To What Extent Lebanese University Students Consider Themselves as
Intercultural Communicators

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Abstract
Globalization has removed all constrained borders and distances among countries, governments, and business corporations. With this fundamental change, there has been an increasing demand for intercultural competent communicators to secure success in the 21st century marketplace. However, some universities in Lebanon, if not all, seem not to have IC as a part of their curricula, or if they do, it is not emphasized. As such, students may not become aware of the importance of developing intercultural communication skills. That's why the researchers aimed to (1) investigate the extent to which students in private Lebanese universities are aware of the importance of IC, (2) whether they consider themselves as culturally competent speakers, and (3) the strategies they follow to develop their intercultural communicative competence (ICC). Using a mixed-methods design, the researchers surveyed 190 participants conveniently sampled from different private Lebanese universities and conducted two focus groups of 5 participants each. The collected data was analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. The derived conclusions from both analyses were triangulated. The findings revealed that the majority of the participants were aware of the importance of ICC, more than half of the participants considered themselves intercultural speakers, and the strategies that helped them the most in developing their ICC were interactions with people from other cultures, different types of media, and international friends among others. The researchers recommend more attention be given to IC in higher education institutions and further research be conducted in the area of IC using an intercultural communicative competence tool.

Keywords: Cross-cultural Communication, Global Communicators, Diverse Cultures, Higher Education, Intercultural Communicative Competence, Lebanon, Middle East, Workplace

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Introduction

Globalization has removed all constrained borders and shortened distances among countries, governments, and business corporations. With this fundamental change, there has been an increasing demand for intercultural competent communicators to secure success in the 21st century marketplace. In fact, Winstead (2021) states "as more and more company leaders prioritize diversity and inclusion in their workplaces," effective intercultural communication (IC) becomes a must in today's workplaces. This is reinforced by Deardorff (2015, p. 137) when she states that because communicating with customers, partners, and employees across international borders is an everyday activity among many employees worldwide, employers need to find employees "who are not only technically proficient, but also culturally astute and able to thrive in a global work environment". She even stipulates that "it is essential that the tuning community intentionally include intercultural competence as a crucial piece of what today's graduates need to know and be able to do, regardless of discipline" (Deardorff, 2015, p. 137).

Lebanon is a country in the Middle East. Arabic is the native language there, and foreign language learning (FLL) (English and/or French) is considered of high importance at least for instrumental reasons, namely pursuing a higher education degree in the foreign language and securing a job nationally, regionally, or internationally. In fact, FLL begins as early as kindergarten, and almost all subject matters are taught in the foreign language either English or French depending on the learner's choice of which foreign language s/he wants to pursue as the first foreign language.

Lebanon has a cultural diversity reflected in its arts, cuisine, ethnic background, languages, and residents among others, and its geographical location makes it open to the global world, which necessitates having a Lebanese generation with a global mindset and intercultural communicative competence rather than mere imitators of native speakers (Byram, 2008).

However, the researchers have concerns about the intercultural education of the Lebanese students, mainly in higher education, as it is a learning outcome neither in higher education nor in school despite the FL teaching. At its best, a few universities have IC as an elective social science course which some students might take to complete a general education requirement. Besides, not much research has been done in the Lebanese context that explores the extent to which the Lebanese learners have the desired intercultural communication skills needed to transition them successfully into their future multicultural workplace and diverse social environments. To this end, the researchers aimed to investigate: (1) the extent to which students in private Lebanese universities are aware of the importance of IC, (2) whether they consider themselves as culturally competent speakers, and (3) the strategies they follow to develop their intercultural communicative competence (ICC).

Intercultural Competence: Terms and Definitions

Different terms for intercultural competence (IC) were given, namely global competence, global citizenship, global learning, intercultural effectiveness, intercultural dialogue, cross-cultural awareness, international competence, global competitive intelligence, and intercultural communicative competence among others. According to Deardorff, (2015, p.140), these terms are specific to each discipline, or different terms are used for different disciplines. For example, it is referred to as intercultural competence or global citizenship in

education, cross-cultural effectiveness in business, global competence in engineering, and intercultural communicative competence in language learning among others.

No matter what term is used, it is essential one adopts a non-essentialist definition of intercultural communication to avoid cultural differentialism (Tiurikova, 2021). This could be done by adopting a broader definition of culture, that is, not limiting it to a country or ethnicity but rather a framework of reference to a group of people and by incorporating the notion of multiple identities (Tiurikova, 2021, p. 124).

