



## The Role of Intercultural Communicative Competence in Willingness to Communicate Among Pre-service English Language Teachers

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Research Article

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.18075114

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### Abstract

Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) refers to the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural contexts by understanding cultural differences, demonstrating empathy, and adapting to diverse communication styles, while Willingness to Communicate (WTC) is defined as an individual's readiness to engage in communication when given the opportunity. Both concepts are critical for pre-service English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in increasingly multicultural classrooms. Despite the importance of these constructs, limited research has explored the direct relationship between ICC and WTC, particularly within the EFL context. This study addresses this gap by investigating how ICC influences WTC among 164 pre-service EFL teachers at a state university in Türkiye employing Arasaratnam's (2010) Integrated Model of ICC and the International Posture Scale (Mystkowska-Wiertelak & Pawlak, 2016), along with 10 open-ended interview questions. The quantitative findings suggest that ICC significantly influenced WTC, explaining 60% of its variance. Both the affective and cognitive dimensions of ICC were key predictors of WTC. Qualitative insights from interviews illustrate how intercultural experiences enhance adaptability and communication readiness. Accordingly, teachers who possess strong ICC and WTC are better equipped to foster inclusive, communicative classrooms where students from diverse linguistic backgrounds feel empowered to use their languages. Moreover, the research demonstrates that those with higher levels of ICC are more likely to participate in conversations, thus promoting more fluid communication in multilingual settings. This study emphasizes the need for curriculum reforms and professional development to foster ICC, promoting inclusive communication in diverse educational contexts.

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**Keywords:** *intercultural communicative competence (ICC), multicultural education, pre-service EFL teachers, willingness to communicate (WTC)*

**Cite as:** Yılmaz, K., & Kazazoğlu, S. (2025). The role of intercultural communicative competence in willingness to communicate among pre-service English language teachers. *Journal of Emerging Educational Studies*, 2(2), 1-24.  
<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18075114>

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## INTRODUCTION

English has experienced a remarkable expansion, emerging as a global lingua franca (ELF) due to various historical, political, and economic factors (Ostler, 2011). As a lingua franca, English facilitates communication among individuals from diverse linguistic backgrounds, serving as a tool for non-native speakers in fields like business, academia, and travel (Cogo, 2008). Its role in breaking down language barriers enables effective communication across cultures, promoting intercultural understanding (Marlina, 2017). Therefore, English language education must extend beyond linguistic proficiency to include intercultural communication skills, fostering cultural awareness and sensitivity (Marlina, 2017). Through ELF, individuals can engage in meaningful dialogue, exchange ideas across cultures, and appreciate diverse perspectives, thereby building bridges between communities (Shohamy, 2006).

ELF has also heightened awareness of different English varieties, which, while contributing to creativity, can lead to misunderstandings (Seidlhofer, 2013; Canagarajah, 2012; Jenkins, 2014). Recognizing and embracing these varieties is critical to understanding the role of English in intercultural communication (Seidlhofer, 2013). Accordingly, learners engaging in ELF interactions must adapt their language use based on context to ensure effective communication, requiring both an understanding of communicative needs and the application of appropriate strategies (Bayyurt et al., 2019).

In response to ELF's global spread, the fields of World Englishes and English as an International Language (EIL) have gained prominence in education. These perspectives highlight the importance of acknowledging diverse English varieties and rejecting monolingual biases in teaching and testing (Ojha, 2022; Matsuda & Friedrich, 2011). The shift towards Global Englishes Language Teaching (GELT) advocates for classroom practices that reflect the linguistic diversity of today's globalized world (Rosenhan & Galloway, 2019). Scholars emphasize that pedagogical approaches must evolve to address the cultural and linguistic diversity that EIL represents, offering more relevant educational strategies (McKay, 2018).

Parallel to developments in ELF and GELT, Global Citizenship Education (GCE) has gained prominence for its emphasis on empathy, cultural awareness, and responsibility beyond national boundaries (Tarozzi & Torres, 2016). GCE promotes values such as social justice and intercultural dialogue, which closely align with the affective and attitudinal dimensions of ICC (Reysen et al., 2012; Aydin et al., 2019). Within language education, these perspectives underscore the importance of preparing teachers who are not only linguistically competent but also willing and confident to engage in intercultural communication.

As globalization promotes cross-cultural exchanges, classrooms are becoming microcosms of diversity (Holliday, 2010; Marginson, 2016). In this context, pre-service EFL teachers often encounter students from varied cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Effective cross-cultural communication is essential in creating inclusive learning environments (Damnett, 2021), which is why teachers must possess strong Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) to address the needs of these heterogeneous classrooms.

Willingness to Communicate (WTC) plays a vital role in language learning, particularly in contexts where learners and teachers communicate in a second language (MacIntyre et al., 1998). Despite the importance of WTC for effective language teaching, there is limited research on the WTC levels of pre-service EFL teachers. Various factors such as individual personality

traits (Öz, 2014), classroom settings, and the pressure to use the native language (L1) may influence a teacher's WTC, potentially diminishing their confidence in using the target language over time. High levels of WTC, as noted by MacIntyre et al. (1998) and Peng (2007), can lead to greater participation in language learning activities and improved communicative competence. Therefore, enhancing WTC among teachers through targeted teacher training is crucial (Gong et al., 2022).

