A study of the intercultural communicative competence and the effects of cultural familiarity on reading comprehension based on ethnicity

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ABSTRACT: As an academic endeavor in an EFL setting especially in the field of reading comprehension, this study intended to examine intercultural communicative competence (ICC) and the effects of cultural familiarity on reading comprehension based on two specific ethnicities (Turk and Fars). To this end, participants, 130 EFL students majoring in English, were chosen from three universities in Iran. The effects of cultural familiarity on students' reading comprehension were examined by utilizing two types of processes, providing relevant background knowledge and text nativization. These two processes were used as two separate treatments for the members of the experimental groups. Members of both control and experimental groups subsequently received reading comprehension tests. Then, to elicit ICC levels, the participants were asked to complete ICC Questionnaire. The statistical analysis of the data revealed the significantly positive effect of cultural familiarity on the reading comprehension performance of both Turk and Fars experimental groups and no significant difference was observed between the reading comprehension performance and ICC level of the ethnic groups of Fars and Turks. The present study emphasizes the facilitating and positive effect of cultural familiarity on the reading comprehension of specific ethnic groups and suggests that cultural familiarity can be a valuable tool for enhancing reading comprehension and promoting language performance and cultural competence of Iranian EFL learners. Therefore, due to the importance of teaching culture in the field of English language teaching, there should be much more attention to cultural and intercultural matters when designing a language curriculum.

KEYWORDS: cultural familiarity; ethnicity; intercultural communicative competence; reading comprehension

1. Introduction

Researchers have emphasized the inseparable relationship between culture and language and the important role of culture in language teaching and learning which must go hand in hand throughout the years (Almutairi, 2021; Civelek and Toplu, 2021; Erten and Razi, 2003; Genc and Bada, 2005; Ghavamnia, 2020). Culture is defined as "something learned, transmitted, passed down from one generation to the next, through human actions and linguistic communication, often in the form of face-to-face interaction, and without fixed boundaries, meaning different things according to situations of

course" (Duranti, 1997; Spencer-Oatey and Franklin, 2012). Another definition comes from Snowdon (2018) who defines culture as behavior patterns that have some consistency and continuity within generations but vary among specific groups or populations. According to Hariri (2022), when students are made aware of their own culture, and its differences from other cultures, they will have better reactions and interactions encounter with people from the other culture(s) and are taught to tolerate differences and avoid stereotyping. Teachers need to prepare EFL students for cultura franca to find shared common grounds to be chosen as a point to begin communication (Hariri, 2022).

Along the same line, Tomalin and Stempleski (2013) believed that culture is the fifth language skill. This fifth language skill teaches EFL students strategies, the mindset and different techniques to use English to learn about, understand, apply, and appreciate the traditions, behaviors, values, and ways of doing things, special characteristics, and unique qualities of the target cultures. It concentrates on how to interact and deal with cultural differences, to be patient, flexible and tolerant of doing things which is different from their own culture. It is believed that culture is the core of the language, and familiarity with the target culture can be useful to improve EFL and ESL learners' English learning. Therefore, to have effective communication and interaction with other English language users, obtaining cultural knowledge is necessary. Therefore, students can use a language effectively, only after cultural issues become the main part of language teaching and learning (Mohammed, 2020).

Moreover, Wei (2005) stated that language has a dual character, first, a carrier of culture and second, a tool for communication. This is unthinkable to consider language without culture and so human culture without language, culture and language cannot be separated from each other (Jiang, 2000) and when it comes to the essence of teaching and learning it is important to know when language learners learn a foreign language, culture is also acquired because language is like a mirror of culture. (Mazzola et al., 2021; Varnum and Grossmann, 2017; Varnum and Kitayama, 2011). This is the "cultural niches" or the society that shaped and also is shaped by the language as a social institution therefore language is a cultural fact and an understanding of the inseparable relationship between language and culture is crucial (Baker, 2011; Byram et al., 2017; Liddicoat and Scarino, 2013). Gonzales et al. (2018) noted that young language learners are better at mastering a new language because they are more prone to learn and identify with a new culture and they often engage in learning processes in educational settings more than their parents.

Given that young language learners are more eager and flexible about a new culture, it is worth noting that an effective way for engaging and motivating them can be by incorporating cultural elements from the target language into language learning materials, to activate their existing cultural schemas specially for improving language learners' reading comprehension skills, which is actually in accordance with schema theory.

The idea that source and target language cultural elements (by providing relevant background knowledge) can facilitate EFL learners' reading comprehension is supported by schema theory. Shen (2008) stated that according to this theory, readers bring their prior knowledge, or schemas, to the reading process. It is also defined as a theory that describes how readers utilize their prior knowledge to comprehend and gain knowledge from written text, as explained by Rumelhart (1980). Rumelhart's definition of schema is "a structure for storing fundamental concepts in memory" (1980, p. 34).

