

The Relationship Between ICC Levels of Language Learners, Their Proficiency Levels and Achievement Scores

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Abstract: Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) has gained importance in language classes to assist EFL learners who lack exposure to the target language. To address potential communication difficulties, this study investigates EFL students' ICC levels and its components (knowledge, skill, attitude) as well as the relationship between their achievement—measured by midterm exam scores—language proficiency, and ICC. A quantitative study was conducted with 172 EFL learners at a Turkish university's preparatory program. Participants completed an ICC questionnaire, and their midterm exam scores were collected. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and MANOVA in SPSS. The findings reveal that proficiency level (A2 to C1) has a significant effect on overall ICC scores. When examining ICC components, proficiency level and learners' achievement scores significantly impacts attitude and skill, but not knowledge. However, the interaction between proficiency and achievement does not significantly affect ICC. The significant influence of proficiency level on overall ICC scores, particularly in attitude and skill, highlights the close relationship between linguistic competence and learners' ability to adapt to intercultural contexts. However, the lack of effect on the knowledge component suggests a need for explicit cultural instruction to complement linguistic development. These findings highlight the need for language curricula that combine intercultural education with linguistic development to foster both communication skills and cultural knowledge.

Keywords: Intercultural Communicative Competence, Proficiency Level, Achievement, Skill, Attitude

1. Introduction

Identifying the cultural aspect as a crucial component in language acquisition and pedagogy has been one of the most significant advancements in the past decades (Alptekin, 1997; Atay et al., 2009; Byram, 2020; Haregu et al., 2024), which has significantly impacted the character of the process of teaching and learning languages. According to Byram et al. (2002), the goal of language learning is not only to acquire communicative competence in a foreign language, but also to “act in a foreign language in linguistically, sociolinguistically, and pragmatically appropriate ways” (p.9). However, the concept of intercultural competence refers to an individual's ability to act responsibly and adaptively in response to actions, attitudes, and behaviors from different cultural backgrounds. (Byram, 2002; Byram et al. 2002).

English Globalization has necessitated the implementation of a global communication system on a worldwide scale. In fact, English has been recognized as the predominant language for international communication, so intercultural communicative skills have become increasingly important in the teaching of English (Alptekin, 2002). As Alptekin (2002) explains, linguistic competence denotes the “knowledge of the syntactic, lexical, morphological, and phonological features of the language, as well as the capacity to manipulate these features to produce well-formed words and sentences” (p.57), which does not suffice for a speaker to use efficient discourse with people representing various cultural identities while speaking in English.

1.1. The Transition from Communicative to Intercultural (Communicative) Competence

Hymes (1972, as cited in Alptekin, 2002, p. 58) proposed and defined “communicative competence as knowledge of grammatical rules as well as language use” standards pertinent to a specific context. Numerous scholars endeavored to delineate the particular elements of Hymes' conceptual framework

for communicative competence as “grammatical competence (knowledge of the language code in a way that refers to Chomsky's linguistic competence); sociolinguistic competence (knowledge of the sociocultural rules of use in a particular context); and strategic competence (knowledge of how to employ communication strategies to deal with communicative competence)” (as cited in Alptekin, 2002, p.58). This idea incorporates a substantial portion of pragmatic competence under sociolinguistic competence, often known as “sociocultural rules of use.”

1.2. Competence in Intercultural Communication

Although the term “intercultural communicative competence” (ICC) is extensively used today, scholars disagree on what it entails (Fantini, 2012). According to Fantini (2012) and Deardoff (2006), ICC encompasses the skillset necessary to communicate appropriately and effectively with individuals who possess linguistic and cultural differences from oneself. Öz (2015) also compiled the most frequent description of ICC in foreign language education as below:

1. Assisting students in developing multicultural sensitivity.
2. Learners' intercultural communication competence.
3. Creating multicultural beings and training intercultural speakers.
4. Lifelong intercultural learning; intercultural learners.
5. The ability to relate successfully with diverse cultures requires cultural understanding, linguistic competence, personal attitudes, self-awareness, and knowledge of others' values and customs.
6. Developing an understanding of cultural dynamics and distinguishing distinct identities in order to maintain intercultural cohabitation.
7. Effectively dealing with linguistic and cultural differences through language or through relating to others.
8. Developing knowledge, motivation, and abilities to communicate effectively with members of various cultures (p.43).

All of the above-mentioned developments in the ability to effectively communicate across cultural boundaries, intercultural communication competence, allow individuals to engage with people from diverse backgrounds while preserving their unique personal identities and acknowledging their multiple social affiliations (Byram, 2020). This passage encourages individuals to adopt an outsider's perspective in order to critically evaluate their own conduct, values, and convictions. (Byram, 2006; 2020).

According to Wiseman, intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is not an innate ability; there are certain criteria for developing it, such as knowledge, skills, and motivation or attitudes, as described by Byram et al. (2002). Byram (2002) proposed the most comprehensive definition of ICC, which includes attitude, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction and critical discourse analysis.

The first key point of ICC, knowledge, means learning about societal organizations, goods, activities and interactional processes (Byram, 2020). Sevimele-Şahin (2022) and Atay et al. (2009) clarify it as different forms of communication in various sociocultural contexts, cultural sensitivity, knowledge of particular cultures, and knowledge of sociolinguistics. According to Byram (2020) and Hişmanoğlu (2011), it is essential to understand the distinctions between one's own culture and other cultures as well as the norms that regulate people's behavior, in order to build healthy interactions with members of those

cultures. Given this necessity, knowledge encompasses both self- and cultural awareness (Zhang & Zhou, 2019).

