Advanced Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies
Volume 10, Issue 1, 2026 | Pages 2963–2975
Journal homepage: www.ajids.dmu.edu.et

Research Article

Effects of Intercultural Instruction on EFL Learners' Intercultural Awareness

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ARTICLE INFO

Received: 23 March 2026
Revised: 10 June 2026
Accepted: 25 August 2026
Available online: 15 September 2026

KEYWORDS

Intercultural instruction,
Intercultural awareness,
EFL learners,
Target culture,
Local culture,
Intercultural competence

ABSTRACT

In an increasingly globalized world characterized by rapid mobility and growing cultural diversity, a purely linguistic focus in EFL instruction is no longer sufficient to prepare learners for complex global interactions. Despite growing recognition of the importance of intercultural competence, many EFL classrooms, particularly in Ethiopian higher education contexts, continue to emphasize linguistic knowledge while giving limited attention to intercultural learning. Therefore, this study investigates the effect of intercultural instruction on EFL learners' intercultural awareness. An embedded quasi-experimental pre-test-post-test non-equivalent design was employed, involving a treatment group exposed to intercultural instruction and a comparison group that followed a conventional linguistically oriented syllabus. Quantitative data were collected using a validated intercultural awareness scale administered before and after the intervention, while qualitative data were obtained through post-intervention open-ended reflection questionnaires. Findings from the quantitative analysis indicated that learners in the treatment group demonstrated a significantly higher level of intercultural awareness compared to the comparison group after the intervention, while the comparison group showed minimal improvement. Qualitative findings further revealed that students in the treatment group shifted their perceptions of English from a purely academic subject to a tool for cultural understanding, mediation, and global communication. Overall, the findings suggest that intercultural instruction significantly enhances EFL learners' intercultural awareness and transforms language learning into a meaningful tool for global communication and cultural understanding.

1. Introduction

Language teaching has undergone considerable evolution, moving from linguistic competence to communicative competence and, more recently, to intercultural competence. Initially, as Chomsky (1965) highlighted, language learning primarily focused on acquiring linguistic structures. This approach often neglects the socio-cultural dimensions of language teaching, with teachers overlooking the broader cultural context in which language functions. Subsequently, the rise of pragmatics in the 1960s and 1970s represented a significant shift in the philosophy of language teaching, emphasizing the importance of communicative effectiveness rather than grammatical accuracy.

Despite its contribution to language education, communicative competence has been criticized for its limited attention to the intercultural dimensions of communication. Scholars such as Byram (1997, 2008), Corbett (2003), Fantini (2009), and Kramsch (1993, 1998) argue that effective communication in today's multicultural world

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DOI: http://doi.org/10.20372/ajids.2026.2963

requires more than linguistic and communicative abilities; it also requires intercultural competence. Consequently, intercultural language teaching has emerged as an approach that places culture at the centre of language education and prepares learners to act as intercultural speakers and mediators across diverse cultural contexts (Byram, 1997; Corbett, 2003; Kramsch, 1993).

Building on this shift toward intercultural competence, incorporating cultural elements into language teaching in contemporary language education is widely recognized as a key requirement for effective learning in the 21st century. Language and culture are widely acknowledged as inseparable components of communication. Cultural knowledge enables learners to understand the meanings, values, beliefs, and social norms embedded in language use, making it essential for effective communication and interaction (Brown, 1994; Kramsch, 1993; McKay, 2003). Consequently, culture has been recognized as an integral element of language teaching and learning, contributing to the learners ability to communicate appropriately and meaningfully across cultural contexts (Bennett, 1993; Kumaravadivelu, 2003; Tomalin & Stempleski, 2013).

To operationalize this cultural integration, intercultural language teaching adopts an integrated analytical framework that combines cultural, social, cognitive, and critical language learning perspectives. Primarily, the study is grounded in Byram's (1997) Intercultural Communicative Competence theory, which conceptualizes language learning as the ability to interpret, evaluate, and negotiate meanings across cultural boundaries. According to Byram (1997), intercultural competence comprises five interrelated dimensions: knowledge, attitude, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness. These dimensions explain how intercultural instruction enhances learners' intercultural awareness by enabling them to compare cultures, interpret cultural meanings, and critically reflect on cultural differences. In addition, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory views learning as a socially mediated process shaped by interaction, collaboration, and the use of cultural tools, such as language and texts, within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). From this perspective, intercultural instruction operates as a scaffolded learning process through which learners construct meaning through engagement with texts, teachers, and peers. Therefore, the integration of ICC and sociocultural theory provides a coherent framework for explaining how intercultural instruction develops EFL learners' intercultural awareness through cognitive-cultural outcomes and socially mediated learning processes. Moreover, intercultural language teaching is aligned with Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy, which emphasizes the capacity of learners to critically examine social and cultural realities, question dominant discourses, and contribute to social justice and equity.