Intercultural competence has been defined differently by different scholars. For instance, Dypedahl (2019) defines it as "mindsets and/or communication styles that are different from one's own" (p. 102). Deardorff (2019) relates IC to "the skills, attitudes, and behaviors needed to improve interactions across difference, whether within society (differences due to age, gender, religion, socio-economic status, political affiliation, ethnicity and so on) or across borders" (as cited in Tiurikova, 2021, p. 125). The Council of Europe (2007) defines IC as "the ability to communicate effectively in cross-cultural situations and to relate appropriately in a variety of cultural contexts" (p. 9), and Byram (1997) defines it as "an individual's ability to communicate and interact across cultural boundaries" (p.7). The top- rated definition among intercultural scholars was "the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (Deardorff, 2004, p. 194).

Byram's (1997) definition of intercultural competence was the most applicable to "higher education institutions' internationalization strategies" (Deardorff, 2006, p. 34). That's why the researchers adopted this definition in their research study and used the term intercultural communicative competence used in language learning. To ensure a non-essentialist definition of IC, the researchers adopted the broader definition of culture and the notion of multiple identities.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this research:

1. To what extent are university students in Lebanon aware of the importance of intercultural communicative competence (ICC)?
2. To what extent do the Lebanese private university students consider themselves interculturally competent speakers?
3. How do they think they have developed their ICC?

Methodology and Methods

The researchers used the mixed-methods design, which incorporates the use of both quantitative and qualitative research methods. This kind of design was selected to get "an expanded understanding" of the research problem (Creswell, 2009, p. 203). The researchers employed the online self-completion questionnaire, which consisted of 5 multiple choice questions and one 5-point Likert scale item, to collect the quantitative data. The researchers complemented that data with two focus- group interviews, each of which consisting of 5 participants, which comprised the qualitative data.

The collected data was analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. The researchers used excel to analyze the quantitative data mainly descriptively for overall trends and patterns. As to the qualitative data, the participants' responses, which were not edited by the researchers to maintain the participants' voices, were transcribed and thematically coded. Then the conclusions derived from both analyses were triangulated so that the "findings may be cross-checked" (Bryman, 2008, p.700). The similarities found between these conclusions contribute to the validity of the findings.

The researchers conveniently selected 200 students from private Lebanese universities located in Beirut, Mount Lebanon, and the South to take part in this study, but only 190 returned the online completed questionnaire. These participants were promised confidentiality, anonymity, and non-traceability. They were all native speakers of Arabic and fluent at least in one foreign language either English or French. They were also coming from different regional and socio-economic backgrounds, and they were of different genders and academic statuses as seen in the following table:

	Sophomore	Junior	Senior	Graduate	Total
Female	24	25	31	9	89
Male	27	16	41	13	97
Other	2	1	1	0	4
Total	53	42	73	22	190

Table 1: Crosstabs of Participants' Gender and Academic Status

Findings and Discussion

Participants' Awareness of the Importance of ICC

The majority of the participants were aware of the importance of ICC to them. In fact, more than half of the participants (54.8%) believed that it was very important and about one third of them (33.9%) thought it was important. About 8% considered it somehow important, and few (2.2%) could not decide. Only very few (1.1%) thought it was not important (See Figure 1 below).
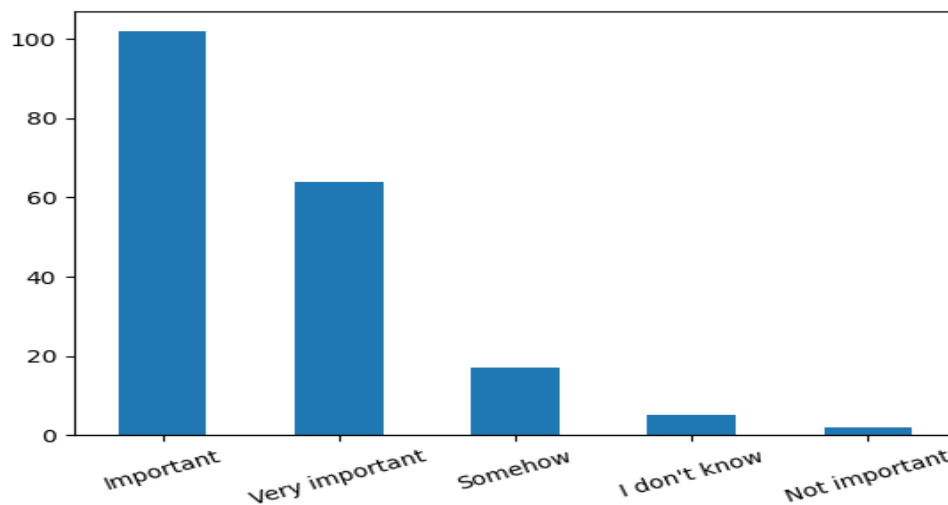

Figure 1: Participants' Awareness of ICC Importance

The qualitative data, which was in line with the quantitative, provided richer data about the participants' awareness of the importance of ICC. Most, if not all, of the participants in the focus groups explained why and how ICC was important to them.

