



Problematizing Language Testing and Assessment Syllabi through Intercultural Competence Assessment Perspective in an EFL Context

Mohammad Kazemian

Department of English, Tonekabon Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tonekabon, Iran

Mohammad Reza Khodareza

Department of English, Tonekabon Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tonekabon, Iran

Fatemeh Khonamri

Department of English, University of Mazandaran, Babolsar, Iran

Ramin Rahimy

Department of English, Tonekabon Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tonekabon, Iran

Introduction

Globalization, in spite of its merits and demerits, has made diverse cultures come into closer contact (Huang, 2012) and the process of globalization has overshadowed the whole world (Mitu et al, 2021). As the use of English spreads, and the language becomes a lingua franca in multiple domains including business, academia and sports, the need for intercultural competence becomes increasingly important in people's everyday lives (Du-Babcock, 2013; Ehrenreich, 2010).

With the emergence of the "Communicative Approach" and "Communicative Language Teaching" in the 1970s, language teaching and learning has undergone a "cultural turn". The "cultural turn" is a preliminary step in intercultural competence (IC) to complete communicative competence (CC) (Byram et al., 2013).

Language and culture are intermixed with each other. Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) has cemented relationships between language and culture in the long run (Komorowska, 2006). Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) argued that it is of the utmost importance to integrate culture in language teaching and learning. Intercultural competence (IC) is a concept that has flourished lately. Bennett (2020) and Fantini (2009) characterize IC as the ability to consciously experience different cultures to perform effectively and appropriately when interacting with speakers of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Intercultural competence assessment (ICA) has newly become the crux of the matter in language teaching and it seems to exercise influence on language testing and assessment as well (Borghetti, 2017; Deardorff, 2011; Sercu, 2004). ICA is defined as "a process that shows on what level a person is at the given moment, what their knowledge level and abilities are" (Mazeikiene & Virgailaite-Meckauskaite, 2007, p. 74).



ICA has been underrated in the language assessment and testing literature (Scarino, 2017), while it tends to be at the heart of the matter in language and culture testing (Borghetti, 2017; Scarino, 2017). The importance of assessment in applied linguistics can hardly be overestimated. Assessment is significant for all disciplines. Teachers would be interested in knowing if their students are learning what they are teaching; moreover, they expect to get feedback on the results of assessments concerning the way in which their teaching level may be tailored. Accordingly, teachers understand that all communications in the target language is intercultural; hence, their teaching should foster the acquisition of intercultural competence (Sercu, 2004).

Despite the fact that the value of culture in the applied linguistics curricula and the development of IC has gripped many applied linguists' attention, syllabus design still suffers from the absence of exact definitions of the concepts owing to the existence of a large number of culturally-oriented fields which have investigated culture both qualitatively and quantitatively in sociology, social and cultural anthropology, psychology, ethnography and ethnology, educational and political sciences, and linguistics (Komorowska, 2006). A challenging problem which arises in this domain is a lack of including ICA in the testing and assessment syllabi. Thus, the purpose of this study was problematizing the current language testing and assessment syllabi in the field of applied linguistics and inviting academics to notice the concept of ICA in their future syllabi.

ICA has hitherto been one of controversial subjects in intercultural language education research (Borghetti, 2017). Correspondingly, Sercu (2010, p. 17) believes that there are "more questions than answers." Yet, the literature appears to demonstrate that ICA assessment in language classes is more or less feasible and even necessary (e.g., Borghetti, 2017; Byram, 1997, 2009; Byram & Morgan, 1994; Fantini, 2009; Sercu, 2004; Song 2019; Kazemian et al., 2021). To our knowledge, no study has been done regarding the problematizing of language testing and assessment syllabi in an EFL context through ICA. To bridge this gap, this study intended to shed some light on the adoption of ICA in assessment syllabi in the EFL context of Iran.

Literature Review

Regarding intercultural studies and ICA, previous studies have emphasized teacher education, ICC assessment in foreign language education, ICC development in foreign language classrooms, and the incorporation of ICC instruction and ICC assessment in writing.

Young and Sachdev (2011) investigated IC and its exploration through English language teachers' perspectives and practices. Attitudes of teacher participants from three countries, the U.S., the U.K., and France, were explored in broad terms indicating that an intercultural approach may be promising and proper. However, it seemed that they were unable or reluctant to put it into practice. The rationale for the aforesaid claim could be attributed to a dearth of learners' enthusiasm, a dearth of curricular support, an absence of appropriate textbook materials, a lack of ICC testing, and an obsession with how to implement testing ICC. The results showed that there was a general agreement among native and non-native teachers in terms of IC. Nevertheless, there were some controversies about IC and their current classroom priorities due to a lack of learner interest, a lack of curricular support, a lack of suitable textbook material, and a lack of ICC testing.

