

The Interface between Iranian EFL teachers' intercultural sensitivity and their ethnic and demographic backgrounds

Marzieh Ghamarnia *, Department of English, College of humanities, Zanjan Science and Research Branch, Islamic Azad University, Zanjan, Iran.

Ali Soltani, Department of English, Zanjan University of Medical Sciences, Zanjan, Iran.

Ali Rahimi, Humanities and tourism management, Bangkok University, Bangkok.

Suggested Citation:

Ghamarnia, M., Soltani, A. & Rahimi, A. (2016). The Interface between Iranian EFL teachers' intercultural sensitivity and their ethnic and demographic backgrounds. *Global Journal of Foreign Language Teaching*. 6(1), 36-45.

Received December 16, 2015; revised January 14, 2016; accepted February, 2016.

Selection and peer review under responsibility of Assoc. Prof Dr. Ali Rahimi, Bangkok University.

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Abstract

Given the ever-increasing trend of interconnectedness among nations on the one hand and the importance of professional development of foreign language teachers on the other, educational systems need to be reoriented to address the intercultural dimension of language teaching and its interface with social and ethnic identities as its inseparable components. This study aimed at investigating the relationship between Iranian EFL teachers' intercultural sensitivity level with their ethnic background, age, and gender. To collect the data, Chen and Starosta's (2000) Intercultural sensitivity scale (ISS) and a demographic background information questionnaire were utilized. The results of the t-test and a Pearson correlation indicated that there is a statistically significant relationship between gender and intercultural sensitivity. But, there is not a statistically significant relationship between age and intercultural sensitivity. Similarly, the relationship between ethnic background and intercultural sensitivity turned out to be insignificant. This study could have some implications for the curriculum designers willing to make their curricula as full-fledged as possible.

Keywords: Age, Ethnic background, Gender, Intercultural Sensitivity, Iranian EFL teachers

1. Introduction

It is believed that Language and culture are closely interdependent and also according to Jiang (2000), separating "culture and language" is impossible (p.328). Each language is, in fact, a reflection of its culture. Thus, second language learning will be meaningful when culture is included in language learning. Supporting this idea, Gao (2006) maintains that the interdependence of language learning and cultural learning is so evident that one can conclude that "language learning is culture learning" and consequently "language teaching is cultural teaching" (p.59). Similarly, Wang (2008) asserts that "foreign language teaching is foreign culture teaching, and foreign language teachers are foreign culture teachers" (p.4).

All of these statements indicate that foreign language teachers can play a significant role in classes by raising the level of students' cultural awareness. However, as Young, Sachdev, and Seedhouse (2009) obviously claim, "there is some empirical evidence that culture is not approached in the classroom in a principled, active and engaged manner, and that this lack of engagement may have a detrimental effect on learning" (p.149). Contrary to this claim, there are some teachers who unknowingly believe that grammar and vocabulary are enough for a successful communication. This belief on the part of teachers can certainly bring about some huge problems; one of these problems is their students' probable pragmatic failures in their intercultural encounters which seem absolutely unavoidable in this global village. Therefore, both teachers and students are obliged to familiarize themselves with the "social and philosophical content" of that language (Bennett, 1997) in addition to being only linguistically competent.

2. Review of the Related Literature

2.1. Intercultural competence and intercultural sensitivity

Intercultural competence is defined by Chen and Starosta (1999) as "the ability to effectively and appropriately execute communication behaviors that negotiate each other's cultural identity or identities in a culturally diverse environment" (p.2). It is also summarized by Hammer, Gudikunts, and Wiseman (1978) as "the ability to manage psychological stress, to communicate effectively and to establish interpersonal relationships" (p.206). Recently Intercultural competence has attracted a great deal of attraction owing to the increasing availability of technology-supported facilities as well as the big changes brought about by globalization. Supporting this idea, Elorza (2008) notes:

Considering the cultural and social complexities involved in global European citizenship, due to the remarkable quantity of speech communities, with a wide range of language and culture coexisting in interacting at various levels, it is not surprising that intercultural competence has received so much attention over the last decade. This interest in intercultural issues has produced a large amount of literature on this topic, with numerous definitions and types of conceptualization developed from different perspectives (sociological, linguistic, semiotic or anthropological, to name but a few) (p.261).