Additionally, incorporating culturally responsive pedagogies into teacher education is essential for developing pre-service teachers' ICC (Byram, 1997; Kramsch, 1993). Through curriculum reforms that emphasize ICC, teachers gain the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to successfully navigate diverse educational settings (Byram, 1997; Kramsch, 1993).

The link between ICC and WTC in pre-service EFL teachers also has profound implications for professional development and teacher education programs. Pre-service teachers undergo formative experiences during their training that shape their pedagogical approaches (Darling-Hammond, 2017; Gudykunts and Kim, 1992). By incorporating ICC and WTC modules into teacher education, future teachers can be better equipped to meet the challenges of globalized classrooms (Fantini, 2009). Teacher education programs that foster intercultural competence offer opportunities for pre-service teachers to gain cultural knowledge and practical skills, enabling them to teach effectively in multicultural environments (Spooner-Lane et al., 2013). Such programs also cultivate a more open attitude toward communication, supporting a teaching workforce that is both culturally aware and capable of fostering cross-cultural dialogue (Fantini, 2009).

## **Literature Review**

### ***Theoretical Framework: Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)***

The concept of Intercultural Communicative Competence has evolved significantly over time, particularly after Byram's (1997) model, which challenged the traditional notions of communicative competence (CC) in foreign language education. Byram critiqued earlier CC models for their unrealistic expectations of learners aspiring to native-speaker proficiency, which ignored intercultural dimensions of communication. His model introduced key intercultural factors that had previously been overlooked, though it has since faced its own theoretical criticisms and been subject to refinements as new perspectives have emerged.

Hoff (2020) highlights the multidimensionality of ICC, characterizing it as a complex construct that weaves together culture, identity, and language. According to Hoff, ICC is comprised of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and critical cultural awareness. "Knowledge" involves understanding cultural norms, values, and differences. "Skills" refer to the ability to communicate effectively across cultures, including interpreting and negotiating meaning. "Attitudes" emphasize openness, respect, and empathy towards other cultures. Finally, "critical cultural awareness" includes the ability to reflect on one's own cultural biases and assumptions, as well as recognize social inequalities and power dynamics.

Byram (1997) proposed five key components of ICC: attitudes, knowledge, skills, critical cultural awareness, and autonomy. Deardorff's (2006) framework, on the other hand, comprises three dimensions: cognitive, affective, and behavioral, all of which contribute to effective intercultural communication. Additionally, other scholars such as Bennett (1993) with his Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, and Earley and Ang (2003) with their Cultural Intelligence Model, emphasize a multidimensional approach to developing ICC.

These diverse frameworks illustrate the broad scope of ICC, showing it as a critical competence in navigating today's interconnected world.

### *The Importance of ICC in Intercultural Communication*

ICC is crucial in today's increasingly globalized societies, where individuals from different cultures interact regularly. Deardorff (2011) defines ICC as the ability to engage effectively with individuals from different cultures, highlighting the role it plays in fostering understanding and collaboration across cultural boundaries. Effective intercultural dialogue—defined by Gudykunst and Kim (1992) as the exchange of meaningful and respectful communication across cultures—requires a high level of ICC to minimize misunderstandings and misperceptions.

The development of ICC offers numerous benefits, both for individuals and society. At a personal level, ICC can enhance empathy, tolerance, and adaptability, leading to improved communication skills and a greater capacity to handle unfamiliar situations (Deardorff, 2006). On a broader scale, Kramsch (2013) highlights the role of ICC in fostering economic and political cooperation between nations. By promoting intercultural competence, societies are better equipped to build peaceful and equitable relationships, reducing conflict and fostering mutual respect.

ICC, however, is not just about linguistic competence; it also requires an understanding of cultural differences, self-reflection on personal biases, and the ability to adapt communication styles to various cultural contexts (Deardorff, 2011). Without these skills, individuals may struggle to engage effectively in intercultural interactions, leading to miscommunication, conflict, or missed opportunities for collaboration. Consequently, ICC is an essential skill for both personal and professional success in a multicultural world.

### *Willingness to Communicate (WTC)*

WTC is a fluid and adaptive concept that evolves as new opportunities for second-language communication emerge. MacIntyre and Legatto (2010) describe WTC as a dynamic system that considers both the stable personal characteristics of speakers and observations of their communication behavior.

WTC plays an important role in language learning and the development of language proficiency. Fernández García and Fonseca Mora (2022) found a strong positive correlation between WTC in EFL classrooms and students' speaking abilities, indicating that a greater willingness to communicate may lead to improved language skills. Intercultural communication contexts also differ significantly across cultures, and WTC is influenced by these variations. For example, a study by Gong et al. (2022) compared university students from Pakistan and China, both collectivist cultures, and revealed that Pakistani students exhibited higher levels of ethnocentrism and lower intercultural WTC than their Chinese counterparts. Additionally, males in both groups demonstrated more ethnocentrism, making them less willing to engage in intercultural communication than females. These findings emphasize how cultural factors such as ethnocentrism shape WTC, particularly in intercultural contexts.

