Enriching experiences: Unpacking Kazakhstani EFL teachers' attitudes and readiness for intercultural approach

Gulnara Kassymova[1], Saule Tulepova[1]*, Madina Bekturova[2]
[1]SDU University, Kazakhstan
[2]Kazakh Ablai Khan University of International Relations and World Languages, Kazakhstan
*Corresponding Author: saule.tulepova@sdu.edu.kz

ABSTRACT

The present study aims to unpack the university English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers' practices and attitudes towards intercultural approach (ICA) and identify the prospective EFL teachers' level of preparedness to implement ICA. For this purpose, 36 EFL teachers and 45 master students doing a program on TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) were chosen to collect data through a survey and project analysis. The research findings indicate that despite recognising the intercultural paradigm in teaching EFL, embedded in all Kazakhstani regulations and the increasing tendency to use authentic textbooks; there is a lack of sound preparedness to implement ICA for both pre-service and in-service EFL teachers. Furthermore, the results suggest that two-thirds (66.6%) of master students could not identify all intercultural attributes in the coursebook. In-service teachers' agreement level on the importance of ICA is high; however, they lack practical skills for nuanced integration of ICA in EFL classrooms. This article can serve as a discussion platform to tackle challenges associated with ICA implementation in higher education not only in Kazakhstan but in the international context, as this issue is topical for many countries in the world where English is taught as a foreign language.

Keywords: intercultural approach (ICA), intercultural communicative competence (ICC), teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL), pre-service and in-service EFL teachers, textbook evaluation

INTRODUCTION

The increasing diversity evident in the contemporary multilingual and multicultural community emphasises the significance of intercultural competence (IC), defined as "… abilities needed to perform effectively and appropriately when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself" (Fantini, 2007). In the context of our study, the term "intercultural communicative competence" (ICC), labelled first by Byram (1997), is used regarding foreign language teaching and assessment. According to Byram, a foreign language learner should become an interculturally competent speaker with communicative competence in the target language and "particular skills, attitudes, values, and knowledge about the foreign culture" (1997). Therefore, a shift from a communicative approach to an intercultural approach (ICA) in foreign language teaching pedagogy requires an EFL teacher to be an intercultural mediator who can interpret, negotiate, and mediate both native and target cultures rather than be an expert on the English language and its functional use. Notably, several scholars highlight that intercultural communicative competence represents a complex personal quality that includes knowledge of native and foreign cultures, practical skills, personal characteristics, and experience that allow the learner to communicate with representatives of other cultures effectively and appropriately (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006; Fantini, 2007; Kunanbayeva, 2013; Spitzberg,1994).

An analytical review of relevant studies indicates that the role of EFL teachers, the level of their theoretical preparedness regarding the development of ICC, and the integration of intercultural dimensions into TEFL have been the focus of intensive investigations during the last decade. The studies are mainly dedicated to exploring in-service EFL teachers' perceptions, practices, and problems of developing ICC in various educational and cultural contexts, such as an international school in the Netherlands (Roiha & Sommier, 2021), state schools in Greece (Petosi & Karras, 2020), English-medium high schools in Kazakhstan (Smakova & Paulsrud, 2020), highs schools in Algeria (Bouslama & Benaissi, 2018), state colleges in Poland (Romanowski, 2017). It is noteworthy that among the studies conducted in this field, great attention is given to exploring university EFL teachers' perceptions and awareness of ICC in different countries such as Turkey (Kılıç, 2013); China (Gu, 2016); Ecuador (Fernandez-Aguero & Chancay-Cedeno, 2019), Pakistan (Aziz et al., 2020); Iran (Ghavamnia, 2020) and others.

The analysis of in-service EFL teachers' position towards ICC development has revealed that despite the willingness of EFL teachers to integrate ICA into English teaching, they lack a clear conception of ICC and an understanding of how to measure and assess it (Bouslama & Benaissi, 2018; Gu, 2016). Also, the studies found an apparent disparity between teachers' perceptions about ICA and their current classroom practices (Ghavamnia, 2020; Zamanian & Saeidi, 2017), as well as teachers' incapability to develop simultaneously all components of ICC: affective, cognitive, and behavioral, based on the comparative study of English-speaking countries, other foreign cultures, and students' native culture. Likewise, according to Genc (2018), half of the pre-service EFL teachers of one of the state universities in Turkey who were supposed to implement ICA had poor levels of ICC themselves.

To address these challenges on the way to successful integration of ICA into foreign language classrooms, the above-mentioned researchers unanimously claim that there is a need for special training sessions and courses that appear to be effective in developing future teachers' intercultural sensitivity (Romanowski, 2017). On the other hand, it was found that pre-service training programs and instructional experience mediate the development of theoretical awareness of ICC but do not lead to the development of practical skills in implementing ICA (Safa & Tofighi, 2021).

