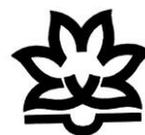




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## Developing Intercultural Communicative Competence through Short Stories: A Qualitative Inquiry

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigated the role of literary texts in the development of Iranian English language learners' Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). To fulfill this general objective, an intercultural syllabus was designed for a fourteen-session course of American English short story at Sharif University of Technology in Tehran. Theoretically informed by Byram's (1997) ICC model and following Kraft's cultural pattern as introduced in Chinaka (2010), the course syllabus was an integration of various cultural topics by using short stories written by some eminent American writers whose fictions lent themselves well to the topics selected for this ICC course. The participants, who were 13 students at the intermediate to upper-intermediate level, were taught these short stories with a contrastive approach where both L1 and L2 cultural points were highlighted. Two main sources of data collection were 1) a series of questions, in the form of journal entries, written by the participants as part of their assignments, and 2) semi-structured interviews at the outset and end of the course. The qualitative analysis of the data indicated that the learners developed intercultural competence under the definitions of Byram's model. The results of the study provide us with valuable insights about the integration of literary texts in teaching culture. The results can be further used by textbook writers and fed into teacher training courses.

**Keywords:** culture; intercultural communicative competence; literature; short story

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## Introduction

Current theoreticians and practitioners within the field of English Language Teaching (ELT) have significantly highlighted the symbiotic relationship between language and culture (Byram, 1997; Jiang, 2000; Kramsch, 1998, 2013; Sharifian, 2013); accordingly, the essential role of culture in language learning has instigated several scholars to pay more attention to this aspect of language learning. This need is more seriously felt once we take into account the internationalization of academia, mass migration, superdiversity, and globalization in general. According to Ducate and Steckenbiller (2017), among many others, three main educational bodies stress the role and importance of culture in language classrooms in different contexts: 1) the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), and the Modern Language Association (MLA). Literature (e.g., Deardorff, 2009) on teaching Intercultural Communicative Competence (henceforth ICC) to language learners confirms the important role that this aspect of language learning can have in equipping language learners with the appropriate competences for initiating and maintaining cross-cultural and intercultural communication. As Arabski and Wojtaszek (2011) have also aptly put it, language learning is a social phenomenon according to which the social and cultural aspects of language learning should not be neglected. Similarly, Kramsch (1998) considers language as the most essential and basic tool through which people carry out their social lives. Others have more seriously discussed the importance of culture and its ensuing challenges when it comes to language education (Nault, 2006; Young & Sachdev, 2011). In spite of the pressing need felt for the role of culture in language education, some critical practitioners and theoreticians show their concerns regarding the hazards and gains that foreign culture can bring about for the local cultures. In other words, many researchers are concerned about the effect that international or Western Culture—including American culture—can inflict upon local culture and identity (Shin, Eslami, & Chen, 2011; Su, 2011). This, however, should not culminate in dismissing the overall positive impacts that culture can bring to burgeoning empathy and respect towards cultural diversity in language learners.

As for the instructional and pedagogical techniques and tools for teaching culture, the literature attests that different tools and educational materials have been employed to boost learners' cultural and intercultural competence. Some have used digital storytelling (Ribeiro, 2016), Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) (Mendez Garcia, 2013), films and TV series (Chao, 2013; Seferoğlu, 2008; Truong & Tran, 2014; Yang & Fleming, 2013), translation activities (Elorza, 2008), web and telecollaboration projects (Helm 2009; Lazar, 2015), heritage language and culture (Fanece, Araújo e Sá, & Melo-Pfeifer, 2016), critical incident exercises (Snow, 2015), and webquests (Stockwell, 2016) for teaching culture. Having reviewed the above-cited studies, the present researchers realized the paucity of research on the role of literary texts in the development of ICC in the Iranian context. In other words, with the exponential need for intercultural communication and encounters, teachers and learners should pay more attention to the role of culture and intercultural issues in their teaching and learning. Literary texts appear as an undervalued resource in teaching cultural topics in language classrooms.

## Intercultural Communicative Competence

As Fischer (2001) has appropriately discussed, there has been a shift in ELT from teaching grammar and vocabulary toward emphasizing communication—especially intercultural communication. This further stresses the role of cultural understanding in developing communicative competence. This tendency, however, should not be interpreted as discarding language skills and subskills and devoting the whole class time to cultural topics, as content. Instead, this shows the role that culture can have for a language learner to be able to successfully

become an intercultural communicator, or speaker. Driven by post-modernist views on identity, Sercu (2002, p. 63) defines an intercultural competent person as follows:

The 'intercultural speaker' is not a cosmopolitan being who floats over cultures, much like tourists tend to do. Rather, he or she is committed to turning intercultural encounters into intercultural relationships. He or she is not satisfied with a view from the outside, with marvelling at differences and at what seems exotic and intriguing about another culture. An intercultural speaker is determined to understand, to gain an inside view of the other person's culture, and at the same time to contribute to the other person's understanding of his or her own culture from an insider's point of view.