The second component of ICC, skills are divided into two by Byram, the leading scholar in ICC studies, as skills of interpreting and relating, which refers to “the capacity to understand a document or event from another culture, to expound it and link it to documents from one’s own.” (Hişmanoğlu, 2011). This ability allows one to detect and explain cultural perspectives, as well as mediate and function in new cultural environments (Byram, 2002). On the other hand, skills of discovery and interaction encompass more of a capacity or an application of this knowledge on a culture (Hişmanoğlu, 2011; Byram, 2002; Council of Europe, 2001), allowing one to put the knowledge of another culture into practice in real life conditions. In other words, the capacities to learn about a culture's traditions and to apply one's knowledge, attitudes, and skills during real-time communication are both connected to the competencies of exploration and interaction (Savoir Apprendre/ Faire).

Attitude, being the third key aspect of ICC, pertains to the motivations or mindset, also referred to as "Savoir etre," which encompasses sentiments and perceptions. This influences one's readiness to engage in cross-cultural communication and their willingness to modify cultural values and beliefs for the purpose of interacting with those who are different. It consists of abilities such as self-esteem, self-monitoring, and empathy (Baker, 2012), which in turn bring about willingness to communicate (Hişmanoğlu, 2011), respect for other cultures (Byram, Gribkova, & Starkey, 2002; Deardoff, 2006).

1.2. Achievement and Proficiency Level

In this study, achievement construct is measured through midterm exams (out of 100), while language proficiency level refers to the levels at which students were placed in an appropriate level based on a placement exam. At the beginning of the academic year, students take a placement exam and are placed into one of four language proficiency levels—A1, A2, B1, and B2—and they continue their education with A2, B1, B2 and C1 levels during the spring term. For example, a student at the B2 level who scores below the passing grade of 65 out of 100, set by the school, is considered unsuccessful, while another student at the A2 level with an average midterm score of 85 is deemed successful in the context of this study. In short, language level and achievement are distinct constructs in the present study.

1.3. Studies on ICC and Achievement

Intercultural competence (ICC) is integral to effective intercultural communication, requiring the cultivation of cultural knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors (Özuorcun, 2014; Sevimeşahin, 2022). Central to this development is the enhancement of language competence, which serves as a medium for expressing and understanding cultural nuances. Developing a stronger command of language competence is therefore imperative, as it intertwines with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that are the fundamental components of ICC (Fantini, 2012; Guo, 2015; Hişmanoğlu, 2011; Sevimeşahin, 2022; Vu et al., 2022; Watson, 2007; Zhang & Zhou, 2019).

Despite the clear correlation between intercultural competence and linguistic proficiency, this significant relationship has received limited scholarly attention within the research community. The research studies by (Vu et al., 2022) and (Rezai et al., 2022) stand out as noteworthy exceptions. The former study focused on the intercultural communicative competence perceptions of 310 English as a foreign language student in Vietnam. The findings revealed that the various components of ICC were interrelated with their English language proficiency backgrounds; that is, intermediate level students outperformed the beginner level of the students in terms of their ICC levels. On the other hand, Rezai et al. (2022) examined the relationship between intercultural communicative competence and academic achievement among 120 Iranian university students. The researchers explored participants' perceived ICC and their overall academic performance, measured by their annual grades, finding a strong positive correlation - higher ICC was linked to better academic outcomes. The previous study focused only on

students at the beginner and intermediate proficiency levels, overlooking those at other levels. Additionally, the latter research utilized undergraduate students' annual grades to assess achievement, which may have been influenced by factors beyond their English language competence alone. Furthermore, the study relied solely on correlational analysis to examine the relationships between variables. This suggests a need for a more comprehensive examination of ICC perceptions across diverse proficiency levels along with their achievement in English language assessments.

In addition to the two studies conducted in English as a Foreign Language contexts, the researchers in Turkey also recruited students from EFL backgrounds within the Turkish context. Hişmanoğlu (2011) and Sevimeşahin (2022) investigated how linguistic abilities, international experiences, and formal education might influence the development of intercultural communication skills. The former study aimed to discover whether there is any relationship between linguistic competency, overseas experience and formal education on ICC enhancement. It was discovered that pre-service ELT students with high levels of "linguistic competency, international experience, and explicit teaching, i.e. formal education focused especially on ICC", had higher levels of ICC (Hişmanoğlu, 2011, p. 815). A more recent study (Sevimeşahin, 2022), similar to this one, aimed to determine whether ICC levels of freshman and senior students at a Turkish university's English Language Teaching department. The findings also revealed an improvement in ICC as the student's approached graduation. Both studies tried to shed light onto the connection between linguistic competence and the ICC of pre-service teachers; however, in order to genuinely have a good command of sub-skills of ICC and establish meaningful communication, not only teacher candidates but everyone learning a language must have strong intercultural communication skills. In the long term, possessing this skill is essential for becoming an international citizen and for being competent in any profession.

To the researcher's knowledge, no prior study has examined the potential relationship between linguistic competence, based on proficiency level and achievement scores, and the components of intercultural communicative competence among EFL learners across different proficiency levels. Examining this dynamic in-depth is essential for cultivating a comprehensive approach to intercultural education and training initiatives. By thoroughly exploring the reciprocal relationship between language proficiency and cultural understanding, along with the interactional effects of ICC components and their influence on achievement and proficiency levels, researchers can better equip individuals to succeed in an increasingly interconnected global context.