Hammer, Bennett, and Wiseman (2003) tended to believe that intercultural competence comes after intercultural sensitivity. That is intercultural sensitivity is the prerequisite for intercultural competence. Bhawuk and Brislin (1992) defined intercultural sensitivity as, "a sensitivity to the importance of cultural differences and to the points of view of people in other cultures" (p.411). They also believe that to live in a community of target culture, particular attributes for language learners are required: a) to be interested in other cultures, b) to be sensitive to cultural differences, and c) to be respectful towards people with cultures different from their own, d) to have a positive attitude toward cultural differences. Intercultural sensitivity has also been defined by Chen and Starosta (1997) as, "an individual's ability to develop emotion towards understanding and appreciating cultural differences that promotes appropriate and effective behavior in intercultural communication" (p.5).

Bennett (1998) categorized intercultural sensitivity into two general stages; ethnocentrism and ethnorelativism. Ethnocentrism was defined by Bennett as, 'using one's own set of standards and customs to judge all people, often unconsciously' (p.26). According to Bennett (ibid), this stage includes

denial, defense, and minimization and ethnorelativism which consists of acceptance, adaptation, and integration stages are "being comfortable with many standards and customs and... having the ability to adapt behavior and judgment to a variety of interpersonal setting," (Bennett, *ibid*). The above-mentioned concepts are elaborated on as follows:

- *Denial*: "an individual denies that there is any difference, that other views of reality do exist" (Bennett, 1993)
- *Defense*: "one's considers one's own culture as the only viable one" (Hammer et al., 2003, p. 242).
- *Minimization*: "elements of one's own cultural worldview are experienced as universal threat associated with cultural differences experienced in Defense is neutralized by subsuming the differences into familiar categories" (Bennett, 2004).
- *Acceptance*: "Values and assumptions are not seen as things so much as they are perceived as manifestations of human creativity" (Bennett, 1993).
- *Adaptation*: "to the practical application of ethnorelative acceptance to intercultural communication" (Bennett, 1993).
- *Integration*: "one's experience of self is expanded to include the movement in and out of different cultural worldviews" (Bennett, 2004).

2.2. Categorization of Individual differences

Individual differences or characteristics which bring about such differences are believed to play a crucial role in the acquisition of a foreign language. These characteristics can be divided into two categories: the first one includes those which can be controlled by teachers like learning style, learning strategies, and motivation. The second category consists of those which cannot be controlled by teachers like age, gender, and ethnic background (Cohen and Dornyei, 2002, p.170). The present study has focused merely on the following differences.

2.2.1. Age

One of the most controversial factors in language learning is age (Stern 1991). It is believed that younger learners are more successful in second language learning. To support this belief, Brown (2000) claims "a biologically determined period of life when language can be acquired more easily and beyond which time language is increasingly difficult to acquire" (p.53). At first, this assumption was only considered to be important in first language acquisition, but later its role attracted attention in second language learning as well (Byolistok 1997; Singleton and Legyel 1995). However, Chastain (1988) believes there is no significant difference between adult and children in second language learning. Cook (2001) also maintains that younger learners are not superior to adults but he considers age as an effective factor. According to him, limited areas of language learning are affected by age. For example, younger language learners have native-like pronunciation. Krashen, Long, and Scarcella (1979) concluded that adults and older children in general initially acquire the second language faster than younger children "older is better for rate of acquisition" but child second language acquirers will usually be superior in terms of ultimate attainment that is "younger is better in the long run" (p.574).