Different models of ICC have been conceptualized in the literature. Byram (1997, pp. 50-53), as one of the leading theoreticians in this field, defines ICC in terms of five abilities (*savoirs*):

- 1) Intercultural attitudes (*savoir être*): showing curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's own.
- 2) Knowledge (*savoirs*): acquiring information about social groups and their products and practices in learners' country and in one's interlocutor's country, and societal and individual interaction.
- 3) Skills of interpreting and relating (*savoir comprendre*): the ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents or events from one's own.
- 4) Skills of discovery and interaction (*savoir apprendre/faire*): ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction.
- 5) Critical cultural awareness (*savoir s'engager*): an ability to evaluate, critically and on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries.

Byram's model has been used as the theoretical backbone of the present study. The researchers intend to see if the integration of literary texts—based on short stories and cultural points from the learners' L1 and L2—can affect their level of ICC. More specifically, the role of literary texts in providing a platform for exploring intercultural issues was investigated.

### Literature in Teaching Language and Culture

Previous studies offer a myriad of definitions of culture. Despite teachers' worries and apprehension about the difficulty of literary texts for language learners (Kramsch, 2001), literature is loaded with valuable cultural content (Amer, 2003). Literary works—including poetry, fiction, and drama—can enrich cultural understanding and engender a sense of empathy in readers. Literature further raises intercultural issues and reveals not only cultural differences but also how different cultures may share some values and beliefs. Collie and Slater (1987) also argue that literature provides authentic content which in turn results in the cultural and language enrichment along with personal involvement of the learners. Furthermore, Ghosn (2002) refers to four main reasons for integrating literature in the case of primary schools, that are extensive to other levels. To put it succinctly, she believes that literature is interesting, full of real-life examples, integrating all the skills, promoting critical thinking and contextualized cultural elements. Likewise, Cunico (2005) summarizes six ways on how drama as a literary genre can be used in foreign language

classes: 1) as a classroom project in which students perform a play, 2) doing some physical activities, 3) drama for its cultural values apart from its linguistic benefits, 4) drama as an authentic tool for language in use, 5) drama through a stylistic approach to appreciate its literary value, and 6) global simulation. Fischer (2001), among many others, also believes that reading the literature of a country can help us better understand the nuances, similarities, and differences between cultures and thereby make us more aware of the beliefs and values of other cultures while using an L2. Several other researchers and practitioners have also foregrounded the pros and cons of using literature in language classes (for example, Carter, 2007; Hall, 2005; Paesani, 2011; Zacharias, 2005).

As for data-driven studies on the role of literature in language classes, qualitative and quantitative experimental studies have been conducted. Scott and Huntington (2002), for instance, compared two groups through the use of fact sheets and poetry. Their results—based on the participants' pretest and posttest questions in the form of a survey tool along with the students' comments during the class—showed that the group which was exposed to poems had further developed their cultural competence. Moreover, Cunico (2005) argued how we can implement drama as an instructional tool for fostering intercultural sensitivity and competence. Fischer (2001) also investigated how modern Irish prose and German literature in diaspora can be employed for intercultural development courses. Similar lesson plans can be used by teachers in other parts of the world to raise learners' awareness of cross-cultural differences. Similarly, Gómez (2012) did an action research on promoting ICC through the inclusion of authentic literary texts, the results of which yielded promising findings corroborating the advantages of using literary texts in enhancing ICC. For this purpose, Gómez used four constructive approaches including an inquiry-based approach, a dialogical approach, a transactional approach, and content-based learning. Rodríguez and Puyal (2012) have also shown how the use of literary texts within a Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) context can enhance the learners' intercultural competence. The results of their study, based on qualitative and quantitative data, showed that literary texts provide an excellent means for developing language learners' tolerance and empathy.

Like in the previous studies, Burwitz-Melzer (2001) referred to the role of literary texts, especially short stories, in imparting cultural and intercultural understanding. The participants of her research were 11 boys and 14 girls around 14 to 15 years at a German school who were given a short story about a Mexican migrant in the US. The researcher videotaped the students' behaviors in class and the results showed how teenagers in her case study could empathize with a text from another culture and how they could bring in their own cultural beliefs to the class. Similarly, Zapata (2005) used Hanauer's (2001) Focus-on-Cultural Understanding approach in teaching L2 Spanish students' cultural understanding in the US. She used a short story, entitled *Juan Darién* written by the Uruguayan author Horacio Quiroga, as a medium of teaching cultural points. The results of her research showed that her learners developed an understanding of the target culture and were also successful in expanding a critical appraisal of both L1 and L2 culture. Matos (2012) also focused on reading literary texts, including minority and postcolonial literature, as a source for engendering critical self-awareness, cultural otherness, and imagination in her learners. In the North-American context, Hibbs (2016) also investigated the role of children and adolescent Spanish literature to explore the attitude of American students toward South Americans. His participants were seventy-six students whose attitude and beliefs were recorded by the researcher through journal entries, surveys, and compositions. The results of his research confirmed that novels played an important role in the learners' understanding of Latino culture.

