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## Intercultural Language Education in an EFL Context: Policymakers' Beliefs, Knowledge, and Planning

Zia Tajeddin<sup>1\*</sup>, Zari Saeedi<sup>2</sup>, & Neda Khanlarzadeh<sup>3</sup>

### Abstract

Although intercultural communicative competence (ICC) has been foregrounded in L2 pedagogy, the status of intercultural pedagogy in the context of English as a foreign language (EFL) education in terms of policymaking and planning stages has remained under-represented. Against this backdrop, the present study used interviews as a data source to explore the intercultural beliefs, knowledge, and planning of language institute managers and supervisors as micro-level policymakers. The findings revealed that, in general, participants were in favor of intercultural pedagogy and held positive views; yet, they lacked sufficient knowledge and neglected ICC in most aspects of their educational decisions and planning. In addition, their preference for considering learners' L1 culture and the existence of restrictive macro-level language policies were among the factors that hindered intercultural practice. Overall, the findings can enhance our understanding of ICC practice in language institutes and policymaking for ICC pedagogy.

**Keywords:** intercultural communicative competence (ICC), intercultural language teaching, language teaching policies, micro-level policymakers

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<sup>1</sup> Corresponding Author: Professor of Applied Linguistics, Department of English Language Teaching, Faculty of Humanities, Tarbiat Modares University, Tehran, Iran;

Email: [tajeddinz@modares.ac.ir](mailto:tajeddinz@modares.ac.ir); ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0430-6408>

<sup>2</sup> Associate Professor of Applied Linguistics, Allameh Tabataba'i University, Tehran, Iran

<sup>3</sup> PhD Candidate in Applied Linguistics at Allameh Tabataba'i University, Tehran, Iran

## 1. Introduction

During the last three decades, the cultural dimension of second/foreign language education has remarkably grown. L2 education has extended its focus from mere linguistic competence towards the attainment of communicative competence, which entails individuals' understanding of other societies' norms and values for successful communication (Byram, 2021). Consequently, the need for incorporating culture into the language learning and teaching process has been acknowledged by several L2 practitioners. One of the well-recognized approaches to teaching culture is intercultural language teaching. Proponents of intercultural education perceive language learning as a dynamic process embedded within social, cultural, and political contexts and consider it a context-dependent and value-laden activity (Byram, 2020; Chamberlin-Quinlisk & Senyshyn, 2012; Liddicoat & Scarino 2013). Meanwhile, whereas mainstream approaches to teaching culture mainly center on transferring cultural knowledge to language learners, the intercultural approach highlights the significance of the meaning-making process and intercultural identity formation that learners experience during their active engagement with language and cultures (Noels et al., 2020; Piątkowska, 2015). Thus, it is believed that ICC enables language learners to become moderators between various languages and cultures (Byram, 2021; Kohler, 2020; Zarate et al., 2004).

Similar to other approaches to language teaching and learning, one of the basic steps in implementing the intercultural approach is to develop appropriate planning and policies that can guide teachers and other stakeholders to practice it more efficaciously (Derakhshan & Shakki, 2020; Katsara, 2020; Liddicoat, 2004; Liddicoat et al., 2003; Nguyen, 2014). To date, several intercultural policies have been established and various actions have been taken in different organizations (e.g., Council of Europe, 2003, 2005, 2007, 2008; HEC, 2010) all around the world. However, compared with many other contexts where English is taught as a foreign language, ELT policies in Iran, including those concerning intercultural teaching, have been largely neglected and seem underdeveloped both at macro and micro levels (Atai & Mazlum, 2013; Mirhosseini & Khodakarami, 2015). Meanwhile, although a considerable number of studies have been conducted on culture and language teaching in Iran (e.g., Derakhshan, 2021; Ghavamnia, 2020; Rasouli & Moradkhani, 2021; Tajeddin & Teimournezhad, 2015), the status of intercultural policies and planning have so far remained underexplored in this context. To this end, the present study sought to investigate the status of intercultural pedagogy in

English language institutes in Iran by examining the intercultural beliefs, knowledge, and planning of institute managers and supervisors as ELT micro-level policymakers.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Intercultural Language Teaching

Intercultural pedagogy was developed to expand the concept of intercultural speaker as a model of culture teaching, as opposed to native-speakerism (Byram & Wagner, 2018). It mainly refers to individuals' "ability to effectively and appropriately execute communication behaviors that negotiate each other's cultural identity or identities in a culturally diverse environment" (Chen & Starosta, 1998, p. 28). Supporters of intercultural language teaching and learning believe that learners should attain the capability to be moderators between various languages and cultures (Byram & Zarate, 1994; Derakhshan & Shakki, 2019; Zarate et al., 2004) and develop meaning-making processes as well as intercultural identity formation during active engagement with language and cultures (Deardorff & Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017). So far, among the mainstream ICC models, Byram and Zarate's (1994) model has been welcomed by many scholars and has inspired subsequent intercultural teaching approaches. The model, which is known as *Savoirs* models, is composed of four main phases: *savoir* (knowledge), *savoir être* (intercultural attitude), *savoir comprendre* (interpreting and relating), and *savoir apprendre* (discovery and interaction), followed by an additional phase, *savoir s'engager* (education) (Byram, 2021; Byram & Zarate, 1994). The model begins with the knowledge of the culture and ends with the individual's ability to make cultural discoveries and critical evaluations. As opposed to the mainstream communicative competence models that idealize target society's cultural values and motivate L2 learners to follow native speakers' norms, proponents of ICC respect learners' L1 values and consider them in their teaching and learning process (Byram, 2020).