An (2013) also draws attention to the importance of schema theory in reading comprehension. She explained that the reader brings his or her experience and prior knowledge into the reading comprehension process to help him or her understand what is going on, according to schema theory. A

key factor in reading comprehension is the interaction between the reader's schemata and the text. The reading process includes the activation of the reader's own schemata, which is associated with content provided in a text. Her study provides examples of the importance of schema theory in teaching English as a second language, emphasizing that teachers need to consider their students' prior knowledge and experience when developing texts and activities.

In addition, according to schema theory, the reader must have prior knowledge or experience with a topic before being able to understand what is written effectively. Schema theory holds that readers interpret meaning by integrating their prior knowledge with new information from the text (Hattan et al., 2023). Besides, the fact that learners may not be able to obtain sufficient cultural background information for an effective comprehension of texts in a new culture and context makes the reading comprehension process even more difficult. This may make it difficult to understand the text and to recognize the hidden meanings and intentions of the author. In order to overcome these problems, it may be essential for learners to actively participate in strategies that facilitate comprehension such as activating existing knowledge, making connections between the text and their own experience or active monitoring of how they understand each other's ideas (Kalina and Powell, 2009).

In the past, the primary goal of foreign language teaching was to develop learners' native language proficiency. Nowadays, English is mainly used for communication between representatives of different cultures, individuals speak it as a second or third language. Hence, the main aim of foreign language instruction naturally has shifted towards educating successful intercultural communicators rather than native speakers.

According to Byram (1997), intercultural communicative competence (ICC) refers to "the ability to interact with people from another country and culture in a foreign language". ICC is also defined as an individual's worldview and the individual's perceptions and reactions to cultural differences or the ability to shift cultural views and adapt behavior to cultural differences (Hammer and Bennett, 2009). Moreover, it is stated that ICC is the appropriate and effective performance when confronting and interacting with people who are culturally different from each other (Fantini, 2007, 2018; Fantini and Tirmizi, 2006). In recent years, ICC has become a central aim in foreign language teaching and equipping language learners for effective intercultural communication is a challenge for teachers around the world (Georgiou, 2011). Language instructors should design activities that support the development of ICC skills to help EFL learners become more competent in terms of cultural knowledge and interactions. Byram (1997) emphasized the need to provide activities and procedures where the foreign or other cultures, behaviors, traditions, and values are considered to help students develop intercultural communicative competence.

In the context of language teaching, the relationship between cultural familiarity and intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is of utmost importance. Cultural familiarity refers to learners' background knowledge and understanding of the target culture, while ICC involves their ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds (Kim, 2020). It is therefore necessary to incorporate cultural familiarity as part of the language education when developing ICC. An appropriate language teaching course should make available to learners an opportunity to learn the culture of the target language by taking advantage of authentic materials, activities and experiences that are representative of its diversity (Deardorff, 2018). This is in line with the schema theory, which suggests that learners' prior knowledge and experience, including their cultural background, influence how they understand and interpret new information. Language teachers can activate and build on the existing schemas of learners related to the cultural context of the language by incorporating cultural materials, activities and experiences reflecting the diversity of the

target culture. This approach would allow learners to gain a better understanding of the language and communicate more effectively, thus enabling them to develop intercultural competence.

Therefore, in response to the importance of culture in preparing EFL learners to use the target language in an intercultural setting successfully, being aware of EFL learners' own cultural rules and how the rules are different from those of the target language becomes essential (Samovar et al., 2016). Hence, culture teaching has gained importance in the field of English language teaching (Khataee, 2018a) and when designing a language curriculum, there should be much more attention to the cultural and intercultural matters, key cultural terms and items, and varieties of cultures to apply the most appropriate teaching strategies to help EFL learners bridge and overpass the culture gaps.

It is necessary for language instructors to consider ICC and cultural familiarity as two important factors when designing language curriculum, to help curricula designers and foreign language teachers be foreign culture teachers as well. Despite the immense importance placed on English by establishing so many language institutions in Iran, most of the language learners do not achieve particularly high levels of intercultural communication skills. The lack of rich experiential and constructionist cultural environments for the development of ICC, cause confidence problems and language anxiety for language learners (Norouzi et al., 2022). On the other hand, ethnicity and race are often challenged in language learning procedures (Nascimento, 2019), however, various studies are carried out regardless of the ethnic group of the participants. Therefore, this study investigated Iranian EFL learners' level of intercultural communicative competence and the effects of cultural familiarity on reading comprehension based on ethnic groups (Fars and Turks) through the lens of schema theory.

1.1. Intercultural communicative competence, models, and related studies

Byram (1997) defined ICC as "the ability to communicate effectively across cultural boundaries in a foreign language". According to Byram (1997), ICC requires intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes in addition to linguistic proficiency. He provided a model and describes how the language learner can effectively develop ICC. Spitzberg and Changnon (2009) explained that so many models characterize and interpret ICC in a wide variety of ways, but this three-part conceptualization is a popular approach. The first component is Knowledge, it concerns the possession of information and subsequent understanding related to one's own and other cultures, it requires the learner to understand how different social groups and identities function. The second component refers to skills, it includes language skills and abilities like adapting, collaborating, listening, conversing, and deferring judgment under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction; and the third is attitudes that are generally related to openness, flexibility and willingness to engage, means that to get an encompassing view of different cultures and values, the intercultural speaker needs to decenter from his perspective to understand and recognize various cultural orientations (Byram et al., 2002).