As well argued, all the above cited studies warrant the beneficial role of literature in cultural and intercultural learning. However, the majority of these studies were conducted outside the Iranian context and few studies have been done in the Middle East. Therefore, the present qualitative inquiry sought to investigate the effect of literary texts—in the form of short stories from some eminent American fiction writers—on the enhancement of Iranian English language learners'

cultural knowledge and understanding. Given the importance of this objective, the following research question was formulated:

*What is the effect of an intercultural communication course on the learners' development of intercultural communicative competence (ICC)?*

## **This Study**

In Iranian schools and universities, the bulk of English language syllabi pivots on language skills and subskills especially reading, vocabulary, and grammar. Less attention is given to other skills including listening, speaking, and writing. Among all, culture receives the least attention within the curriculum. Therefore, this study attempted to see if a course focusing on reading literary texts in the L2 could facilitate intercultural understanding and develop a more positive attitude among the learners regarding their L1 and L2 cultures.

### *Participants*

The participants in this research were 13 intermediate to upper-intermediate undergraduate students from different Science and Engineering departments at Sharif University of Technology in Tehran who had taken a short story course with one of the researchers. The participants' level of language proficiency was confirmed based on their TOEFL iBT score or other English language certificates they already held before taking the course. All the participants were Iranian and spoke Persian as their mother tongue. The course was offered as an optional module; therefore, participation was based on the learners' own interest. There were 5 male and 8 female students who ranged from 18 to 22 years old. Although the students did not have any problems in understanding the texts assigned for the course, the reading materials selected were novel to them. It should be also noted that these students had already passed some relevant English courses, including Reading Comprehension and Advanced Writing, with the same teacher. Furthermore, the students were familiarized with writing journal entries for this course. The main phase of the study was conducted in Fall 2015 but a pilot study was done with another similar group in a previous term. The piloting phase helped the researchers make some modifications in the content and methodology of the course. An example was the exclusion of "The Waste Land" after the piloting phase due to its complex language and content for these students.

### *Tools and Materials*

#### *Intercultural Syllabus*

The most challenging part of this study was developing a course in line with the objectives set at the beginning of this research project. Since the Iranian schools and universities are strictly following Islamic rules, care was taken into account to include the most culturally appropriate materials. However, this did not prevent the researchers from including relevant short stories. As a result, the researchers drew upon Kraft's cultural pattern as introduced in Chinaka (2010).

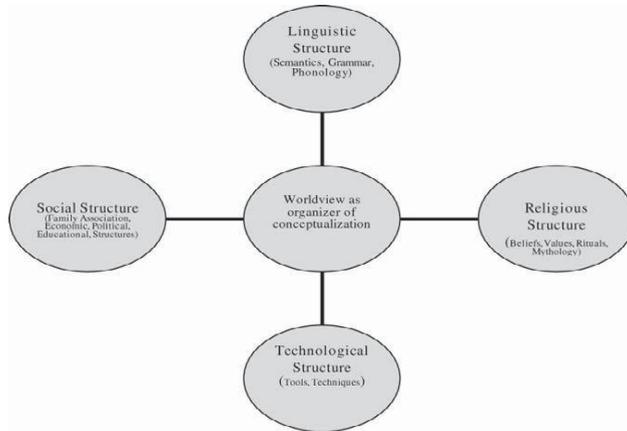


Figure 1. Charles Kraft's Cultural Patterns (Chinaka, 2010, p. 23)

Kraft distinguishes four components that are crucial in defining culture (see Fig 1). These elements include linguistic, social, technological, and religious structure—with the worldview in the center. The topics introduced in Kraft's model were used in the intercultural syllabus; for instance, there were stories about the role of religion and technology in today's world. The syllabus was therefore anchored on Kraft's model notion of culture. Drawing on this pattern from Kraft, the present researchers devised a fourteen-session ICC course on reading American English short stories.

Therefore, eight main topics relevant to cultural differences between American and Iranian culture were identified (See Table 1). For each topic, a literary text was selected. Not only the cultural load of the stories but also the stylistic and linguistic complexity of the texts were checked by the two researchers so that the learners would not have a hard time understanding the themes of the stories. In teaching and reading these short stories, the teacher also shifted to Iranian writers and compared their styles, literary school, and other relevant cultural, contextual, and stylistic similarities and differences. For instance, session one was about feminism during which some Iranian feminist writers were also introduced. References were made to Forough Farrokhzad's poetry and Shahrnush Parsipour's novel *Women without Men*. During another session in which the anti-war novelist Kurt Vonnegut was introduced, the teacher referred to the novel *The Burnt Land* by Ahmad Mahmud in Iran which is about the early days of the Iran-Iraq war (See Rezaei & Seyedan, 2015). This way the students were able to compare and contrast the works between their L1 and L2.