Evidently, attaining an appropriate level of ICC is challenging for most L2 learners (Peters & Anderson, 2021) as it cannot be fully achieved extemporaneously and requires a certain amount of time to be developed; in fact, it is a complicated process that demands constant attempt and feedback (McCloskey, 2012). Thus, teaching methods and techniques for enhancing individuals' ICC have proved to be quite effective (e.g., Lin et al., 2017; Lin & Wang, 2018; Truong & Tran, 2014;

Wang, 2023). A number of researchers have focused on the pedagogical aspects of ICC and suggested models that describe the individuals' ICC learning process (Liddicoat, 2006; Liddicoat et al., 2003). For example, Scarino and Liddicoat (2009) developed a model founded on the four stages of individuals' intercultural operations: noticing, comparing, reflecting, and interacting. The model suggests that individuals start by noticing new L2 cultural values, followed by comparing L2 cultural norms with their L1 cultural values, and, eventually, using their intercultural repertoire to actively engage in the meaning-making and expressing process.

Apart from suggesting various models depicting the ICC learning process (e.g., Liddicoat, 2006; Scarino & Liddicoat, 2009), a number of scholars embarked upon analyzing the effects of practicing different approaches and materials on learners' ICC development. For instance, Corbett (2003) and East (2012) discussed the potentials of communicative tasks and task-based language teaching (TBLT), respectively, as effective ways of practicing ICC in classes. Some researchers have also discussed the use of various texts and literature to increase learners' (inter)cultural awareness (e.g., Escudero, 2013; Kramersch, 2003; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013; Porto & Byram, 2017; Rodríguez & Puyal, 2012). Furthermore, as offspring of today's technological words and advances, more recently, countless effort has been made to develop L2 learners' ICC via web-based approaches (e.g., Godwin-Jones, 2019; Hirotani & Fujii, 2019; Jin, 2015; Lenkaitis et al., 2019; Lin & Wang, 2018; O'Dowd & Lewis, 2016; Sykes, 2016; Wang, 2023). Meanwhile, other approaches and techniques including portfolio projects, simulations, role-plays, games, translations, and immersions have been suggested and practiced by many L2 practitioners (see Bruna & Goethals, 2021; Busse & Krause, 2016; Fois, 2020; Hofstede & Pedersen, 1999; Jackson, 2018; Rothwell, 2011; Su, 2011). Piątkowska (2015) characterized these approaches to fostering learners' ICC into three categories: formal instruction, experiential learning tasks, and the use of new technologies. She believed that teaching practices that provide experiential learning for language learners, whether by means of technological equipment or not, would be more beneficial than methods that are based on solely formal instruction. Despite the rich literature on ICC and ICC development, due to the existing disputes on the definition and conceptualization of ICC, there is a lack of unified teaching methods for L2 teachers to draw upon (Byram & Wagner, 2018; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2010; Piątkowska, 2015). In addition, the insufficient support from policymakers and practitioners' insufficient knowledge in this area has aggravated this situation and hindered ICC from being practiced effectively (Gu, 2015; Young & Sachdev, 2011).

## 2.2. (Inter)Cultural Policies and Planning

Language policies can occur in different levels and areas of L2 education, including acquisition planning, corpus planning, and status planning (Wright, 2016). Since establishing language policies is one of the fundamental steps in second language education (Nekvapil, 2011), they need to be thoroughly explored by language practitioners. Today, the mainstream theories and models of language learning, internationalization, globalization, and the movement toward English as lingua franca have led to the growth of an intercultural approach in second/foreign language teaching and education policy (Crozet et al., 1999). To implement this new approach to language teaching, different policies have been developed and numerous actions have been taken in different countries. For example, during the late 1990s, the American Council on International Intercultural Education (ACIIE) included intercultural skills among their four proposed developmental stages of obtaining "global competence" (American Council on International Intercultural Education, 1996). Moreover, the Council of Europe (2003, 2005, 2007, 2008), as one of the leading language teaching organizations has made several revisions and discussions on the role of culture in individuals' foreign language development. It has emphasized that learners' ICC should be valued and the context for intercultural interactions should be created; thus, the importance of ICC is highlighted, and teacher educators are advised to include it in their programs. Later, in an online program called Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters, several principles based on Byram and Zarate's model (see Byram, 2021; Byram & Zarate, 1994) were suggested for developing ICC language learners (Council of Europe, 2003).