Additionally, there are other ICC models:

1)   The first one is Spitzberg and Cupach's (1984) ICC framework. This framework emphasized the necessity of individuals' already having or acquiring knowledge of their own and others' cultural system.

2)   Based on the second, ICC includes knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Hamilton et al., 1993). Knowledge refers to awareness of knowledge of self as it relates to cultural identity, commonalities and discrepancies across cultures. Skills refer to awareness or ability to engage in self-reflection, identity and articulate cultural similarities and differences. Attitudes refer to awareness of one's own values group and group equality.

3)   The model proposed by Imahori and Lanigan (1989) is derived from Spitzberg and Cupach's (1984) 3-D framework of ICC that included knowledge, skills, and personality or motivation elements. Therefore, the third is a relational model.

4)   Matveev (2017) stated that ICC happens when people coming from different cultures try to communicate using referencing toward the common referential construct. Therefore, the fourth is a co-orientational model of ICC.

5)   Fantini (1995) describes the fifth as intercultural interlocutor competence which is the relationship between the output of interlocutor one and the input of interlocutor two as mediated by the external environment through a system of selective perception, semantic clusters, morphology and syntax, phonology, and signs.

In a study carried out by Liu and Xie (2013), the ICC of provincial college English major students was investigated. The participants were 118 English majors in grade three. To examine their level of ICC, an intercultural communication test was taken and it was revealed that the general level of the English major students' ICC is low.

Regarding the importance of ICC, Kazemian et al. (2022) and Kazemian et al. (2023) conducted two studies under the rubric of problematizing language testing and assessment syllabi through intercultural competence assessment perspective in an EFL context and ELT scholars' attitudes towards inclusion of intercultural competence assessment in language proficiency tests. These aforementioned studies reveal concrete evidence that ICC is important not only in reading comprehension but it also in language testing and assessment.

In addition, Kazemian et al. (2021) tried to verify if instruction on ICC and its application through Iranian EFL advanced learners helps in dealing with ICC perspectives in writing and whether gender plays any role in the tendency to use that competence. For this purpose, 33 Iranian advanced EFL learners were divided into two experimental classes. As a treatment, all the participants received a five-week instruction on ICC. Results revealed that instruction on ICC helped learners in coping with intercultural issues in their writing course; however, gender did not play any role in using the ICC in writing.

In the same vein, Christiansen and Silva (2016) indicated that it is necessary to integrate culture into language teaching to help EFL learners develop their cultural awareness and intercultural communicative competence for a better function in an intercultural world. Sarwari and Wahab (2016) investigated the relationship between the English language proficiency (ELP) and ICC of 120 postgraduate students from 17 different countries studying at Malaysian Public Universities. They reported that students' ELP assisted them in ameliorating their ICC and it was the main factor that affected the interactions of international postgraduate students.

Moreover, Han and Song (2011) looked into the status quo of Chinese teachers' conceptualization of different facets of ICC in language instruction through a questionnaire survey among 30 English university teachers, they found that teachers could easily distinguish between a communicative and an intercultural approach, but they responded with ambiguity to their perception of ICC, showing skepticism toward the viability of teaching and acquiring intercultural skills at university.

In another study done by Smakova and Paulsrud (2020) on the extent of ICC integration in high schools in Kazakhstan, the researchers explored that however the respondents moderately integrated ICC, due to various challenges such as how to teach ICC, how to assess ICC aspects, and how to promote students' ICC. This integration is not regular. As conclusion, professional development programs to

increase teachers' knowledge were suggested. Besides, Soodmand Afshar et al. (2018) investigated Prospects and Vision 1, which are recently developed local textbooks used for teaching the English language to junior and senior students in Iran. Based on the results, the major focus was on grammatical structures and functions of the language and specifically some local cultural features were involved and not intercultural features.

Furthermore, Fungchomchoei and Kardkanklai (2016) concluded that Thai teachers respectively have sufficient knowledge of ICC needed in an ELT setting, but as evidenced by the prioritization of language objectives and activities over culture-based learning tasks, they do not apply their ICC knowledge in the classroom. Zhuang (2006) also emphasized the importance of ICC in ELT, as the world is globalized and the need for interculturally competent speakers is exploding.

1.2. Cultural familiarity

There have been many studies on the impact of cultural familiarity on students' learning processes in EFL classrooms (Brantmeier, 2003; Byram and Kramsch, 2008; Chou, 2011; Cristina and Martinez, 2014; Diep et al., 2022; Erten and Razi, 2003; Gilakjani and Ahmadi, 2011; Jafari and Aghaei, 2013; Jalilehvan and Samuel, 2014; Kendeou and Van Den Broek, 2007; Khatae, 2018b; Pei-Shi, 2012; Rogatin et al., 2019). In all the above-mentioned studies, the researchers investigated the effect of cultural familiarity on students' reading comprehension by utilizing two types of processes. They have provided relevant background knowledge or nativized the texts.

