultural norms besides American and British in English communications, and that knowledge enrichment of different cultures develops their ICC. The participants reported that they had learnt more about their own cultures by comparing them to English and the various cultures regarding non-verbal communication, politeness, and silence. Interestingly, they claimed to have learned some languages to participate in intercultural communication and avoid communication breakdowns. This finding aligns with the previous section, showing that some participants had learned

additional languages to prevent communication breakdowns. However, they might not have actively used them in real-life intercultural interactions.

Regarding attitudes, nearly all participants showed open-mindedness towards other cultures and had positive attitudes towards their own cultural norms and beliefs. They also valued keeping their Kurdish identity and wished to be recognised as Kurds in international environments when they spoke English, though not necessarily through their accents. Overall, they showed a positive attitude towards cultural diversity in relation to their own culture and broader ELF settings. Table 4 shows mean scores for the study participants' knowledge and attitudes toward cultural diversity in ELF contexts.

Table 4: Knowledge and attitudes towards cultural diversity in ELF settings

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
Knowledge	72	2.23	1.02	1.06
Attitude	72	2.03	.95	.92
Valid N (listwise)	72			

Note. 1= strongly agree; 2 = agree; 3 = neutral; 4 = disagree; 5 = strongly disagree

4.5. Relations between demographic characteristics and the results

Across all three subsections of the questionnaire, the findings showed relatively high standard deviation and variance. Therefore, some inferential analysis was applied to find any significant relations between the demographic characteristics of the participants and the results. A normality test was performed to ensure statistical validity, and the resulting bell-shaped histogram confirmed that the normality assumption was met. The researcher ran a two-sample t-test and ANOVA to analyse relations between the findings and variables such as gender, number of spoken languages, travel history, and years of English language experience.

The independent-samples t-test showed no significant differences between male and female participants in the study's measured variables.

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to examine the effect of the number of languages spoken and years of studying English on intercultural knowledge and attitudes. The number of languages spoken was found to have significant effects on several questionnaire items. Differences among groups were significant for "knowledge of different English varieties" (Item 5), $F(2, 69) = 3.19$, $p = .047$, $\eta^2 = .09$; "learning about non-native English varieties vocabulary" (Item 6), $F(2, 69) = 4.74$, $p = .012$, $\eta^2 = .12$; for "learning other languages to negotiate meaning in intercultural communication" (Item 9), $F(2, 69) = 3.99$, $p = .023$, $\eta^2 = .10$; for "positive attitudes towards other English accents" (Item 11), $F(2, 69) = 4.18$, $p = .019$, $\eta^2 = .11$; for "feeling less pressure to sound native-like" (Item 13), $F(2, 69) =$

4.38, p = .016, η^2 = .11; and for "knowledge of cultural differences in non-verbal communication and turn-taking" (Item 18), $F(2, 69) = 6.66$, p = .002, η^2 = .16. These significant results are summarised in Table 5.

Table 5: Significant One-way ANOVA Results for the Number of Languages Spoken (N = 72)

Item	F(2, 69)	p	η^2
5	3.19	.047	.09
6	4.74	.012	.12
9	3.99	.023	.10
11	4.18	.019	.11
13	4.38	.016	.11
18	6.66	.002	.16

Note. F(2, 69) = one-way ANOVA F-statistic with 2 and 69 degrees of freedom; η² = eta squared (effect size).

Understandably, these results show that participants who spoke more languages tended to possess greater knowledge and more positive attitudes. As far as years of studying English are concerned, a significant difference emerged only found for Item 18 ("knowledge of cultural differences in non-verbal communication and turn-taking of the non-native English varieties"), $F(3, 68) = 2.87$, p = .043, η^2 = .11. This also might demonstrate the impact of language exposure on enhancing ICC.

Lastly, an independent-samples t-test was conducted to investigate whether travel history influenced participants' scores. The results indicated a significant difference for "learning other languages to negotiate meaning in intercultural communication" (Item 9), $t(50.14) = -2.38$, p = .021, with travellers (M = 1.95, SD = 0.69) scoring lower than non-travellers (M = 2.44, SD = 1.00). A second significant difference was found for "improving knowledge of other Englishes outside the classroom to improve ICC" (Item 15), $t(50.24) = -2.29$, p = .026, with travellers (M = 1.70, SD = 0.66) again scoring lower than non-travellers (M = 2.15, SD = 0.96). Given that lower scores suggest greater agreement, these results suggest that participants with travel history were more likely to have developed language skills for negotiating meaning and a greater willingness to learn about non-native English varieties.

5. Discussion

The findings indicate that the participants were generally aware of and held positive attitudes towards the changing sociolinguistic reality of the English language, its various varieties, and cultural diversity in EFL contexts. However, they expressed a strong preference for native English varieties over non-native ones and were more inclined to enrich their knowledge of the former. Although gender did not impact the results, other factors, such as multilingualism, years spent studying English, and

travel history, had significant positive associations with several of the study's findings.