In a similar vein, movements toward ICC pedagogy have been sought in Asia and the Middle East. By developing a framework of New Standards for English Courses in 2006, Chinese policymakers considered shifting the focus of English courses from linguistic information to cultural awareness in order to enhance EFL learners' cultural knowledge competency and intercultural communication (Newton et al., 2010). Similarly, language educators in Turkey began to notice the role of culture in the Higher Education Curriculum and considered cultural competence among their three main domains of English language teacher education programs (HEC, 2010).

Some researchers have embarked on analyzing several national or international language policies (Faas et al., 2014; Hajisoteriou & Angelides, 2017; Schneider,

2020). For example, Faas et al. (2014) reviewed the key European-level policy documents in the field of intercultural education and reported an increase in European educational policy cooperation. Their analysis demonstrated that the main emphasis of recent European-level policies was on developing social cohesion by including migrant students. However, the proposed cultural policies were not practiced carefully in real classrooms, and cultural competence has been neglected in Turkish teacher education programs so far (Mahalingappa & Polat, 2013).

The significance of intercultural teaching in Iran, the context of the current study, has been noted by various scholars and they consider it as an important factor in improving international communications (Ardavani & Durrant, 2015; Davari & Aghagolzadeh, 2015). Yet, despite the great role of (inter)cultural knowledge in current language teaching approaches, Iranian national language teaching policies have recurrently advised teachers and materials developers to protect Iranian and Islamic cultural values and identities against the cultural invasion that might occur as a result of L2 teaching (Mirhosseini & Khodakarami, 2015; Rashidi & Hosseini, 2019); hence, prioritizing L1 culture over L2 culture can be vividly observed in Iranian ELT policies (Borjian, 2013; Tollefson, 1991). Accordingly, the published ELT materials in Iran that are supervised by national and state organizations seem to have fallen short of teaching (inter)cultural competence (Tajeddin & Teimournezhad, 2015). Meanwhile, little is known about ELT policymaking and policymakers in Iran, and scant research has targeted intercultural pedagogy (e.g., Mirhosseini & Khodakarami, 2015; Rashidi & Hosseini, 2019). Against this backdrop, this study sought to explore Iranian micro-level policymakers' beliefs, knowledge, and plans by focusing on the following research question:

RQ. What are Iranian EFL policymakers' beliefs, knowledge, and planning regarding intercultural language teaching?

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Participants

Overall, 31 micro-level policymakers, including English language institute supervisors and managers, were selected through purposive sampling in the current study in order to discuss their beliefs, knowledge, and planning concerning intercultural language teaching. In general, language institutes in Iran offer L2 classes across different proficiency levels and recruit teachers from different

educational backgrounds who meet requisite L2 proficiency and teaching quality standards. The participants were all working in such local and private language institutes and were responsible for administering their institutes' teacher training programs, materials selections or developments, and other educational decisions, besides the local policy development. In fact, as managers and supervisors or teacher educators make critical decisions in language institutes, their roles as micro-level policymakers in creating local policies are undeniable and their perceptions need to be investigated. In other words, unlike public school officials who follow the guidelines and materials developed by the Ministry of Education, language institutes' managers and supervisors are mostly language experts who have the liberty of establishing educational decisions in their centers. It should be noted that some of the participants acted as both managers and supervisors in their institute. The participants' work experiences varied from 1 to 25 years, which could provide us with a comprehensive view of various micro-level policymakers' beliefs. Furthermore, most of them (n = 30) held English-related degrees, that is, English Translation (n = 2), English Literature (n = 3), and Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) (n = 25). For the sake of anonymity, throughout the study, the participants were coded as P1-P31.

### 3.2. Data Source

To capture policymakers' beliefs, knowledge, and planning regarding intercultural language teaching and learning, a semi-structured interview protocol including 10 core questions (see Appendix) was developed in advance by the authors and validated by two professionals in the field of ICC pedagogy. Having the benefits of unstructured and fully structured interviews, the semi-structured interview process can be altered by the researcher on the spot in order to become more suited and purposeful. It provides the researcher with the chance to reformulate the misinterpreted questions and delve into the unexpected and ambiguous responses (Patten & Newhart, 2018). The questions probed into participants' beliefs, knowledge, and planning regarding intercultural pedagogy, and they were inspired by the literature on intercultural pedagogy and L2 practitioners' cognitions and beliefs (see Borg, 2003; Byram & Zarate, 1994, Scarino & Liddicoat, 2009, Sercu, 2005). Each interview lasted about 20-30 minutes. Participants were asked about their definition of the concept of culture, the importance of cultures in language teaching,

their opinions and experiences regarding ICC, ICC practice, the extent to which they consider ICC in their pedagogical decisions, and the importance of teachers' ICC level and practice. All the interview sessions were recorded with participants' permission.