Exposure to intercultural experiences and the development of a global perspective (GP) also enhance WTC. Zhao (2010) suggests that students who engage with foreign cultures and develop a GP tend to be more eager to communicate in English. Teachers can actively foster this development by integrating global perspectives into their instruction, thereby increasing

students' WTC and improving their communication skills. Creating supportive and non-threatening English-speaking environments can also encourage students to engage in communication, helping them overcome any anxiety or fear associated with using a second language (Xiao & Qiu, 2022). Additionally, informing learners about the relationship between global perspectives and WTC can lead to sustained language learning.

Affective factors such as confidence, motivation, and the context in which communication takes place also play a significant role in influencing WTC. Yashima et al. (2004) note that these emotional and psychological aspects can either enhance or hinder a learner's willingness to communicate. Therefore, promoting WTC in language and intercultural education requires a diversified approach. Teachers must create an inclusive environment that encourages communication, addresses affective factors, and integrates cultural awareness and global perspectives into language learning. By doing so, learners can develop both the confidence and the competence necessary for successful communication in a second language.

### **Significance of the Study**

Although WTC has been widely examined in learner populations, research focusing on pre-service EFL teachers remains limited. Moreover, studies investigating ICC and WTC have largely treated these constructs independently, leaving their interrelationship underexplored in teacher education contexts. Given that intercultural sensitivity, confidence, and openness may directly influence teachers' readiness to communicate in English, examining the ICC-WTC relationship is particularly important for preparing teachers for globalized classrooms.

Addressing this gap, the present study investigates how different dimensions of ICC (affective, behavioral, and cognitive) relate to and predict WTC among pre-service EFL teachers. By adopting a mixed-methods approach, the study aims to contribute empirical evidence to the literature and offer pedagogical implications for integrating ICC and WTC into teacher education programs. Guided by these objectives, the research will seek to answer the following key questions to uncover the dynamics between ICC and WTC in pre-service EFL teachers:

1. How does the level of ICC (affective, behavioral, cognitive) influence WTC among preservice EFL teachers, and to what extent do these different dimensions predict variations in WTC?
2. What are the perceptions of prospective EFL teachers regarding:
  - a) the factors influencing the development of ICC?
  - b) the nature of ICC concerning its susceptibility to instruction and effective methods to improve it?

## **METHOD**

### **Data Collection and Participants**

In the current study, a mixed-methods design was employed, leveraging both quantitative and qualitative approaches to capitalize on their respective strengths. The quantitative component involved the use of an online survey incorporating the IMICC Scale (Arasarathnam et al., 2010) and the International Posture Scale (Mystkowska-Wiertelak & Pawlak, 2016). The qualitative part encompassed ten open-ended questions delivered through an online platform to a subset of participants from the quantitative phase. This approach enabled a detailed

analysis of individual perspectives, enriching the overall understanding of the research problem (Clark & Creswell, 2008).

To ensure rigor, the study adhered to ethical standards, including obtaining informed consent, maintaining participant anonymity, and securing ethical approval from the relevant institutional review board and ethics committee.

### **The Setting and Participants**

The quantitative phase of the study included 164 preservice EFL teachers from a state university in Turkey, with their demographic distribution detailed in Table 1.

**Table 1. Distribution of Participants Across year of study**

<b>Grade</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>1st</b>	38	23,2
<b>2nd</b>	32	19,5
<b>3rd</b>	47	28,7
<b>4th</b>	47	28,7
<b>Total</b>	164	100

In the qualitative phase, 22 participants were selected from the quantitative sample, comprising 15 females (68.2%) and 7 males (31.8%). Table 2 shows that 95.5% of these participants had not participated in the Erasmus program. Linguistically, 72.7% spoke additional languages, including Arabic, German, and French, while 27.3% reported no proficiency in other languages.

**Table 2. Characteristics of Participants**

	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	15	68.2%
Male	7	31.8%
<b>Grade</b>		
1 <sup>st</sup>	2	9.1%
2 <sup>nd</sup>	3	13.6%
3 <sup>rd</sup>	2	9.1%
4 <sup>th</sup>	15	68.2%
<b>Participating Program</b>		
Yes	1	4.5%
No	21	95.5%

Speaking Language	Additional	
Yes	16	72.7%
No	6	27.3%

### Data Collection Instruments

Pre-service EFL teachers' ICC levels were assessed using the Integrated Model of ICC (IMICC), developed by Arasaratnam, Banerjee, and Dembek (2010). The IMICC is a 21-item Likert-type scale, where each item is rated from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) and consists of three subscales aligned with Deardorff's (2006) ICC components: affective, behavioral, and cognitive dimensions.

To ensure the IMICC's validity in our specific context, we conducted principal component analysis followed by confirmatory factor analysis. This process, detailed in the findings section, led to the deletion of some items to better reflect the ICC construct. The revised version of the IMICC included 13 items across the original three subcategories, achieving a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.82, indicating high internal consistency.

