

EFL Teachers' Beliefs About Integrating Intercultural Competence in Higher Education in Karakalpakstan: A Descriptive Mixed-Methods Study

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Abstract: This study investigates higher education EFL teachers' beliefs about intercultural competence and its integration into classroom practice in Karakalpakstan. Adopting a descriptive mixed-methods design, the research draws on data collected through an online questionnaire consisting of closed-ended and Likert-scale items, as well as open-ended responses. The study aims to explore how teachers conceptualise culture and intercultural competence, what intercultural teaching practices they report, and how their beliefs influence their pedagogical choices.

The findings indicate that most teachers demonstrate a generally positive orientation toward intercultural competence and define it as the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately across cultures. However, a minority of participants still associate intercultural competence with linguistic proficiency, suggesting some conceptual ambiguity. In terms of classroom practice, intercultural teaching is predominantly implemented through knowledge-based and teacher-centred approaches, with a strong reliance on textbook materials and factual cultural information.

The results further reveal a relationship between teachers' beliefs and their teaching practices. Teachers who hold more static views of culture tend to adopt transmissive instructional methods, whereas those with more dynamic understandings are more likely to promote interaction and reflection. Nevertheless, a gap is observed between teachers' stated beliefs and their actual classroom practices, indicating the influence of contextual constraints.

The study underscores the need for targeted professional development initiatives that bridge the gap between teachers' beliefs and classroom practices. The findings contribute to a better understanding of intercultural language teaching in under-researched contexts such as higher education in Karakalpakstan.

Keywords: Intercultural competence; EFL teachers; teacher beliefs; intercultural teaching; higher education; Karakalpakstan.

Introduction: Intercultural competence is broadly recognised as the capacity to communicate effectively and appropriately with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, utilising pertinent knowledge, skills, and attitudes. This notion has been extensively examined within the fields of applied linguistics and language education, notably by scholars such as Byram, who highlights intercultural competence as a synthesis of linguistic proficiency and intercultural awareness essential for meaningful interaction in a globalised society.

In today's increasingly interconnected world, developing students' intercultural competence has become an important goal of education. Foreign language education plays a central role in this process because language and culture are inseparable, and language classrooms naturally provide opportunities for intercultural learning (Kramsch, 1993).

However, intercultural competence does not develop automatically through exposure to a foreign language or contact with other cultures. As Byram (1997) argues,

its development requires intentional pedagogical support from teachers. Therefore, language teachers play a key role in fostering learners' intercultural attitudes, knowledge, and skills. At the same time, this requires teachers themselves to be interculturally competent, which is often a complex and demanding expectation in real educational contexts.

Despite the growing recognition of intercultural education, many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers still struggle with how to integrate intercultural competence into classroom practice. This challenge is often linked to limited training opportunities, time constraints, and lack of methodological clarity. As a result, a gap remains between the theoretical importance of intercultural competence and its actual classroom implementation.

Research on teacher cognition highlights that teachers' beliefs strongly influence their instructional decisions and classroom practices. Borg (2003) emphasizes that what teachers believe about teaching and learning often has a stronger impact on classroom behavior than formal training or prescribed methods. Similarly, Pajares (1992) argues that beliefs act as a filter through which teachers interpret new pedagogical ideas and experiences.

In intercultural language teaching, teachers' beliefs shape how they understand culture, how they conceptualize intercultural competence, and how they attempt to integrate it into their teaching practices. However, despite increasing interest in intercultural foreign language teaching (IFLT), relatively little is known about how teachers in specific contexts, such as higher education in Karakalpakstan, conceptualize intercultural competence and apply it in practice.

Therefore, this study aims to explore higher education EFL teachers' beliefs in Karakalpakstan regarding the integration of intercultural competence into foreign language teaching. The study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do in-service higher education EFL teachers in Karakalpakstan define culture and intercultural competence?
2. What intercultural teaching practices do these teachers endorse?
3. How do teachers' understandings of culture and intercultural competence influence their intercultural teaching practices?

METHODS

Research design

This study employed a descriptive mixed-methods design to explore higher education EFL teachers' beliefs about intercultural competence in Karakalpakstan.

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire containing both closed-ended and Likert-scale items, which allowed for quantitative analysis, as well as open-ended responses that supported qualitative interpretation.

Participants

The participants of the study were in-service English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers working in higher education institutions in Karakalpakstan. A purposive sampling strategy was used to select participants who had experience in teaching English at the university level. A total of 64 teachers participated in the study.

Teachers were invited through online communication channels, and they completed the questionnaire voluntarily.