### 3.3. Data Collection and Analysis

This study adopted the qualitative approach in both the data collection procedure and analysis of the gathered data to address the research question. We collected the data from 31 policymakers through interviews. Before starting data collection, all policymakers were asked to provide their informed consent about participating in this study. Afterward, the data were collected. The participating micro-level policymakers were briefed about the interview questions and were interviewed individually while they were being audio-recorded. The interviews were conducted in the participants' first language (Persian) in order to avoid any confusion or misunderstanding. The recorded responses were transcribed and examined through content analysis. The transcripts were precisely scrutinized, coded, and re-coded iteratively. To this end, a constant comparative method of coding was utilized, including three phases: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Scott & Medaugh, 2017). First, during the open coding phase, the data were divided into different sections mostly based on each interview question, as each question targeted a specific aspect of policymakers' beliefs, knowledge, or planning. Each part of the data was examined to identify relevant codes. Moreover, some parts of the data were divided into sub-codes based on the emerging codes. Next, through axial coding, the data were further categorized based on their relationship with participants' beliefs, knowledge, or planning. Parts of the data that were related to each of the categories of beliefs, knowledge, and planning were grouped together. In other words, the related sub-themes or subcategories were merged. Finally, through selective coding, the main categories were selected and labeled to summarize the entire data. Furthermore, the frequency of some of the recurring codes was calculated for the better presentation of the findings.

Finally, the reliability of the coding process was sought by calculating inter-rater reliability. To this end, 20% of the data, selected randomly, were content analyzed and coded by a second coder. The analysis of Cohen's Kappa measurement of agreement between the two sets of codes indicated the value of .726, which signifies a good level of agreement (Peat, 2001).



## 4. Findings

The responses to the interview questions concerning participants' beliefs, knowledge, and planning on ICC demonstrated the following findings.

### 4.1. Micro-Level Policymakers' Intercultural Knowledge and Beliefs

First, when the participants were asked about the components of culture, only three out of 31 participants referred to all aspects of culture, according to the National Standards (2006) model, which included perspective, practice, and product. According to this categorization, practices are defined as the patterns of behavior that are accepted by society; products are what a society creates during the course of time, both tangible (e.g., music, literature) and intangible (e.g., oral tales, rituals, art); and perspectives refer to the underlying ideas, attitudes, and values that explain why a society performs its practices and creates its products. In other words, the majority of them were not able to present a clear definition of the concept of culture, and only three of them referred to all aspects and components of culture. In addition, regarding Tomalin and Stempleski's (1993) well-known definition of culture and its components, only 12 of the participants highlighted both big c and small c cultures. The components of culture pointed out by the participants and their frequencies are as follows:

- (a) Perspective: mainstream latent values, ideas, etc. which shape people's identity (n = 11)
- (b) Practice: acceptable behavior patterns (n = 21)
- (c) Product: various social artefacts including art, tales, rituals (n = 13)
- (d) Big c: more visible aspects of culture such as cuisine, festivals, art, etc. (n = 0)
- (e) Small c: less visible aspects of culture including society's beliefs, behaviors, and values (n = 19)

Meanwhile, few of the participants (n = 3) referred to Perspective, Practice, and Product and 12 of them highlighted both big c and small c cultures.

Excerpts 1 and 2 highlight two incomprehensive definitions of culture provided by policymakers. Some missing components of culture can be observed in the provided definitions.

*Excerpt 1: Culture refers to the range of acceptable behaviors in a society. (P1, manager and supervisor)*

*Excerpt 2: It includes how people talk to each other. For example, how they greet or the way they show their disagreement. (P4, manager and supervisor)*

It could be argued that, by "acceptable behaviors" in Excerpt 1, the participants referred to the Practice or big c aspects of culture, and, in Excerpt 2, the other participant pointed out to the Practice and small c culture.

The policymakers were asked about the importance of culture in L2 teaching and learning. It turned out that, in general, 27 out of the 31 participants deemed culture as an important and undeniable aspect in L2 learning and teaching, as most of them (n= 27) referred to it as an "integral" and "inseparable" aspect, "intertwined" with the language, and stated that teaching language without considering the concept of culture would be "unreasonable" or "impossible". Excerpt 3 from one of the participants captures this point.