Given the need to explore these relationships, the main focus of the research was on investigating EFL students' level of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) and its components, namely *knowledge, skill and attitude*. Furthermore, the investigation aimed to examine the relationship and interaction between students' achievement, their language proficiency and their level of ICC. The research was conducted in the Department of Basic English at METU in Ankara, Turkey. The study seeks answers to the following questions:

1. What is the level of intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes self-reported by the university student participants?
2. Is there a statistically significant difference in students' intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes based on their language proficiency levels (A2, B1, B2, C1)?
3. Do university students classified as "academically successful" demonstrate significantly higher levels of intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes compared to "academically unsuccessful" students?
4. Does the relationship between students' language proficiency levels (A2 to C1) and their intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes differ significantly between "academically successful" and "academically unsuccessful" student groups?

2. Methodology

2.1. Setting

This survey included 172 preparatory students from Middle East Technical University's School of Foreign Languages (SFL) Department of Basic English (DBE). The DBE seeks to develop fundamental language competencies of the students so that they can pursue their undergraduate education at the university without impediments. To this end, the department offers a one-year foundation program emphasizing integrated instruction in reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

Students are categorized into four proficiency levels - pre-intermediate (A2), intermediate (B1), upper-intermediate (B2), and advanced (C1)- and attend 15, 20, or 25 hours of classes per week throughout the academic year. To be eligible for freshman standing, students must not only succeed in assessments such as midterms and unannounced quizzes, but also compile a writing portfolio by the end of each semester. Additionally, they must demonstrate satisfactory performance in speaking exams or oral presentations.

In a dialogue completion or response to a situation section, speaking is also examined indirectly in midterm exams or pop quizzes. Furthermore, they must pass the English Proficiency Exam (exit exam) at the end of the year. In the English preparatory program, English is taught in an integrative manner. The students study a primary course book, which is usually a commercial one, METU press books specifically produced for reading and listening skills by the home institution's teachers, and handouts prepared by the level coordinators and material development unit. Because instructors teach macro skills in an integrative approach, specific class hours for speaking are not given.

2.2. Participants

The study included 172 DBE EFL students as participants. Female participants numbered 76, while male participants numbered 96. Because the ICC level of the participants can be ascribed to their background knowledge, they were asked several demographic questions.

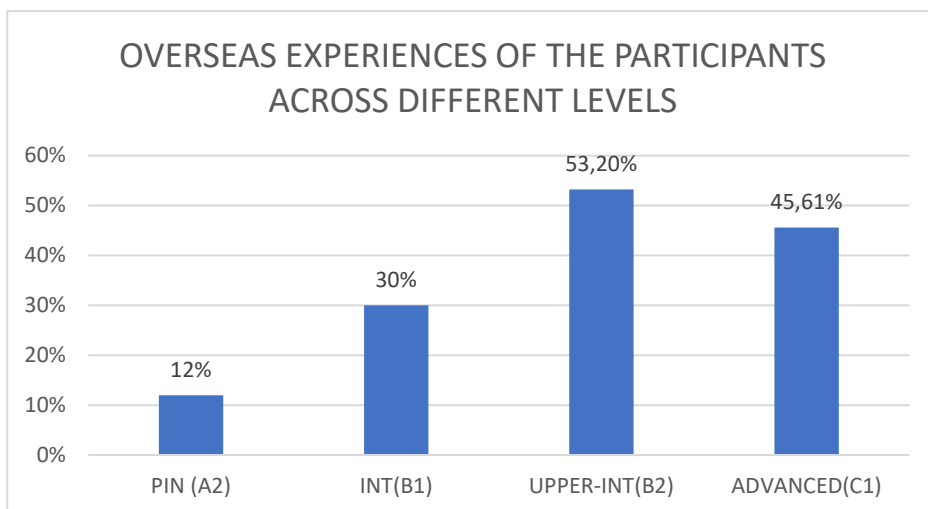
As to the high school type they have attended, more than half of the participants (58.7%) graduated from Anatolian High School, where students learn six to eight hours of English in their first year and two hours in the following years. On the other hand, 1.2% of the students have attended Vocational or Anatolian Vocational High School. 12.8% of them came from Science School, 12.2% of them are graduates of Social Sciences High School. On the other hand, very few of them graduated from Regular High School or others (e.g. Distance learning). This pattern shows that most of the students at METU completed their high school which required them to be successful in high-stakes exams where all lessons were tested before they were accepted to these high schools.

Since students learn English in an EFL context, they were asked whether they have taken part in activities in which they are able to converse with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. Most of them with a percentage of 63.4 participated in such activities. Specifically, out of the participants who stated to use such activities, 20.3% of them reported to have been involved in social, sportive or academic activities rather than touristic activities (7.6%) or personal relationships (9.9%) or both. The remaining of them (25.6%) prefer more than one activity.

As ICC is intertwined with overseas experience, the participants were asked about their experience abroad. The findings are presented below:

Figure 1

Overseas experiences of the participants at different levels



The figure illustrates that as the level of the participants go up, their overseas experience also becomes relatively higher. This might stem from the fact that students at lower levels tend to come from socio-economically disadvantaged families and they might not have experienced going abroad for financial reasons or the background of their family.