Research instrument

The questionnaire included both closed-ended and Likert-scale items. The items were designed to investigate teachers' beliefs about intercultural competence, its importance in foreign language teaching, and its implementation in classroom practice. The Likert scale ranged from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree," allowing respondents to express the degree of their agreement with each statement.

The use of an online questionnaire ensured convenient and flexible data collection, enabling participants to respond at any time and from any location.

Data collection procedure

After the questionnaire was designed, it was distributed online to EFL teachers in higher education institutions. Participants completed the Form voluntarily. All responses were collected automatically through the platform.

Data analysis

The collected data were analysed using descriptive statistical methods. Frequencies and percentages were used to identify general trends in teachers' responses regarding intercultural competence.

This approach allowed the researcher to summarise teachers' beliefs and to interpret the overall tendencies in their perceptions and classroom practices related to intercultural competence.

RESULTS

Teachers' understanding of culture

The analysis of the data revealed several key themes regarding EFL teachers' beliefs about incorporating intercultural competence in higher education in Karakalpakstan. The findings are presented by integrating quantitative survey results with qualitative interpretations to provide a more comprehensive

understanding.

First, participants demonstrated a strong conceptual understanding of cultural awareness. A large majority of respondents (82.5%) defined cultural awareness as the ability to understand and respect cultural similarities and differences. This reflects an inclusive and interaction-oriented perspective on intercultural competence. In contrast, a smaller proportion of teachers (11.1%) associated cultural awareness with memorizing cultural facts, indicating a more surface-level understanding. Only a negligible number of participants selected options such as rejecting other cultural values or promoting only national traditions, suggesting that ethnocentric views are not dominant among the respondents.

Second, teachers' beliefs about their role in a pluricultural classroom highlight a tendency toward facilitative and reflective teaching practices. More than half of the respondents (58.7%) indicated that the teacher's role is to facilitate dialogue and encourage critical reflection on cultural differences.

This suggests that many teachers view intercultural competence as an interactive and dialogic process rather than a passive transmission of knowledge. However, some participants still preferred more traditional approaches, such as focusing primarily on linguistic accuracy or avoiding cultural discussions, which may limit the development of students' intercultural skills.

From a descriptive interpretation, these patterns suggest that while most teachers recognise the importance of intercultural competence, their depth of understanding and pedagogical application may vary. Teachers who emphasised dialogue and critical reflection appear to align with contemporary approaches to intercultural language teaching, whereas those favouring factual knowledge or linguistic focus may require additional support and training.

Overall, the findings indicate that EFL teachers in

Karakalpakstan generally hold positive beliefs toward integrating intercultural competence into their teaching. Nevertheless, inconsistencies in responses point to the need for targeted professional development programs to strengthen teachers' practical implementation of intercultural approaches in higher education contexts.

EFL teachers' conceptual understanding of intercultural communicative competence

The analysis of the questionnaire responses indicates that higher-education EFL teachers generally hold positive attitudes toward intercultural competence (IC).

The analysis of responses to the item investigating the concept of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) reveals a clear majority of participants. As illustrated in Figure 1, most respondents (68.8%) defined ICC as the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people from different cultures. This dominant response indicates that a large proportion of participants hold an understanding of ICC that is generally aligned with widely accepted definitions in the field.

A smaller proportion of respondents (15.6%) associated ICC with mastery of English grammar rules, suggesting that some participants still conflate linguistic competence with intercultural competence. Other responses, including the ability to avoid cultural differences, comparing cultures, and the coexistence of isolated cultures without interaction, accounted for only minor percentages, indicating limited endorsement of these interpretations.

Overall, the findings show that while most participants demonstrate an appropriate understanding of ICC as a communicative and culturally embedded competence, a minority still holds simplified or inaccurate views. These results highlight the importance of further strengthening teachers' understanding of the distinction between linguistic competence and intercultural competence in EFL education.

1. Intercultural communicative competence refers to:
64 responses

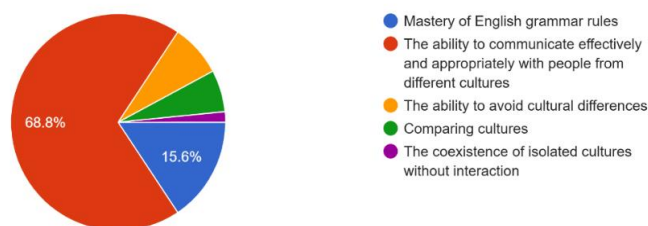


Figure 1. EFL teachers' responses to the definition of intercultural communicative competence (ICC)

EFL Teachers' intercultural teaching practices

The analysis of teachers' responses regarding intercultural teaching practices reveals that most EFL teachers in higher education institutions in Karakalpakstan operate within a predominantly structuralist view of culture. Within this perspective, culture is perceived as a fixed, describable system closely linked to nationality or ethnicity and characterised by clear boundaries between different cultural groups.