*Excerpt 3: I think it is very unreasonable to learn a foreign language without being familiar with its culture because many of the functions used in English are based on cultures and customs. Even the register of a language, for example, how it is formal or informal, has some cultural basis. I think it is very important. (P10, manager and supervisor)*

Yet, some of them (n = 4) believed that including culture in language teaching depends on other factors, namely learners' needs, interests, and age. It is also important to note that not all participants deemed L1 culture, L2 culture, and international culture as equally important. Only six of them acknowledged all cultures as equally important and as one of the main principles of ICC, whereas one of them put more emphasis on L1 culture, eight of them on L2 culture, and three of them on international culture. Moreover, most of them pointed out that, today, the English language is not the property of native speakers in the UK or US; thus, incorporating different cultures in language teaching classes is essential. For instance, as one of the participants argued in Excerpt 4:

*Excerpt 4: We can't call it English culture anymore since, as you know, English is not a language spoken in Britain or the US only. In addition to English-speaking countries, practically, we are using it all around the world. (P3, manager and supervisor)*

However, six of the participants believed that choosing among cultures is bounded by other factors, especially learners' needs and goals. Furthermore, few of them (n=6) believed that either L1 and L2 or L2 and international cultures should be the main focus in classes.

Moreover, the findings revealed that only a few of the participants, mainly those who held graduate degrees in teaching English, were familiar with the tenets of ICC whereas most of them had no conception of it before the interview sessions. Once the concept of ICC was briefly explained to them, the participants seemed to appreciate it as many of them voiced their positive opinion, although they admitted the difficulty of implementing this approach and referred to the necessity of certain higher-level policies and cultural foregrounds. It is important to note that six of them did not agree with ICC pedagogy due to their lack of interest, preference for linguistic competence, and lack of appropriate materials, among others. Excerpts 5 and 6 show policymakers' agreement regarding the intercultural pedagogy, while 7 illustrates an example of negative comment in this respect:

*Excerpt 5: I agree with this approach, but it's a big deal. Because even if a person does not want to leave the country to use this competence, ICC will increase his knowledge. But I think it is a very difficult thing to happen. (P2, manager and supervisor)*

*Excerpt 6: We cannot change the contents of the materials. We can only choose a textbook. Deliver it to teachers, and ask them to teach it in their classes. In this way, teachers are limited to teach based on the given books. This (intercultural pedagogy) is a great movement that needs to be decided and supported by higher levels of policymaking. (P8, supervisor)*

*Excerpt 7: If we try to focus on culture in our classes, at the end of the day, learners end up learning cultural values and discussing them without learning any grammar or new vocabulary. (P5, supervisor)*

#### **4.2. Micro-Level Policymakers' Intercultural Planning**

With regard to (inter)cultural programs and activities, it can be claimed that the micro-level policymakers were not very successful, as more than half of them (n = 20) admitted that they do not fully take (inter)cultural issues into account in their policies or programs, and two of them blatantly affirmed that they do not consider

them at all. The reasons for neglecting these issues as well as their frequency are given below:

- (a) Learners' lack of interests, and, in the case of young learners, their parents' lack of consensus (n = 8)
- (b) Limited choice of books and teaching materials, as only limited and prespecified types of textbooks can be used in language institutes (n = 6)
- (c) Macro-level policies that prohibit institute managers and supervisors from some activities (n = 6)
- (d) Teachers' lack of ICC and its teaching techniques (n = 2)

Excerpt 8 indicates one of the participants' reasons for neglecting ICC practice in her language institute as a result of the limitations imposed by the macro-level policies.

*Excerpt 8: We have faced some problems in implementing it (intercultural pedagogy). For example, you cannot decorate a Christmas tree during Christmas. They won't let us. We even used to celebrate Valentine's Day in our institute. I, personally, used to do it, but the new policies imposed on language institutes won't let us anymore. Therefore, whatever I want to do in this respect will be stopped by higher-level policies. (P1, manager and supervisor)*

However, nine of the participants considered intercultural pedagogy in their policies and programs, although some of them were mostly concerned with L1 culture and restrictive rules for teachers and learners. For example, they had to avoid sensitive topics that are against learners' L1 culture in class discussions, which obviously cannot be interpreted as an action for promoting intercultural pedagogy.

Moreover, the majority of the micro-level policymakers neither prepared any policy documents regarding (inter)cultural issues nor provided any guidelines in this respect for teachers and students to follow. Only seven prepared policy documents in their institutes that included cultural policies but were not concerned with L2 teaching pedagogy, as they mainly focused on students' and teachers' dress codes and general social behavior. In addition, 21 participants stated that they had received some national documents about L1 cultural issues which warned them about observing Islamic values, including teachers' and learners' dress codes as well as the content of the materials. However, this was not appreciated by micro-

level policymakers, as most of them (n = 23) believed these policies to be highly restrictive and unrelated to language pedagogy. The remaining participants, on the other hand, believed that these rules are necessary for educational contexts due to learners' L1 cultures.

The participants also neglected intercultural pedagogy in teacher recruitment and teacher education programs. Only five of them considered teachers' ICC while recruiting new teachers, whereas the majority of them admitted that ICC was not one of their main criteria or that they did regard this for the evaluation of teacher candidates (n = 21). They prioritized teachers' mastery of linguistic and teaching techniques. They claimed that hiring proficient teachers with both high linguistic and cultural proficiency was challenging as most of the recruited teachers in language institutes did not have English-major academic backgrounds.

