An Explanatory Analysis Of English Language Learners' Intercultural Communicative Competence At The Post-Graduate Level In A Public Sector University

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Abstract

Intercultural Communicative Competency (ICC) has become an essential element in today's globalized world especially when communicating with other cultures' people as it highlights the importance of both linguistic proficiency and the ability to comprehend and engage with many cultural contexts. Therefore, this study investigates the level of ICC among post-graduate English students at Kohat University of Science and Technology (KUST), Pakistan and identifies the factors that facilitate or hinder its development. Guided by Byram's (1997; 2020) model, ICC was assessed across five components: knowledge, attitude, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness. By using a qualitative research design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews from ten MS/MPhil English students and analysed thematically. The major findings of the study reveal varying levels of ICC, ranging from beginner to advanced levels, across the different components, highlighting disparities in students' cultural knowledge, openness, interpretive skills, and critical awareness. Key facilitating factors include personal attributes such as curiosity and openness, as well as exposure to social media, movies, and culturally rich learning materials. Conversely, hinder factors include limited intercultural classroom diversity, lecture-centered teaching, and psychological barriers such as shyness and lack of confidence. The study underscores that ICC is a progressive, context-dependent process requiring deliberate educational planning, reflective engagement, and institutional support among others. These findings of the study provide insights for integrating intercultural perspectives in English language instruction, aiming to prepare students as competent, culturally aware communicators in a globalized environment.

Keywords: Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)**,** Postgraduate Students**,** ESL/EFL Context**,** Cultural Awareness**,** Byram's Model**,** Language and Culture**,** Higher Education Pakistan**,** Intercultural Skills

Introduction

In the last decades, Intercultural Competence has been replaced with Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) owing to its impact and contribution to foreign language teaching and learning (Rocha & Guerrero, 2015). It implies that the knowledge of the target language culture is equally important for gaining full mastery in the target language, i.e., English. As an effective communication or interaction does not merely depend on expertise in both communicative competence and linguistic competence but one should also be well aware of the target language cultural dimensions (Ilyas, 2021; Radhika, 2017).

The concept of communicative competence was originated from the Chomsky's (1965) distinction between competence and performance (Ruiz & Spínola, 2019). Hymes (1972) thought that Chomsky concept of separating competence (understanding the rules of language) and performance (using the language) was too limited to describe language behavior as a whole. Furthermore, he distinguish two kinds of competence (a) linguistic competence is the ability how to produce and understand the sentences that are grammatically correct (Tulasi & Murthy, 2022) and

(b) communicative competence is, how to use language that appropriate and acceptable to a particular situation (Abdulrahman & Abu-Ayyash, 2019). Canal and swain (1980) proposed a model in which includes grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence. Subsequently, Byram (1997; 2020) expended earlier models and added intercultural focus. He explains that intercultural communicative competence includes Knowledge, attitude, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction and critical cultural awareness.

Byram (1997) defines "Intercultural communicative competence is the ability to interact with people from another country and culture in target language" (P.71). Fantini (2006) states that intercultural communicative competence as set of abilities that enable people to communicate effectively and appropriately with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself. Furthermore, a person who has developed intercultural communication skills is able to build a good relationship while speaking in the targeting language, communicate effectively respecting both their own and others' opinions, ideas, and need and help people to understand one another while they belong to diverse cultures background (Byram, 2020).

In the twenty first century workplace, we recognize that the people face the problems of misunderstanding due to language barriers and cultural differences are common, we understand that the intercultural communicative competence (ICC) has become the reality of modern workplaces where workers from different cultures interact, work together or connected online from different countries (Yousef, 2024; Gul et al., 2023). Deardorff (2015) states that is why ICC has become essential employability skills in today's global market. The same idea also attested by the British Council (2013) with respect to the workplace where different people, possess diverse religious and sociocultural backgrounds. They believe and think differently and communicate in different styles in various socio-cultural, political, philosophical, physical, natural and ecological contexts. As it may be one of the reasons that national organizations and global corporations are looking for employees who are not merely expert in their fields but also culturally aware and would be able to succeed in global environment in commercial dealings (Mehdaoui, 2023).