Gu (2016) investigated assessment of ICC in foreign language education in China. Data were gathered from 1170 EFL teachers in a Chinese university via a questionnaire. The results revealed that in spite of being willing to assess ICC, EFL teachers had a lack of knowledge of the conception of ICC which had a detrimental effect on measuring their students' ICC.

Huang (2021) studied the developing ICC in foreign language classrooms through explicit instruction in Taiwan. The research had two purposes: (1) integrating of ICC instruction in foreign language education via explicit teaching; (2) Finding a proper choice and an effective instrument for assessing ICC. The results indicated that explicit instruction based on presentation, text analysis and description, and

video materials could assist them in acquiring knowledge about cultures of their own and others. However, the study included a small sample size of who were enrolled in a selected course.

Kazemian et al. (2021) did a mixed-methods study under the rubric of instruction on ICC and its application by Iranian EFL writers. Thirty-three male and female advanced Iranian EFL learners were surveyed in this study. After taking a five-week course on ICC skills, the results indicated that instruction on ICC assisted learners in coping with intercultural issues differently in their writing.

Despite the publication of several studies on ICC (e.g., Huang, 2021; Young & Sachdev, 2011), and ICA (e.g., Gu, 2016; Kazemian et al., 2021), there is still a gap for considering the significance of ICA and designing a syllabus for language testing and assessment. In particular, no study to date has examined problematizing the language testing and assessment syllabi in the Iranian context. Thus, this study seemed to be novel in its own way. To fill the gap in the literature of the EFL context, the research question that guided this study was:

RQ. Do applied linguistics instructors feel the need to include the concept of ICA in their Ph.D./M.A. language testing and assessment syllabi?

Method

Design

This study utilized narrative inquiry, document analysis, and interviews. The design of this research could be called innovative mixed-methods research (MMR). The rationale is that applied linguistics researchers are able to use grounded theory-mixed methods or mixed methods phenomenological research models when applicable to the study or they have the freedom of experimenting with different integration patterns including MMR and narrative inquiry, MMR and arts-based research, MMR and different forms of ethnography, etc. (Hashemi, 2020).

Participants

The participants consisted of thirty-two applied linguistics scholars, mostly full professors, associate professors, and very few assistant professors, from different universities in the world who were selected through purposive sampling (Table 1). Debriefing sessions were organized. It is worth noting that the researchers followed Ericsson and Smith (1991) in defining a specialist and chose those who have exhibited superior performance in a particular domain, testing and assessment in our study. Additionally, the ethics of research issues was considered in such a way that there was no bias in gender, age, or nationality. The philosophy of the study was elaborated on thoroughly and the participation in the narrative research inquiry was voluntary.

TABLE 1
Participants' Demographics

	Nationality			
	American	British	Indonesian	Iranian
Participants	5	4	8	15
Mean age	62	65.11	50	38.5
Google Scholar (h-index)	17	16	12	14
Mean years of experience	39	38.5	27.5	32.5

Data Collection

Testing and assessment syllabi

The researchers collected twenty Applied Linguistics syllabi of Advanced Language Testing and Assessment courses in Ph.D. programs from twenty Iranian (state and Azad,) universities. Azad University is a university system in which students pay tuition for their education, as opposed to state universities. Then, the aforesaid syllabi were analyzed to explore whether TEFL experts specify ICA in their syllabi or not.

Narrative research inquiry

Narrative research questions were emailed to the assessment and testing experts. There were three main questions for narrative research and the interview: 1. To what extent is ICA important to the applied linguistics community? 2. Do TEFL instructors feel the need to include the concept of ICA in their PhD or MA language testing and assessment syllabi? 3. To what extent is ICA prioritized in current English as a foreign language programs? The questions were sent to five testing and assessment (i.e., two full professors, four associate professors) experts from Tehran, Qom, Kharazmi, and Shahid Beheshti universities in Iran for validation procedures. Moreover, the aforementioned questions were sent to two full professors and two associate professors in Tehran, Mazandaran, and Sharif universities in Iran for the pilot study and the questions were modified to some extent and emailed to the experts to pursue the goals of the study. There were three drafts of research inquiry designed by the researchers. The language of all drafts including the main draft was English. The reviewers worked independently. The piloting process was conducted in a trial session and the first and the second rounds of piloting were done with the same group after a four- week interval. Moreover, extra elaborations and clarifications were provided to ensure the participants grasped the concept.