This stimulated them to neglect ICC in their teacher education programs as well. Twenty-six of the policymakers admitted that they do not consider this competence seriously in their teacher education programs, and instead put emphasis on teaching methodologies and general English in these programs. Excerpts 9 and 10 highlight policymakers' positioning regarding the importance of ICC in their teacher education programs.

*Excerpt 9: There are so many problems in hiring teachers that I think culture is the last thing that I would pay attention to. I pay more attention to their general English and the way they treat students... Culture has not been one of our priorities and I have never thought about it. (P4, manager and supervisor)*

*Excerpt 10: We just practice based on the textbooks. I cannot say that we worked on it (ICC) very much. We usually focus on teachers' speaking skills, teaching methodologies, and creativity .... (P15, supervisor)*

ICC was not among their primary criteria for the selection of learning and teaching materials. More precisely, less than half of the policymakers (n = 12) analyzed the cultural content of the textbooks before selecting them. They attempted to adopt the materials that were more compatible with learners' L1 culture and avoided the use of materials that contained culturally controversial contents or overemphasized L2 culture. This policy can be vividly observed in Excerpt 11.

*Excerpt 11: I remember we didn't choose the Interchange book series because*

*the first lesson was about dating and the learners would ask us what the date was. This is what the transfer of L2 culture means. For this reason, we put aside the Interchange system and chose to use the Top-Notch series, which was more appropriate for our institute.* (P19, supervisor)

Regarding the materials selection, the participants also pointed out that they have limited choices and are only allowed to choose between predetermined books suggested by the Ministry of Education or the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. Despite this, they mostly preferred widely accepted textbooks such as the *Top-Notch* series and the *American English File* series, published by international publications, which mainly focus on L2 culture, unlike Iranian public schools which focus on nationally published materials. Furthermore, they claimed that due to financial and commercial issues, they needed to compete with other institutes and adopt the mainstream and "up-to-date" textbooks on the market which, by then, had been welcomed by Iranian L2 learners. As one of the policymakers stated in Excerpt 12:

*Excerpt 12: We usually use up-to-date books which are very well-known... This is because of the competitive situation with other institutes too. We are sure that the American English File series is good, and everyone is using them now.* (P8, supervisor)

In general, although the majority of the micro-level policymakers held positive views about intercultural pedagogy and were in favor of incorporating culture into L2 teaching and learning, in practice, they did not consider them in their policies and programs. They prioritized linguistic competence in most of their educational decisions and prudently observed L1 cultural values. Furthermore, their consideration for observing L1 cultural norms was substantially more than what they had claimed to be.

## 5. Discussion

Given the nexus between language and culture as well as the intercultural turn in language education during the past few decades, ICC has witnessed a surge of interest among numerous L2 researchers and practitioners. The present study focused on the policy-making aspects of ICC development and aimed at exploring L2 micro-level policymakers' beliefs, knowledge, and planning regarding intercultural language teaching. As influential agents in L2 pedagogy, supervisors and institute management are responsible for improving both the teaching process

and teachers' professional development (Chen & Cheng, 2013; Mette et al., 2020). These micro-level policymakers play substantial roles in L2 pedagogy as they mediate between higher-level policymakers and grass-root stakeholders, namely teachers who are in direct contact with language learners (Spillane et al., 2002; Wang, 2010); thus, delving into their perceptions and actions can contribute to our understanding of the current teaching practice.

The analysis of interviews with Iranian micro-level policymakers indicated their inclination towards including cultural and intercultural aspects in their teaching programs, which was also evidenced in previous related research (Byrd et al., 2011). Yet, despite this tendency, their knowledge of intercultural education is quite limited; that is to say, they failed to consider all components of culture in their definitions and were not aware of the principles of intercultural pedagogy. Micro-level policymakers find it truly difficult to incorporate ICC in their practices and planning. In other words, although they are in favor of including culture in their educational goals and attest to the tangled nexus between language and culture, thus far, they have not been successful in doing so. For example, during the process of recruiting teachers in their institutes, ICC was not among policymakers' criteria for assessing teachers' qualifications, as they mainly focused on teaching methodologies and teachers' linguistic competence. Iranian policymakers' limited knowledge of language competence and their overreliance on the four skills in language teaching and learning were previously highlighted in Pazhouhesh and Hosseini Fatemi's (2020) study. The participants also did not consider ICC in their teacher training courses and programs. Evidently, these criteria for assessing teachers and developing teacher training were similarly reported in previous studies both in Iran (e.g., Akbari & Yazdanmehr, 2012; Ganji et al., 2018) and in other international contexts (e.g., Akcan et al., 2017).