This aim of the study is to measure the level of intercultural communicative competence of post-graduate students. Correspondingly, it is an explanatory study whether the students' level of ICC is high or low then we identified the causes or factors which facilitated or hindered the development of ICC.

Statement of the Problem
While interacting effectively with people from diverse cultures in real life situations and communicating in a foreign language has become necessary in numerous professional and pragmatic fields. In such situations and fields merely good knowledge of language i.e., full mastery over grammar and knowledge of vocabulary are not enough to communicate effectively in the target language situations (Aldosari & Mekheimer, 2018). It implies that both linguistic competence and intercultural competence are equally important but to achieve intercultural competence is still marginalized and the field of intercultural communication is frequently under discussion (Zhang, 2017; Habib et al., 2025).

Likewise, it also means that having the requisite ability of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) i.e., to be aware of distinct cultures, respect them, and interact with people from diverse cultures is crucial along with a set of grammar

rules and knowledge of lexical items. Language is connected to culture and societies in which people need to communicate with one another. English as a lingua franca provides a means of communication among different cultures. Consequently, English teaching as foreign or second language contexts, requires providing situations to foster intercultural communicative competence. Thus, the study in hand investigates intercultural competence of students at post graduate level at Kohat University of Science and Technology (KUST).

In the same line, there are numerous factors responsible for the facilitation or hinderance of intercultural communicative competence, viz. learner-related factors, teachers-related factors, and learning material-related factors. Correspondingly, this research study also focuses on such factors while assessing ESL learners' intercultural communicative competence at post graduate level at the department of English, Kohat University of Science and Technology (KUST) Kohat, KP, Pakistan.

Furthermore, this study also aims to offer insights and directions for the enhancement of English teaching methodologies and to promote intercultural competence in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in particular, and in Pakistan in general.

Research Questions

What is the level of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) of post-graduate students at the department of English of a public sector university?

What are the responsible factors that facilitate or hinder the achievement of this Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)?

Research Objectives

To find out the level of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) of post-graduate students at the department of English in a public sector university

To unfold the responsible factors that facilitate or hinder the achievement of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) at the Post Graduate level of a public sector university.

Rationale

Language serves as a medium for the expression of culture (Siregar, 2022). It suggests that language is not merely a combination of words. It is culture, tradition, and history. of specific groups. Likewise, an intercultural communicative competence means the ability and potential to interact or communicate appropriately in other cultures. We as language users, need to comprehend fully the culture of that language to attain intercultural competence and to not be considered fluent fools (Bennett, 1997). It implies that language and culture are strongly correlated. The Language learning process without cultural foundation is difficult (Ilyas, 2021; Gul et al., 2022; Khan et al., 2025). Intercultural communicative competence is recognized as one of the important skills for students, especially at the postgraduate level, where students are often preparing for foreign academic study and professional situations. In Pakistan, there has been conducted limited research study on intercultural communicative competence (ICC) such as Yasin et al. (2021) studied the influence of English textbook on intercultural communication is EFL/ESL setting in intermediate level in Punjab (Pakistan). There are numerous studies measuring intercultural communicative competence in EFL context such as (Ilyas, 2021; Mehdaoui, 2023; Sevimel-Sahin, 2020; Imsa-ard, 2023). Ilyas (2021) claims that:

The cultural impact on language learning is not only underrated in Iraqi EFL settings, but I might also say, it is totally neglected. Throughout my 12 years of teaching EFL at the College of Education for Humanities, Department of English, I noticed that there is no integration of cultural-related practices whatsoever whether in curriculum design or even in teachers' activities (p.02).

Therefore, it means that the intercultural communicative competence is also measured in ESL context if the native speaker is not present because we developed ICC through watching movies, through reading literary text such as novels, short stories (Rezaei & Naghibian, 2018; Gómez, R., & Fernando, 2012; Herrero, 2017).

Literature Review

The term "competence" is not limited to the field of linguistics but in present day it is also used in general sense in other fields. In general, competence refers to the ability to perform a task effectively, appropriately within a given context (Gul, 2021; Ishtiaq et el., 2022). The term "communicative competence" was first introduced by Hymes in (1972) as a sociolinguistic concept in response to the concept of "linguistic competence" which was introduce by Chomsky in 1965. Hymes (1972) defines 'communicative competence' refers to the level of language that enable language users to transmit their message effectively and comprehend or understand the message of others. According to Yule (2010) communicative competence can be defined as "the general ability to use language accurately, appropriately, and flexibly" (p.194). It means that it is the ability to use language accurately, appropriately according to context to convey the message effectively.