Table 1  
Course Syllabus

Week	Topic	Materials
1	Introduction	Basic terminologies and definitions
2	Feminism	"The Yellow Wall Paper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, 1892
3	Feminism and Modernity	"The Story of An Hour" by Kate Chopin, 1894
4	Religion, Tradition, and Southern	"A Good Man is Hard to Find" by Flannery O'Connor,

	Gothic Literature	1955
5	Religion and Tradition	“The Lottery” by Shirley Jackson, 1948
6	Politics, Tradition and Change	“A Rose for Emily” by William Faulkner, 1930
7	Politics	“Harrison Bergeron” by Kurt Vonnegut, 1961
8	Black Voice and Discrimination	“Early Autumn” by Langston Hughes, 1950 “The Man who Was Almost a Man” by Richard Wright, 1961
9	Science Fiction and Futurism	“The Pedestrian” by Ray Bradbury, 1951
10	Individualism, Family and Social Relationship	“The Kugelmass Episode” by Woody Allen, 1977
11	Existentialism: To Be or Not to Be	“A Clean, Well-lighted Place” by Ernest Hemingway, 1933 “Hills Like White Elephants” by Ernest Hemingway, 1927
12	Post Colonialism and War	“The Snows of Kilimanjaro” by Ernest Hemingway, 1936
13	Post Colonialism and War	“The Things They Carried” by Tim O’Brien, 1990
14	Summing up the course	

### *Classroom Activities*

The classroom activities in this course were devised based on the researchers’ own experience along with some suggestions provided in Wintergerst and McVeigh (2011). These activities included:

- *Intensive Reading:* Students were guided through some paragraphs to discuss the hidden cultural points and agenda.
- *Extensive Reading:* Students were given some time to read a portion of the text by avoiding sub-vocalization. After that, some questions were asked about the content of the text.
- *Cross-cultural discussions:* Students were asked how the values, customs, behaviors, etc. would be in agreement or disagreement with their own culture.
- *Critical thinking:* Students were encouraged to think more deeply and reflectively about the cultural and historical facts in the short stories.
- *Role Play:* Students were asked to demonstrate how they would act in similar situations as those portrayed in some short stories. As an example, a short story entitled “The Ninny” by Anton Chekov was performed as a play and students were asked to discuss its themes.

### *Journal Entries*

As an introspective and least obtrusive research tool, journal entries—also known as diaries, logs, or autobiographical notes—provide valuable data about the research participants’ thoughts, experiences, feelings, and anecdotes (Bailey, 1990; Rezaei, 2017). Part of the data for this research was collected through the journal entries that the students wrote every week after each session. These journal entries started with a prompt posed by the researchers and based on the same topic or short story they had read. The students were requested to respond to those prompts in the form of journal entries. These entries later provided the researchers with a tool to trace the

learners' ICC development; in addition, it assisted the learners to realize their progress and the abilities they had acquired inside or outside the classroom. The questions, which were formulated to tap the ICC factors proposed by Byram (1997), generated a sort of extended responses sometimes in the form of personal vignettes. These questions were mostly of two types:

Type 1) The first set of questions was of opinion type which attempted to exert internal feelings and attitudes of learners toward a particular issue. An example of this type of question was:

*Probably you have been exposed to issues of Feminism and Positivism in Persian via different media like the TV, newspapers, cyber world or at university. In your opinion, does the presentation of these topics in English have any significant impact on your not only better understanding of these concepts but also your better understanding of English language and culture? If yes elaborate.*

Type 2) The second type of questions, however, required the participants to have an analytic approach and focus on a specific topic. The students were encouraged to research further about the topic of the session. An example of this type of question was:

*Find out about the history of a cultural tradition you recognize to be irrational or dysfunctional in modern Iran and the US but still operating in their respective societies. Try to address it critically and explain why you think it is no longer acceptable today and what is your suggestion for change?*

#### *Interview*

Apart from the journal entries kept by the students, interviewing was also conducted in English and Persian at the outset and end of the course. The questions in the semi-structured interview consisted of 18 items which were also formulated by drawing upon Byram's (1997) model of ICC. The interview questions aimed at shedding light on the issues that could not be referred to in the form of prompts in journal entries. These issues were formulated in the form of questions such as participants' attitudes toward L1 and L2 culture, their general assessment and evaluation of the course and syllabus, their understanding of intercultural competence, and their criticism of the course. Some general questions were also asked at the outset of the course to seek the participants' opinion about their own culture.

#### *Procedure*

At the outset of the study, the researchers ran an informal interview with the participants to seek their attitude toward their L1 and target culture. This interview included questions such as the following:

- Do you participate in ceremonies such as Halloween or Valentine's day?
- Do you like religious ceremonies in Iran such as the ones held during the *Asbhoura*?
- Do you like Persian literature and art? Or you prefer the Western literature and art?
- Would you like to live in a Western country such as the USA? Or do you prefer to live in Iran?
- Do you associate yourself more with a western life style or an Iranian life style?