Translating these theoretical frameworks into real-world practice is essential, as meaningful intercultural interaction has emerged as an indispensable condition for successful relationships in a globalized society. Intercultural awareness becomes especially important when language learners interact with people from different countries or cultures within their own country. It refers to the cognitive aspect of intercultural communication and the understanding of one's own and others' culture, which affects how people think and behave (Liu, 2016). Jiang (2000) argues that communication between people with different cultural backgrounds would be a misunderstanding without intercultural awareness. Consequently, the development of intercultural awareness should be regarded as a central priority in contemporary language education.

Despite the recognized importance of this educational priority, English language teaching in many Ethiopian universities remains predominantly focused on linguistic aspects of language learning, with limited attention to intercultural dimensions (Habtamu, 2011; Tsegaye, 2012**)**. As a result, students often have insufficient opportunities to engage with diverse cultural perspectives, critically compare cultures, and develop the intercultural competencies required for effective communication in multicultural settings. This challenge is particularly significant in institutions of higher education characterized by increasing cultural and ethnic diversity. Studies conducted by Abera (2010) and Tsegaye (2012) indicated that inadequate preparation for intercultural interaction may contribute to ethnocentrism, prejudice, distrust, and interpersonal conflicts among students from different cultural backgrounds.

These empirical findings are further supported by the researchers' primary instructional observations. The professional experience of the researchers as an EFL instructor in Ethiopian universities further supports these concerns. Informal interactions with students revealed difficulties in interpreting intercultural meanings, comparing cultural perspectives, and understanding cultural references embedded in English language materials. Students frequently rely on their own cultural frameworks when interpreting unfamiliar cultural practices, which may reinforce stereotypes and limit their appreciation of cultural diversity. These observations suggest that the limited

integration of intercultural content in English language instruction may hinder the development of learners' intercultural awareness.

In this regard, intercultural instruction has been proposed as a potential pedagogical approach for addressing these challenges by providing opportunities of learners to encounter diverse cultural perspectives and critically reflect on cultural differences and similarities. Accordingly, many scholars argue that intercultural instruction can effectively promote intercultural awareness by exposing learners to diverse cultural perspectives and encouraging critical reflection on cultural differences and similarities (Baker, 2011; Byram, 2008; Fantini, 2009; Kramsch, 1998, 2013; Van, 2009). Nevertheless, the effectiveness of intercultural instruction remains a subject of debate. Holliday (2011) contends that intercultural teaching in many EFL contexts is often superficial and fails to foster deep critical engagement. Moreover, Liu and Fang (2017) claimed that the use of cultural materials at a surface level without critical reflection does not significantly increase students' intercultural awareness. Similarly, Phipps and Guilherme (2004) argue that meaningful intercultural awareness develops primarily through lived experiences and critical reflection, while Phillipson (1992) cautions that if not implemented critically, intercultural instruction may unintentionally reinforce linguistic and cultural dominance.

Although intercultural issues in Ethiopian higher education have received some scholarly attention, the effects of intercultural instruction on EFL learners' intercultural awareness have not been investigated directly. For instance, Haregu et al. (2024) examined the relationship between intercultural competence and cooperative classroom life, while Tsegaye (2012) focused on intercultural communication as a framework for managing cultural diversity in higher education. Similarly, Mekonnen et al. (2023) studied the effects of culture-based tasks on improving the speaking skills of EFL learners. However, these studies mainly emphasize intercultural competence, classroom interaction, speaking skills, and cultural content integration rather than directly measuring the effect of intercultural instruction on intercultural awareness. Moreover, there is limited empirical evidence that specifically examines the effect of intercultural instruction using local and target cultural texts on EFL learners' intercultural awareness within Ethiopian higher education EFL contexts. Hence, the objective of this study was to examine whether or not intercultural instruction develops EFL learners' intercultural awareness. Accordingly, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. Is there a statistically significant difference in EFL learners' intercultural awareness between the treatment and comparison groups after the intervention?
2. How do EFL learners' in treatment group reflect on their experience with intercultural instruction after the intervention?

2. Methods

2.1. Design of the Study

This study employed an embedded quasi-experimental pre-test-post-test non-equivalent design, primarily quantitative, but supplemented with open-ended questionnaires to collect qualitative data. Creswell and Clark (2007) assert that embedded quasi-experimental designs incorporate some qualitative data within an experimental framework, where the quantitative component remains dominant and the qualitative element serves a supportive role. This design included a treatment group that engaged in intercultural instruction and a comparison group that followed the conventional language instruction, with both groups demonstrating baseline equivalence prior to the intervention. Such designs are frequently used in educational research to statistically assess intervention effects while simultaneously capturing participants' experiences about the intervention process.