It was also found that the development of pre-service English teachers' ICC is not influenced by such factors as their gender and academic achievement (Genc, 2018). According to Saricoban and Oz (2014), living and studying abroad, even for a short period, is strongly correlated with the knowledge, skill, and attitude dimensions of ICC. Likewise, volunteering in non-governmental organisations positively affects the development of intercultural sensitivity (Arcagok & Yilmaz, 2020).

As for the practical readiness of prospective EFL teachers to implement ICA into the teaching process, this aspect appears to be underexplored. Motivated by the above discrepancy and the challenges of implementing ICA into TEFL in higher education, the present study takes a different angle as it covers both in-service EFL teachers and TEFL master students in one private Kazakhstani university.

Thus, the current study aims to identify the prospective EFL teachers' (master students) level of preparedness to implement ICA in their teaching practice and to reveal the university EFL instructors' practices of and attitudes towards intercultural approach (ICA) in TEFL. According to these aims, two research questions were set: 1) To what extent are master students in the TEFL program capable of evaluating the cultural content of an English coursebook as one of the main indicators of their preparedness for implementing ICA? 2) What are the university EFL teachers' practices and attitudes towards implementing ICA in their English classrooms?

First, implementing an intercultural approach to teaching EFL requires clarifying some theoretical concepts regarding the object of this study. It is crucial to define the meaning of ICA and differentiate it from the cross-cultural approach (CCA), which is sometimes used interchangeably. The foci of these approaches in intercultural communication research are different; according to Woodin (2010), the cross-cultural approach (CCA) studies culture as a behaviour that can be identified and described, while the intercultural approach (ICA) focuses on understanding culture as created within the interaction. Baynham (2014) differentiates these

approaches using terms such as "brought along" (CCA) and "brought-about" (ICA), as "culture-comparative approach" and "culture-interactional approach", respectively. On the ground of this and considering the domain under study – foreign language teaching and its current goal – development of intercultural communicative competence (ICC), it is assumed that FL teachers should be able to implement an intercultural approach as "meaning-making" between interlocutors of different languages and cultures in an interaction. However, these approaches are not mutually exclusive, and in FLT, the use of ICA is based in some way on the use of CCA. According to Romanowski (2017), successfully implementing ICA in learning and teaching EFL requires the application of three different but complementary approaches: an experiential learning approach, an ethnographic approach, and a comparative approach. Therefore, below is the discussion on how all these approaches could be implemented in the Kazakhstani context. The most crucial issue for us in Byram's (1997) model is that the development of ICC should be started from the learners' awareness of their own culture and their own language, which provides a basis for comparing it with a foreign language and culture, understanding the difference between them, and therefore, achieving critical cultural awareness. The native language (Kazakh) environment and Kazakh language functioning are very specific and painful due to some historical, political, and economic factors in the Republic of Kazakhstan (Kassymova, 2017). Meanwhile, the Russian language is used for interethnic communication by speakers of different nationalities residing in the Republic of Kazakhstan and among Kazakh people for intra-ethnic communication. Therefore, along with teaching the target language and culture, it is necessary to raise the learners' awareness of their native language and culture by applying an ethnographic approach (Damen, 1987) to TEFL.

Secondly, the current teaching culture in English classrooms needs to be considered. Methodologists perceive ICC as the fifth skill, along with listening, speaking, reading, and writing. However, as Kramsch (1993) states, culture is not just a chosen aspect of teaching or skill; it should be a constant background within which a foreign language is taught (p. 1). Moreover, it is crucial to be aware of the aspects of culture, namely, big C-culture and small C-culture or objective and subjective culture (Bennet, 1998). The big C-culture is a visible aspect and represents a piece of information about fine arts such as literature, music, painting, films, theatre, sculpture and so on, while small C-culture is mostly invisible and covers attitudes, beliefs, assumptions, stereotypes, perceptions, values, customs, rituals and celebrations, norms of verbal and non-verbal behaviour, such as body language, use of space and time. Furthermore, culture is not a fixed entity; on the contrary, it is an ever-changing and constantly evolving phenomenon. In TEFL, teaching small C-culture is the most difficult and problematic aspect; it is often missed or taught superficially and sometimes incorrectly due to insufficient knowledge or a lack of cultural experience of students and teachers for relating and interpreting cultural phenomena. Thus, the experiential approach is needed for the ICC development of EFL students and instructors.