The results of sentiment analysis, which is a method of seeking people's opinions about a specific topic, on the interview questions showed that the thirteen participants could be categorized into four main groups:

- 1) Six of the participants were more attached to Western values in comparison to their own local culture.
- 2) Two of the participants were very critical of Western values and strongly believed in local and especially Islamic values.
- 3) Four of the participants were neutral and did not take side with any.
- 4) One of the participants who had read extensively on western and Islamic philosophy was critical of both Iranian and Western cultural points and talked about the positive and negative points in both cultures.

Regarding the teaching methodology, as mentioned earlier, a myriad of activities was used by the teacher to get the students more involved with the short stories designated for each session. The whole course was composed of fourteen sessions with each session commencing with a short lecture presented either by one of the students or the lecturer himself. These lectures provided a quick overview of the topic selected for each session. For instance, in the session with the focus on War, there was a short lecture on Civil War in the USA. References were also made to the wars Iranians had experienced including the Iran-Iraq war. Moreover, students were supposed to do some online and library search before participating in class. This provided them with some basic concepts before coming to the class. In case the students' presentations did not provide sufficient background, the lecturer would add to the introductory notes before reading the short story. During the short story reading time, the students' attention was more explicitly directed toward the cultural issues as the dominant theme of the story. References to and discussion over literary terms were also the focus of the class.

## Results

The qualitative results of this study were obtained from two sources:

- 1) questions posed at the end of each session. These questions sought the participants' opinions regarding the short stories and the cultural and literary issues identified. These questions were written in the form of journal entries which were kept in a portfolio for each participant.
- 2) Interview questions which probed the participants' opinions regarding the course implementation and objectives.

The results obtained from these two sources were compared and contrasted to allow for more sound conclusions. In other words, after reading 140 journal entries in the portfolios and listening to and transcribing the interview files, the main themes and codes were identified through content analysis. In order to reach inter-coder reliability and a more reliable understanding of the themes, both researchers did the content analysis. According to Hsieh and Shannon (2005), there are three main types of qualitative content analysis namely conventional, directed, and summative content analysis. According to Hsieh and Shannon, the conventional content analysis is inductive and lets the data reveal categories and tenets rather than resorting to some pre-conceived notions. According to this approach, the researcher reads the data carefully and extracts categories, also known as codes. On the other hand, Hsieh and Shannon define directed content analysis as a

deductive approach in which the research draws on pre-existing theories in the literature too. In this approach, some targeted questions may be also raised (like the interview questions in the present study) to better tap the theories the researcher is using in his/her research. Hsieh and Shannon further stress that the directed approach is very useful when supporting or extending a theory in the literature—as the ICC model in the present study. Finally, Hsieh and Shannon define the summative approach as a more quantitative approach in which the researchers count the number of appearance of some key words in a text which can be later followed by latent content analysis. As will be seen below in the data analysis section, the present researchers drew on different types of content analysis based on the sort of data obtained. In other words, both quantitative thematic and descriptive code-based analysis were implemented. As shown in Tables 2 and 3, the dominant themes extracted from the journal entries and interview data are summarized according to their frequency (F). Table 2 shows the main themes from the interviews held at the end of the course.

Table 2  
*Interview Themes*

Theme	F
1 No drastic change in their attitudes at the end of the course	7
2 A more critical appraisal of the two cultures	3
3 Positive attitudes toward L2 culture	3
4 Iranian culture is in danger because of globalization	13

\* F stands for the frequency of the occurrence of each theme based on the participants' Responses.

Following the same procedures as with the themes extracted from the interview, the writing assignments of the students also went through content analysis. As Table 3 shows, three themes emerged. As the questions posed at the end of each session were about the topic of the session and the story therein, the themes also were in line with those topics. In other words, as seen in Table 3, all the themes were based on what was discussed in class and what was produced as after-the-class assignments at home. As seen in this table, the number of themes is less than the number of topics and sessions because some of the topics did not produce much reflection in the participants.

Table 3  
*Themes from Journal Entries*

Portfolio Themes	Theme Descriptor	F
1 Feminism as a Western artefact	Issues pertinent to Feminism have been resolved and women's condition has improved to a great extent in the US, while in Iran there are still barriers in the society.	1 1
2 Tradition and religion in Iran and the US	There are unreasonable and irrational customs and traditions both in the US and Iran still operating in the communities.	1 3
3 Westernization and Colonialization	The spread of English language and the culture it signifies are tools of new colonialism and a threat to our national culture and identity.	7

\* F stands for the frequency of the occurrence of each theme based on the participants' diaries

As said above, in order to explore and see if the course had any effect on the participants' attitude toward Iranian and American culture—i.e., the first component in Byram's ICC model—the data from both the journal entries and the interviews went through content analysis. As can be seen in Table 2, mixed views emerged from the data. As seen in this table, seven of the participants believed that participation in the course had not affected their perception of Iranian and