2.2.2. Gender

First of all, it should be noted that gender and sex are different. Sex is related to biology and psychology, whereas gender is related to socio-cultural behavior (Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet, 2003). Gender, according to West and Zimmerman (1987), and Butler (1990), "is not something we are born with and not something we have, but something we do" (p.1) and "something we perform" (p.1). A number of studies have attempted to probe into the relationship between gender and language learning. Green and Oxford (1995) claimed that female students are more successful than male students

in terms of the number of strategies employed. Hong-Nam and Leavell (2006) also asserted that female students are more likely to establish a relationship with others. But Ellis (1994) interestingly states:

Gender is, of course, likely to interact with other variables in determining L2 proficiency. It will not always be the case, therefore, females outperform males. Asian men in Britain generally attain higher levels of proficiency in L2 English than do Asian woman for the simple reason that their jobs bring them into contact with the majority English speaking group while women are often enclosed in the home. Gender interacts with such factors as age and ethnicity in a particular social class (p.204).

2.2.3. Ethnic Background

The same new thing can be perceived by people differently owing to different factors one of which is ethnic background (Gudykunts and Nishida, 1989; Singer, 1998; Wiseman, 1995). In an attempt to investigate the impact of ethnicity on the use of language learning strategies, Yang (2007) administrated the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) to 451 junior college students in Taiwan. Based on the results of his study, he strongly claimed, "ethnicity did play a significant role in the selection of language learning strategies" (p. 35).

Iran is one of the countries in which ethnic disparity is so important that diverse ethnic backgrounds should be taken into careful consideration when it comes to making firm decisions and making general policies as to the content of ethnicity-matched curricula designed for teacher trainers.

3. The current Study

Despite the bulk of research having been conducted on the centrality of cultural dimensions of language teaching and learning, what is deemed neglected in many studies is the necessity of probing into the relationship between intercultural sensitivity and ethnic and demographic background variables. The present research in English as a foreign language setting in an Asian context will hopefully provide a deeper understanding of foreign language teaching and learning processes through determining the effects of ethnic and demographic background variables such as age, gender, and ethnicity on Iranian teachers' intercultural sensitivity. Inspired by these issues, this study attempted to answer the following research questions.

1. Is there any significant relationship between Iranian EFL teachers' intercultural sensitivity and age?
2. Is there any significant difference between Iranian EFL teachers' intercultural sensitivity across gender groups?
3. Is there any significant difference between Iranian EFL teachers' intercultural sensitivity across participants with different ethnic backgrounds?

4. Method

4.1. Participants

Three hundred and thirty-five male and female English teachers who served as the participants for this study were randomly selected from several institutes in Zanzan and Karaj. Three hundred female and male English teachers with the age range from 22 to upper 45 were randomly selected. Their majors were English translation, English literature, and TEFL. To homogenize them, teachers having a TOEFL certificate were selected. It is noteworthy that the participants of this study held B.A., and came from two different Ethnic backgrounds, namely Azeri and Farsi. All participants were assured that their participation in this study was voluntary and their personal information would remain confidential.

4.2. Procedures

These participants were teaching in several institutes in Zanjan and Karaj. They were required to complete the ethnic and demographic background questionnaire and intercultural sensitivity scale. The researchers explained the items on both the questionnaire and the scale in detail. The participants had enough time to complete them. The steps taken were as follows.

1. The participants were assured that no one would have access to their answers but the researchers.
2. The researchers stressed the significance and aims of the research before the administration of ethnic and demographic background questionnaire and intercultural sensitivity scale.
3. To clarify everything, the researchers answered the participants' questions while they were completing the questionnaire and the scale.
4. Both the questionnaire and the scale were completed in the presence of the researchers.

4.3. Instruments

To fulfill the objectives of this study, the general language proficiency test of TOEFL PBT, (TOEFL ACTUAL TESTS, 2005, pp.7-36), an intercultural sensitivity scale (Chen and Starosta, 2000), and an ethnic and demographic background questionnaire were utilized. The TOEFL test was employed to assess the level of proficiency of the participants. The intercultural sensitivity scale was used to measure the level of intercultural sensitivity of the participants. The ethnic and demographic background questionnaire was utilized in order to collect some information about each participant's demographic and ethnic background. These instruments are described in detail as follows.