2.3. Instrumentation

2.3.1. Intercultural Communicative Competence Questionnaire (ICCQ).

The study employed the intercultural communicative competence questionnaire developed by Mirzaei and Forouzandeh (2013) to evaluate participants' perceived intercultural communicative competence. Grounded in Deardorff's extensive research (2006), the ICCQ comprises 22 items designed to assess various aspects of participants' ICC. This includes 12 items examining their knowledge, such as cultural self-awareness, cultural information, linguistic proficiency, and sociolinguistic awareness. Additionally, the questionnaire contains five skill-related items to gauge participants' ability to communicate effectively across cultures, as well as five attitudinal items to identify their respect, openness, and tolerance of ambiguity towards diverse cultures (Deardorff, 2006; Mirzaei & Forouzandeh, 2013). The study utilized sample statements from this comprehensive assessment tool as: "I believe that intercultural experiences can add some information to my previous knowledge; I can take part in any L2 conversation dealing with daily life issues; When I am uncertain about cultural differences, I take a tolerant attitude". Participants scored the statements on a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from 1. strongly disagree to 5. strongly agree). According to Cronbach's Alpha, the original scale's internal consistency was $=.71$. The internal consistency of the scale was measured to be $=.74$ in the current investigation, establishing a valid index for assessment.

To avoid any potential language barriers from interfering with the scale's implementation, it was provided to the students in Turkish. Before giving it to the students, systematic translation and back-translation methods were used to ensure that there was no substantial semantic loss/shift between the Turkish and the original English versions and the validity of the scale was kept. Both versions were compared for their equivalence at both levels. Initially, the original ICCQ was translated with the aim of retaining as much clarity and coherence as possible while conveying the content in Turkish. The translation task was undertaken by two English instructors, and the compiled translations were subsequently reviewed by another two English teachers along with the author. It was emphasized that the translations should not rely on mechanical translation tools in order to ensure effective communication. In the second phase, back translation was conducted by a different pair of translators

possessing similar qualifications. Following Geisinger's (1994) recommendation, the back translation was carried out from the Turkish version without consulting the original. Two academic specialists then compared and merged the translations to produce a unified version for the purpose of equivalence assessment.

2.3.2. Achievement Scores

The assessment tool used in the investigation gathered demographic and background data pertaining to the participants' midterm performance at the preparatory school. Students' data on their scores of midterms 4 and 5 were received from the school administration. Midterm exam papers are marked by instructors out of a possible maximum hundred.

These summative assessments, referred to as midterm exams, are designed to evaluate whether the participants have successfully attained the learning objectives related to three core language skills and overall language proficiency. These achievement exams primarily assess linguistic skills, measuring aspects of English such as syntax, vocabulary, word formation, and pronunciation. Midterm exams in this institution typically assess speaking abilities indirectly by requiring students to complete dialogues or respond to situations. However, speaking skills are also evaluated twice a semester through oral presentations and standard speaking tests. Although class teachers subjectively assign oral presentation scores without using a rubric, and the speaking exam has yet to be administered, these scores were not considered as part of the achievement scores at the time of data collection. Midterms are designed by a group of instructors/testers who have been carefully selected for their expertise. They are then evaluated for their reliability and validity by a team of highly skilled teaching professionals. To determine inter-rater reliability, two instructors grade students' written responses, conversational skills, or problem-solving abilities. Although students with varying levels of proficiency do not take the same exam, they are still required to complete midterm assessments that are tailored to their specific level of skill. According to school policy, students must score at least 65 out of 100 in the midterm exams in order to take the exit exam at the end of the year. In this study, 65 points was accepted as the success threshold in accordance with the context.

2.4. Data Collection Procedures

The researcher first administered the questions to 200 students at Middle East Technical University's English preparatory program (DBE) after reviewing the final version of the translated instrument with three PhD students. The tool was provided to the students with the assistance of the researcher's colleagues. After receiving some feedback on the study and questionnaires from the researcher, each instructor administered the questionnaires to their respective classes.

Cluster random sampling was utilized to select the classes in which the questionnaires were distributed, with the aim of gathering quantitative data from student questionnaires. To put it another way, because there are four proficiency level groups, namely pre-intermediate(A2), intermediate (B1), upper-intermediate (B2), and advanced (C1), three classes from each group are chosen to represent the entire population in this department.

2.5. Data Analysis

This study examined ICCQ and achievement scores using SPSS 25. The researchers performed preliminary analyses, including checking for outliers and testing for normality, as recommended by Pallant (2020). Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) can be sensitive to extreme data points, so the researchers excluded three students' responses that appeared to be outliers based on Mahallanobis Distance, as these could have distorted the MANOVA results. Results from the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test ($p = .07$) for normality and Shapiro Wilk ($p = .093$) showed that the data were normally distributed.

As the instrument has 12 questions for *Knowledge*, five questions for *Attitude* and five questions for *Skills*, the scores for each construct were computed by summing the Likert-scale responses. Specifically, descriptive statistics were utilized to address the first research question, and a multivariate analysis of variance was run to examine whether high-achieving and low-achieving students differed in their levels of intercultural communicative competence components. Further, MANOVA analysis was carried out to reveal whether the ICC scores vary according to proficiency level. To explore whether there exists any interaction effect between these two, the latest English test scores and proficiency levels of the students were taken as independent variables while participants' perception of their own ICC components were regarded as dependent variable.

2.6. Ethical Aspects of the Study

The study was approved by the Middle East Technical University Ethics Committee (0210-ODTUIAEK-2023). Written permission was obtained from the institution where the study was conducted. Participants provided informed consent and were informed that the data would only be used for research purposes and they could withdraw at any time. The researchers ensured data security on a computer only they used.