American culture as they already held some established beliefs. For example, one of the participants said that:

### **Extract 1**

*The course was very helpful in helping me think more critically but it did not change me as I think before the course I had similar, if not the same, views.*

This certainly does not mean that these participants had not learnt anything new from the course. Quite on the contrary, some of the students asserted that participation in the course and reading the short stories and their ensuing discussions helped them a lot to better become aware of their own and Western cultural values. That is why there is an overlap between some of the themes in Table 2. Other themes in Table 2, nonetheless, show that participants did develop a more intercultural attitude at the end of the course. Theme 2, for instance, shows that three of the participants had developed a more critical attitude toward both their L1 and L2 cultural points. The findings, presented through separate themes in Tables 2 and 3, follow the components in Byram's model. Below, the qualitative data which are related to each of these components are presented. It will be further discussed how each of the components are tapped by the data obtained from the participants. In this regard one of the participants said that:

### **Extract 2**

*It was an interesting course and it was the first time for me to discuss the pros and cons of my own culture with that in the West and be more critical about what happens in the West and Iran.*

Theme three in Table 2, on the other hand, indicates that the participants held a more positive attitude toward Western culture and they approved American or Western culture for its widespread use and appeal among the new generations. Themes two and three in Table 2, specifically, fall in close affinity with the development of an intercultural attitude, i.e., the first component in Byram's (1997) model of ICC. This shows how participants were willing to adopt a more intercultural understanding and evade a monolithic and insular attitude. This trend can be also seen in an interview excerpt from one of the participants who said:

### **Extract 3**

*I agree that there are many problems in the West but still I like to live and study abroad. I like experiencing the life overseas to see foreigners and explore the differences and similarities.*

Or another participant in one of his journal entries wrote that:

### **Journal Entry 1**

*In response to your question about my attitude toward discrimination in the west, I should confess that I sometimes fear such encounters but I still think that it is worth having this chance to live among people different from myself. I know that, like the character in the story [The Man Who Was Almost a Man], there are some bias and racist beliefs but we have similar cases in our country too.*

The last theme in Table 2, in contrast, showed that in spite of all these findings they were all concerned about their own cultural values too. This shows that although the participants had developed a better understanding of the Western culture, this did not imply a divorce from their

own home culture. This theme was explicitly extracted from the journal entries and the interview data. For instance, two of the participants mentioned:

#### **Extract 4**

*I am a Muslim and I think people have a wrong interpretation of Islam in the West. Muslims are kind, as our religious texts clearly say. I am afraid Hollywood movies and the [English] textbooks children are reading may put their religious beliefs in danger.*

#### **Journal Entry 2**

*When I was reading this story [Hills Like White Elephants] I compared the relationship between the two characters with the ones in Iran. I enjoyed reading it but I am afraid this sort of negligence about the future of a baby or such illegitimate relationship may increase in Iran. I don't like this type of culture to come to my country. I think as Muslims we should remain loyal to our Islamic beliefs.*

On the other hand, theme one in the journal entries in Table 3 shows that students, in spite of their critical appraisal of this course, found some benefits in women movements in western countries. In other words, *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins and *The Story of an Hour* by Kate Chopin sharpened their concerns regarding the place of women in the society. The discussion over this short story resulted in very interesting arguments and counter-arguments from both male and female participants. The writings that the students delivered to the teacher the following session also showed that most of the students had grown more positive attitudes toward feminist beliefs, especially its moderate version, though some still refuted this. As shown in Table 3, eleven students referred to this in their writings. An example from one of the participants' journal entries is:

#### **Journal Entry 3**

*I read the story [The Yellow Wallpaper] and I liked the ending. The discussion we had in class was also very interesting and it was surprising for me to hear some of my male classmates disagreeing with women rights in the society. I was also excited to see that some of them changed their minds or became less radical in their beliefs regarding women in the society.*

The interview extracts and journal entries cited above all bear witness to an intercultural attitude being promoted in the learners after being exposed to the short stories and the discussions that emerged. As for the second component in Bryam's model of ICC, Table 3 clearly shows that learners developed intercultural knowledge during the term. As interview codes indicate, the learners said that they gained some knowledge on cultural issues at the end of the course. These results from both the interview (themes 2, 3, & 4) and journal entries (all the themes) show that the course had succeeded to push the learners to search for new information about both American and Iranian culture. The participants said that before the course they had little knowledge about the Constitution in the USA or the lifestyle, art, and literature in the Western world and if they had, it was insufficient or convoluted. This can be seen in one of the writings by one of the participants:

#### **Journal Entry 4**

*I had heard about feminist beliefs but it was usually frowned upon at university. After reading about the problems that women had even in the US, in the past, I came to know more about feminist movements and women condition in Iran and other countries.*

Two other participants also commented:

#### **Extract 5**

*My knowledge of American culture was only restricted to some social media, movies, music, and TV shows and it was the first time that I encountered American culture in an organized and academic way.*

#### **Extract 6**

*Although I had familiarity with some of the topics, after discussions in the class I found that my knowledge was defected and insufficient.*

These interview extracts and the journal entries show that the course has been successful in enhancing the participants' intercultural knowledge regarding some issues such as women rights (theme 1), religious beliefs (theme 2), and western monopoly (theme 3) in the world.