For many participants ICC is important for creating harmony with others, *"It opens for us a new horizon and create a sort of harmony, ... we are so open to each other ... there is a high chance that we would immigrate or someone would come to us or even on social media so this really helps us understand the human relation better."* Some participants talked about accepting others and building better relationships as revealed in the following participants' testimonies, *"To feel like accepted,"* *"To have better relationships with others"*, *"It helps us build better relationships and understand these people. It also helps us gain more insight and more knowledge about them and their backgrounds and so on, so it is really helpful"*.

Other participants viewed ICC important because it helped them respect and accept differences, *"learn to accept others who are different,"* *"To be understanding of each group and appreciate them to the best of our abilities,"* *"I think it is really important to have because in a way it teaches you how to respect differences cuz [sic]we already accept similarities but the fact that you can have a conversation with someone who is different than you it is important and makes you grow as a person in a way."*

Another participant described ICC importance in terms of increasing his job prospects and preparing him to work in a diverse environment. He clearly stated, *"as a software engineer, my ambition is to work as a consultant at a point. Because this domain is not much as available in Lebanon, then I assume I will travel to work abroad, most probably I will be in the gulf, especially Dubai, which is cosmopolitan. So I need to be ready for such an experience."*

For other participants, ICC is important in helping them avoid pre-judgement when interacting with the other. For example, one participant stated, *"When I listen to someone's point of view, I don't directly make a judgement. So I try to listen to their opinion and how they view things and at the end I give my opinion trying to convince them with something."* Similarly, another participant explained *"I possess the quality of not like being judgmental or to have like previous judgement on what they might be like, their culture and the like."*

In general, most participants agreed that ICC improves their ability to communicate with others. For example, they talked about the following reasons: *"To be able to interact with others"*, *"Have effective communication,"* *"I would be more knowledgeable if I encountered someone from that culture, I would know how to interact and maybe through like my interactions I would earn that person's respect."*

The participants' awareness of the importance of ICC aligns with previous studies done by researchers such as Liu (2016), Allo (2018) Allen (2021), Mu and Yu (2021), Halim et al. (2022) among others, who reported about their participants' awareness of the importance of ICC. In addition, the participants' narrated reasons behind the importance of ICC also echo with those found by Halim et al. (2022). Through reflective journals, the majority of their participants talked about the importance of ICC as it helps them build better relationships and develop a more respectful, tolerant and non-judgmental attitude (Halim et al., 2022).

Participants' Perceptions: Intercultural Speakers or Not

About half of the participants (52.2%) consider themselves intercultural speakers. However, about 10% only don't consider themselves intercultural speakers, and more than one third of them (38.2%) can't decide whether they are intercultural speakers or not (see figure 2 below).
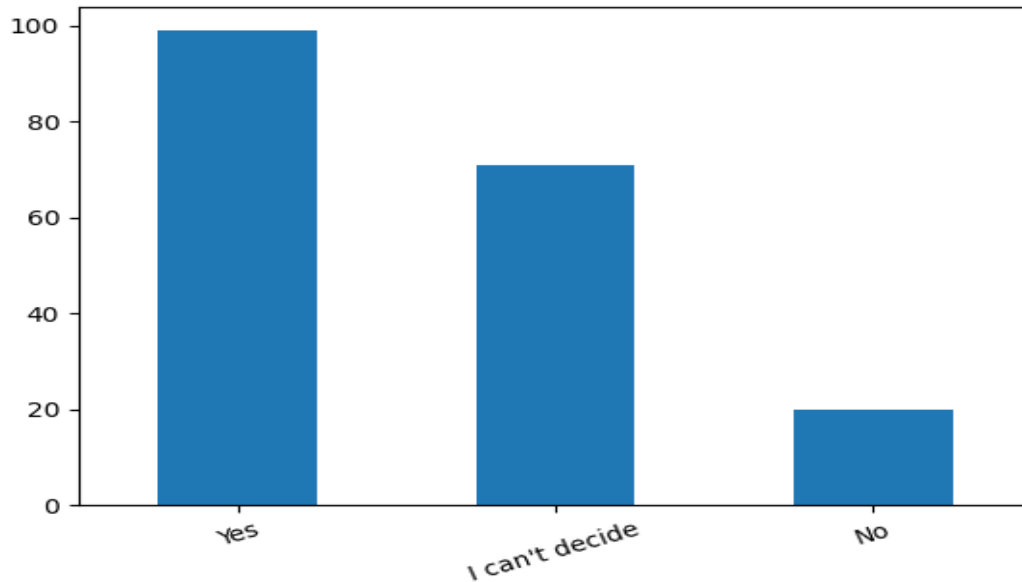