2.2. Participants and Sampling Techniques

Seven intact sections of first-year EFL learners were enrolled in the Communicative English Language Skill I course during the study period. To establish a representative sampling frame while keeping data collection manageable, four sections were initially selected using a simple random sampling procedure (lottery method). Randomly selecting these four sections rather than through convenience sampling ensured that every section had an equal chance of inclusion, thus minimizing potential bias despite practical constraints (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Following this initial random selection, a pre-test on intercultural awareness was administered across all four chosen sections. To determine baseline equivalence, an independent samples t-test was conducted on pre-test scores. Based on these statistical results, two intact sections that demonstrated no statistically significant difference in their mean scores were selected, establishing initial homogeneity between the groups before the intervention.

Finally, to assign the two homogenous sections to their respective conditions, a lottery draw was used to designate one section as the treatment group (n=52) and the other as the comparison group (n=54). Although full randomization was not possible due to the administrative structure intact university classrooms, combining initial random section selection, statistical baseline equivalence testing, and random assignment of conditions minimized potential selection bias and satisfied the requirements of a rigorous quasi- experimental research design.

2.3. Data Gathering Instruments

2.3.1. The Intercultural Awareness Scale

The selection and design of data-gathering instruments were directly derived from the integrated theoretical frameworks. Specifically, Byram's (1997) five-dimensional ICC model operationalized the construct of intercultural awareness; sociocultural theory guided the emphasis on capturing learners' mediated experiences through qualitative reflection; and critical pedagogy informed the inclusion of items that assess learners' ability to critically examine cultural assumptions and power dynamics.

Grounded in these theoretical foundations, the intercultural awareness scale was structured across five core dimensions. First, it assesses learners' affective reactions to cultural diversity and their emotional openness to other cultures. Second, it evaluates the metacognitive aspect by gauging the extent to which learners recognize and reflect upon their own cultural perspectives and biases. Third, the scale measures the cognitive aspect, examining how intercultural instruction facilitates EFL learners' knowledge of factual and conceptual dimensions of different cultures to prevent misconceptions and promote mutual understanding. Fourth, it captures the motivational component, reflecting EFL learners' willingness to engage with other cultures and their potential for intercultural communication. Finally, the behavioral dimension measures the real actions of EFL learners in cross-cultural interactions.

To operationalize these dimensions, quantitative data were collected using a 60 item questionnaire with a five -point Likert scale, ranging from 5 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree). It was administered as both a pre-test and a post-test, and was adapted from Ang et al. Koh (2007), and Saka and Asma (2020). To examine the reliability of the instrument, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was employed. Therefore, the intercultural awareness scale was pilot tested with a sample, and the analysis yielded an alpha of 0.75. The results revealed that the scale items were homogeneous and were assessing the same underlying intercultural awareness construct.

2.3.2. Reflection Questionnaires (Treatment Group only)

The open-ended reflection questionnaires were designed to capture the students' lived experiences, involvement in the lessons, and challenges faced during the intervention. Moreover, it was utilized to obtain feedback from students about what was most or least helpful, as well as their suggestions for improving future instruction. In order to make this instrument appropriate, the researchers designed the questionnaires aligned with the key dimensions of Byram (1997) intercultural competence model.

The questionnaire items were designed to capture learners' experiences across all three levels of the integrated framework. Questions addressing sociocultural mediation (e.g., How did comparing Ethiopian and British cultural practices help you understand both cultures better?) were derived from Vygotsky's concept of cultural tools. Questions addressing critical consciousness (e.g., Did the instruction challenge any stereotypes you previously held?) were derived from Freire's critical pedagogy. Questions addressing intercultural competencies (e.g., Describe a situation where you felt more confident communicating across cultures after the intervention) were derived from Byram's ICC model.

2.3.3. Validity of Instruments

To ensure the validity of the instruments used in this study, namely the intercultural awareness scale and reflection questionnaires, several procedures were undertaken. First, content validity was established through expert review. The initial versions of the instruments were examined by PhD in TEFL holders in language education. The experts evaluated whether the items adequately represented the construct of intercultural awareness and reflected its key dimensions, including cultural knowledge, attitudes toward cultural diversity, respect for cultural differences, openness to other cultures, and intercultural interaction. They also assessed the relevance, clarity, comprehensiveness, and appropriateness of each item for first-year EFL learners. Based on their comments and recommendations, unclear, redundant, and ambiguous items were revised, reworded, or removed.