This understanding of culture is reflected in the types of intercultural teaching practices teachers endorse. When asked to describe how they integrate intercultural content into their foreign language teaching, most participants reported practices that are largely textbook-based and focused on providing cultural "background knowledge." In this sense, intercultural teaching is mainly associated with explicit cultural topics such as festivals, food, traditions, and folklore, which are presented as factual information.

As one teacher explained:

"At this stage, I think the main thing is to show students different aspects of foreign culture as much as possible while they are learning the language. This includes customs, traditions, and ways of life from different countries. The aim is to help them understand cultural differences."

Similarly, another participant described intercultural teaching as the transmission of cultural facts:

"I mainly introduce cultural knowledge to students. For example, I explain the origins of festivals like April Fool's Day and Halloween and talk about what people in other countries do during these events."

Because teachers' understanding of culture is strongly framed through national or ethnic boundaries, the concept of "difference" is frequently emphasized in their teaching practices. One participant stated:

"In my understanding, intercultural teaching is mainly about cultural differences. Since we have limited time, we focus on the most important differences between the two cultures."

While cultural differences are an important component of intercultural teaching, the findings suggest that many teachers tend to equate intercultural competence primarily with the teaching of differences. As a result, similarities between cultures and the idea of shared cultural space are often overlooked. Moreover, intercultural teaching is largely implemented through teacher-centred explanations, where teachers provide information about other cultures rather than engaging students in reflection or inquiry-based learning.

A typical example of this approach is reflected in the following description:

"In our teaching, we mainly rely on textbooks. We do not treat culture as a separate teaching element. When the textbook includes topics like festivals, greetings, weather, or numbers, we briefly mention cultural aspects. We just touch on them as we go along."

This suggests that intercultural elements are typically incorporated in an unsystematic and occasional manner, rather than being embedded within a well-structured pedagogical framework. This type of practice is often referred to as a "by-the-way" approach, in which cultural information is introduced only when it arises in the textbook, without clearly defined teaching goals or planned instructional focus.

Another important finding is that many teachers view intercultural competence as a higher-level skill that depends on students' linguistic proficiency. In this view, language ability is considered a prerequisite for intercultural learning:

"You need basic language skills first. If students do not have a strong language foundation, it is difficult for them to understand cultural aspects effectively."

"I think students should have sufficient language competence before learning culture. Without enough input, they cannot express their ideas, and real communication does not happen."

As a result, teachers often believe that intercultural competence should be developed at later stages of education, such as in secondary or higher levels, rather than in earlier learning contexts.

However, not all teachers fully maintain a rigid structuralist perspective. Some participants questioned the clear boundaries between cultures and reflected critically on cultural classification.

Overall, the findings suggest that while EFL teachers in Karakalpakstan generally recognise the importance of intercultural teaching, their practices are largely shaped by traditional, knowledge-based, and teacher-centred approaches, with only limited engagement in reflective or inquiry-based intercultural learning.

The relationship between teachers' beliefs and their intercultural teaching practices

The findings also point to a noticeable connection between teachers' perceptions of culture and intercultural competence and their approaches to classroom instruction. Those who tended to view culture as a stable and clearly defined set of national characteristics were more inclined to adopt teacher-centred methods focused on delivering factual information. In such cases, classroom practices largely consisted of presenting cultural knowledge, such as

traditions, customs, and everyday life, often based on textbook materials.

In contrast, educators who perceived intercultural competence as a dynamic and communicative process tended to emphasise interaction and active learner participation. Their methodologies encompassed fostering discussions, encouraging reflective thinking, and involving students in comparing cultural viewpoints, thereby facilitating the development of critical intercultural awareness.

Nevertheless, the results suggest that these more interactive approaches are not widely or consistently implemented. Even among teachers who expressed more flexible and process-oriented views of intercultural competence, there was not always a clear alignment between their stated beliefs and their actual teaching practices. Practical constraints, including limited instructional time, curriculum pressures, and insufficient methodological support may influence this inconsistency.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide important insights into higher education EFL teachers' beliefs about intercultural competence and its integration into classroom practice in Karakalpakstan. Overall, the results indicate that while teachers generally hold positive attitudes toward intercultural competence, there are notable inconsistencies between their conceptual understanding and their pedagogical implementation.