Some findings of this study align with those of Mirzaei and Forouzandeh's (2013) study in two key aspects. First, neither study found a significant relationship between gender and ICC awareness or attitudes. It seems that gender is not associated with either awareness or positive/negative attitudes among Kurdish and Iranian English language learners. Second, Mirzaei and Forouzandeh (2013) discovered a positive relationship between ICC and motivation. Likewise, this study found that multilingualism and prolonged English language study had a significant positive association with openness towards intercultural communication, developing meaning-negotiation skills, and learning features of other non-native varieties of English. This might imply that motivated language learners, who typically invest more time in learning languages, are more likely to have developed ICC levels.

The results also support findings from Candel-Mora (2014) and Mutlu and Dollar (2017) regarding ICC awareness and attitudes in intercultural contexts. Like the participants in those studies, the participants of this study recognised that although linguistic knowledge is the sine qua non for verbal communication, it alone does not ensure effective interaction in intercultural settings. Given that engaging with other non-native speakers of English is much more likely in global communication, adopting an intercultural approach to English language teaching and learning has become increasingly essential to avoid making cultural mistakes that might result in misunderstandings or communication breakdowns.

In line with the findings of Sevimel-Sahin (2020) and Hassan (2019), participants in this study reported that learning English enhanced both their cultural and self-awareness. They also showed a preference for native English varieties. However, unlike previous findings, this study's participants acknowledged that they were more likely to interact with non-native speakers in ELF settings. They felt confident in their abilities to communicate with native speakers due to their meaning-negotiation skills. Despite this, they still strongly preferred native varieties over non-native ones. Additionally, respondents expressed a desire to preserve their ethnic cultural identities in intercultural interactions and, in return, expected their cultural values, beliefs, and norms to be respected. This aligns with Marín et al.'s (2024) findings on preserving cultural identity in intercultural contexts. However, while Marín et al.'s participants aimed to preserve their identity by speaking their native language in their intercultural encounters, the participants in this study sought to do so through their overall English language proficiency, though not necessarily their accents, when communicating with speakers from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

These results are also consistent with the post-test findings of Mai's (2018) experimental study. In her study, the overall pre-test mean score for knowledge was

3.67, which improved to 1.61 (on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 indicates "completely agree" and 5 indicates "completely disagree"). In comparison, the overall mean score for knowledge in the present study was 2.14. A similar trend is evident for attitude: the overall attitude score in this study was 1.99, which is closer to the post-test mean of 1.47 than the pre-test mean of 3.42 in Mai's study. These differences may reflect the demographic backgrounds of the respondents, as those in the present study were students at an English-medium university, while Mai's participants were third-year English majors. Nevertheless, Mai's (2018) findings highlight the significant impact of an intercultural approach to instruction on developing EFL learners' ICC knowledge and attitudes.

Overall, the findings of this study demonstrate that Kurdish EFL learners had a moderate awareness of ICC and generally positive perceptions of it. While they tended to demonstrate considerable knowledge and positive attitudes, their attitudes toward non-native English varieties remain somewhat reserved. As previous studies have indicated, individual differences are significantly associated with ICC levels (Dombi, 2013). Therefore, exposing learners to different English varieties and adopting an intercultural approach to English language teaching and learning in the Kurdish EFL context—as well as in similar EFL settings worldwide—is essential, especially because interacting with other non-native speakers is far more common in international intercultural exchanges.

6. Conclusion

Recognising the significance of ICC in intercultural communication, this study examined Iraqi Kurdish EFL learners' perceptions of their ICC knowledge and attitude dimensions—two key components of ICC—in communication within ELF contexts. The overall results indicated that participants demonstrated considerable ICC knowledge and positive attitudes. They were generally aware of and held positive attitudes toward the changing sociolinguistic reality of English, its various varieties, and cultural diversity in ELF interactions. However, they demonstrated a stronger preference for native English varieties and showed little interest in acquiring the linguistic features of non-native varieties. Statistical analyses revealed that multilingualism, travel history, and length of English learning experience significantly impacted the participants' knowledge and attitudes regarding ICC.

The degree of multilingualism had significant effects on the participants' knowledge and attitudes toward ICC. The more languages the participants spoke, the more they demonstrated knowledge of native and non-native English varieties, meaning-negotiation skills, and deeper awareness of cultural differences in non-verbal communication. They also held more positive attitudes towards all English

varieties and felt less pressure to sound native-like. Their travel history also significantly impacted their knowledge of other languages used to negotiate meaning in intercultural settings, and their willingness to improve their knowledge of other Englishes beyond the classroom to enhance their ICC. Finally, the results showed that learners with longer experience learning English were understandably more knowledgeable about cultural differences and non-verbal features of communication in English. These findings underscore the significance of adopting an intercultural perspective and exposing EFL learners to different varieties of English.