Complementing expert evaluation, face validity was established through pilot testing. The intercultural awareness scale and reflection questionnaires were administered to a group of students who possessed characteristics similar to those of the actual study participants. The pilot study enabled the researchers to evaluate the readability, clarity, comprehensibility, and appropriateness of the instruments. Participants were encouraged to provide feedback regarding confusing terms, unclear statements, and the overall length of the instruments. Based on their feedback, many items were modified to improve clarity and ensure that respondents could easily understand and respond to them. Furthermore, the reflection questionnaire was reviewed by experts to determine whether the open-ended questions effectively elicited students' perceptions, experiences, and reflections related to intercultural learning. The experts confirmed that the questions were aligned with the objectives of the study and capable of generating relevant qualitative data concerning learners' intercultural awareness development. Ultimately, through expert evaluation, pilot testing, and subsequent revisions, the instruments were refined to ensure that they accurately measured the intended constructs and generated valid data for the study.

2.4. Intervention

2.4.1. Treatment Group

The intervention design was explicitly grounded in the theoretical frameworks, with each component developed to operationalize the underlying theories. First, consistent with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, the reading texts were selected as cultural tools that mediate learning. The pre-, while-, and post-reading activities were structured as scaffolded tasks within the learners' Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD): pre-reading activities activated prior knowledge (providing scaffolding from teacher and external sources), while-reading activities guided comparative analysis (fostering co-construction with peers), and post-reading activities required independent synthesis (internalization). Collaborative activities such as group discussions and role-playing were designed to facilitate social interaction as the primary mechanism for intercultural learning.

Moreover, drawing from Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy, the intervention emphasized problem-posing rather than cultural transmission. Learners were not simply told about cultural differences but were asked to critically examine why differences exist, who benefits from certain cultural norms, and how their own cultural positioning shapes their perceptions. Activities explicitly encouraged learners to question stereotypes, recognize cultural biases in texts, and develop agency as cultural mediators rather than passive recipients of cultural information. The safe and inclusive classroom environment, noted by students in their reflections, was deliberately established to enable critical dialogue without fear of judgment.

In addition, operationalizing Byram's (1997) Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) model, the intervention systematically addressed all five competency dimensions. Attitudes of curiosity and openness were fostered through pre-reading discussions that elicited personal reflections. Knowledge of self and other cultures was developed through comparative analysis of Ethiopian and British cultural texts. Skills of interpreting and relating were practiced through tasks requiring learners to identify similarities and differences across cultures. Skills of discovery and interaction were developed through role-plays and debates simulating intercultural encounters. Critical cultural awareness was cultivated through post-reading activities that asked learners to evaluate cultural practices from multiple perspectives and justify their evaluations with evidence from texts.

The intervention comprised reading comprehension passages that were specifically selected to represent both the target culture (British) and local culture (Ethiopian) culture. The intervention was conducted over 12 weeks, during

which students were engaged with five reading texts that incorporated intercultural instruction, with two texts representing each culture and one reading text containing both the target and local cultures.
For the target culture component, the participants worked with two reading comprehension passages that explored various aspects of British culture. These reading texts covered topics such as Boxing Day and The Art of Queuing. These passages were adapted from Davis & Holland (2007) and Christopher (2015). Likewise, the local culture components required participants to read two texts based on aspects of Ethiopian culture. These reading texts addressed topics related to Ethiopian holidays: traditions, festivals and historical events. While Ethiopia has a rich diversity of cultures, the researchers chose these texts because they offered valuable insights in to Ethiopian traditions and practices, making it possible to effectively compare and contrast them with the target culture (British). This criterion ensured that there were ample opportunities within the reading passages for the learners to develop intercultural awareness. Hence, they guaranteed that each and every part of Ethiopian culture was thoroughly allocated to a different part of the society for the learners. The local cultural reading texts were adapted from the Ethiopian Authority for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage. Moreover, a reading text incorporating both the target (British) and the home culture (Ethiopian) entitled Politeness and Manners in British and Ethiopian Culture was designed. This reading text examined the different ways of conveying politeness in British and Ethiopian contexts and demonstrated how cultural values and norms shape interpersonal communication.

Intercultural reading tasks were designed as pre, during and post-reading stages. Pre-reading activities were aimed at activating learners' prior knowledge, engaging them in discussions to tap into their existing knowledge of target and local cultures, and eliciting personal reflections, beliefs and experiences related to these cultures. In addition, the contents of these activities provided relevant cultural background information on British and Ethiopian societies, and visual aids were incorporated to help students established a meaningful context for the cultures under study. The students were also provided with pre- teach vocabulary related to equip them with the necessary linguistic tools. The activities also motivated students to make predictions about the content and topics of the texts to be read, by utilizing the cultural settings, and to establish personal objectives concerning what they would like to learn or the insights that they expect to gain from each culture.