According to Khataee (2019), the familiar content of a text is an important criterion for material selection since EFL learners who are exposed to read texts with culturally familiar concepts would have a better reading comprehension performance when they are provided with the relevant background knowledge. Hence, language teachers must focus on cultural background knowledge of the target language to prevent being misunderstood or misinterpreted (Dabou et al., 2021; Gunasinghe et al., 2018; Mousavi-Davoudi et al., 2021). Zhang and Kim (2014) also indicated that when the reader is more culturally familiar with the content of a text, more understanding will occur, and this will decrease the higher levels of stress and anxiety they experience during the process of reading comprehension. Moreover, Nasirahmadi et al. (2014) scrutinized the effects of integrating cultural-based resources such as the literature into EFL classes. The participants were fourteen language learners, randomly selected and divided into two groups conventional and experimental. The researchers found that the experimental group outscored the traditional group within the semester regarding classroom discussions.

1.2.1. Cultural nativization

Nativization refers to "the pragmatic and semantic adaptation of the textual and contextual clues of the original story into the learner's own culture, or the identification of foreign cultural elements and changing them to native cultural elements while keeping its linguistic and rhetorical content essentially intact". Alptekin (2006) indicated that to make the text culturally more familiar, the cultural elements of a text can be nativized and this nativization helps language learners make a better comprehension in comparison to reading the original but culturally-remote texts. Furthermore, he stated that "the role of cultural background knowledge needs to be investigated not necessarily in the framework of two texts that are thought to be syntactically, lexically, and rhetorically equivalent, but in the context of the same text used in two different ways, one being the original and the other a culturally nativized version".

In a study carried out by Dehghan and Sadighi (2011), the effect of cultural background on the performance of Iranian EFL students on local (bottom-up) and global (top-down) processes was investigated. The findings illustrated the significantly better performance of Iranian EFL learners on local

items compared with global items and their overall performance was mostly influenced by text familiarity. Moreover, Ruthemsley (2011) explained that the cultural familiarity of ESL students affects their comprehension of English texts. The findings showed that students who belonged to different cultures had different understandings and perceptions of the texts because the new information was not from their own culture. In addition, students who did not possess the relevant knowledge found it difficult to comprehend English written passages. The researcher concluded that cultural nativization facilitates comprehension of texts.

Additionally, Erten and Razi (2003) conducted a study in which they nativized an American short story into Turkish culture. The participants were four groups of English major students at a university in Turkey. The first group was given the original version of the short story while the second group read the nativized version, the third group of students read the original story with some reading activities while the fourth group was given the nativized version with the same activities. The results of this study showed that the members of the groups who read the nativized version of the short story, regardless of whether they received any activities or not, outscored the other two groups who received the original story either with or without reading activities.

1.2.2. Background knowledge

Lipson (1983) investigated the influence of religious contexts on reading comprehension and showed that subjects who were asked to read texts with familiar religious content were significantly better in terms of comprehension than the other group. Kitishat et al. (2015) also carried out a study to verify the importance of cultural background knowledge in foreign language learning. They explained as there is a close relationship between culture teaching and language teaching, English language teaching should not be restricted to the linguistic knowledge of the language but also the knowledge of culture. Finally, they concluded that cultural prior knowledge helps language learners to improve their language skills. They have suggested that educational contexts must be supplied with a proper situation to encourage learning a foreign language.

Similarly, Chen (2008) investigated the effect of background knowledge and previewing texts on the reading comprehension of native Mandarin-speaking English language learners (ELLs). To provide the students with proper and relevant background knowledge, he applied previewing activities and found that the culturally familiar ad previews facilitated the reading comprehension process of ELL students.

As reported by Smith et al. (2021), learners who either lack or fail to activate relevant background knowledge, found it difficult to comprehend texts and therefore failed to perform well in post-reading comprehension tests. In another study by Nur and Ahmad (2017), the extent to which background knowledge activation happens accurately, will facilitate reading comprehension performance and the lack of relevant background knowledge results in language learners' inaccuracy and difficulty in extracting the correct meaning of texts. Background knowledge activation improves reading comprehension by making interaction between learners' prior knowledge and new information in the text.

Moreover, the findings of a study by Cho and Ma (2020) showed that the experimental group supported background activation and demonstrated a better reading comprehension performance than those of the control group. Likewise, Elleman and Oslund (2019) explained that language learners with deeper relative background knowledge achieved higher scores on comprehension tests than those with limited or no background knowledge of the same specific subjects. Generally, lack of relevant cultural background knowledge leads to misunderstanding and misinterpretation even if someone is linguistically proficient, they may not be able to communicate effectively (Umaira, 2020).