For evaluating WTC, International Posture Scale (Yashima, 2002, 2009), later adapted by Mystkowska-Wiertelak and Pawlak (2016), was utilized. This scale measures an individual's readiness for cross-cultural communication through aspects such as intergroup approach-avoidance, interest in international activities, and foreign affairs. Originally a seven-point Likert scale, it was modified to five points, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.78.

In the qualitative component of the study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a subset of participants to explore their intercultural communication experiences and perceptions of ICC development. The open-ended nature of these interviews, as recommended by Creswell et al. (2003), provided a deep understanding of the participants' experiences and allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the research questions.

### Data Collection

Data collection utilized two distinct Google Forms, each linked to QR codes prominently displayed in classrooms with the assistance of teachers. Students were allocated a specific class session to complete the surveys by scanning the provided QR codes.

The first Google Form comprised three sections: basic demographic information, the Integrated Model of ICC (IMICC) by Arasaratnam, Banerjee, and Dembek (2010), and the International Posture Scale (Yashima, 2002; Mystkowska-Wiertelak & Pawlak, 2016). This form gathered comprehensive data on both ICC and WTC.

The second Google Form was distributed to a smaller group of participants via WhatsApp groups. This form collected demographic information and included ten open-ended questions designed to explore qualitative aspects of participants' experiences and perceptions.

## **Data Analysis**

Quantitative data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22.0. Regression analysis (multiple linear regression) was employed to assess the contribution of ICC to WTC. Prior to regression, preliminary checks were performed to ensure that assumptions were met (normality of residuals, independent errors, multicollinearity, and absence of influential outliers). Qualitative data were analysed with MaxQDA Pro Analytics 2022; themes were generated by two experienced researchers and verified by an independent qualitative expert.

In addition to the regression analysis reported below, the validity and reliability of the adapted instruments were examined using factor-analytic techniques and internal consistency statistics, the full details of which are presented in the Findings Related to Validity and Reliability of Instruments section.

### **Validity and Reliability of Instruments**

To assess the suitability of the dataset for factor analysis, the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity were conducted. The results indicated adequate sampling adequacy and a statistically significant test of sphericity, confirming that the data were appropriate for factor-analytic procedures (see Appendix A).

Exploratory principal component analyses (PCA) were conducted to examine the construct validity of the adapted ICC instrument and to determine whether the items clustered under the theoretically proposed dimensions. The initial analysis revealed a multidimensional structure exceeding the intended three components. Therefore, items exhibiting weak factor loadings or conceptual inconsistencies—particularly those related to reverse coding—were removed. Following these revisions, a refined three-component structure (affective, cognitive, and behavioral) emerged, explaining approximately 55% of the total variance.

Subsequently, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed to test the factorial validity of the revised ICC scale. The results demonstrated acceptable to good model-fit indices ( $\chi^2/df = 1.75$ , CFI = .93, SRMR = .058, RMSEA = .068), indicating that the three-dimensional model provided a satisfactory representation of the data. Standardized factor loadings and inter-factor covariances further supported the construct validity of the instrument (detailed results are presented in Appendix B).

Reliability analyses revealed strong internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients of .83 for the ICC scale and .87 for the WTC scale. Prior to regression analyses examining the predictive relationship between ICC and WTC, assumptions including normality, independence of errors, multicollinearity, and outliers were tested. One outlier was identified and removed, after which all assumptions for regression analysis were met.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Findings Related to Influence of ICC Level on WTC**

RQ 1: How does the level of ICC (affective, behavioral, cognitive) influence WTC among preservice EFL teachers, and to what extent do these different dimensions predict variations in WTC?

Table 3 shows that participants scored highest in the affective dimension of the ICC ( $M = 4.10$ ,  $SD = .62$ ) and lowest in the behavioural dimension ( $M = 3.55$ ,  $SD = .61$ ), indicating the

participants perceive themselves as less competent behaviourally, possibly due to limited experience in intercultural communication.

**Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for the Scales**

	N	Mean	SD
WTC Overall	164	3,7991	,52922
ICC Affective		4,1026	,62563
ICC Cognitive		3,8780	,69178
ICC Behavioural		3,5467	,61329

After addressing the outlier, the assumptions for regression analysis were confirmed. Multicollinearity was ruled out as none of the independent variables (affective, cognitive, behavioural) showed high correlation (Tolerance  $> .6$ , VIF  $< 1.7$ ), and the Durbin-Watson value of 1.961 confirmed independent errors. The residuals also followed a normal distribution, allowing for a valid regression analysis. The multiple linear regression results ( $F(3,160) = 81.560$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .60$ ) showed that ICC explains 60% of the variability in WTC scores. Both affective ( $B = .535$ ) and cognitive ( $B = .163$ ) dimensions significantly contributed to WTC, while the behavioural dimension did not.