In the while-reading stage, activities included strategies such as skimming for the gist of a text, scanning for specific information, making connections to personal experiences and external knowledge, visualizing content for better retention, and inferring implicit meanings. During this stage, students compared and contrasted the cultural elements, practices, and beliefs depicted in the target and local cultural reading texts.

Summarizing and synthesizing activities were subsequently designed for the post-reading phase. The researchers encouraged students to connect this new information with prior knowledge and develop an overall understanding of the texts. Moreover, the activities established an inclusive atmosphere for students to freely express their opinions and interact with one another in a respectful manner. Students considered the ways in which the texts shaped their understanding of both the target and local cultures and how such understanding related to their own cultural identity. The students were asked to justify their points with quotes from the texts and to include personal interpretations that demonstrated critical thinking skills. Additionally, group discussions, role- plays, and debates were held as students participated in intercultural dialogues on the issues and cultural differences contained in the reading passages. Furthermore, these activities enabled the learner to spot similarities and differences within specific cultural categories discussed in the target and the local culture reading texts. Finally, students were asked to identify cultural values, practices, or beliefs that differed distinctly across cultures and reflect on how these differences shaped their understanding.

2.4.2. Comparison Group

The researchers provided the comparison group with conventional language instruction. This instruction followed the design of the course book teaching materials provided by the Ministry of Education (MoE) of Ethiopia for all universities in the country. The comparison group engaged in the entire reading process; namely, pre-, while-, and post-reading stages. However, the reading texts and tasks were not intercultural oriented. During the lessons, the students' tasks were heavily text-bound. Students were engaged in activities such as locating the main ideas, skimming for specific details, decoding vocabulary, paraphrasing, and solving grammatical exercises based on the reading passages. The aim was to foster grammatical competence and vocabulary knowledge while guiding students through a semi-structured learning process. Overall, the primary objective maintained a strong focus on linguistic content, ensuring that students could accurately decode and re-encode information from the text. The learning

structure was predictable, as it intended to move from pre-reading vocabulary activation to while-reading comprehension checks and finally to a personal opinion or summary after reading. Cultural content was considered as a background setting but not as the central focus of the analysis.

In addition, the activities led learners toward understanding the explicit statements in the text, but did not encourage them to question underlying cultural assumptions or relate the topics with their own cultural realities or those in world contexts. For example, while the students paraphrased the main ideas, they were rarely prompted to question the cultural context of the information or examine it in light of their own experiences and those of others.

2.5. Methods of Data Analysis

Data analysis involved inferential statistics namely independent and paired samples t-tests were conducted, and effect size were calculated using Cohen's d. Before conducting the t-test for independent samples, assumption of normality, homogeneity of variance, and independence of observations were tested using SPSS. The Shapiro-Wilk test was applied separately to the treatment and comparison groups to examine normality. Normality assumption was met because the *p*-values for both groups were above the conventional significance level of 0.05. In addition, the equality of variances was tested using Levene's test, which was non-significant suggesting that the assumption of homogeneity of variance was not violated. The assumption of observational independence was also satisfied because the data were collected from different participants without repeated measures or interdependence. Because all statistical assumptions were met, the use of the independent samples t-test as a parametric test was considered valid for comparing group means. A significance level of $p < 0.05$ was used to determine statistical significance.

In addition, paired samples t-tests were performed to examine within-group differences between the pre- and post-test scores for both the treatment and comparison groups. Before conducting the paired samples t-tests, the following key assumptions were examined. Assumptions of paired observations, a continuous dependent variable, and independence of pairs were satisfied because the continuous dependent variables were assessed in the same subjects at two time points, and each subject's data were independent of others. No violations of the assumptions were observed and, therefore, the paired samples t-tests results were accepted as valid.

Finally, participants' responses to the reflection questionnaire were subjected to thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: (1) familiarizing with data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. This qualitative analysis offered deeper insights into the quantitative findings by capturing participants' reflections on the intervention.

2.6. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Department of English Language and Literature at Debre Markos University before data collection commenced. Institutional permission was secured from the university authorities, and the purpose, procedures, benefits, and potential risks of the study were clearly explained to all participants.

Written informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to their involvement. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. To ensure data privacy and protect participant rights, all collected data were treated confidentially, and anonymity was maintained by removing or coding any identifying information. Throughout the study, the researchers adhered to established ethical principles to safeguard participants' well-being and ensure the integrity of the research process.