As mentioned above, a notable number of studies emphasized the importance of ICC facets and also the effects of cultural familiarity in the area of language teaching (Han and Song, 2011; Khataee, 2018b; Kitishat et al., 2015; Rogatin et al., 2019; Ruthemsley, 2011; Smakova and Paulsrud, 2020). However, we cannot find many studies investigating these two based on ethnicity and research into the students' perceptions and levels of ICC is still inadequate. Therefore, this study aims to address the following questions:

RQ1. Does cultural familiarity by providing relevant background knowledge have any effect on the reading comprehension of Turk and Fars EFL learners?

RQ2. Does cultural familiarity by utilizing text nativization have any effect on the reading comprehension of Turk and Fars EFL learners?

RQ3. Are there any statistically significant differences in the two ethnic groups' levels of intercultural communicative competence?

2. Data and method

2.1. Participants

The participants of the study were 130 Iranian EFL students studying in the field of English language with two ethnic backgrounds (Fars and Turk). The participants of the study were selected purposely from three universities located in Iran (Arak University, Hormozgan University, and Zanjan University). Each ethnic group included an experimental group of 28 participants and a control group of 27, therefore, we had two experimental groups and two control groups (see **Tables 1** and **2**).

The participants of the study were both females and males. The age range was between 18 and 28 and their English language proficiency was advanced. The Oxford Placement Test (OPT) consisting of 60 multiple-choice items was given to participants to check their proficiency level. According to the results of the Oxford Placement Test, the participants were approximately at the identical level of English proficiency.

Table 1. Distribution of students in experimental and control groups by ethnicity.

Group	Fars	Turk
Experimental	28	28
Control	27	27
Total	55	55

Table 2. Distribution of students' respondent to the ethnicity questionnaire.

Group	Frequency
Fars	65
Turk	65
Total	130

2.2. Pilot study

The items of the reading comprehension tests were piloted with 14 EFL learners of similar educational backgrounds and cultures to the participants in the study, who had OPT scores in the same range as those of the participants. The purpose of the pilot study was to identify test items that were too easy or too difficult. The study revealed that each item performed satisfactorily, suggesting that the reading comprehension tests were considered to be consistent enough to go on conducting the tests to the real sample. Test validation was done by three TEFL professors, and the problems were solved.

2.3. Materials and instruments

For the study, Oxford Placement Test, reading comprehension texts and tests, and the ICC questionnaire (Mirzaei and Forouzandeh, 2013) were prepared and used. The Intercultural Communicative Competence Questionnaire (ICCQ), which was developed by Mirzaei and Forouzandeh (2013), was used to explore the level of intercultural communicative competence of the participants. This questionnaire includes 12 items for evaluating the participants' knowledge about cultural self-awareness, culture-related information, linguistic knowledge and socio-linguistic awareness, five items to assess participants' ability to communicate across cultures and also five items for assessing participants' respect for other cultures, so it has a total of 22 items (Mirzaei and Forouzandeh, 2013). The items have been rated on a five-point Likert scale type ranging from one strongly disagree to five strongly agree by the participants.

The material used for the treatment of the study was authentic English texts with a high load of cultural information. The original and nativized version of the text one and the original and the relevant background knowledge of the text two (prepared by the researchers), were also applied to the EFL learners.

2.4. Data collection procedures

This experiment was conducted over two months and in four phases as follows: Week 1 (First phase): Administration of Oxford Placement Test/Week 3 (Second phase): Treatment 1 (Nativization Process)/Week 5 (Third phase): Treatment 2 (Providing Relevant Background Knowledge)/Week 7 (Fourth phase): ICC Questionnaire. In the first week, the participants were asked to complete the Oxford Placement test to ensure that they are homogeneous. Nine students were excluded from the study since their test scores were extremely low or high.

Then, in week 3, the original and nativized version of the first text with a high load of cultural knowledge were used for the experimental and control groups. There were two experimental and two control groups (Turk and Fars). Members of the control groups were the ones who studied the original version of the first text, and members of the experimental groups were the ones who received the treatment (nativization process) of the study and studied the nativized version of the same text.

After that, in week 5, a culturally loaded text (text two) was given to both experimental and control groups. The students in the experimental groups were provided with the appropriate background knowledge. The members of the control groups were provided with no background knowledge. Comprehension tests, aimed at testing the participants' reading comprehension of the cultural content of the texts were conducted after the administration of each text in weeks 3 and 5.

At last, all the participants were asked to complete the ICC Questionnaire (Mirzaei and Forouzandeh, 2013) to explore their level of intercultural communicative competence. Each questionnaire took about 20 to 25 minutes to be completed. After that, the participants sent the answers through email to the researchers. The questionnaire includes 12 items for evaluating the participants' knowledge about cultural self-awareness, culture-related information, linguistic knowledge and socio-linguistic awareness, 5 items to assess participants' ability to communicate across cultures and also 5 items for assessing participants' respect for other cultures, so it has a total of 22 items.

3. Results

The second phase of this study aimed at investigating the effect of cultural familiarity by using text

nativization (Treatment 1) on reading comprehension based on ethnicity and also to examine whether there are any differences in the performance of Turk and Fars EFL learners. **Table 3** shows the descriptive statistics giving the mean scores of the experimental and control groups of both Turk and Fars EFL learners. According to **Table 3** and also **Figure 1**, the participants of the experimental groups who received the nativized version of the original text in both Fars and Turk groups had higher mean scores than the control groups (Turk experimental mean = 6.68, Turk control mean = 4.96, Fars experimental mean = 7.00, and Fars control mean = 4.93).