Figure 2: Participants' Perceptions of Being Intercultural Speakers

The qualitative data could clarify and add further insights to these findings. The participants who considered themselves intercultural speakers explained why they thought so. Some of the evidence they reported was about never failing an intercultural encounter before as expressed by one participant who stated, *"I consider myself an intercultural speaker as I never failed to maintain a good interaction with my conversation partner. I used to ask them about their cultures or what is considered offensive in their culture."*

Another proof given by another participant was maintaining appropriate attitude and skill when interacting with diverse people. She said, *"I am a competent speaker because I try to accommodate what they find offensive and what they don't find offensive."*

Avoiding being judgmental, tending to wait and listening objectively to the other are other traits the participants mentioned as proofs for viewing themselves as interculturally competent communicators. One participant narrated *"I am culturally confident because I believe when I interact with someone from another culture I tend like to wait and see how for example they speak or how for example their perspective on some stuff."* Likewise, another participant stated *"I consider myself I fit in that criterion so I don't like to have previous judgement on what they might be like, their culture and the like."* One more participant said, *"When I listen to someone's point of view, I don't directly make a judgement."*

However, some participants lacked awareness of ICC and could not decide whether they are competent or not. For example, one participant who could not decide for herself, said *"I can't decide as I haven't been in an intercultural encounter before."* Another participant said,

"Honestly, I don't know. I respect other people's beliefs. I don't think I have a problem dealing with them." When the interviewer, one of the researchers, probed about the reason why she did not consider herself an intercultural speaker, she replied, *"I can't decide because I don't have any experience in this regard."* Asking her further about what she thought an intercultural speaker should be like or have, she answered, *"I don't know."* Also, another participant said "I *don't know"* and when asked about the reason, he replied *"because I don't have experience like every day I experience this."*

Showing the appropriate attitude and skill when interacting with others, refraining from making hasty judgments, respecting differences are all important qualities to ensure successful intercultural communication. These findings are all in line with the literature (Mirzaei & Forouzandeh, 2013; Liu, 2016; Allo, 2018; Allen, 2021; Mu & Yu, 2021; Halim et al., 2022).

How Participants Think They Developed ICC

In response to the question about how the participants had developed their ICC, the participants selected these strategies in a descending order: 1) interactions with people from different cultures (71.5%), 2) different types of media (63.4%), 3) international friends (55.4%), 4) travel (43%), 5) courses (37.1%), 6) readings (36.6%), and 7) globalization (28.5%) among others that were selected by fewer participants. Figure 3 below provides further information on these strategies.
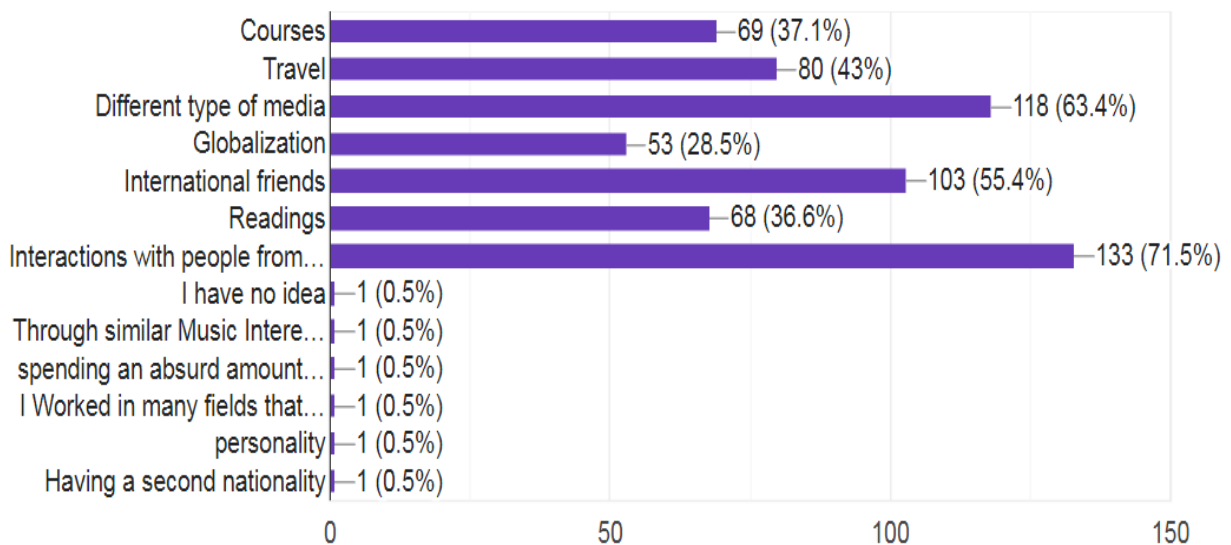