This suggests that while emotional and cognitive factors play a significant role in shaping participants' willingness to communicate, one cannot determine their WTC solely based on the behavioural component of their ICC. More specifically, ICC dimensions, particularly affective and cognitive components, account for 60% of the variation in WTC scores (refer to Table 3). This suggests that teachers with higher ICC levels are more open to communicating with diverse cultural groups. This finding mirrors Öz's (2014) research, which did not specifically target ICC's effect on WTC but similarly showed that higher personal traits, such as openness, influence communication in multicultural contexts. Ghonsooly et al. (2012) also found that ICC contributes significantly to WTC, reinforcing this study's conclusion. Moreover, Mytskowska-Wiertelak and Pietrzykowska (2011) found that understanding and embracing diverse cultural perspectives not only boosts an individual's international posture but also significantly increases their willingness to engage in meaningful communication across cultural boundaries.

The strong influence of affective and cognitive dimensions on WTC highlights the importance of nurturing both emotional predispositions and cognitive assessments in intercultural interactions. In contrast, the behavioral dimension of ICC was not a significant predictor of WTC, a finding that invites further investigation into the factors that modulate communication behavior in intercultural settings. This aligns with Weaver's (1986) Iceberg Theory, where cognition and affect lie below the surface as key drivers of communication readiness. Theories such as this help illuminate why ICC's cognitive and affective elements have a stronger correlation with WTC compared to behavior alone.

Moreover, the study emphasizes the need for educational institutions to integrate ICC into their curricula through activities like cross-cultural communication exercises and intercultural sensitivity training. Doing so would develop both affective and cognitive dimensions, which, as shown, are essential for fostering WTC.

### Findings Related to Factors that Affect ICC Level and WTC

1. RQ 2a: What are the perceptions of prospective EFL teachers regarding the factors influencing the development of ICC?

Participants' views on the factors that affect a person's desire to communicate across different cultural boundaries are given in Table 4.

**Table 4. Elements of affected a person's readiness to communicate**

Themes	<i>f</i>
open-mindedness	8
curiosity	7
respectful	6
empathy	4
open to communication	3
kindness	2
tolerance	2
self-confident	2
cultural awareness	2
similarity to your own	2
sensitive	1
communication skills	1

According to Table 4, being open-minded, curious, respectful, empathetic, and open to communication are the most frequently mentioned factors by the participants.

*In my opinion, it's an individual trait, a matter that depends on the person. I believe that the person needs to be open-minded, respectful (especially in the context of discussing accents or cultures), and should also know how to adapt to their surroundings. (P9)*

*Openness to intercultural communication is influenced by factors like cultural curiosity, empathy, flexibility, and a willingness to learn. While personal characteristics vary, these traits can enhance readiness for cross-cultural conversations. (P13)*

*The first criterion, in my opinion, for preparing to engage in intercultural communication is having a basic knowledge about the culture. Additionally, individuals who can ask questions, actively listen, and steer the conversation within that context tend to excel in this area. Moreover, I believe that people*

*who have not lost their sense of wonder and curiosity about life are also better equipped for intercultural communication. Lastly, the most crucial element is to be respectful. (P1)*

*I think the most important characteristic must be being open-minded and curious. If you aren't open to new cultures and traditions, if you aren't willing to accept them, then you'll probably have hard time adjusting. (P2)*

Participants stated that being polite, tolerant, self-confidence, cultural awareness and establishing similarities with one's own culture are among the important elements in intercultural communication.

*I think some people communicate with people who are close to their own cultural background much more easily. But sometimes people are more open to other cultures. I can do both but while doing so I need to be non-judgmental while communicating. (P4)*

*Tolerance. People first need to understand the spectrum of human behaviour and cultural heritage across humankind and most of the time how a single person can only cover a minuscule portion of that spectrum. This leads to the fact that another person from another culture most likely has vastly different beliefs and rituals. The ability to tolerate to difference is the bedrock of intercultural interaction. The higher the tolerance the better the access to the previously mentioned spectrum. (P8)*

Finally, some participants pointed out the importance of accepting differences, being flexible, being an active listener, and not being judgmental or prejudiced.

*I think empathy, open-mindedness, curiosity, respect and cultural awareness are the elements. Especially, being an open-minded person is essential. (P12)*

*Being open to learning about new cultures and accepting the differences is very important. A person's prejudice or too positive feelings for a specific group of people can be effective on the success of the communication. (P14)*

Empathy and cultural sensitivity emerged as significant factors influencing WTC, corroborating findings from prior studies (Öz, 2014; Bagui & Adder, 2020; Jiang et al., 2022). Participants highlighted how understanding others' cultural backgrounds aids in overcoming communication barriers and establishing rapport. Mutual respect was also a recurring theme, reinforcing its importance in intercultural communication (Fang & Baker, 2017; Baker, 2015).

However, the complexities of fostering mutual respect in real-world settings became apparent in studies like Sobkowiak (2019), which found that studying abroad may not always yield meaningful intercultural engagement. Furthermore, Fang & Baker (2017) identified challenges in effectively incorporating intercultural citizenship into ELT practices, despite its recognized importance. These contrasting findings suggest that fostering mutual respect and cultural sensitivity in educational settings requires nuanced approaches, considering local contexts and practical challenges.