However, it should be noted that our participants believed that ICC teaching skills were beyond the abilities of their teachers and the lack of competent teachers is one of their main problems. These limitations in teachers' ICC and their practice were similarly witnessed in other studies in this area (Ahmadi Safa & Tofighi, 2022; Fernández-Agüero & Chancay-Cedeño, 2019; Naidu, 2018). For example, in East's (2012) analysis of teachers' and school advisors' interviews and class observations, it was reported that school advisors, who observe L2 classes, attested to teachers' incompetency in practicing intercultural education and incorporating culture in their classes. In addition, as mentioned above, micro-level policymakers

held positive attitudes towards practicing ICC in L2 classes. The importance of (inter)cultural competence in L2 education for school advisors or micro-level policymakers was another point that has been evidenced in East's (2012) study. Similarly, Liddicoat et al. (2003) reported different Australian L2 policymakers' positive attitudes regarding intercultural language teaching. More precisely, such terms as "reciprocal" or "intertwined" were similarly used by the respondents in their survey, including language institute managers and teachers, to describe the language-culture relationship.

Yet, the policymakers believed that macro-level policies were one of the main limiting factors that hinder successful intercultural practices. The same assumption was previously observed in Fatollahi's (2017) analysis of Iranian education policy documents. They mostly disagreed with these policies and deemed them to be vague, non-pedagogical, intangible, and restrictive. In the context of Iran, previous research has also demonstrated that the existing national or higher-level policies are not specifically related to language teaching pedagogy, as they are mostly concerned with religious, political, and general cultural issues (see Atai & Mazlum, 2013; Mirhosseini & Khodakarami, 2015; Rashidi & Hosseini, 2019); thus, the lack of detailed and well-informed language policies, once more, stand out. As acknowledged by the participants, most of the cultural language policies provided by upper-level policymakers are heavily influenced by deep-rooted ideological, religious, and political values, which was also highlighted in Mirhosseini and Khodakarami's (2015) as well as Rashidi and Hosseini's (2019) studies on Iranian ELT policies. In other words, Iranian policymakers promoted L2 practice devoid of any foreign cultural contents in order to serve the socio-political, sociocultural, and socioeconomic Islamic goals (Rashidi & Hosseini, 2019; Sharifian, 2013). Furthermore, as reported in Mirhosseini and Khodakarami's (2015) study, generally, the majority of the institute managers and supervisors are not aware of the details of national L2 policies and if they are, they do not fully agree with them, the point which was also evidenced in the current study.

Our participants, additionally, acknowledged that in order for intercultural pedagogy to be practiced in language institutes, great support and well-established guidelines need to be developed by macro-level policymakers. As previously argued by Crozet and Liddicoat (1999) as well as Nguyen (2014), shifting to intercultural pedagogy requires support and radical changes in language policies. Besides, the language policies should be tangible and well-communicated to



different stakeholders in order to provide the required resources for pedagogical changes (Diallo & Liddicoat, 2014; Lavrenteva & Orland-Barak, 2015; Naidu, 2018); the lack of this point was also highlighted by our participants. However, apparently, these problems are not limited to intercultural pedagogy, per se, or Iranian L2 teaching and learning policies. L2 policies occasionally might seem intangible to teachers, and language institute supervisors might flout them due to several pedagogical or financial reasons. Inconsistencies between macro-level language policies and micro-level policymakers' interpretations or planning were also evidenced in Wang's (2010) study, which focused on L2 administrators' perceptions of the implementation of EFL curriculum policies in the Chinese tertiary context. Yet, it is difficult to explain such results in some other international contexts where intercultural pedagogy has been included in their L2 policies but has not been successfully practiced effectively by teachers (Crozet & Liddicoat, 1999; Diallo & Liddicoat, 2014; Naidu, 2018; Nguyen, 2014).

Nonetheless, Iranian micro-level policymakers are still deeply affected by their L1 cultures and macro-level policies, which accentuates their L1 cultural and religious values. In other words, they mainly observe their L1 culture whilst making pedagogical decisions in their institutes, although they are totally aware of the importance of other cultures in L2 teaching and learning. Therefore, the gap between L2 policies and actual practices in the Iranian context, as reported by Atai and Mazlum (2013), and later Aghagolzadeh and Davari (2017), might not hold true for micro-level policymakers as one of the implementers of macro-level policies.

## **6. Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications**

ICC, as one of the critical components of language competence, is included in numerous L2 policies and programs all around the world, as it enables individuals to communicate successfully and effectively with people of other cultures and languages. The results of the interviews with L2 micro-level policymakers in private language institutes revealed that despite their motivation for incorporating ICC into their programs, they lack the required knowledge, support, and foundational infrastructures in macro-level policymaking. In addition, in spite of their disagreement with the existing macro-level policies that implicate careful considerations of L1 cultural and religious values, micro-level policymakers are, deeply affected by them. In other words, although they attested to their preference

for intercultural language teaching, micro-level policymakers tend to consider L1 cultural norms more regularly in their educational decisions, which is against the core principles of intercultural pedagogy or did not consider the role of culture altogether, even in cases where they have the liberty and are not confined by macro-level policies.