Figure 3: Strategies that Helped Participants Develop ICC

The qualitative data echoed the quantitative data as the participants in the focus-groups named almost the same strategies. The most strategies referred to by the participants were social media as reflected in one of the responses *"Definitely social media comes as number one: Tiktok; twitter; podcasts"* as well as movies and books, *"shows for example, series, sometimes books help me learn about those kind of things…They help you discover the criteria like you should do this and that when interacting with people from different culture."* Other responses were related to *"Travels"* and *"International friends."*

Upon probing about how courses contributed to developing their ICC, one of the participants stated that *"I knew nothing about IC until I joined the university and took Intercultural communication course with you. Unfortunately, I was in a public school, and teachers there did barely teach us."* Similarly, other participants from a different institution said *"through courses and discussion with our teachers who kept on referring to it."*

The most named strategies by the participants also match with the strategies presented in previous studies. To name a few, in Allen (2021), for example, the participants named technology, social media, and traveling. Mu and Yu's (2021) participants referred also to social media, TV series, songs and movies. In Halim et al. (2022), the participants named social networking sites, mainly YouTube and WhatsApp, as the strategies that helped them understand the netiquette of communication and the skill of showing respect to others.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In this study, the researchers examined the Lebanese university students' awareness of the importance of ICC, their perceptions of themselves as intercultural communicators, and the strategies they think that helped them to develop ICC. Using a mixed- methods design, the researchers surveyed 190 participants conveniently selected from private Lebanese universities and interviewed ten participants in two focus-groups.

The majority of participants are aware of the importance of the intercultural communicative competence for several reasons related to creating harmony with others, helping them understand and respect others, listening objectively to others, being able to work in diverse workplace contexts, and befriending others. However, a few could not decide and few seemed not to be aware of ICC importance.

Though a lot of the participants consider themselves interculturally competent speakers, quite a number of them cannot decide for themselves, and fewer don't perceive themselves as intercultural speakers. This hints at the probability that the participants are not well-informed about ICC, they do not know how to evaluate themselves due to their lack of experience in intercultural encounters, or even they lack the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of an intercultural speaker.

The most sources that helped them develop their ICC are 1) their interactions with people from different cultures, 2) different types of media, 3) international friends, 4) travel, 5) courses, and 6) readings. These results reinforce the fact that students develop their ICC on individual basis or personal effort related to their social circle, whereas it should have been a part of the learning outcomes they develop in their universities like other universities in European countries. This puts learners coming from lower socio-economic background at a disadvantage.

Because the sample is a non-probability sample, the researchers cannot generalize the findings to represent all Lebanese university students in the private sector. In addition, though the sample comes from different socio-economic backgrounds, participants from the public sector who mostly come from low-socio economic sector are not represented, hence impacting on the generalizability of the findings too. Moreover, the findings reflect the perceptions of the students. Although the different types of data were cross-checked, still the researchers cannot be confident that these perceptions mirror their behavior in real-life intercultural encounters.

Due to these limitations, the researchers recommend that the participants' ICC be assessed using an intercultural communicative competence tool to see to what extent they have the required knowledge, attitudes, skills, and critical cultural awareness of an intercultural speaker as per Byram's (1997) ICC model. In other words, a follow-up study is suggested to investigate the extent to which participants' responses reflect Byram's multidimensional components of ICC. The researchers also recommend that other data collection methods, such as observation and cultural incidents, and a representative sample be used in future research. In addition, the researchers recommend that more attention should be given to intercultural communication in higher education to raise students' awareness about its importance, to be more knowledgeable about what ICC is about, and to ensure equity of exposure among all students.

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