4.3.1. Language Proficiency Test

To select a homogeneous group of participants, a general language proficiency test of TOEFL (collected by research unit of Ebteda publications, 2005, pp.7-36), was utilized. It was pilot-tested before administration and the reliability index calculated by Kuder-Richardson (KR-21) formula was 0.78. The teachers whose scores were between one standard deviation above and below the mean on the normal distribution of this TOEFL test were selected as the main participants of the study.

4.3.2. Intercultural Sensitivity

by Chen and Starosta. The participants were supposed to express their ideas by choosing one of those five Likert-type scales: strongly disagree, disagree, uncertain, agree, and strongly agree. All of the negatively-worded items were reversed before any calculations. In order to evaluate the reliability of this instrument, a few pieces of research were done in the U.S. by Chen and Starosta (2000). According to them, the Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient was 0.86.

4.3.3. Ethnic and Demographic Background Questionnaire

Ethnic and demographic background questionnaire was the third instrument. Ten items were included in the questionnaire; these items were about each participant's ethnic and demographic background information like age, academic major, present educational level, gender, place of residence, and religion. The sixth, fifth, and second items on the questionnaire dealt with the participants' personal identity, age, gender, and place of study. The third item asked about participants' major, the fourth item inquired participants' present educational level. The seventh, ninth, and tenth items related to, religions, mother tongue, and teaching experiences, and the ninth item of this questionnaire required the participants to select the ethnic background they belonged to.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1. Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive data on all of the participants' ethnic and demographic characteristics such as standard deviations, and percentages of age, gender, and ethnic background obtained through ethnic and demographic background information questionnaire are shown in Tables 1, 2, 3, as follows:

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the ethnic groups

Ethnicity	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Azeri	210	76.5857	4.26118	.29405
Farsi	90	76.4000	4.13481	.43585

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for the gender groups

Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Male	47	95.2766	8.09644	1.18099
Female	252	92.4365	7.12383	.44876

Table 3. The percentage of 300 participants' responses to intercultural sensitivity scale

Items	* Responses							M	SD
	1.S.D	2.D	3.U	4. A	5.S.A				
1. I enjoy interacting with people from different cultures..	.7	.3	7.7	55.2	36.1	4.26	.668		
2. I think people from other cultures are narrow-minded.	.3	.7	7.0	43.5	48.5	4.39	.679		
3. I am pretty sure of myself in interacting with people from different cultures	1.0	1.7	35.8	44.8	16.7	3.75	.787		
4. I find it very hard to talk in front of people from different cultures.	1.3	7.7	33.4	39.8	17.7	3.65	.905		
5. I always know what to say when interacting with people from different cultures.	.3	6.4	46.5	39.5	7.4	3.47	.738		
6. I can be as sociable as I want to be when interacting with people from different cultures.	.7	5.0	32.1	45.8	16.4	3.72	.819		
7. I don't like to be with people from different cultures.	.7	2.3	9.4	54.5	33.1	4.17	.743		
8. I respect the values of people from different cultures.	2.0	1.0	7.0	44.1	45.8	4.31	.810		
9. I get upset easily when interacting with people from different cultures.	.3	7.0	19.1	49.5	24.1	3.90	.857		
10. I feel confident when interacting with people from different cultures.	.7	8.4	22.4	51.8	16.7	3.76	.854		
11. I tend to wait before forming an impression of culturally-distinct counterparts.	2.3	6.7	17.4	58.2	15.4	3.78	.871		
12. I often get discouraged when I am with people from different cultures.	0	2.7	17.1	55.9	24.4	4.02	.723		
13. I am open-minded to people from different cultures.	.3	1.0	14.0	61.2	23.4	4.06	.665		
14. I am very observant when interacting with people	0	6.7	16.1	52.5	24.7	3.95	.822		