Furthermore, to ensure fairness and minimize any potential disadvantage to students in the comparison group, arrangements were made to provide them with access to the intercultural language teaching materials and instructional approaches following the completion of the intervention. Make-up sessions, tutorial classes, and remedial support were planned to help these students benefit from the same learning opportunities received by the treatment group. This measure was taken to uphold the ethical principle of equity and ensure that no participant was deprived of the potential educational benefits associated with the intervention.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Pre-Intervention Results

To verify that any subsequent effects could be attributed to the intervention itself and not to pre-existing group differences, an independent samples t-test was conducted. Table 1 presents the pre-intervention statistics for intercultural awareness for both the treatment and comparison groups. An independent-samples t-test was performed to evaluate the initial equivalence of the two groups. The results indicated that the difference between the treatment group (M = 1.73, SD = .214) and the comparison group (M = 1.69, SD = .206); t(104) = 1.00, p = .317 was not statistically significant. The magnitude of the difference between the means was very small (Cohen's d = .19), further confirming that the groups were similar at the beginning of the study.

Table 1**.** Pre-test result on intercultural awareness**.**

Group	N	M	SD	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances			t-test for Equality of Means			Effect Size
					F	Sig.	T	df.	p (2-tailed)	
Treatment	52	1.73	.214	Equal variances Assumed			1.00	104	.317	
Comparison	54	1.69	.206	Equal variances not assumed	.031	.861	1.00	103	.317	0.19

3.2. Post-Intervention Results

Table 2 displays the post-intervention statistics for intercultural awareness across the treatment and comparison groups. An independent-samples t-test was performed to evaluate the differences in the final scores. The analysis identified a statistically significant difference in the outcomes of the treatment group (M = 2.42, SD = .21) and the comparison group (M = 1.77, SD = .23); t(104) = 14.9, p = .001). The effect size was very large (Cohen's d = 2.9). This large effect size can be explained by a substantial improvement in mean scores following the intervention combined with relatively low variability within the groups, particularly in the treatment group, as reflected in the small standard deviations demonstrating a large and meaningful difference between the groups after the intervention period. Since Cohen's d standardizes mean differences using pooled or difference standard deviations, reduced variability naturally leads to larger effect size estimates.

Table 2. Post-test result on intercultural awareness.

Group	N	M	SD	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances			t-test for Equality of Means			Effect Size
					F	Sig.	T	df.	p (2-tailed)	
Treatment	52	2.42	.21	Equal variances Assumed		.685	14.9	104	.001	
Comparison	54	1.77	.23	Equal variances not assumed	.165		14.9	103	.001	2.9

3.3. Pre- and Post-Test Comparisons

Table 3 displays the pre- and post-test outcomes for intercultural awareness in the treatment group. A paired-samples t-test was conducted to compare scores from the pre-test and post-test administrations. The findings indicate a substantial rise in mean scores from the pre-test (M = 1.73, SD = .214) to the post-test (M = 2.42, SD = .217). This increase was statistically significant, t(51) = -18.96, p = .001. The effect size was very large (Cohen's d = 2.6). Statistically, Cohen's d increases when there is a large mean difference relative to the variability of score changes. In this study, the significant improvement in post-test scores compared to pre-test scores (mean difference = 0.69)

combined with a relatively small standard deviation of the difference scores resulted in the magnified standardized effect size.

Table 3.Treatment Group: Pre- and Post-Test Intercultural Awareness

Repeated Measures	Descriptive Statistics			t-test for Equality of Means			Effect Size
	N	Mean	SD	T	Df	Sig. (2- tailed)	
Pre-test	52	1.73	.214				
Post-test	52	2.42	.217	-18.96	51	.001	2.6

From a pedagogical perspective, the large effect size was attributed to the intensive and focused nature of the intercultural instruction, which was systematically integrated into classroom activities. The intervention provided learners with continuous exposure to intercultural content, reflective tasks, and guided practice, which likely led to a strong and consistent improvement across participants. In addition, the relatively homogeneous background of the participants may have contributed to reduced variability in learning gains, further increasing the magnitude of the standardized effect.

Table 4. Comparison Group: Pre- and Post-Test Intercultural Awareness

Repeated Measures	Descriptive Statistics			t-test for Equality of Means			Effect Size
	N	Mean	SD	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	
Pre-test	54	1.69	.206				
Post-test	54	1.77	.233	-1.99	53	.052	.36

Table 4 presents the pre-test and post-test statistics for intercultural awareness within the comparison group. A paired-samples t-test was performed to evaluate changes in scores over the study period. The analysis indicated an increase in mean scores from the pre-test (M = 1.69, SD = .206) to the post-test (M = 1.77, SD = .233); however, this difference was not statistically significant; $t(53) = -1.99$, $p = .052$. The effect size was small (Cohen's $d = .36$). Therefore, it can be concluded that there was no meaningful improvement in intercultural awareness for the comparison group.