Additionally, the term "intercultural communication" was first introduced in Edward T. Hall's influential and seminal book, The Silent Language. Intercultural communication takes place when people who belong to different cultures and ethnicities start communication or conversation to each other. Hence, intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is the ability to use communicative behaviour effectively and appropriately to manage and respect cultural identities inside cultural diversity while interacting in diverse cultural settings (Chen and Starosta, 1998). Their definition emphasizes on three fundamental components of ICC: intercultural sensitivity (the affective dimension), intercultural awareness (the cognitive dimension) and intercultural adroitness (the behavioural dimension). Consequently, these components together encompass both verbal and non-verbal styles of communication, which are essential elements of intercultural communicative competency.

For this reason, Scollon et al. (2012) differentiate the areas of intercultural communication (IC) and cross-cultural communication (CCC). The focus of IC is on the actual or real-life interaction and communication exchange between members of different cultures. For instance, when French manager is not satisfied with the work of Slovak subordinates then how French manager communicate to him. In contrast, cross-cultural communication examines and compares the communication practices of two or more cultural communities, for example compare the conflict style of German and Spanish managers.

Furthermore, Intercultural communication focus on how people from diverse cultural backgrounds interact and communicate with one another and how cultural differences affect communication behaviour in real-time (Gudykunst, 2003). In contrast, cross-cultural communication involves the comparative study of communication patterns

across cultures rather than direct interaction. It seeks to identify similarities and differences in communication styles, values, or behaviours between cultural groups (Samovar et al., 2017).

A comparative analysis of these definitions reveals clear differences in how scholar conceptualize ICC. Chen and Starosta (1998) emphasize on internal components or dimensions such as cultural sensitivity, awareness, adroitness and Deardorff (2006) expanded this by including reflection and attitude, viewing ICC is an ongoing process. Bannett (1993) describing ICC as evolving from ethnocentrism to ethno-relativism, while on the other hand Ting-Toomey (1999) highlights the dynamic and interactive aspects of communication, focus on mutual adaptation and shared understanding.

Inter-discourse communication examines how culture becomes meaningful within a text or interaction, and how individuals construct and express their cultural identity through language and communication (Piller, 2017). For instance, Galasiński and Jaworski (2003) explored how people living in tourist destinations are portrayed in travel writing. They analysed articles from the travel section of a British broadsheet newspaper and found three common ways in which local residents were represented. First, writers often used very broad and vague labels, such as locals or women, without giving specific detail. Second, the articles frequently described a "typical" or idealised local person, creating a simplified image of what people in that place are supposedly like. Finally, local residents were commonly depicted as friendly, helpful, and eager to assist tourists.

Kamila (2023) says teacher's intercultural knowledge, teaching method and encouragement significantly influence learners ICC. Students' intercultural communicative ability improves when teachers actively include culture information into their course content and designed relevant cultural activities. In a similar vein, teaching material used in classroom play important role. Culture-rich book, video, examples and real-life situations help students to comprehend various cultural settings (Snigdha, 2022). It adds that the learning environment has an impact on ICC as well. While culturally constrained or stereotyped surroundings may hinder students' growth, positive, open, and culturally varied situations provide students the confidence to express ideas and engage with others (Rahimi & Ghorbani, 2025).

Methodology
Theoretical Framework
This study theoretical framework is based on the Byram (1997; 2020) model of ICC, which emphasises not just mastery of a foreign language but also the capacity to perceive, relate, explore, engage, and critically reflect across cultural boundaries. According to Byram, ICC is made up of five interconnected components:

Knowledge:
It involves knowing one's own social groups and culture, as well as those of the interlocutors. It also involves comprehending the interactions process at both an individual and societal levels.

Attitude: It focuses on two capacities; curiosity, openness, and readiness to interact with individuals from different cultures, as well as the ability to avoid judging one's own culture as superior to others.

Skills of interpreting and relating:
Individuals' ability to interpret and relate to circumstances or documents from different cultures, as well as explain and link them to events

Skills of discovery and Interaction:
The ability to engage in real-time interactions, acquire new cultural knowledge, and apply existing knowledge, skills, and attitudes effectively during immediate communication and intercultural exchanges.