Concerning the first research question, the findings show that most teachers define culture and intercultural competence in ways that align with widely accepted perspectives in the field. A majority of participants viewed intercultural competence as the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with individuals from different cultural backgrounds. This understanding reflects key elements of intercultural communicative competence as proposed by Byram (1997), particularly the integration of cultural awareness and communicative ability. However, the presence of some simplified or inaccurate interpretations—such as equating intercultural competence with grammatical proficiency—suggests that not all teachers have a fully developed conceptual understanding. This supports Pajares' (1992) argument that teachers' beliefs are often shaped by prior experiences and may include incomplete or inconsistent knowledge structures.

In relation to the second research question, the findings reveal that teachers' intercultural teaching practices are largely characterised by a knowledge-based and teacher-centred approach. Intercultural

content is most commonly introduced through textbook materials and is often limited to factual information about cultural products such as traditions, festivals, and customs. This tendency reflects what can be described as a “by-the-way” approach to intercultural teaching, where cultural elements are addressed incidentally rather than through systematic instructional planning. Such practices suggest that, despite recognising the importance of intercultural competence, teachers may lack clear methodological strategies for its effective integration into language teaching.

The third research question focused on the relationship between teachers' beliefs and their classroom practices. The findings indicate that teachers' conceptualisations of culture play a significant role in shaping their pedagogical choices. Teachers who hold a more structuralist view of culture tend to adopt transmissive teaching approaches, focusing on the delivery of cultural knowledge. In contrast, those who perceive intercultural competence as a dynamic and interactive process are more likely to emphasise dialogue, reflection, and student engagement. This finding is consistent with Borg's (2003) view that teacher cognition strongly influences classroom practice.

However, the study also reveals a noticeable gap between teachers' beliefs and their actual teaching practices. Even when teachers express more contemporary and interaction-oriented understandings of intercultural competence, these beliefs are not always translated into classroom practice. This mismatch may be explained by contextual constraints such as limited time, curriculum requirements, and insufficient professional training. As a result, teachers may rely on more traditional and manageable teaching methods despite holding more progressive beliefs.

These findings have important implications for teacher education and professional development. In order to support the effective integration of intercultural competence, it is essential to provide teachers with not only theoretical knowledge but also practical pedagogical tools and strategies. Training programs should focus on helping teachers move beyond knowledge transmission toward more reflective, student-centred, and inquiry-based approaches to intercultural learning.

Overall, this study highlights the need to bridge the gap between theory and practice in intercultural language teaching. While teachers demonstrate a general awareness of the importance of intercultural competence, further support is required to ensure that

these beliefs are consistently reflected in classroom practice.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore higher education EFL teachers' beliefs about intercultural competence and its integration into classroom practice in Karakalpakstan. Using a descriptive mixed-methods approach, the findings provide a comprehensive overview of how teachers conceptualise intercultural competence and how these beliefs are reflected in their teaching.

The results indicate that most teachers demonstrate a generally positive orientation toward intercultural competence and recognise its importance in foreign language education. Many participants defined intercultural competence in line with widely accepted academic perspectives, emphasising effective and appropriate communication across cultures. However, the findings also reveal that some teachers hold partial or simplified understandings, particularly when intercultural competence is conflated with linguistic proficiency.

In terms of classroom practice, intercultural teaching is predominantly implemented through knowledge-based and teacher-centred approaches. Cultural content is typically introduced through textbooks and focuses on factual information such as traditions, customs, and festivals. These practices suggest that intercultural competence is often addressed in an incidental and unsystematic manner rather than through clearly defined pedagogical objectives.

Importantly, the study highlights a relationship between teachers' beliefs and their instructional practices. Teachers' conceptualisations of culture influence how they approach intercultural teaching; however, this relationship is not always consistent. A gap was identified between teachers' stated beliefs and their actual classroom practices, indicating that broader contextual and institutional factors may limit the practical application of intercultural approaches.

Based on these findings, the study underscores the need for more targeted professional development initiatives that focus on both theoretical understanding and practical implementation of intercultural competence. Providing teachers with concrete strategies for integrating intercultural learning into everyday teaching may help bridge the gap between belief and practice.

While this study contributes to the growing body of research on intercultural language teaching, it is not without limitations. The use of a questionnaire as the primary data collection instrument may limit the depth

of insight into teachers' actual classroom behaviour. Future research could incorporate classroom observations or interviews to gain a more nuanced understanding of how intercultural competence is enacted in practice.

Overall, the study emphasises the importance of aligning teachers' beliefs with effective pedagogical practices in order to promote meaningful intercultural learning in higher education contexts.

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