Interview

Besides the thirty-two aforementioned applied linguists, twelve Iranian TEFL experts, associate and full professors, were invited via purposive sampling to participate in a semi-structured interview with one of the researchers. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the interviews were conducted and recorded via Skype. The duration of the interview was between fifteen to thirty minutes. The reason for allocating this much time was that because of some technical glitches such as the speed of the Internet, the interviewer asked the interviewee to repeat her/his answers. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and themes and codes were generated. The transcripts were read, revised and reviewed by a colleague as an inter-coder. An overall inter-coder reliability was 83%. It is worth noting that the interview data were categorized thematically.

Procedure

Three open-ended, and narrative research questions were sent through email, to ninety-seven experts in language testing and assessment. Some further correspondence was done regarding the experts' responses to the initial email that is, clarifying the concepts of ICA and ICC thoroughly.

The replies were analyzed thematically and individual comments were coded and categorized as agreement, disagreement, and ambivalency separately by two raters to ensure inter-rater reliability. It is worth mentioning that coding the data was done by hand due to small sampling, and it took four weeks to separate the coding with a co-coder within a research team. Thematic analysis, which is a part of the content analysis technique (Creswell & Creswell, 2017), was utilized to indicate the responses which were based on

the theme of the research questions. For instance, “ICA is a necessary component of producing graduates/students who are ready for the global marketplace - regardless of their profession.” was coded as “Agreement” to show that the scholars were in favor of ICA in the applied linguistics community.

“ICA is not necessary in the testing and assessment syllabus” was coded as “Disagreement” to demonstrate the experts were at odds with the notion of incorporating ICA in the testing and assessment syllabus, and “Well, I am not sure if it is necessary” was coded as “Ambivalent” to demonstrate the scholars were uncertain.

Data Analysis

Both qualitative and quantitative paradigms were employed in this research study. First and foremost, in the qualitative phase the responses of assessment and testing experts were analyzed thematically. To calculate the inter-analyzer reliability, an expert who was an associate professor in TEFL, reanalyzed 15% of the extracts (kappa coefficient .90).

It is worth noting that the experts’ names were anonymized and coded (i.e., native speaker (NS#1), non-native speaker (NNS#2) in this study. Furthermore, in order to address the research question, a quantitative paradigm including a Chi-square test was employed to investigate whether native and non-native applied linguists feel the need to include the concept of ICA in their Ph.D. /MA language testing and assessment syllabi.

Results

In what follows, the key findings related to the analysis of narrative inquiry and semi-structured interview data will be displayed. For the sake of brevity, some of native and non-native beliefs are reported here and classified as agreed, disagreed, and ambivalent. Moreover, two phases of data analysis were conducted for the research question: The first phase is the quantitative analysis and the second one is the qualitative analysis.

The research question considers whether applied linguistics instructors feel the need to include the concept of ICA in their M.A./Ph.D. language testing and assessment syllabi. In order to verify this question, two phases were utilized. The first phase is the quantitative research paradigm. To investigate whether applied linguistics instructors feel the need to include the concept of ICA in their M.A./Ph.D. language testing and assessment syllabi, a chi-square was run.

TABLE 2
Chi-Square Test Frequencies

	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
Agree	19	10.7	8.3
Ambivalent	5	10.7	-5.7
No idea	8	10.7	-2.7
Total	32		

TABLE 3
One-Way Goodness-of-Fit Chi-Square

Value	Df	Asymp. Sig
10.188 ^a	2	.006

Note. 0 cells (.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 10.7.

Table 3 shows the results of chi-square analysis indicating that TEFL instructors need to include the concept of ICA in their M.A./PhD language testing and assessment syllabi. In fact, Table 3 demonstrates that the results are significant (.006).

Qualitative Analysis of Native and Non-native Speaker Experts

Nineteen native and non-native speaker TESOL experts agreed with including the concept of ICA in their M.A./Ph.D. language testing and assessment syllabi. For the sake of brevity some research inquiry feedback and interview responses are reported here. As some relevant pieces of evidence, NS#1 believes “Since I am very concerned that pragmatics has a key role in any assessment program and therefore in any assessment courses.” NS#2 believes “I believe that the need for intercultural competence becomes increasingly important, i.e., business, academia, sports.” NS#4 contends that “I believe it should be part of syllabus design/curriculum development.” NS# 6 surmises that “I think we should think about cultural competence in the context of language testing and assessment courses.” NS#16 believes that “I contributed a course for foreigners and Koreans in a Korean university. Koreans and foreigners explored cultural aspects of Korean movies.”