Critical cultural awareness:
It reflects the ability to engage in critical evaluation by considering different perspectives, reasoning processes, and the values present in both one's own culture and other cultures (Byram, 2020; as cited by Thongpan & Thumawongsa, 2023).

Research Design
This research applied qualitative research methods i.e. non numerical data collected and analyzed to understand the factors, concepts, opinions and experiences of the participants regarding intercultural communicative competence, (Mwita, 2007). The reason behind opting qualitative research method in this journey is that qualitative research method offers a considerable amount of flexibility in undertaking research objectives and questions. Furthermore, it allowed the researcher to observe and identify other issues that were not initially thought of or included in the inception stage of the study. It implies that qualitative research approach provides opportunity for in-depth analysis and information.
Furthermore, in phase second, the researcher identified the key factors which influence the development of intercultural communicative competence at Post Graduate level in ESL context. Therefore, owing to the aforementioned purpose, collected from the participants of the study through open-ended questionnaire, which adapted from the previous studies (e.g., Rui & Tong, 2021; Tran & Vong, 2021)

Data Collection
In the current study, data collected in two phases, in the first phase, researcher measured participants i.e. MS/MPhil English linguistics, scholars' intercultural communicative competence (ICC) individually through designed scale which is based on five interrelated components, viz. knowledge, attitude, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction and critical cultural awareness as proposed by Byram, (2020) for the measurement of intercultural communicative competence (ICC).

Population and Sample of the Study
The Target population of this study is the total number of students which enrolled in MS in English department of Kohat university of science and technology (KUST). This research conducted at KUST, the data collected for 10 MS/MPhil scholars randomly from the department of English KUST Kohat. Data will be collected both five male and female each.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data analyzed through thematic analysis, using the following steps. First, familiarization with the data involves reading and re-reading the collected data such as interview transcript. The second phase is generating the initial codes, where identifying and labelling significant patterns in the data. The third phase involves searching for themes: organizing and grouping similar codes into boarder patterns or categorizing that reflect important concepts in the data. In Phase four, reviewing themes, all the themes were brought together and refining the themes and ensuring they accurately represent the data. Fifth phase is defining and naming them, where they clearly describing each theme's essence and assigning concise (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017; Dawadi, 2020)

Analysis and Discussion

Level of ICC

To begin with, this section discusses the learners' level of ICC it explains how learners demonstrate different levels of intercultural knowledge, attitudes, skills, and awareness based on their responses in the semi-structured interviews. The analysis shows differences in how learners understand cultural differences, how open they are to other cultures, and how well they can communicate in intercultural situations. The answers were compared to the key components of ICC, which allowed beginner, intermediate, and advance levels of intercultural competence to be identified

Knowledge

The knowledge component of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), as proposed by Byram (1997), refers to an individual's understanding of social groups, cultural practices, and communicative conventions within one's own and other cultures. It includes awareness of how people interact, the meanings behind behaviours, and the relationship between language and cultural context. This domain enables individuals to interpret cultural actions not merely as isolated behaviours but as expressions of underlying values, beliefs, and worldviews (Deardorff, 2006).

Participants 3, 4 and 7 placed in **beginner level** of knowledge in intercultural communicative competence. their responses demonstrate a basic awareness of how people greet in Pakistan and other or foreign cultures. All three participants provide descriptive accounts of common practices such as in Pakistan we say Assalamu alikum and in other or foreign cultures we say Hi, Hello, Good morning etc. further they describe the physical contacts in different genders during greeting and participant 3 is also mentioned greeting styles within Pakistan.

In contrast, Participants 1, 2, 6, 9 and 10 Placed in **intermediate level** in knowledge domain. Their Reponses demonstrated that these five participants were able to recognize basic cultural norms and differences in simple context such greeting styles in Pakistan and other or foreign country. These participants are also able to explain the cultural differences in both personal and professional context and they are also aware how cultural norms effect the communication styles.