3. Findings

3.1. Research Question 1: ICC Components: Knowledge, Skill, Attitude

The study aimed to investigate which components of intercultural competence participants reported as more prominent in their experience. Descriptive statistics indicated that among the components of ICC, *attitude* had the highest mean score ($M = 4.17$, $SD = 0.42$), while *knowledge* ($M = 3.80$, $SD = 0.36$) was also prominently reported by participants. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics:

Table 1

Descriptive statistics: Total ICC score and Its components

	N	M	SD
ICC TOTAL	172	3.88	.33
Knowledge	172	3.80	.36
Skill	172	3.76	.48
Attitude	172	4.17	.42

Attitude had the highest mean score of 4.17 ($SD = .42$), while *skills* received the lowest mean score among the components of ICC ($M = 3.76$; $SD = .48$).

3.2. Research Question 2: Proficiency Level & ICC Components

The second goal of this research was to investigate if perceived ICC components were consistent across proficiency levels. Table 2 shows a breakdown of total scores based on proficiency level:

Table 2

ICC across Proficiency Levels

	Pre-intermediate(A2)			Intermediate (B1)			Upper-intermediate(B2)			Advanced (C1)		
	N	M	SD	N	M	SD	N	M	SD	N	M	SD
Knowledge	33	3.79	.45	50	3.84	.37	32	3.81	.35	57	3.78	.31
Skill	33	3.51	.5	50	3.73	.52	32	3.86	.48	57	3.88	.41
Attitude	33	3.98	.52	50	4.14	.36	32	4.2	.38	57	4.29	.38

Multivariate analysis of variance revealed a significant main effect of participants' proficiency levels on their ICC test performance, as indicated by Wilks' Lambda ($\Lambda = .824$, $F = 3.71$, $p < .000$), suggesting a

medium-sized effect ($\eta p^2=.062$). While the mean scores were similar across proficiency groups, a modest improvement in knowledge was observed for the intermediate group. However, the differences in participants' proficiency levels did not reach statistical significance ($F=.2$, $p=.875$, $\eta p^2=.05$). Nevertheless, other group differences on proficiency levels were statistically significant: *attitude* (pre-intermediate= 3.98; intermediate =4.14; upper-intermediate=4.2; advanced=4.29; $F = 4.026$; $p = .008$; $\eta p^2=.067$); *skill* (pre-intermediate=3.51; intermediate= 3.73; upper-intermediate=3.86; advanced= 3.88; $F = 4.794$; $p = .003$; $\eta p^2=.079$).

3.3. Research Question 3: Success & ICC Components

Learners' academic success appeared to substantially influence the ICC components they reported for examination performance ($\Lambda =.932$, $F = 4.063$, $p =.008$), albeit with a minor effect size ($\eta p^2=.039$). Table 3 shows a breakdown of mean values for ICC components based on success:

Table 3

ICC across proficiency levels

	Successful			Unsuccessful		
	N	M	SD	N	M	SD
Knowledge	117	3.83	.35	55	3.75	.38
Skill	117	3.84	.48	55	3.6	.48
Attitude	117	4.22	.42	55	4.05	.38

Both high-achieving and low-achieving students reported their attitude level of ICC as a top-ranked factor, with similar mean values across the groups.

Significant success differences, when there was any, were in favour of successful students. Participants with better achievement scores had higher mean values on all the components of ICC, implying that those with better achievement scores considered more than unsuccessful students that they had higher ICC components. In fact, compared to unsuccessful students, successful participants seemed to have high a level of *skill* (successful = 3.84; unsuccessful=3.6; $F = 9.246$; $p = .003$; $\eta p^2= .052$) and *attitude* (successful= 4.22; unsuccessful = 4.05; $F = 6.223$; $p = .014$; $\eta p^2= .035$) at a statistically significant level. The difference between the successful and the unsuccessful ones did not qualify as statistically significant as regards the *knowledge* component of ICC (successful= 3.83; unsuccessful = 3.75; $F = 1.759$; $p = .187$).

3.4. Research Question 4: Interaction between Proficiency Level & Success across ICC Components

When the interaction effect was explored, there were no such significant effects of exam scores and proficiency level of the students on the ICC scores, indicating that these two variables exhibited largely parallel variation in their direction ($\Lambda = .931$, $F = 1.302$, $p =.234$).

Table 4

ICC scores according to the proficiency level and success

	Pre-Intermediate (A2)						Intermediate(B1)					
	Successful			Unsuccessful			Successful			Unsuccessful		
	N	M	SD	N	M	SD	N	M	SD	N	M	SD
Knowledge	19	3.85	.47	14	3.71	.4	23	3.80	.92	27	3.85	.36
Skill	19	3.59	.52	14	3.4	.46	23	3.78	.54	27	3.68	.52
Attitude	19	4.09	.58	14	3.82	.42	23	4.14	.42	27	4.14	.34

	Upper-Intermediate (B2)						Advanced (C1)					
	Successful			Unsuccessful			Successful			Unsuccessful		
	N	M	SD	N	M	SD	N	M	SD	N	M	SD
Knowledge	22	3.87	.34	10	3.66	.33	53	3.81	.29	4	3.33	.34
Skill	22	3.98	.46	10	3.62	.44	53	3.89	.4	4	3.65	.18
Attitude	22	4.2	.42	10	4.2	.26	53	4.32	.36	4	3.9	.5