Skills of interpreting and relating (*savoir comprendre*) were also seen to be promoted in the learners after the course. Based on the data from both interviews and journal entries some themes pertinent to the learners' skills of interpreting and relating were extracted. Theme 2 in Table 3 shows how the participants were successful in interpreting the cultural points in the story and how they managed to relate them to their own home culture. This theme shows that the participants were able to analyze and compare or contrast the two cultures, in this case the US and Iranian constitution. Two of the participants in their interviews added:

#### **Extract 7**

*At first I could not follow the course but later I was able to compare the Iranian system with that in western countries. For instance, I was able to take out the positive and negative aspects of the two cultures. I think the course helped us a lot to better juxtapose the two cultures.*

#### **Extract 8**

*I plan to apply abroad and I have talked with many about life and study overseas. Now that I have passed this course, I think I have come to know more about my own and western culture. I have talked with some friends overseas who said such cultural issues are way more important than the language ability itself.*

These two extracts better show how this component in Byram's ICC has been triggered. In other words, students became more conscious of such differences and were more able to relate them to their own beliefs.

The skills of discovery and interaction (*savoir apprendre/faire*) could not be easily discerned from the data in this research. In other words, since the participants were not within the L2 context and were limited to interactions with people from their own culture, the results obtained cannot be easily extrapolated. Nonetheless, some participants showed that they were more willing to communicate with foreigners. There were also some traces of empathy and more understanding toward foreigners, especially Afghans, in Iran.

All the participants (see Table 2 theme 4) were worried about their own Iranian cultural identity and believed that local culture was in many aspects superior to American culture. Some later changed to a more positive attitude toward Western culture. In other words, three of the

participants who were very patriotic and at times chauvinistic about their Iranian culture and identity gradually shifted to a more moderate and welcoming orientation. This view emerged as they developed a more critical and logical appraisal of the two cultures (theme 2 in Table 2). This shows how these participants were able to discover the positive and negative aspects of each culture and instead develop a more complete knowledge of the two cultures through interpreting, relating, discovery, and interaction—i.e., components 2, 3, and 4 in Byram's (1997) model of ICC. A good piece of evidence for this positive attitude can be seen in an interview extract and a journal entry from two of the participants:

### Extract 9

*Now that we have finished the course, I can see I should be more careful about the way I interact with people from other cultures. I remember we had a story [Lottery by Shirley Jackson] which showed how traditional beliefs are dangerous. I think we should respect other cultures and customs but at the same time we should be knowledgeable to know how to confront them.*

### Journal Entry 5

*About the Things They Carried [The short story by Tim O'Brien] I realized how war as a catastrophic event in the world is not limited to our country. Now I feel I can talk more about the history of the US and what common things we have to talk about. I did not know about the destructive nature of war for Americans.*

The last component in Byram's ICC model is critical cultural awareness which is an "ability to evaluate, critically and on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries" (Byram, 1997, p. 53). Theme 2 and 4 in Table 2 and all the themes in Table 3 reveal that learners had moved toward a critical view of (American) English language and culture. These themes show that the participants had grown a more critical evaluation of their own and Western cultures. In other words, they had freed themselves from a tilted evaluation of either culture. Instead, they tried to make a more logical and rational appraisal of the two cultures. An example in the interview corroborating this stance is given by one of the students who said that:

### Extract 10

*...Now I don't think Iranian culture is as bad as I thought before because I didn't know that these [cultural] problems existed in United States for decades.*

This shows that the short stories selected and the discussions held in class were successful in engendering critical awareness in the learners. This can be further consolidated based on an interview extract and a journal entry from two of the participants:

### Extract 11

*At the beginning, I was blindly attached to Western cultural norms and values but now that we have read some short stories about life condition in the west [wars, marriage, politics, etc.], I can better talk about the strengths and weaknesses of my own culture and American one. I think all the students became more critical by the end of the term.*

### Journal Entry 6

*Many in Iran criticize the war Iraq imposed on us, for instance. But after the course I came to know that similar wars have been imposed on other countries too. I also realized that soldiers like the ones in "Things They Carried" were manipulated. This made me aware of war consequences in Iran and the west and how I should be more critical about the western powers when they attack other countries in the name of justice.*

The above extract and journal entry show the participants' reflections on some critical issues in the history of Iran and the West. This shows how the participants had become more critical about the topics in the course, thereby making them more competent for their later interactions with foreigners. This result confirms that American culture or Iranian culture should not be viewed from an essentialist vantage point with all their values and beliefs being good or bad. This stereotypical image of the west and of Iran should be questioned and instead a more intercultural or transcultural attitude should be promoted.