Evidently, in order for intercultural language teaching to be practiced successfully in an EFL context like Iran, several requisite actions need to be taken. To this end, the findings of the present study suggest a number of implications for enhancing intercultural pedagogy. Clarifying micro-level policymakers' perceptions and planning in this respect extends our understanding of the current intercultural policies and planning. It also allows professionals to identify the inherent challenges in this area and, consequently, propose effective solutions. Similarly, it informs macro-level policymakers about the actual status of intercultural language teaching in language institutes and gives them an idea of how ICC is being implemented in different parts of the country. Moreover, the results of the study elucidate managers' and supervisors' lacks and needs; thus, teacher educators and materials developers can tackle them and enhance the quality of intercultural pedagogy. As one of the most critical steps in implementing intercultural pedagogy, L2 policymakers, including macro and micro-level policymakers, need to be informed about the tenets of ICC and its significance in today's globalized world. Being familiar with this pedagogical approach can help policymakers develop the required policies and make appropriate decisions in their planning. Along the same line, L2 educators can prepare effective programs to enhance both teachers' and policymakers' knowledge and beliefs in this regard. Besides, the micro-level policymakers' dependence on textbooks, which are published out of Iran and are devoid of learners' L1 cultures and consequently decrease the chance of ICC practice in L2 classes, implies the necessity of developing appropriate and culturally unbiased locally-developed L2 teaching textbooks and materials by Iranian materials developers. The role of proper learning materials in promoting ICC pedagogy is undeniable; thus, materials developers need to prepare textbooks and other learning materials that represent various cultures and provide the necessary space for learners to acquire and compare different cultural values.

The results of the current study have to be considered in view of some limitations. The findings of the present study rely on interviews with managers and supervisors; therefore, data triangulation using observational methods of data

collection and analyzing language institutes' official documents, if available, could lead us to more consistent results. In addition, future studies can concentrate on exploring macro-level policymakers' policies and teachers' perceptions, beliefs, and practices regarding intercultural language teaching in order to present a wider view of the prospects of intercultural pedagogy.

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## **Appendix**

### **Micro-Level Policy-Makers' Interview Protocol**

1. What is your perception of the concept of culture?
2. What is your opinion about the role of culture in L2 teaching and learning?
3. Which culture (first language, second language, and global culture) is the most important one in second language teaching and learning?
4. What is your opinion about teaching L2 (EFL) using intercultural approaches?
5. How much do you consider cultural issues (L1 culture, target culture, and international culture) in your policies and programs?
6. Have you provided the teachers with any local or national policy documents or frameworks regarding the use of culture in their classes? How much do you agree with such national policies? Explain your reasons, please.
7. Do you consider teachers' intercultural competence and their abilities in teaching it before hiring them? Discuss it, please.
8. Do you consider intercultural competence in your teacher education programs?
9. Have you considered cultural issues (L1 culture, target culture, and international culture) in selecting your textbooks and other learning materials?
10. Is there another point that you would like to share?

### About the Authors

**Zia Tajeddin** is a Professor of Applied Linguistics at Tarbiat Modares University, Iran. His main areas of research include teacher education, intercultural language education, and L2 pragmatics. He serves as the editor (with Thomas Farrell) of the Springer book series *Studies in Language Teacher Education*. He co-edits two international journals: *Applied Pragmatics* (John Benjamins) and *Second Language Teacher Education* (Equinox). His recent co-edited books include *Lessons from Good Language Teachers* (with Carol Griffiths, Cambridge University Press, 2020), *Pragmatics Pedagogy in English as an International Language* (with Mino Alemi, Routledge, 2021), *Teacher Reflection: Policies, Practices and Impacts* (with Atsuko Watanabe, Multilingual Matters, 2022), and *Language Education Programs: Perspectives on Policies and Practices* (with Carol Griffiths, Springer, 2023).

**Zari Saedi** received her Ph.D. from the British University of Trinity College and is an Associate Professor of Allameh Tabataba'i University, Iran. She has taught various B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. courses in different universities, taking part in different national/international conferences, presenting/publishing papers/books on a range of topics including educational neuro/psycholinguistics and brain functioning, cognitive language learning and in particular, brain-based language learning (BBL), culture, technology-assisted language learning, and Role and Reference Grammar Theory of linguistics. Her published paper and book in John Benjamins and Equinox publications are among the recent ones. Her most recent publication is the dictionary of virtual education with a focus on computer assisted language learning.

**Neda Khanlarzadeh** is a Ph.D. candidate in Applied Linguistics at Allameh Tabataba'i University, Iran. Her areas of interest are discourse studies, second language pragmatics, and (intercultural) teacher education. She is currently teaching English courses at Iranian universities and English language institutes. She has published book chapters, book reviews, and papers in national and international journals, including *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching*, *Language and Intercultural Communication*, *Iranian Journal of Language Teaching Research*, *Applied Research on English Language*, and *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching*.