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of Turk and Fars groups (Treatment 1).

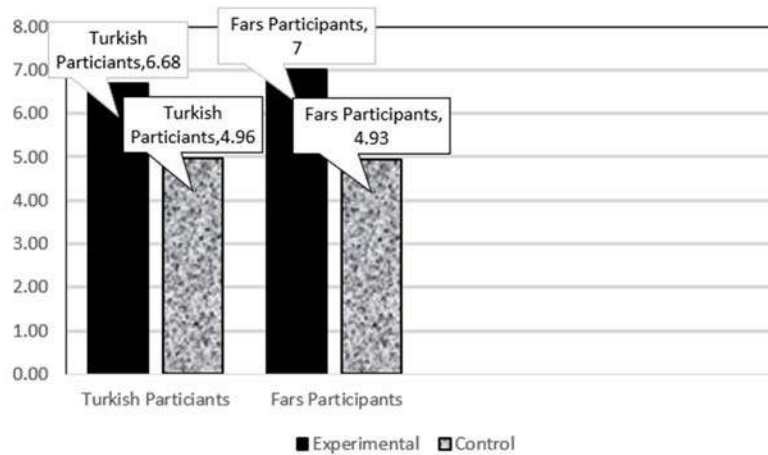| Ethnicity	Group	N	Mean	SD	Maximum	Minimum
–	Ex	28	6.68	1.25	8	4
Turk	Con	27	4.96	1.70	8	3
–	Ex	28	7.00	1.02	8	5
Fars	Con	27	4.93	1.69	8	3

Figure 1. Mean differences in experimental and control groups of Turk and Fars EFL learners (Treatment 1).

Table 4 is the presentation of descriptive statistics giving the mean scores of the experimental and control groups of both Turk and Fars EFL learners for Treatment 2, which is providing the relevant background knowledge. According to **Table 4** and also **Figure 2**, the participants of the experimental groups in both Fars and Turk groups had higher mean scores than the control groups (Turk experimental mean = 6.93, Turk control mean = 5.00, Fars experimental mean = 6.50, and Fars control mean = 4.89) (See **Table 2** and also **Figure 2**).

Table 4. Descriptive statistics Turk and Fars groups (Treatment 2).

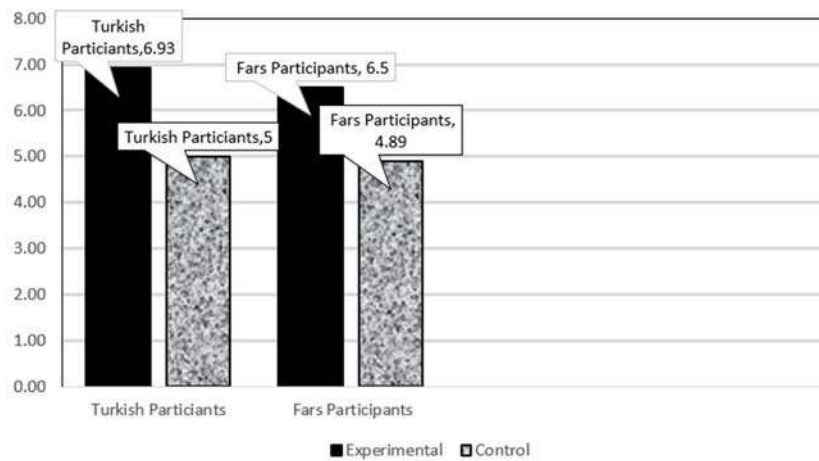| Ethnicity	Group	N	Mean	SD	Maximum	Minimum
–	Ex	28	6.93	1.02	8	5
Turk	Con	27	5.00	1.78	8	3
–	Ex	28	6.50	1.23	8	4
Fars	Con	27	4.89	1.63	8	3

Figure 2. Mean differences in experimental and control groups of Turk and Fars EFL learners (Treatment 2).

Independent-sample *t*-test was used to examine the differences between Fars and Turk experimental and control groups regarding their familiarity with the cultural content of the texts. Based on the results of the *t*-test, **Table 5** indicates that students differ significantly in experimental and control groups in both treatments 1 and 2. Treatment 1: Turk groups ($t = 4.2797$, df = 53, $p < 0.000$) and Fars groups ($t = 5.5470$, df = 53, $p < 0.000$). Treatment 2: Turk groups ($t = 4.9664$, df = 53, $p < 0.000$) and Fars groups ($t = 4.1525$, df = 53, $p < 0.000$).

Table 5. *t*-statistics of Turkish and Fars groups.