from different cultures.							
15. I often feel useless when interacting with people from different cultures.	.3	1.7	10.4	51.8	35.8	4.21	.718
16. I respect the ways people from different cultures behave.	0	.3	10.0	64.5	25.1	4.14	.587
17. I try to obtain as much information as I can when interacting with people from different cultures.	.3	4.3	9.7	53.8	31.8	4.12	.778
18. I would not accept the opinions of people from different cultures.	2.0	17.7	23.7	35.1	21.4	3.56	1.074
19. I am sensitive to my culturally-distinct counterpart's subtle meanings during our interaction.	.7	2.0	27.1	47.5	22.7	3.90	.794
20. I think my culture is better than other cultures.	4.3	19.1	32.8	34.4	9.4	3.25	1.011
21. I often give positive responses to my culturally different counterpart during our interaction.	3.3	23.7	39.5	28.8	4.7	3.08	.918
22. I avoid those situations where I will have to deal with culturally-distinct persons.	.7	3.3	12.4	60.2	23.4	4.02	.744
23. I often show my culturally-distinct counterpart my understanding through verbal or nonverbal cues.	2.3	15.7	24.4	48.8	8.7	3.46	.938
24. I have a feeling of enjoyment towards differences between my culturally- distinct counterpart and me.	0	1.3	23.4	54.2	21.1	3.95	.705

1. S.D= Strongly Disagree, 2. D= Disagree, 3. U= Uncertain, 4. A= Agree, 5. SA= Strongly Disagree. M= Mean SD= Standard Deviation

5.2. Inferential Statistics

This part deals with both the relationship between intercultural sensitivity and ethnic and demographic characteristics. In fact, the researchers attempted to determine the degree to which the intercultural sensitivity was affected by ethnic and demographic background characteristics variables. An independent-samples t-test and a Pearson correlation were run. The results are displayed in Table 4, 5, and figure 1 below.

Table 4. T-test results for ethnic backgrounds

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means			Mean Difference
	F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	
Equal variances assumed	.113	.736	-.349	298	.727	-.18571
Equal variances not assumed			-.353	173.180	.724	-.18571

The results showed that the mean difference between the performance of the two ethnic groups is not statistically significant ($t(298) = -.349, p=.727$), meaning that there are no significant differences between these two ethnic groups in terms of intercultural sensitivity.

Table 5. T-test results for the gender groups

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means			Mean Difference
	F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	
Equal variances assumed	1.254	.264	2.454	297	.015	2.84009
Equal variances not assumed			2.248	60.014	.028	2.84009

The results indicate that the mean difference between the performance of the males and females is statistically significant ($t(297) = 2.45, p = .015$) which means that there are significant differences among these two gender groups in terms of intercultural sensitivity.