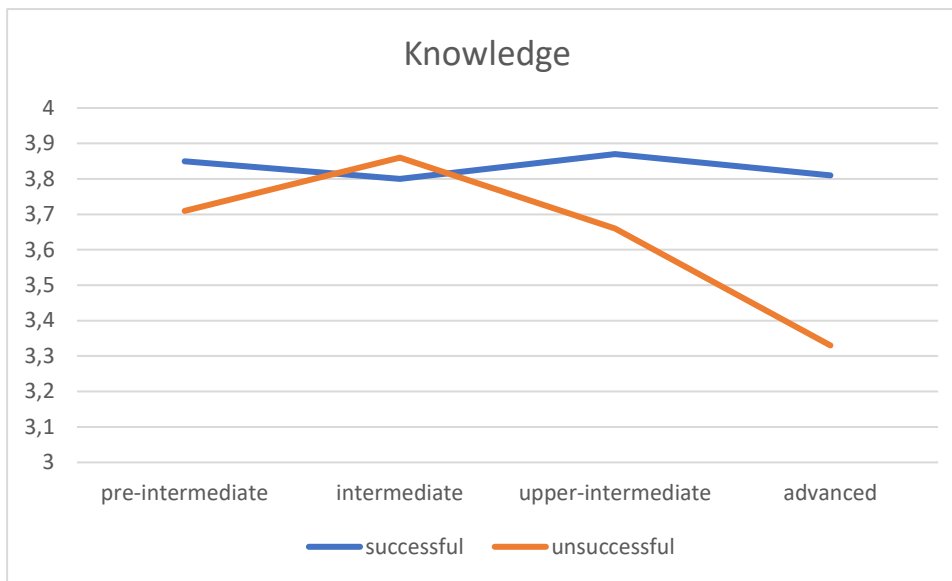
By and large, successful students reported higher levels in all ICC scores across each language proficiency level (pre-intermediate: 3.84; intermediate: 3.87; upper-intermediate: 3.85; advanced: 3.94) whereas unsuccessful students for almost all proficiency groups perceived their ICC at a lower level (pre-intermediate: 3.66; upper-intermediate: 3.77; advanced: 3.53). The mean scores of ICC total for intermediate level students (M: 3.88) remained the same for the unsuccessful students.

When it came to the specific components of ICC, the findings suggested that knowledge was not significantly impacted by the interaction between academic success and proficiency level ($F=2.397$; $p=.07$). Successful students' perceived level of *knowledge* seemed to be higher at all levels.

The observed significance value ($p = 0.07$) appeared to be just outside the typical threshold for statistical significance and this approximate interaction seemed to be on intermediate levels. This was also evidenced in the Figure 2 below:

Figure 2

Proficiency level and success effect on knowledge

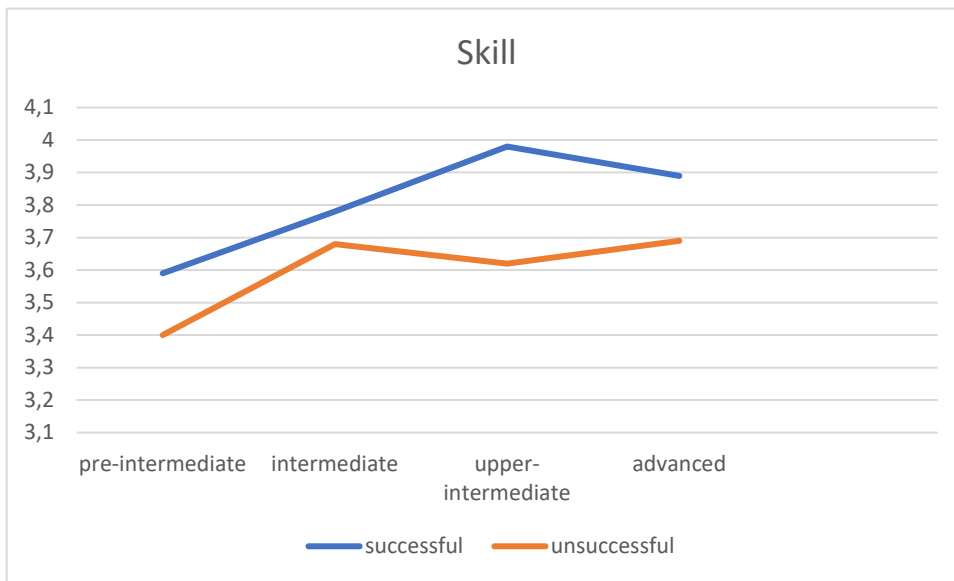


As seen in Figure 2 and Table 4, successful students at the pre-intermediate (M: 3.85), upper-intermediate (M: 3.87) and advanced levels (M: 3.81) seemed to have higher mean scores of *knowledge* compared to the unsuccessful correspondents (pre-intermediate: 3.71; upper-intermediate: 3.66; advanced: 3.33). By contrast, intermediate level higher achievers seemed to have lower mean score (M: 3.8) than the lower achievers in the same level group (M: 3.86).