Ethnicity	Text	Group	*t*	df	*p*
–	Treatment 1	Ex	4.2797	53	<0.000
Turk	–	Con	–	–	–
–	Treatment 2	Ex	4.9664	53	<0.000
–	–	Con	–	–	–
–	Treatment 1	Ex	5.5470	53	<0.000
Fars	–	Con	–	–	–
–	Treatment 2	Ex	4.1525	53	<0.000
–	–	Con	–	–	–

As seen in the **Tables 3**, **4**, and **5**, there is an affirmative answer to the first and second research questions; the participants who received the treatment of the study, which was text nativization as Treatment 1 and providing relevant background knowledge as Treatment 2 outscored and outperformed the other groups (both Turks and Fars). Therefore, cultural familiarity has a significantly positive effect on the reading comprehension of both Turk and Fars EFL learners.

To explore whether there is any difference between experimental and control groups based on ethnicity, an independent-sample *t*-test was used (see **Table 6**). Results of the *t*-test showed that EFL learners of the Fars experimental group were not significantly different from the Turk experimental group ($t = 1.0495$, df = 54) and ($t = 1.4240$, df = 0.1602). **Table 6** demonstrated that Turk and Fars language learners have a similar reaction in response to cultural familiarization in reading comprehension, and ethnic differences cannot be the reason for the difference in reading comprehension performance of EFL learners in Iran.

Table 6. *t*-statistics of experimental Turk and Fars groups.

Text	Ethnicity	N	Mean	SD	t	df	The two-tailed *p*-value
Text 1	Turk	28	6.68	1.25	1.0495	54	0.2986
–	Fars	28	7.00	1.02	–	–	–
Text 2	Turk	28	6.93	1.02	1.4240	54	0.1602
–	Fars	28	6.50	1.23	–	–	–

At last, the participants were asked to complete the ICC Questionnaire (Mirzaei and Forouzandeh, 2013). To find out whether there is any difference between groups' ICC level based on ethnicity, descriptive statistics and an independent sample *t*-test was conducted. **Table 7** shows the results of the descriptive statistics for participants' scores on the questionnaire. As it is shown in the table, there were 65 Turk (50%) and 65 Fars (50%) EFL learners and a total of 130 participants who completed the questionnaire. Regarding the participants' ICC scores (Min = 57 and Max = 89), the mean score of the Turk participants is (74.98) and the mean score of the Fars participants is (75.12). According to **Table 7**, the mean score of the Turk participants is similar to the mean score of the Fars participants.

Table 7. Descriptive statistics for the Turk and Fars EFL learners' ICC level.

ICC	N	M	Min	Max	SD	SEM
Turk	65	74.98	63	86	6.08	0.75
Fars	65	75.12	57	89	7.78	0.97
Total	130	75.05	57	89	6.96	0.61

Finally, an independent sample *t*-test was computed to find out whether there is any significant difference between the ICC scores of Turk and Fars participants. **Table 8** indicated the *t*-test results for ICC scores of the two groups of participants. As is presented in **Table 8**, there was no significant difference between both ethnic groups' mean scores. Turk mean score (M = 74.98, SD = 6.08) and Fars mean score (M = 75.12, SD = 7.78), ($t = 0.1143$, $p = 0.9092$). **Table 8** demonstrates that the Turk and Fars EFL learners did not perform differently on the ICC questionnaire. Therefore, in the present study, ethnic differences do not seem to have resulted in significant differences in the EFL learners' ICC level.

Table 8. *T*-statistics of Turk and Fars EFL learners' ICC level.

ICC	N	M	SD	t	df	The two-tailed *p*-value
Turk	65	74.98	6.08	0.1143	128	0.9092
Fars	65	75.12	7.78	–	–	–

4. Discussion

The researchers analyzed the data after collecting them, to find the answers for each research question. The outcomes demonstrated that the experimental groups of both Fars and Turk EFL learners outscored the control groups in the reading comprehension test. The findings demonstrated that familiarity with the cultural content of the text improved the reading comprehension performance of the Turk and Fars Iranian EFL learners. The reason why the experimental groups outscored the control groups can be attributed to the cultural nativization and background knowledge provided for the experimental groups. The relevant background knowledge and the nativization process led to schema activation and better performance of the experimental groups in reading comprehension. Students connect new information to their previous background and this connection is crucial, constructive and positive in reading comprehension.

Today, there are many language learners with special sets of, traditions, cultures, and beliefs studying at different universities who come from Fars, Turk, and other ethnic backgrounds. According to Akhbari

and Zolfeghari (2009), Iran is a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society ad every year many Iranian students from different ethnic backgrounds enroll at universities to pursue English language (translation studies, linguistics or English language and literature). This ethnical diversity can potentially have an immense effect on culture-related abilities and intercultural communicative competence and teaching and learning processes.

The findings of the present study confirm Dehghan and Sadighi (2011), Diep et al. (2022), Erten and Razi (2003), Gunasinghe et al. (2018), Jalilehvand and Samuel (2014), Kitishat et al. (2015), Mousavi-Davoudi et al. (2021), Ruthemsley (2011), Smith et al. (2021), and Zhang and Kim (2014) who reported the powerful and positive impact of cultural familiarity and background knowledge on students' learning processes in ELT settings. To facilitate foreign language learning, incorporating cultural issues into foreign language teaching is vital and this can help EFL learners make communications with the target language users (Diep et al., 2022).