Participants 5 and 8 are placed an **advance level** of knowledge domain in intercultural communicative competence because both of them provided detail, accurate and culturally correct explanations about greeting practices and conversational norms. Both participants highlighted that in Pakistan greeting practices are mostly influenced by gender, status, religion and age. They mentioned that handshake and hug between

same gender is common. While in other culture shaking hand and check kiss between male and female is normal especially in especially in western countries. P5 compare Pakistani practices not only with western cultures, but also with East Asian cultures such as China and Japan, where bowing is used in greetings. This indicates broad intercultural awareness rather than a limited comparison.

Attitude

Participant 3 is placed in **below the beginner level** in attitude component. P3 display very little openness to cultural diversity and instead of being curious or understand cultural differences, they exhibit rigid, affectively charged responses. P3 assumption that "all Pakistanis share the same culture" so, P3 ignores intranational variation and demonstrates a lack of epistemic humility.

In the scenario in greeting male colleague from other culture giving kiss on the check, P3 respond in these words. "I'll slap him in the face." It demonstrates that P3 has not the ability to tolerate the unusual activity and this reaction focus on anger rather than explaining one's cultural expectations and diplomatic refusal. Such responses shows that a limited ability to willingness to suspend one's own cultural beliefs or handle cultural differences in a respectful manner.

At the **beginner level**, participants such as (P4, P7, P8, P10) demonstrated basic awareness of cultural differences but their openness remain limited. Participants mentioned the differences between Pakistani culture and other cultures such as P4 mentioned Mentions collectivism, respect for authority, and religious values as shaping communication in Pakistan, while in many western cultures focus on individualism, direct communication and equality. P7 and P8 says that communication differences come from whether culture in individualistic or collectivistic.

At the **intermediate level** learners in component of attitude demonstrate their openness to cultural differences and can be able to explain how cultural norms affect the communication and communicative behaviours. So, participants 2 and 9 are placed at intermediate level; in discussing the role of cultural diversity, both participants demonstrate an emerging analytical awareness that extends beyond mere description. P2 explains that in Pakistan people avoid the eye contact with elder, but this can cause misunderstanding or misconception with cultures where eye contact is normal or acceptable. This demonstrates that P2 understand how cultural norms affect the communication. Similarly, P9 identifies Pakistan's internal linguistic and cultural variety and compares it to multicultural patterns in other contexts, demonstrating the capacity to compare communicative norms across cultural settings rather than perceiving communication uniformly. This demonstrates the intermediate learner's capacity to understand cultural variations in personal and broader social situations.

At the **advance level** learners in component of attitude demonstrate openness, empathy and flexibility when face cultural differences. Participants 1, 5 and 6 comes to this level because they show that they understand the cultural practices without judging them, compare behaviour between societies and change their own behaviour when interacting with people from other cultures. P1, P5, and P6 talk about cultural diversity in a way that shows they can think carefully about communication and look at situations from more than one cultural point of view.

Skills of Interpreting and Relating

Skills of interpreting and relating is the ability to interpret cultural information, events, phrase, or communicative behaviour from another culture explain their meaning, and relate them to one's own cultural context.

Participants 2 and 7 were evaluated using the skills of interpreting and relating component of the ICC model and the analysis demonstrates that both the participants placed in **below the beginner level**. When interpreting culturally nuanced expression or phrase "we should catchup sometime" this expression in many western contexts function as a polite, non-committal social closure. Both the participants provided literal explanations and meaning of the phrase.

The responses of participant 6 and 10 demonstrated that they placed in the **beginner level** in skills of interpreting and relating component because the participants are able to understand simple cultural differences and interpret the cultural expressions. When interpreting the phrase "we should catchup sometime" both participants recognized that the expression serves as a polite conversional closure rather than a literal meeting arrangement.

The responses of participants (1, 3, 4, 5, 8, 9) demonstrate competencies aligned with the **intermediate level** of skills of interpreting and relating. All participants have the ability to interpret culturally embedded phrase and compare them with equivalent expression in Pakistani context. When interpreting "we should catchup sometime," these participants consistently identify it is a polite strategy to end a conversation, and several (P1, P3, P4, P5) relate it to Urdu equivalents such as "phir kabhi milain ge." This illustrates their ability to recognize their pragmatic purpose of the phrase and relate it cross culture context.