However, these results have certain limitations due to the questionnaire's focus on ICC as restricted to knowledge and attitudes, the sample size, and reliance on quantitative analysis. These limitations hinder a more in-depth understanding of ICC in the Iraqi-Kurdish EFL context. Future studies could focus on studying ICC from the perspective of key stakeholders across different EFL contexts and use mixed-method approaches, incorporating qualitative data and advanced statistical analyses (e.g., regression models) to offer a more comprehensive picture of ICC in EFL settings.

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Appendix
Questionnaire on Iraqi-Kurdish EFL learners' perceptions of ICC

Part 1:
Please indicate your gender: Male   Female
Please choose your age group: 18-20   21-25   26-30   31-40
How many languages do you speak?
What languages do you speak?
For how many years have you studied English so far?
How old were you when you started to study English?
Have you ever been to an English-speaking country?
Have you ever travelled to a country where you communicated in English?

Part 2:
Q1. I am aware of the spread of English and its changing status in the mobilized world.
Strongly agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly disagree

Q2. I have learned more about the new roles and functions of English as an international language today.
Strongly agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly disagree

Q3. I am aware that to be proficient in English communications is not only developing linguistic skills but also intercultural communication competence.
Strongly agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly disagree

Q4. I have a desire to learn more essential knowledge and skills to communicate successfully in intercultural encounters.
Strongly agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly disagree

Q5. I am aware that besides American English or British English, there are other varieties of English such as Indian English, Singlish, etc.
Strongly agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly disagree

Q6. I have learned some different accents and vocabulary of Singlish, Indian English, and Manglish besides American and British Englishes.
Strongly agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly disagree

Q7. I am aware that I might communicate in English with people from other countries or regions (such as China, English-speaking countries such as America or Britain.
Strongly agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly disagree

Q8. I have learned that people coming from different countries or regions might have different accents.
Strongly agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly disagree

Q9. I have learned and practiced using some languages to negotiate the meaning in intercultural communications.
Strongly agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly disagree

Q10. I have learned and practiced using some languages to join intercultural communications and avoid the breakdown.
Strongly agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly disagree

Q11. I respect all accents of English wherever speakers come from.
Strongly agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly disagree

Q12. I wish my accent of English will be respected by other interlocutors from other countries.
Strongly agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly disagree

Q13. I do not feel ashamed if I do not speak like a native speaker.
Strongly agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly disagree

Q14. I want to keep my identity through my English accent when communicating with people from other countries (e.g., Iran, Turkey, Germany, China, and etc.)
Strongly agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly disagree

Q15. I want to enrich my knowledge of other Englishes outside the classroom to enhance my intercultural communicative competence.
Strongly agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly disagree

Q16. I am aware that besides American or British cultural norms, there are a diversity of cultural norms and beliefs expressed by English speakers from different cultures in English communications.
Strongly agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly disagree

Q17. I am aware of enriching my knowledge of different cultures to develop my intercultural communicative competence.
Strongly agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly disagree

Q18. I have learned about various cultures of different countries besides American or British cultures such as about non-verbal communication, politeness, silence, and turn-taking, etc.
Strongly agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly disagree

Q19. I have developed my knowledge about my own cultures in English.
Strongly agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly disagree

Q20. I have understood more about my culture in comparison with other cultures.
Strongly agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly disagree

Q21. I have developed my knowledge about people and cultures in the world.
Strongly agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly disagree

Q22. I have learned some languages to participate in intercultural communications and avoid the breakdown.
Strongly agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly disagree

Q23. I have an open mind to different cultures that I might meet in international communications.
Strongly agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly disagree

Q24. I respect other cultural norms and beliefs in intercultural communications.
Strongly agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly disagree

Q25. I wish other interlocutors will also respect my cultural norms and beliefs in intercultural communications.
Strongly agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly disagree

Q26. I want to keep my identity in intercultural communications.
Strongly agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly disagree

Q27. I wish other interlocutors recognise me as an Iraqi Kurd in an international environment although I speak English.
Strongly agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly disagree

Q28. I am sympathetic with cultural mistakes or conflicts that might happen in intercultural communications.
Strongly agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly disagree

Q29. I do not feel embarrassed or ashamed if there is a cultural misunderstanding in an intercultural communication.
Strongly agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly disagree

Q30. I feel more confident to communicate in English in an international environment.
Strongly agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly disagree

Q31. I love the world more with a multicultural picture.
Strongly agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly disagree

Q32. I love my own culture more.
Strongly agree   Agree   Neutral   Disagree   Strongly disagree