3.4. Analysis of Post-Treatment Reflection Questionnaires

A central theme in the reflections was a noticeable shift in the learning approach to English language learning. Students consistently redefined the purpose of learning EFL. Instead of concentrating only on linguistic aspects, such as vocabulary and grammar, they began to see language as a tool for cultural understanding and global connection. This new perspective was expressed by Student 10, who stated, 'Before, English was just an exam subject.' 'Now, I see it as a key to understanding people from other countries and sharing my own culture.'

Increased awareness and confidence in intercultural communication was also important theme. Students reported developing deeper understanding of their own culture alongside empathy for and acceptance of other cultures. This shift was particularly evident following intervention. For instance, Student 7 remarked, 'I had to explain my own holidays to an international partner, which made me understand my own culture better before I could even understand others.' This growing confidence, cultivated through structured peer feedback sessions, was frequently associated with students expressing a stronger intention to seek out future intercultural exchanges. Student 42 supported this observation: 'The first time I discussed a sensitive topic in class, I was nervous.' However, the respectful rules we set made it safe. Now, 'I speak to more people from those backgrounds and I feel more confident.' The safe space of the classroom fostered through these discussions was essential, as it express their views and listen to alternative perspectives.

Therefore, it can be concluded that intercultural instruction fostered a positive and engaging learning environment which increases intercultural awareness level of students. Collectively, these findings indicated that foreign language learning may shift from a mechanical concern with linguistic accuracy to a more intellectually enriching

and humanistic activity. Ultimately, this approach allows students to acquire both language skills and the critical cultural competencies necessary to thrive as thoughtful and confident citizens in an interconnected world.

4. Discussion

This study was designed to investigate the effect of intercultural instruction on EFL learners' intercultural awareness and to identify whether there was a statistical significance between the comparison and treatment groups in the post-test. The quantitative results indicated that the treatment group significantly outperformed the comparison group. This substantial gain aligns with the principles of sociocultural theory, suggesting that intercultural texts may function as cultural tools that foster cognitive and affective development (Vygotsky, 1978). By engaging with instructional materials that integrated both local (Ethiopian) and target (British) contexts, learners were able to bridge new cultural concepts with their existing mental frameworks. This aligns with Kramsch's (1993), 'third space' concept, where learners negotiate meaning between their own culture and others. Furthermore, giving equal weight to local (Ethiopian) traditions and target (British) customs, the instruction avoided marginalizing native identity of learners, a common pitfall of Western-centric curricula (Phillipson, 1992). Although this balanced pedagogy facilitated key disposition of intercultural citizenship (Byram, 2008), it should be noted that the present study did not directly measure students' behavioral capacity to act as intercultural mediators in real-time encounters.

These findings corroborate a broader body of literature emphasizing the deliberate integration of cultural dimensions in English language teaching. For instance, Byram's (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence asserts that effective language teaching must transcend purely from linguistic training to foster openness, curiosity, and relational skills. In the present study, the treatment group's heightened ability to identify and overcome stereotypes reflects Byram's notion of critical cultural awareness: the capacity to critically evaluate both home and foreign cultural practices. Likewise, these empirical gains align with Sercu's (2005) model, which posits that embedding intercultural components enhances students' analytical skills rather than merely increasing factual retention. The present results are further supported by Lee (2012), who reported increased cultural awareness and reduced stereotyping among Korean EFL learners exposed to culture-based language programs. Both studies demonstrate that structured intercultural learning is vital for breaking down entrenched biases and nurturing intercultural empathy. Expanding beyond basic cultural awareness, the post-test improvements also confirm findings by Porto and Byram (2015), who advocated for a critical intercultural pedagogy that stimulates critical reflection and socially accountable learner action. In this study, asking learners to interrogate power dynamics, stereotypes, and cultural presuppositions encouraged active cognitive engagement. Consequently, the observed gains suggest that critical-pedagogy-informed instruction fosters both intercultural understanding and learner agency within EFL contexts.

However, contradictory findings exist. Liu and Fang (2017), warned that exposure at the surface level to cultural materials without critical reflection might not significantly increase students' level of intercultural awareness. Their results showed that many students were shallowly aware with their home culture, and they suggested it was significant to bringing local culture into the language education. They claimed that valuing local culture is part and parcel of contesting the hegemony of Anglophone norms English language teaching. Likewise, Phipps and Guilherme (2004) also claimed that authentic intercultural awareness is the result of lived experience and critical reflection, and is very difficult to replicate in formal educational settings. . In contrast, the current study tackled the issue by involving students' local and the target culture. This finding suggests that situating intercultural pedagogy within learners' cultural frames of reference may contribute to more inclusive and meaningful learning outcomes.