Skills of Discovery and Interaction

According to responses participant 3 and 8 placed at **below the beginner level** in skills of discovery and interaction component. When asking about follow-up questions about unfamiliar food terms, both P3 and P8 relied only on simple phrases such as "I did not understand; please explain," demonstrating no development of explanatory questions or awareness how to adjust communication for cultural clarity. Their responses to addressing teacher also reveal an assumption that communication practices are same in every culture. This means that they are not curious about other cultures and do not know how to change their behaviour when talking to people from different cultural backgrounds. When describing how they resolve the misunderstanding which is create because of cultural differences between two different culture background persons.

The **beginner level** is characterized by Byram (1997; 2021) is the ability to show curiosity and ask simple, direct questions and response in cultural situations but difficult to adapt communication in another cultural context. Participant 7 demonstrates such basic competence and placed in beginner level. When asking about follow-up questions about unfamiliar food terms, participant 7 ask simple specific and structured questions "about taste, preparation recipes and it is halal or haram in Pakistani culture" it shows the ability to guide the interaction toward cultural understanding rather than simple comprehension. Further, P7 has the ability to ask basic questions and responded in cultural situation. In discussing how teacher should be addressed in conversation, P7 addressed the teacher in Pakistani and other culture in the following words.

Participants at the **intermediate level** demonstrate the ability to manage conversation

or communication with people from different cultural backgrounds and also has the ability to adapting speech and response according to the cultural context. So, participants (1, 4, 6, 9, 10) are placed in intermediate level. When asking about follow-up questions about unfamiliar food customs, these participants ask specific, structured questions about ingredients, cultural significance, taste, and preparation showing the ability to guide the interaction toward cultural understanding rather than simple comprehension. Similarly, how to address the teacher during communication, all five participants noted that, in the Pakistani context, teachers are addressed using titles such as 'Sir' or 'Madam' to convey respect, whereas in foreign or other cultural contexts, teachers are addressed by their first names, reflecting a sense of equality."
"Regarding how to resolve misunderstandings between individuals from different cultural backgrounds, the participants generally stated that one could explain cultural differences. P6, however, identified non-verbal cultural differences (e.g., Bulgarian nodding practices), demonstrating an ability to recognize the cultural sources of misunderstanding.

Participants 2 and 5 at **the advanced level** in skills of discovery and interaction. It is the ability to hypothesize, explain, negotiate, and mediate meaning across cultures using both prior knowledge and new cues. When discussing how they ask follow-up questions to understand the food customs, they ask culturally informed questions that consider identity, values, and social meaning such as serving practices, eating utensils (P2), religious compatibility, and contextual use. Both P2 and P5 show an understanding of cultural differences in how teachers are addressed during communication. They explain that in Pakistan, using titles such as 'Sir' or 'Madam' is seen as respectful and reflects a hierarchical culture. In contrast, they note that in many Western contexts, calling teachers by their first names is linked to values of equality. Both participants recognize that these different practices stem from different cultural beliefs about respect and status.

Critical Cultural awareness
Critical cultural awareness (CCA) is the ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, and practices in one's own culture and other cultures. It means that we do not just describe cultural differences, but we critically examine them, understand why they exist, and judge cultural practices on universal principal such as respect, equality and human dignity.
However, participants in the **beginner level** are aware of cultural differences but they lack the evaluate abilities. Their responses or answers based on broad generalizations, stereotyped analogies, and personal opinions rather than critical or analytical evaluation. So, participants (3, 9, and 10) are placed at the beginner level in the CCA component. When discussing other culture and Pakistani people attitude toward punctuality, all three participants see western cultures or other cultures is better and they more focus on punctuality compared to Pakistan. They mentioned "the British people value time due to professionalism" (P3), "They are more punctual and respect other people's time as well." (P9 & 10). While "Pakistanis do not value time." (P3, 9 & 10). These participants recognize the cultural distinctions but struggle to question norms or think critically, and furthermore, their statement reveal unquestioned assumptions, indicating little consideration of the structural, historical or social elements behind these differences.
Participants placed at the **intermediate level** display the ability to describe, compare,

and partially evaluate cultural practices by acknowledging complexities rather than relying entirely on stereotypes. So, the participants (1, 4, 5, 6, 7 & 8) are demonstrates intermediate level and their responses demonstrate emerging analytical ability, beginning to evaluate cultural norms, and practices critically and recognize biases and inequalities, although their evaluations still rely heavily on personal experiences and general observations rather than systematic criteria.