Similar to *knowledge*, successful participants seemed to be competent in terms of *skill* concerning ICC levels. However, the interaction effect of the success and the proficiency level was not observed in *skill* ($F=.483$; $p=.695$) as presented in the figure below:

Figure 3

Proficiency level and success effect on skill

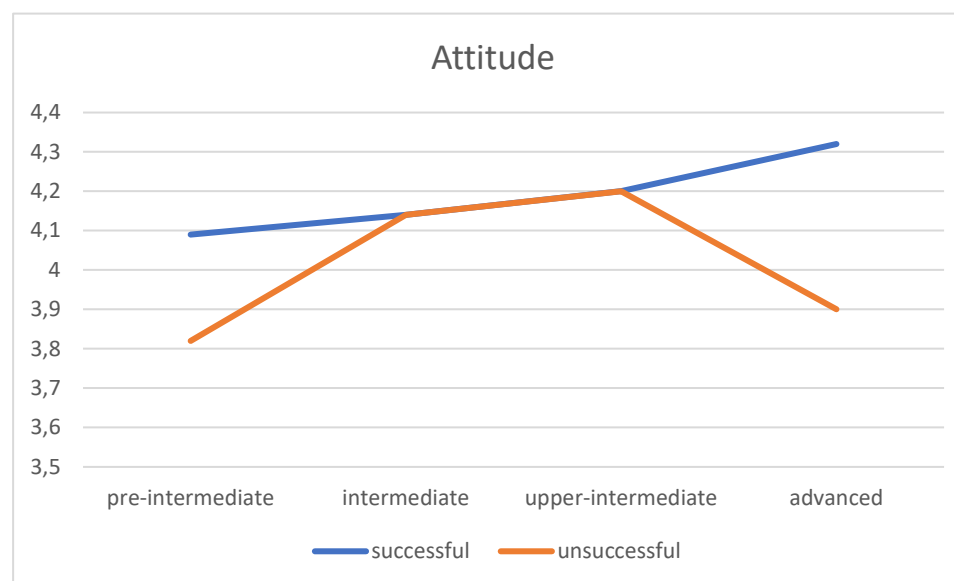


As seen from the figure above, interaction effect concerned *skill*, seemed to be non-existent similar to other components of ICC. In terms of *skill*, there was a parallel pattern across all proficiency levels, meaning that the mean scores for successful students (pre-intermediate= 3.59; intermediate= 3.78; upper-intermediate= 3.98; advanced= 3.89) tend to decrease for unsuccessful students in all levels (pre-intermediate=3.4; intermediate= 3.68; upper-intermediate= 3.62; advanced=3.69).

The interaction effect of success and the proficiency level was not seen in terms of *attitude*, either ($F=1,561$; $p=.201$). While successful students across different levels either had exactly the same mean scores (intermediate= successful= 4.14; unsuccessful= 4.14; upper-intermediate: successful= 4.2; unsuccessful= 4.2) or successful students received higher mean scores (pre-intermediate: successful: 4.09; advanced=4.32) compared to the unsuccessful students (pre-intermediate= 3.82; advanced= 3.9).

Figure 4

Proficiency level and success effect on attitude



4. Discussion

According to the findings, successful students, regardless of language proficiency level, reported greater levels in all ICC scores than unsuccessful students. This suggested that students who did well on tests had higher scores on all facets of interpersonal communication competence. The mean results reported for each language proficiency level indicated that successful students regularly got higher scores. Conversely, the findings indicated that low-achieving students perceived their ICC at a lower level than successful students in most proficiency categories. These data implied that successful students, regardless of language skill level, had better levels of interpersonal communication competence. In contrast, underperforming students often believed their ICC to be lower, albeit the relationship between exam scores and ICC varies depending on competence level. This apparent effect of achievement and proficiency levels of the students on their ICC scores is related to their better level of linguistic competence (Guo, 2015; Sevimeşahin, 2022; Zhang-Zoe, 2019; Watson, 2007). As Berg et al. (2009) highlight, as students study the target language for a longer period and have better command in terms of linguistic competence, they exert more control over it and they could gain better intercultural communication skills. This competency might derive from the fact that they were better at inferencing, understanding and using speech acts effectively and employing hedging in their communication (Hişmanoğlu, 2011; Trosborg, 2011).

The interaction analysis looked at the impact of the interaction between success (successful vs. unsuccessful students) and proficiency level on their ICC levels. The lack of a significant interaction between proficiency level and achievement on ICC indicated that these two factors contributed independently to ICC development rather than reinforcing each other. In other words, the combined effect of proficiency and achievement did not create a greater impact on ICC than their individual contributions. This finding suggested that educators and curriculum designers should address proficiency and achievement as distinct factors when developing strategies to enhance ICC.

Examining the interaction effect between achievement and proficiency level on the specific components of ICC, the data on the knowledge component suggested that successful students, regardless of their competence level, perceived themselves as having a higher level of knowledge. This implied that successful students believed they had a greater understanding or grasp of ICC knowledge. These findings might be related to the assessment policies in schools. That is, achievement exams generally measure the receptive level skills, which mainly overlap with the knowledge of ICC. "Syntactic, lexical, morphological, and phonological features of the language" are often the primary focus of teachers, as students and schools prioritize exams, leading educators to concentrate mainly on enhancing students' linguistic abilities (Alptekin, 2002, p. 57). However, this emphasis may hinder students from effectively applying their intercultural skills, which require practical language use in diverse cultural contexts (Hişmanoğlu, 2011). As Zhang and Zoe (2019) suggest, if studying abroad is not possible, school-based intercultural training and learning should be integrated into both the teaching and assessment processes.

When it comes to the skills, the results showed that the relationship between success and competence was constant regardless of proficiency level. This showed that successful students, regardless of competence level, consistently demonstrated better skill levels in ICC. However, no interaction impact existed between success, proficiency level, and skill. This suggested that the association between success and skill was stable across degrees of proficiency as Berg et al. (2009) and Guo (2015) state. As the proficiency level went up, the students seemed to have better skills of intercultural communication, which might be related to the students' linguistic knowledge again. It suggested that linguistic competence paved the way for intercultural communicative skills, as well. According to (Vu et al., 2022), learning English, the path to cross-cultural understanding, is crucial and should be emphasized from the beginner levels. This helps develop students' mindsets and improve their intercultural communication

skills. Mastering the language empowers students to meaningfully engage in cross-cultural interactions, expanding their global perspectives and communication abilities.