NS#10 contends that “We should definitely include a focus on assessment in teacher education programs.” NNS#2 suggests that “ICC is an integral part of communicative competence so courses with proficiency goals should include it in teaching and assessment.” NNS#14 believes that “It needs to be included in any testing courses.” NNS#9 surmises that “The extent that it can be included in teaching programs, it should also be reflected in tests made to assess what has been taught.” NNS#13 believes that “IC is a necessary component of producing graduates/students who are ready for the global marketplace - regardless of their profession.” NNS#10 argues that “The issue of intercultural competence and intercultural competence assessment have not received proper attention from those who are involved in the field.” NNS#1 believes that “This will be welcome in elementary or secondary education of English in Iran as the ministry or policy makes see foreign language learning as a threat to national culture of Iran.” NNS#4 believes that “It must be duly emphasized in language teaching and assessment.” NNS#6 contends that “Language testing with its design and content should be as communicative as possible so that IC can safely find its way in language testing.” NNS#11 surmises that “I do believe that intercultural competence MUST be included as one important component in today’s language teaching syllabuses.”

Furthermore, five native and non-native speaker experts were ambivalent about including the concept of ICA in their M.A./Ph.D. Language Testing and Assessment syllabi. As some relevant pieces of evidence, NS#3 believes “The European perspective is that IC should be engaged with across the curriculum in every subject.” NNS#7 surmises “Only if the context of language use demands it.” NS#17 believes “Whether or not it belongs to a language assessment syllabus depends on how much time there is in the course and what the course goals are.”

Discussion and Conclusions

The combined qualitative and quantitative paradigms in the current study explored a picture of the beliefs of native and non-native speaker experts regarding problematizing language testing and assessment syllabi in the M.A./PhD programs of TEFL. In fact, this study examines whether applied linguistics instructors feel the need to include the concept of ICA in their M.A./Ph.D. language testing and assessment syllabi or not.

The results demonstrated that about 60% are for the idea, about 16% against, and 25% had no opinion. The surprising point is that twelve Iranian TEFL professors approved in the online interview that the concept of ICA must be in the M.A./Ph.D. language testing and assessment syllabi. However, no trace of it was seen in their classrooms’ syllabuses. This is in line with Young and Sachdev (2011) in which there was a dearth of syllabus and curricular support, and a lack of suitable textbook material in ICC and its test. This result ties well with previous studies wherein ICC and ICA are utilized in Huang (2021) and Kazemian et al. (2021).

As one of the participants of this study mentioned, ICA will be appreciated in the Ministry of Education in Iran and consider it as a kind of guard against the national culture. This standpoint can be supported by the glocalization of English, i.e., thinking globally and acting locally (Sharifian, 2010)

which is the essence of ICC. The outcome of this study contradicts Gu (2016) who proposed the EFL teachers had a clear dearth of the conception of ICC in his study. This difference is due to the fact that TEFL professors were aware of the importance of ICA; however, they did not include it in their syllabi.

The report concludes by arguing among applied linguists that having the concept of ICA in the testing and assessment syllabi seems to be necessary. The inclusion of ICA in the testing and assessment syllabi for enhancing assessment systems can revolutionize higher education, institutions, and the learning environment as well as to collect experiences and reflect on teachers which leads to better teaching and learning. The quotations given in the results section showed an important and complex picture of ICA, especially among TEFL experts in EFL circles. The findings of this study can assist Iranian policy makers, syllabus designers and curriculum developers, and university TEFL professors in viewing the concept of ICA in language testing and assessment syllabuses more seriously so that they will incorporate it in their future agenda.

The Authors

Mohammad Kazemian-Sana'ati is a Ph.D. candidate in applied linguistics at Islamic Azad University, Tonekabon Branch, Iran. He is an Associate Editor of *MEXTESOL Journal*. His areas of research interests are intercultural studies, language testing and assessment, SLA theories, and CALL.

Email: m_kazemiansanati@yahoo.com

Mohammad Reza Khodareza (corresponding author) is an assistant professor of applied linguistics at Islamic Azad University, Tonekabon Branch, Iran. His areas of research interests are intercultural perspectives, and language testing and assessment.

Email: m.r.khodareza1349@gmail.com

Fatemeh Khonamri is an assistant professor of applied linguistics at University of Mazandaran, Babolsar, Iran. Her areas of research interests are applied linguistics, language testing and assessment, SLA theories, and intercultural studies.

Email: fatemeh.khonamri1350@gmail.com

Ramin Rahimy is an assistant professor of applied linguistics at Islamic Azad University, Tonekabon Branch, Iran. His areas of research interests are intercultural studies, and language testing and assessment.

Email: rahimy49@yahoo.com

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