The participant 2 is categorized at the **advance level** because their assessment of cultural practices includes accurate, reasoned argument, defined criteria and an acknowledgement that cultural norms have both advantages and disadvantages depending on circumstances.

When discussing other culture and Pakistani people attitude toward punctuality, P2 interprets British emphasis on time not only as a behavioural difference, but as a value-based system linked to respect, efficiency, and for foreign culture people "time is money" and P2 says about Pakistani people attitude toward time "In Pakistani culture, time is usually taken for granted, with individuals coming late and showing little concern for the time of others." This demonstrates an awareness of underlying cultural practices rather than obvious differences.

Table
Summary of all components

Level	Knowledge	Attitude	Skills of Interpreting and Relating	Skills of Discovery and Interaction	Critical Cultural Awareness
Below the Beginner Level	___	P3	P2 and P7	P3 and P8	___
Beginner Level	P3, P4 and P7	P4, P7, P8 and P10	P6 and P10	P7	P3, P9 and P10
Intermediate Level	P1, P2, P6, P9 and P10	P2 and P9	P1, P3, P4, P5, P8 and P9	P1, P4, P6, P9 and P10	P1, P4, P5, P6, P7 and P8
Advance Level	P5 and P8	P1, P5 and P6	___	P2 and P5	P2

Factors Affecting ICC
Following the measurement of the learners' ICC level in first phase, now in the second phase of data analysis aims to investigate and identify the factors which affect the enhancement or development of ICC among postgraduate learners. Intercultural communicative competence is not developed itself with language learning. It is influenced by different factors like personal, educational and contextual factors. These factors either facilitate or hinder the learners' ability to develop intercultural knowledge, attitudes, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction and critical cultural awareness.

Facilitating Factors

Facilitating factors are those which help in achieving to develop ICC. These characteristics or factors facilitate students' comprehension, acceptance, and engagement with others from diverse cultural backgrounds. Learners are motivated to interact openly, reflect on cultural differences, and acquire respect for other perspectives as a result of these facilitating factors. When such factors or characteristics are present, there is a better chance that learners will increase and develop their knowledge, abilities, and understanding of differences between cultures. In this section discuss the factors which positively affect the ICC of the learners.

Personal Factors

Notably, personal factors significantly influence the learner's development of ICC. These personal factors connect to an individual's beliefs, emotions and personal attributes that affect their interactions with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. Individuals with favourable or positive personal attributes are typically more open to multicultural communication or interaction and exhibit enhanced capacity for acceptable and successful communication across diverse cultures.

The most prominent personal factors found in the participants' responses which helped them to develop intercultural communicative competence were curiosity and openness and flexibility towards target culture.

Social Media

Social media seemed to be another very important way to learn about other cultures. For learners, it gives them real-time, interactive, and varied cultural material.

Participants often highlighted that platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and other online network facilitated their interactions with individuals from diverse cultural and language backgrounds. P3 described that social media was the major experience that let them connect directly with people from different cultures. Through these interactions, they were exposed to different perspectives, values and everyday practices, which not only shaped their beliefs but also broadened their overall worldview. Similarly, P7 and P9 indicated that social media offers real-time updates and genuine insights into foreign cultures. These platforms allow learners to see how people behave in everyday situations, how they speak and how they express emotions. Such direct exposure is challenging to achieve in classroom settings, especially within culturally homogeneous environments. Monika et al., (2020) also reports that social media provides real-time intercultural contact and exposure to authentic cultural expressions, helping learners understand and adapt to diverse communication styles, norms, and values, thereby enhancing intercultural communication competence (ICC).

Movies and Dramas

Participants also indicated that movies encouraged reflection, cultural comparison, and deeper understanding, which is the key elements of ICC. P5 observed that watching Nigerian vloggers and dramas enhanced their appreciation of e richness and diversity within Nigerian culture, leading them to reconsider and revise previously held assumptions. Overall, movies and dramas provided participants with a dynamic and engaging way to learn about unfamiliar or unusual cultural practices, values, and behaviours. These findings closely align with the previous study of Adraoui et al. (2025), in which they found that media exposure and media literacy substantially

enhanced students' intercultural awareness, confidence and enabling them to engage effectively with others in intercultural situation or communication.