### **Findings related to perceptions of prospective EFL teachers on the nature of ICC**

RQ 2b: What are the perceptions of prospective EFL teachers regarding the nature of ICC concerning its susceptibility to instruction and effective methods to improve it?

Participants' opinions on whether intercultural communication is a trait that can be taught or improved are given in Table 10.

**Table 5. Developing or teaching communication competence**

Themes	f
by experiencing or practice	13
having knowledge or information	6
exposure	4
no	2
open minded	1
cross-cultural training	1
empathy	1
listening patiently	1

According to Table 5, 13 participants stated that it could improve with experience and practice, six participants stated that it could improve with knowledge acquisition, and four participants stated that it could improve with exposure.

*I do believe practice is the most important to develop it. And the necessary information as well. (P11)*

*Yes, they just need to read, watch a lot. But it can't happen over a night, as it takes quite a bit of time to do it. May take even years. (P4)*

*Yes of course, why not? The most important is that children should be exposed to differences between their and other cultures so that they start developing that competence at a very young age. (P15)*

*Of course it could be developed by maybe observing and practicing more every day. (P3)*

*It can be developed, i think. By creating chances where people can communicate across cultures may help. The instructor observe or lead the learners if necessary. Another method I use is to read-watch-listen more about different cultures. (P8)*

There are also participants who state that they can improve with open-mindedness, intercultural education, empathy and patient listening.

*Yes, intercultural communication competence can be taught and developed. Valuable methods include cross-cultural training, immersion experiences, and learning from interactions with people from diverse backgrounds. (13)*

*I think it can be both taught and developed, as every human being is born with a certain ability, whether in a minimal or a maximal amount, called "empathy". All one must do is to gain insight concerning different cultures. (P21)*

*It can be both taught and developed over time. That depends on. If you grow up in a society where other cultures are not accepted it's natural to abstain from other people and even hate them. We need to be open hearted and friendly. The environment we grow up doesn't determine who we are. (P10)*

Two participants stated that there was no way to learn or develop it.

*I think it can only be taught if you have the willingness to do it. Otherwise, I don't think it can be taught and done well. (P2)*

*I don't think so. Because it depends on the people and their personal traits. (P20)*

Participants overwhelmingly agreed on the value of experiential learning in enhancing ICC, which aligns with studies such as Baker (2015) and Kittelman et al. (2023). They underscored the significance of direct engagement with diverse cultures, along with the complementary role of theoretical knowledge. This suggests that practical experiences and academic understanding are both essential for developing intercultural communication competence.

However, skepticism about the teachability of ICC surfaced among a small number of participants, a point also raised by Nguyen et al. (2021), who noted challenges in developing students' intercultural competence in Vietnamese university settings. Despite these doubts, studies such as Fang & Baker (2017) challenge this skepticism, showing that effective curriculum design can foster ICC development.

The study also highlights the importance of open-mindedness, empathy, and patience, indicating that personal traits are interconnected with communication competence. Fostering these attitudes through experiential learning, cross-cultural training, and theoretical instruction may provide a multifaceted approach to enhancing ICC among preservice English teachers.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study demonstrated that ICC significantly affects preservice EFL teachers' WTC. The results showed a strong correlation between ICC and WTC, with affective and cognitive components accounting for 60% of the variance in WTC scores (Table 3). This suggests that preservice teachers with higher ICC levels are more confident and willing to engage in intercultural communication, consistent with the findings of Öz (2014) and Ghonsooly (2012). Poort et al. emphasize that traits such as openness which positively affect an individual's level of cognitive engagement in intercultural contexts (Poort et al., 2021). Specifically, the incorporation of metacognitive skills in conjunction with intercultural training has been proposed to be beneficial in promoting preservice teachers' ICC, as highlighted in recent studies (Haerazi, 2023; Huang, 2023; Erradi & Belhorma, 2024).

Findings related to the first part of the second research question revealed that affective and cognitive dimensions significantly predicted WTC, whereas the behavioral dimension did not. The insignificant role of the behavioral dimension indicates the need for future research exploring contextual variables such as cultural norms and situational factors that may influence behavioral expressions of ICC.

Moreover, empathy and cultural sensitivity were identified as major contributors to WTC and the development of intercultural competence. Participants emphasized the importance of understanding cultural backgrounds, building rapport, and demonstrating mutual respect. These findings align with previous studies highlighting empathy and cultural sensitivity as

key elements in effective intercultural communication (Bagui & Adder, 2020; Jiang et al., 2022; Harper, 2020) and with literature emphasizing the role of mutual respect and intercultural citizenship in ELT (Fang & Baker, 2017; Alptekin, 2002; Baker, 2015; Byram & Wagner, 2018; Huda et al., 2021; Langmann, 2016; Rapanta & Trovão, 2021; Wang et al., 2021). However, differing perspectives exist, with Sobkowiak (2019) and Fang & Baker (2017) suggesting challenges in fostering mutual respect and integrating intercultural components effectively in ELT settings.

The findings related to the second part of the second research question revealed that experiential learning was considered the most influential factor in developing ICC ( $f=13$ ), followed by theoretical knowledge ( $f=6$ ). These outcomes support research highlighting the importance of practical cultural experiences and academic grounding for effective ICC development (Baker, 2015; Kittelman et al., 2023; Medina-Lopez-Portillo, 2013; Hesan et al., 2019).