Examining the attitude mean scores revealed more about the relationship. Across all competence levels, successful students displayed either the same or higher mean scores than their unsuccessful peers. Specifically, both successful and academically poor students had equal mean scores at the intermediate and upper-intermediate levels, showing no difference in attitudes between the two groups. The lack of difference among the groups could stem from the fact that attitude is related to individual factors such as willingness to communicate or motivation (Byram et al., 2002; Deardoff, 2006; Hişmanoğlu, 2011; Mirzaei & Forouzandeh, 2013), so learners might refrain from interaction with the others, leading them to be deprived of bolstering their ICC.

Overall, the notable variation in proficiency levels regarding skill and disposition may be attributable to the students' limited international exposure (Atay et al., 2009; Guo, 2015; Hişmanoğlu, 2011; Sevimeleşahin, 2022; Zhang & Zoe, 2019) in lower levels. Mostly, the students from the low proficiency groups, such as pre-intermediate and intermediate, had fewer overseas experiences as indicated before, and they usually did not have the opportunity to contact people from different cultures, which might have placed a barrier for the lower-level students to be able to use their skills and to develop positive attitude towards different cultures.

5. Conclusion

The study revealed that successful students consistently displayed better levels of knowledge, skill, and positive attitude in ICC across all competency levels. This finding suggests that students' competence in understanding as well as being adept in the subskills of the ICC is influenced by their language proficiency levels. The similar pattern observed in the mean scores of successful students at all skill levels could be attributed to the importance of language proficiency in transforming the knowledge of ICC into employing intercultural skills. This finding also means that students with higher levels of ICC components are likely to have better communication skills. Given the lack of significant interaction effects between achievement, proficiency level, and ICC components, the interconnection between the level of language proficiency and ICC is stable across all proficiency levels. Discarding the proficiency level, a better command of English was found to play an important role on students' knowledge, skills, and attitudes at ICC.

5.1. Implications

Students can excel in ICC, as revealed in Hişmanoğlu (2011). Specifically, Zhang and Zoe's (2019) comprehensive meta-analysis on ICC implementations in learning environments suggests that the successful promotion of ICC is achieved through involvement in practical, experiential learning activities. These activities include role plays, culturally diverse group projects, and intercultural interviews. Additionally, students can benefit from instructional resources featuring "real content from target cultures," such as books and movies. Enrolling in "long-term integrated intercultural programs" with in-depth training courses also fosters ICC development (p. 42-43).

However, it is essential to recognize that linguistic competence alone does not determine ICC. Other critical factors include cultural competence, interpersonal skills, and contextual elements, such as study-abroad experiences (Zhang & Zoe, 2019). While achievement exams typically aim to measure linguistic competence, they often test ICC only indirectly. Therefore, as Zheng (2014) suggests, teachers should incorporate diverse activities to foster the skills and attitude components of ICC. For instance, they could use attitude scales to monitor shifts in students' perspectives over an academic year. To develop skills, educators could adopt task-based approaches, such as portfolios or collaborative projects, where students engage in meaningful communication in English.

The findings on the lack of difference between proficiency groups suggest that students at all levels could benefit from more hands-on activities to apply their knowledge in practical ways, particularly in developing skills and attitudes. Without such opportunities, students risk facing miscommunication or cultural challenges, as highlighted by Hişmanoğlu (2011), in today's interconnected world where technology bridges distances effortlessly. In the 21st century, cooperative learning and collaboration are indispensable skills that can be nurtured in ICC-integrated classrooms (Haregu et al., 2024). These skills, along with ICC levels, can be effectively promoted through tele-collaboration and Generative Artificial Intelligence tools.

5.2. Limitations

The present investigation has several limitations. The sample size was limited and the study is based primarily on quantitative analyses, which poses challenges in generalizing the results. To enhance the generalizability, it would be advantageous to incorporate a larger and more diverse participant pool, encompassing a range of institutional affiliations and proficiency levels. The paucity of participants, particularly at the higher end of the proficiency spectrum, may impede the implementation of advanced statistical techniques, such as regression analysis or structural equation modeling.

5.3. Suggestions for Further Research

Researchers may find it worthwhile to investigate the connection between learners' performance on high-stakes assessments and their development of intercultural communicative competence, encompassing knowledge, attitudes, and skills in both written and verbal domains. Additionally, it could yield valuable insights to explore whether factors such as international experience or the utilization of artificial intelligence tools contribute to excellence in intercultural communicative competence. Given the heavy reliance on quantitative data to address the research questions, it will be essential to gather qualitative data, such as classroom observations and material analysis, to better understand and incorporate the perspectives of students regarding the constituent elements of their intercultural communicative competence development.

In conclusion, this study has shed light on the intricate relationships that exist between academic success, linguistic proficiency, and interpersonal communication competence (ICC). This shows that academic success is correlated with a deeper understanding and application of interpersonal communication abilities. To this end, incorporating intercultural communication experiences and training into language education curricula is crucial. Giving students the chance to interact with different cultures, whether through study abroad options or formalized intercultural learning programs, is crucial for developing their language skills as well as their intercultural competence at all proficiency levels.

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