The last theme in Table 2 and 3 revealed a sense of apprehension among all the learners who feared how globalization and its by-products, through cultural artefacts including cinema, can endanger local values. Interestingly, this idea and belief would not emerge from the data unless the learners had already developed a critical attitude toward local and Western values. This theme further demonstrates that the five themes extracted from the interview data are closely inter-related and one cannot be easily separated from the rest.

The last theme in Table 3, i.e., Westernization and Colonialization, was related to the effect of globalization on the spread of English language and culture in the world. As seen in Table 3, seven of the learners had referred to this in their writings. In other words, the participants admitted that Western values and cultural norms are circulating which in turn can jeopardize local cultures. This result, as seen in the students' writings, is analogous to the second and fourth theme in the interview data (see Table 2). This further assured us that what the students had acknowledged at the end of the course was already in their writings after each session. In other words, the two data sources triangulated the findings. This theme taps critical cultural awareness from Byram's (1997) ICC model; that is to say some form of critical cultural awareness is revealed, demonstrating an intercultural disposition.

### Discussion and Conclusion

In short, it should be pointed out that the students, in general, developed intercultural understanding and respect for both their local and Western culture but at the same time were critical of some aspects. In other words, the results from the students' interview and journal entries showed that some patterns of change emerged after the dialogic discussions held in class and the writings that the students composed in the form of reflective responses:

- 1) Seven of the participants remained the same or with little change. In other words, they claimed that the course had not changed them at all. The researchers, however, later realized that the course had consolidated their knowledge. In other words, though the students had some pre-ordained beliefs about their local and American cultural values, the course content and discussions secured or modified their stance.
- 2) Three participants were more critical and did not take things at face value. They contributed a lot to the classroom discussions and were not easily persuaded by their

peers or the teacher. Therefore, there was an on-going debate regarding these critical topics in class.

- 3) All the participants, even those who were very critical in class, developed a more positive attitude toward both their own and Western cultures. This shows that the course has been successful in imparting a more international view.
- 4) All the students were worried about their own cultural norms in Iranian society. Although they were not concerned at the outset of the term, they gradually developed a better understanding of their own cultural norms thereby equipping them with a more 'glocalised' view and identity. This can be achieved by appropriating global issues or cultural values and add local taste to it—or sometimes critiquing global norms and localizing it. This can be also seen in the themes extracted from the interview and journal entries.

As Byram, Gribkova and Starkey (2002) assert, an interculturally competent learner must be aware of the elusive, multilayered and multifaceted nature of a culture. He or she should be exposed to diverse aspects of a foreign culture and read about the alternative voices and less represented issues before making a judgment. The results of this research can be compared with the case study done by Burwitz-Melzer (2001) who showed how students' language and culture learning can be promoted with the use of short stories. Burwitz-Melzer (2001) used one short story about a Mexican migrant in the US and the researcher assessed her students understanding through a number of different tasks including writing a title for a short story and writing an end for a story. Similarly, Hibbs (2016) used novels for promoting his learners' ICC. He used some short stories with some cultural points for discussion in a short story class. In this study, it was also found that short stories provided a good platform for the learners to become more cognizant of intercultural issues. Some of the participants of the current study gradually shifted from total attachment to the target culture and alienation from their own native culture to a more global understanding of other cultures. In other words, the participants in general became more aware of their own and target culture. This result is similar to Zapata (2005) whose research culminated in a critical stance of the participants to both L1 and L2 cultures. The results of this research are also comparable with Rodríguez and Puyal (2012) who also highlighted the role of literary texts in enriching not only their learners' linguistic but also cultural knowledge. Like what Gómez (2012) did in Colombia, the present study also shows that the exploration of literary texts, for instance short stories, can develop a more (inter)culturally competent person.

The results of the present qualitative research have several pedagogical implications for both language teachers and learners. The results of this research showed that literary texts are useful materials for raising intercultural awareness. Furthermore, materials developers should pay more attention to the cultural components in the textbooks they devise. Textbook writers should include more cultural topics from local people and avoid having an Anglo-Saxon focus to the exclusion of local or minority cultures. Teacher training courses should also allocate some modules to teaching culture in order to reach a more socially just teaching where marginalization is critiqued and a more emergent syllabus based on local values and beliefs is appreciated (Ramezanzadeh & Rezaei, 2018).

As for the direction for further research, the researchers in the present study focused on American short story writers and shifted the students' attention to local writers to compare both the stylistic and cultural differences within these two different contexts. Future research can further incorporate world literature to see how this intercultural understanding can be nurtured. Other materials such as movies and drama can be also used. Researchers can also compare the effect of different media and modes of teaching, for example the comparison between literature

and cinema in teaching intercultural issues. Other data collection tools such as questionnaires can be also used to better trace the pre- and post-course changes in the students' attitudes.

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