A minority of participants ( $f=2$ ) expressed skepticism about the teachability of ICC, emphasizing intrinsic motivation—an issue also raised by Nguyen et al. (2021). In contrast, Fang & Baker (2017) argue that intentional pedagogical designs can successfully cultivate ICC. Studies such as Hismanoglu (2011), Jiang et al. (2022), Galante (2015), and Tosuncuoğlu (2019) reinforce the importance of practical experiences, cultural exposure, and theoretical understanding. Additional research (Phuong, 2017; Snigdha, 2022) supports developing open-mindedness, empathy, and active listening as essential elements of ICC.

This study suggests that educators should focus on both language proficiency and intercultural competence, particularly addressing students' emotional and cognitive predispositions towards intercultural interactions. Interventions such as cultural immersion experiences or support programs for students with lower ICC levels could help foster inclusivity and enhance communication skills in multicultural settings. However, it is also important to recognize that ICC development relies on individual factors such as intrinsic motivation, making it essential to complement formal education with self-driven learning and reflection.

## **PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS**

One key implication of this study is the challenge to the common assumption that all teachers, especially pre-service EFL teachers, are naturally competent in WTC. While WTC is often presumed to be a given for language teachers, this research highlights the need to actively explore and develop this competency. The study uniquely contributes by showing that WTC is significantly influenced by ICC, which is not always fully integrated into teacher education. This finding suggests that simply being a teacher does not automatically guarantee a high level of WTC, particularly in intercultural contexts, and that both ICC and WTC should be nurtured through targeted interventions.

Furthermore, the study implies that teacher training programs need to rethink their approach to communication skills development. Traditionally, teacher education emphasizes linguistic proficiency and pedagogical knowledge, but this research demonstrates the importance of intercultural skills in fostering WTC. Therefore, curricula should incorporate ICC training to help teachers feel more confident and willing to engage in diverse communicative scenarios, both inside and outside the classroom. By equipping pre-service

teachers with intercultural competence, they can better model effective communication for their students, promoting a more inclusive and open classroom environment.

Another implication is for classroom practice. Teachers who are more aware of the connection between ICC and WTC can intentionally create learning environments that encourage intercultural dialogue and communication among students. This could involve designing lessons that include cross-cultural topics, group discussions with culturally diverse peers, or virtual exchange programs to expose students to different perspectives. These strategies not only enhance learners' language skills but also promote greater WTC by reducing communication anxiety and fostering openness to new cultural experiences.

Lastly, this study's findings suggest that institutions should offer continuous professional development that focuses on both intercultural competence and communication strategies. This would benefit not only pre-service teachers but also in-service educators who may need to enhance their skills in these areas to better support students in increasingly diverse classrooms. By addressing ICC and WTC as intertwined competencies, EFL education can more effectively prepare both teachers and learners for success in global communication contexts.

In summary, this research breaks new ground by challenging assumptions about teacher competence in communication and underlining the critical role of ICC in enhancing WTC, with far-reaching implications for teacher training, curriculum design, and classroom practice.

## LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

While this study provides valuable insights into the relationship between Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) and Willingness to Communicate (WTC) there are several limitations to consider. First, the sample size, though sufficient for statistical analysis, was limited to 164 participants from a specific educational context, which may affect the generalizability of the findings to other cultural or linguistic settings. Future research could benefit from a larger and more diverse sample to ensure broader applicability of the results. Additionally, the cross-sectional design of the study limits the ability to draw causal conclusions. Although a significant relationship was found between ICC and WTC, it is unclear whether higher levels of ICC directly lead to increased WTC over time.

Three main recommendations arise from this study. First, longitudinal studies are needed to track the development of ICC and its influence on WTC over time, providing a deeper understanding of long-term impacts. Second, future research should assess the effectiveness of educational interventions aimed at improving ICC, helping to identify best practices for teacher training and curriculum development. Lastly, cross-sectional studies in more culturally diverse settings (e.g., preparatory schools, engineering faculties, or medical schools) could provide further insight into the behavioral aspects of ICC and its impact on communication behaviors.

## Acknowledgements

This manuscript is derived from the corresponding author's master's thesis.

### **Declaration of AI Use**

AI tools (e.g., ChatGPT, Grammarly) were used only for language editing and grammar correction. All ideas, analysis, and interpretations are the authors' own.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A

#### *KMO and Bartlett's Test*

**Table A1. KMO and Bartlett's Test**

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy	,802
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square 1188,399
	df 210
	Sig. ,000

#### *Exploratory Principal Component Analyses (PCA)*

To ensure the validation and reliability of the adapted instruments, a series of principal component analyses (PCA) were conducted.