Although the short-term effectiveness of the intervention is clear, its long-term impact sustainability remains a question. For example, Vande Berg et al. (2023) reported that exposure to cultural difference, such as study abroad programs without structured reflection, frequently results in superficial learning or reinforce stereotypes. This highlights the necessity for guided, reflective pedagogy if deep intercultural learning is to be realized. Similarly, Holmes and O'Neill (2012) emphasized that intercultural development is a non-linear, long-term process which demands on-going assistance. The substantial post-intervention gain is encouraging, but it poses a significant question in term of sustainability. Do they continue to be high levels of awareness and confidence, or do they decay without continuous instructional support? This highlights the need for longitudinal study that maps the development of intercultural awareness beyond the immediate instructional context. Thus, while the present research validates the short-term positive impact of the structured intercultural instruction, it also indicates the necessity of longitudinal studies to investigate the persistence of such effects.

Based on these contradictory findings, the present study provides evidence on whether it is feasible to teach intercultural communication in the EFL classroom. The marked improvements observed in the treatment group suggest that systematic intercultural instruction can enhances learners' critical cultural awareness, empathy, and ability to challenge stereotypes within higher education contexts.

5. Conclusion

The findings of this study provide evidence that the intercultural instruction was associated with a significant improvement in EFL learners' intercultural awareness. The quantitative results revealed a statistically significant difference in intercultural awareness between the treatment and comparison groups at post-test. The treatment group, which received intercultural instruction, demonstrated substantially greater gains from pre-test to post-test and achieved a significantly higher post-test mean than the comparison group. The large within-group effect size (Cohen's $d = 2.6$) further indicates that the observed improvement was educationally substantial. However, given the quasi-experimental design, this improvement should be interpreted as an association with the intervention rather than as definitive evidence of a causal effect.

The qualitative findings from the post-intervention reflection questionnaires further indicated that intercultural instruction created a positive and engaging learning environment that supported students' development of intercultural awareness. Students described a shift in their perceptions of English from viewing it primarily as a subject for academic purposes to recognizing its role in intercultural communication and connecting with people from different cultural backgrounds. They also reported greater critical self-awareness and empathy, as well as increased confidence in expressing their own cultural perspectives and listening respectfully to alternative viewpoints. These findings suggest that structured intercultural instruction may provide learners with opportunities to develop comparative and reflective perspectives that can help them question and reconsider cultural stereotypes. Nevertheless, such outcomes should be interpreted within the specific context of the present study and cannot be generalized broadly without further evidence from diverse educational settings.

The pedagogical implications of the study are therefore potentially significant. Language instructors may benefit from integrating intercultural elements into language teaching through tasks that encourage comparison between local and target cultures and through classroom environments that provide opportunities for respectful dialogue and critical reflection. Such activities may create a supportive space in which learners can examine different perspectives while maintaining connections with their own cultural backgrounds.

Overall, the findings contribute to the growing body of research supporting the potential value of intercultural pedagogy in EFL contexts. Intercultural instruction may contribute to the development of attitudes, knowledge, and skills associated with intercultural awareness and intercultural citizenship alongside linguistic proficiency. However, given the limitations of the present study, further research involving larger and more diverse samples, multiple educational contexts, and longitudinal follow-up is needed to examine the generalizability and sustainability of these outcomes.

6. Limitations of the Study

Despite its positive findings, this study has some limitations that should be acknowledged when interpreting the results. First, the study involved a relatively small sample of first-year EFL learners from a single university, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other educational contexts. Second, the intervention was conducted over a relatively short period, and no longitudinal follow-up was undertaken. Consequently, it was not possible to determine whether the observed improvements in intercultural awareness were sustained over time. Third, the study relied predominantly on self-report measures and quantitative assessments, which may not fully capture the dynamic complexity of intercultural awareness development. Future research should employ larger and more diverse samples, incorporate longitudinal designs, and utilize mixed-methods approaches with multiple data sources to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the long-term effects of intercultural instruction.

Acknowledgment

We are grateful to Debre Markos University, Burie Campus first-year students for their cooperation and participation during the twelve-week implementation process of intercultural language teaching. Their participation was instrumental in the success of this study.

Declaration of Conflict of Interest

The authors do not have any conflict of interest.

Authors' Contribution

Melsew Shibabaw Bishaw conceptualized the study, designed the research framework, conducted data collection, performed data analysis, and drafted the manuscript. Dr. Mekonnen Esubalew Tariku and Dr. Belachew Zerihun Dememe supervised the study, provided methodological and theoretical guidance, and critically reviewed the manuscript for important intellectual content.

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