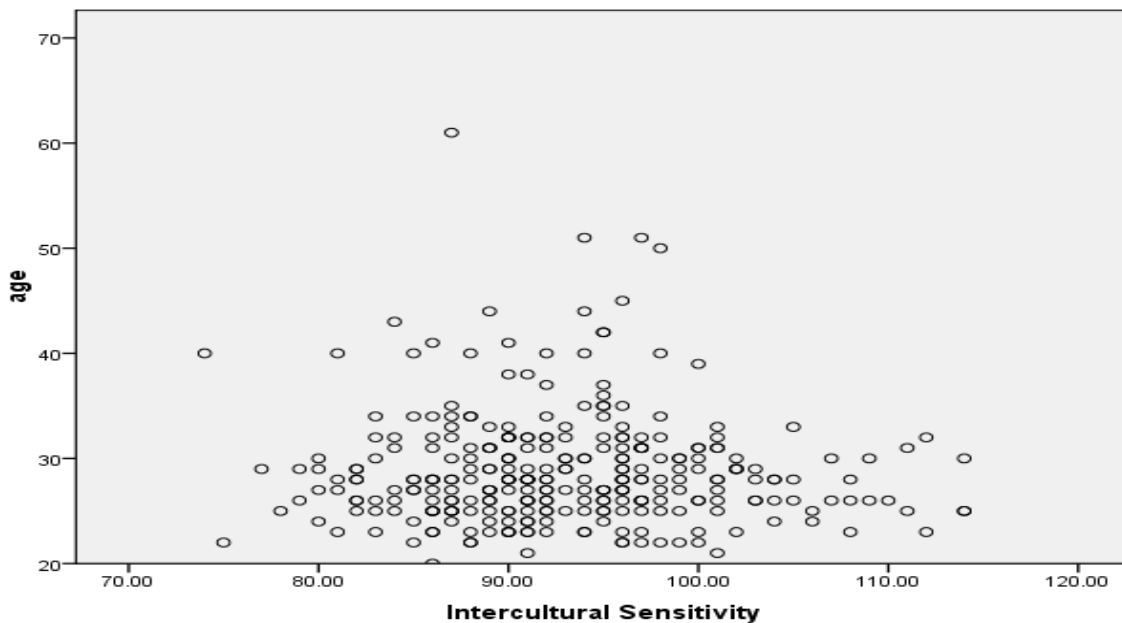


Figure 1: The relationship between age and intercultural sensitivity (Scatter-plot)

In a Pearson correlation technique, the results will be between -1 and 1. It rarely happens to be 0, -1 or 1. A number will be between these values. If the number is between .5 to 1.0 or -0.5 to -1.0, there will be a high correlation. If it is between .3 to .5 or -0.3 to -.5, there will be a medium correlation, and if it is between .1 to .3 or -0.1 to -0.3, there will be a low correlation. The correlation coefficient turned out to be -.049 which is clearly too low to indicate any relationship between intercultural sensitivity and age. The scatterplot (Figure 1) indicates that there is no relationship between them.

The results indicated that although gender and intercultural sensitivity turned out to enjoy a significant relationship, such a relationship was, however, found to be insignificant with regard to age and ethnic background. In other words, the similar results obtained through the t-test analyses for both gender and ethnic background, and a Pearson correlation analysis for age showed that whereas gender had a significant role in the teachers' intercultural sensitivity level, ethnic background and age failed to influence teachers' intercultural sensitivity level. These findings are interestingly contrary to some research findings which were mentioned in the review of the literature. The finding of this study regarding age was contrary to what Chastain (1988) asserts. According to Chastain (ibid), there is no significant difference between adult and children in second language learning. Cook (2001) also maintains that younger learners are not superior to adults, but he considers age as an effective factor.

Contrary to the current research finding, Krashen, Long, and Scarcella (1979) assert that adults are faster in second language learning, but younger children are superior. The result of the current study in terms of gender is contrary to what Green and Oxford (1995) claimed. According to them, female students are more successful than male students in terms of the number of strategies employed, but Ellis (1994) believed that being male or female is not important in language learning. As to the relationship between ethnic background and intercultural sensitivity, it should be mentioned that intercultural sensitivity levels of neither Azeri nor Fars teachers were high enough to be statistically significant.

6. Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that there is a significant relationship between intercultural sensitivity and gender group. In other words, the male Iranian teachers showed a strong tendency towards moving from ethnocentric stages to ethnorelative stages. But given the variation observed between the ethnic groups (i.e. Azeri and Farsi) in terms of their different intercultural sensitivity levels, no significant relationship was seen. And there is not a statistically significant between age and intercultural sensitivity.

Adopting novel methods of intercultural teaching given the ever-increasing trend of globalization and internationalization of teacher education, teacher trainers should feel responsible for making their prospective teachers aware of their, most probably low, level of intercultural competence and make their rigorous attempts to explore new methods of enhancing the level of their intercultural competence. This paper can have some important contributions to all people involved in educational contexts which have multiethnic populations. Other similar studies could explore the relationship between EFL teachers' intercultural sensitivity level and other variables like years teaching in schools, ethnic background, and motivation.

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