**Table A2. Principal Component analysis of ICC Scale items**

Component	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	20,628	20,628
2	10,300	30,928
3	10,162	41,090
4	7,386	48,475
5	6,110	54,586
6	6,079	60,665
7	5,594	66,259

**Table A3. Principal Component analysis of ICC after deletion of items**

Component	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	27,653	27,653
2	15,582	43,235
3	12,273	55,507

## Appendix B

### *Item Distribution and Factor Loadings*

The remaining 13 ICC items loaded conceptually on three components. Table B1 presents the distribution of scale items across the three subcomponents—Affective, Cognitive, and Behavioral—along with their respective factor loadings.

**Table B1. Scale items across subheadings**

	Component		
	Affective	Cognitive	Behavioral
item 16	,824		
item 14	,802		
item 19	,788		
item 8	,673		
item 15	,666		
item 2	,575		
item 13		,738	
item 10		,622	
item 17		,594	
item 4		,480	
item 18			,786
item 9			,695
item 21			,527

The conceptual distribution of these items allowed for a confirmatory factor analysis to test whether the instrument produced a statistically viable model, as illustrated in Figure 1.

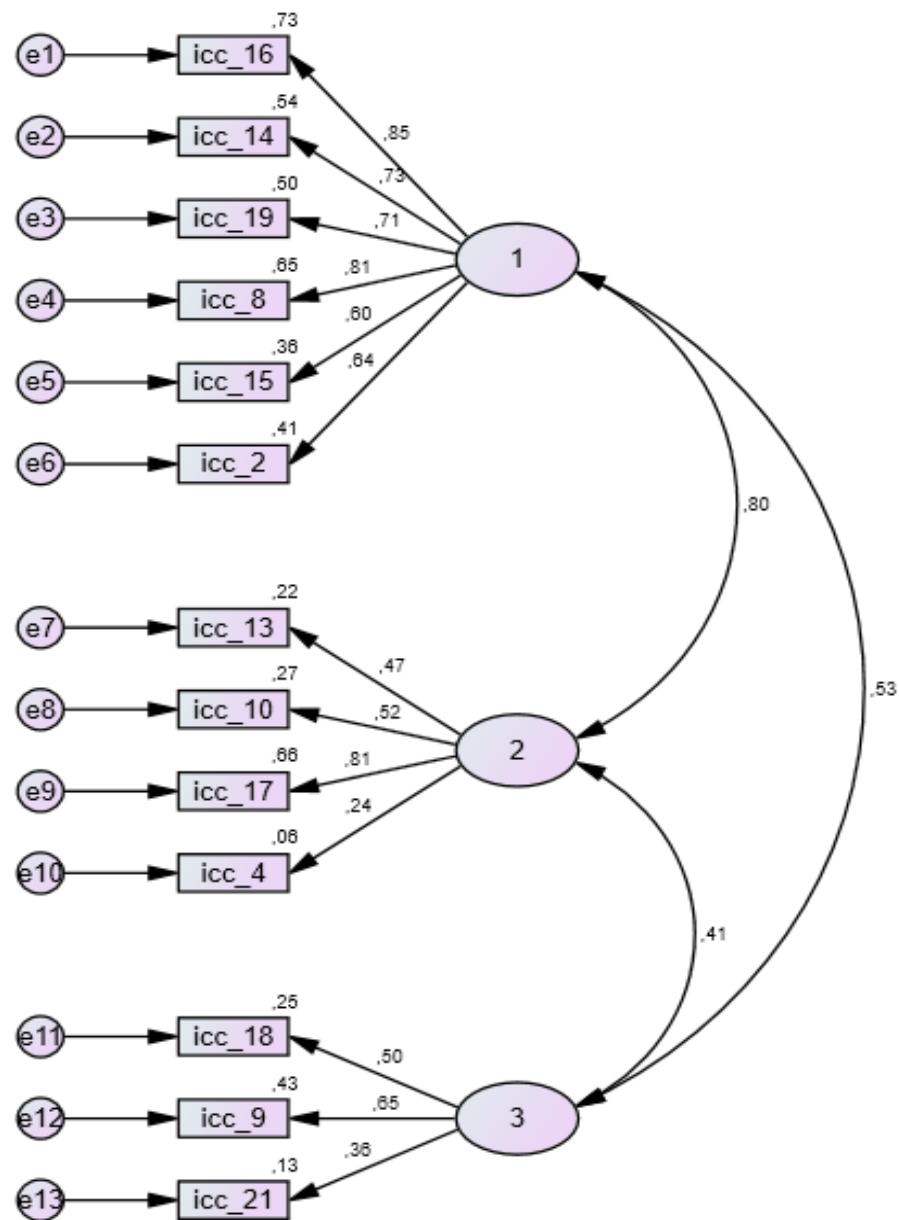


Figure 1. CFA for the three-dimensional version of ICC

Table B2 provides a detailed overview of the model-fit measures for the proposed three-dimensional instrument.

Table B2. Model fit indices of the ICC items

Model	$\chi^2$	$df$	$\chi^2/df$	$p$	CFI	SRMR	RMSEA
	108.417	62	1.749	.087	.93	.058	.068

Cut off values:  $\chi^2/df < 3.00$ ; CFI  $> .95$ ; SRMR  $< .08$ ; RMSEA  $< .08$ ;  $p > .05$  (Schreiber, Stage & Nora, 2006)