Hinder Factors

Nevertheless, ICC is very important for learners especially for those who wants study in abroad or they communicate with people from different cultural background through social media or online exchange. There are several factors that can hinder the development of ICC among learners. These factors limit the opportunities for learners to communicate with people from different cultures and interact appropriately in intercultural situation. Understanding these barriers is essential, as they highlight the challenges learners face and explain why ICC may remain underdeveloped even when its importance is recognized. Such factors often arise from educational settings, social environments, and personal circumstances that restrict meaningful intercultural interaction.

Lack of Intercultural Environment and Classroom Diversity

A lack of intercultural environment and limited classroom diversity is one of the strongest hinder factors which limit the intercultural communicative competence (ICC) development. Several students reported that their universities did not offer opportunities to interact or communicate with individuals from different cultural backgrounds. P4 said that there were few chances to interact with diverse cultures, and that their exposure to cultural variety was restricted. Similarly, P6 observed that most students had the same Pashtun cultural background, resulting in a highly homogenous university atmosphere. This lack of diversity hindered learning opportunities for spontaneous intercultural interactions, which are essential for developing curiosity, empathy, and adaptable communication abilities. The lack of intercultural environments restricts learners' ability to develop crucial ICC skills, including interpretation, empathy, and behavioural adaptation.

Psychological and Personal Barriers

Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is hard to achieve because of psychological and personal barriers. These problems have to do with how learners feel, what they think, and how they act, which all affect how they see and deal with people from other cultures. Even when there are chances to experience other cultures, these kinds of internal problems can keep students from fully participating and gaining from them. The utmost psychological and personal barriers in most of the participants' responses are hesitation and shyness, Lack of language proficiency and lack of confidence which hindered the ICC.

Lecture-Based Teaching

Lecture-cantered teaching was often seen as a major problem for intercultural learning. Traditional lecture-based instruction frequently puts students as passive recipients of knowledge, information and limiting opportunities for interaction, discussion, and cultural reflection. According to Freire (1970) such type of "Banking" education, where teacher or instructor just deposit information in students mind, these limits the students critical thinking and active involvement. However, these skills are very important for developing intercultural communicative competence.

Participants clarify that in classroom teacher focus on completing the syllabus,

preparing students for exam and covering prescribed textbook or course content. As a result, there was not much space for open discussion, sharing personal experiences or stories and exploring cultural issues in depth or compare two cultures. Cultural topics, when discussed, were seen as factual data rather than as opportunities for critical analysis or cross-cultural comparison.

Conclusion
Overall, this study illustrates that ICC is a gradual or progressive, complex and context dependent process which is shaped by learners' experiences, teaching and educational practices, social and institutional environments and the study also highlights that the ICC cannot be developed by itself or accidentally rather than it requires deliberate educational planning, reflective engagement, and institutional commitment. The dependence merely on linguistic instruction without systematic intercultural integration limits or obstruct learners' ability to move beyond surface-level cultural awareness toward deeper intercultural understanding and ethical engagement.

Further, this study contributes to the limited research on intercultural communicative competence within the setting of higher education in Pakistan and emphasizing the experiences of postgraduate learners. It provides insights into the development of intercultural competence, especially in environments with little foreign exposure. The study establishes a basis for subsequent research and educational change intended to match English language instruction in Pakistan with the requirements of a progressively interconnected global environment. In shorts, enhancing ICC is not a secondary component of language teaching but a fundamental educational objective. Incorporating intercultural viewpoints into ESL instruction is crucial for enabling learners to be not only skilled language users but also thoughtful, courteous, and accountable contributors to global communication.

Recommendations
Typically, a single research study cannot cover all aspects of a research problem and that is why there is always space for improvement and research gap or novelty to examine various aspects of the research problem. Future studies may also include larger and more diverse groups of students from different universities, disciplines, departments and at various educational levels. The same would allow comparisons across institutions and provide a more accurate picture of ICC in Pakistani higher education. Long-term studies are also recommended especially in Pakistani context to see how ICC develops over time. Following student performance over several semesters can show whether an ongoing teaching method combined with exposure to multiple cultures is enough for students to make positive changes in their lives.

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