Moreover, it is stated that activating previous knowledge appropriately results in successful reading comprehension. Language learners relate their background knowledge to the new information during schema activation and a successful connection aid them in learning the English language more effectively (Bilokcuoğlu, 2014).

There is a close association between cultural familiarity and ICC, hence, speaking about cultural familiarity without mentioning its mate, ICC, is not fair as they are both in the same boat. According to Maleki and Zangani (2007) and Sadeghi (2005) language learners' improvement in intercultural communicative dispositions can bring them more motivation and success in communication in the multicultural interconnected world. Language learners with high levels of ICC show more motivation and enthusiasm to learn cultural facts and eventually engage in social interaction with members of other societies or speakers of other languages. This study also investigated the ICC level of EFL learners firstly to find out whether there is a difference between Fars and Turk language learners and secondly to provide information for language curriculum designers to provide teaching materials in a way that taps learners' intercultural communicative potentials and increase EFL learners' awareness of intercultural issues. In sum, incorporating cultural and intercultural issues into foreign language teaching is crucial to facilitate foreign language learning. Hence, the findings of this study are in accordance with the idea that the more cultural familiarity, the greater the level of understanding (Devrim and Bayyurt, 2010; Erten and Razi, 2003; Jalilifar and Assi, 2008; Rokhsari, 2012; Sasaki, 2000).

5. Conclusion

Language and culture are so close to each other and no one can claim to teach one without the other. Nowadays, the need to integrate culture into language teaching is firmly established, however, many language teachers believed that language should be taught as a separate phenomenon from culture and this non-academic method of teaching has plagued the field for many years. Much more information is needed about EFL learners' cultural familiarity in reading comprehension and intercultural communicative competence for designing language curriculum and applying the most appropriate techniques and methods in the classroom. This study investigated Iranian EFL learners' intercultural communicative competence and cultural familiarity as two basic factors in cultural and intercultural studies.

It needs to be highlighted that the new achievement of the present study, which has been less discussed in previous studies, is the comparison of the performance of two groups of language learners

with two different ethnicities. Based on the results of the research, it can be stated that cultural familiarity has an extremely positive effect on reading comprehension of both ethnicities and no significant difference was observed between the reading comprehension performance and ICC level of the ethnic groups of Fars and Turks.

There are two goals for investigating the ICC level of Turk and Fars English major university students. The first is to find out whether there is any difference between the ICC level of the two ethnic groups and the second is to help them to facilitate their reading comprehension and communication skills with people from different cultural backgrounds effectively.

The present study shed light on the necessity of the improvement of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) in reading comprehension, as it is the ability to use linguistic knowledge means being able to interpret written language, pedagogically. The participants in the experimental groups (Turk and Fars), who were made more familiar with the culture by receiving the nativized version of the text and also relevant background knowledge as two separate treatments, scored significantly higher than the control groups in both ethnical groups. Similar to the majority of the research existing in the field of cultural familiarity in reading comprehension, this study suggests a powerful and positive relationship between reading comprehension and students' cultural background.

In conclusion, the findings of the present study provide some pedagogical implications that might be of benefit to EFL teachers, language learners, and curriculum designers. This study emphasized that culturally-based ELT classrooms develop learners' intercultural competencies which result in successful communication with native speakers of the target language. Moreover, the findings of the study suggest that in order to improve EFL learners' reading comprehension, it is essential to support cultural factors such as cultural nativization, cultural background knowledge, cultural familiarity, ICC and motivation. These factors should be taken into consideration by instructors when teaching language and incorporating material and activities that reflect the cultural diversity of the sources and target languages.

The study also suggested that EFL teachers should be provided with opportunities to raise students' cultural awareness and employ one's own culture together with foreign culture to have a deep understanding of a foreign language. In addition, it is important to mention many EFL teachers underestimate the fundamental role of ICC and culture in foreign language teaching. The present study demonstrated that culture needs to be taught and learned and EFL teachers should apply effective and innovative strategies to increase students' cultural knowledge.

The current study faced limitations that need to be taken into account in the findings. The main limitation of the study is the number of students. Future studies should include more participants to gain more generalizable results. Additionally, the participants of this study were selected from students in Arak, Hormozgan, and Zanjan universities. Thus, it made it a little difficult to generalize the findings to all EFL learners in Iranian universities. Therefore, further research can replicate this study with more EFL learners from different universities in Iran or other countries with other ethnicities.

Author contributions

Conceptualization, EK and HD; methodology, EK; software, EK; validation, EK and HD; formal analysis, EK; investigation, EK; resources, EK; data curation, HD; writing—original draft preparation, EK; writing—review and editing, EK and HD; visualization, EK; supervision, HD; project administration, EK and HD. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Conflict of interest

Both authors declared no conflict of interest. The article has been conducted and written in accordance with the highest level of transparency and scientific ethics.

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