Third, analysis of Kazakhstani trilingual policy (MES, 2011) and Concept of Kazakhstani Foreign Language Education (MES, 2010) has revealed that 1) they represent an adaptation of an international model of foreign language education (Council of Europe, CEFR, 2001) to the national educational conditions of the Republic of Kazakhstan; 2) the development of ICC is defined as learners' ability to participate in foreign language communication on the intercultural level. According to the intercultural paradigm proposed in these documents, a language learner has more opportunities to become a subject of academic process and intercultural communication while learning a foreign language. Additionally, the Typical Curriculum on the discipline: "Foreign language" (General English) for non-linguistic departments of higher educational institutions (MES, 2016) aims to develop learners' ICC within the A2-B2 level (CEFR) based on cognitive-lingua-cultural methodology of foreign language education presented by Kazakhstani scholar Kunanbayeva (2005) who outlined cognitive, lingua-cultural, socio-cultural, communicative, and professional components of ICC. Thus, the developers of Kazakhstani state regulation documents emphasise the significance of the intercultural paradigm in TEFL and expand the foreign language teachers' view from a linguistic, communicative to an intercultural approach.

Fourth, it is important to identify the teachers' position towards ICC development, their awareness of this concept, their understanding of the need to implement ICA in TEFL, as well as their ability to evaluate cultural content in the textbooks and prepare additional material in case of their absence. Replacing native speakers with an intercultural speaker, mediating both languages and cultures, resulted in a significant shift in foreign language teaching methodology (Byram & Zarate, 1994; McKay, 2003). However, being a mediator for a teacher implies building bridges between languages and cultures, "establishing and maintaining relationships" across cultural boundaries (Byram, 1997). Therefore, in the process of learning a new foreign language and becoming an intercultural speaker, the first language cannot be suppressed. Although the competence of native and intercultural speakers is not the same linguistically or culturally, it does not mean EFL teachers should rely only on an essentialist, culture-differential approach to ICC teaching that empathises differences over similarities (Dervin, 2016). Moreover, EFL teachers should implement critical and constructive approaches to ICC and ICA based on high reflexivity (Berti, 2019; Roiha & Sommier, 2021). Thus, an "intercultural teacher" should help students see similarities and connections between native and other cultures instead of stressing only cultural differences, as well as awaken the learners' curiosity about difference and otherness, develop tolerance, sympathy and empathy towards foreign culture, that all together leads to effective intercultural communication. Therefore, implementing ICA requires EFL teachers to use a comparative approach based on differences and a constructive approach based on finding similarities between cultures.

Fifth, to implement ICA effectively, TEFL should focus on using realistic and authentic materials, such as audio and video materials, pictures, worksheets, newspapers, textbooks, and speaking activities that are natural to native speakers of English. Therefore, textbooks must also be authentic like, that is, "authentic, in the sense that the language is not artificially constrained, and is, at the same time, amenable to exploitation for language teaching purposes" (MacWilliam, 1990, p. 160). Similarly, Asakereh, Yousofi, and Weisi (2019) claim that listening and speaking activities "need to reflect authentic real-life interactions". Kazakhstani English language teachers use coursebooks issued by foreign editions such as Cambridge University Press, Oxford University Press, Macmillan, and others to provide authenticity. Authentic and authentic-like materials motivate the learners and provoke teachers to handle better the foreign language and culture they teach. Moreover, understanding and evaluating the ICC attributes in the EFL coursebooks is essential (Pinzon & Norely, 2020; Lei & Soontornwipast, 2020). It is important to differentiate the type of coursebook in terms of cultural content, for example, "Textbooks focused on teaching target culture: USA, UK"; "Textbooks based on source cultures, learners' native culture" (Cortazzi & Jin, 1999). Most authentic-like textbooks published by foreign editions are focused more on target or, to some degree, on international target cultures but lack learners' native culture, which influences the opportunity of becoming a real intercultural speaker (Tas, 2010). The textbooks should be loaded not only with the culture of the target language but with learners' native language culture as well because it helps the learners to compare the target culture with native culture, reflect critically, thus develop their critical cultural awareness (Byram & Esarte-Sarries, 1991; Kiliskaya, 2004). Moreover, reflective learning of native culture by English language learners may help to strengthen their national identity, and as Meyer notes, "Intercultural competence includes the capacity of stabilising one's self-identity in the process of cross-cultural mediation, and of helping other people to stabilise their self-identity" (Meyer, 1991).

As seen above, ICA incorporates a complex of interconnected and significant aspects that must be considered for effective implementation. As an initial step in doing so, the current article attempts to unpack the university EFL instructors' practices and attitude towards intercultural approach (ICA) and identify the prospective EFL teachers' level of preparedness to implement ICA in their teaching practice.

METHOD

This study employs a mixed method design because it allows us to present an objective view of considered issues supported by qualitative and quantitative data. Considering Deardorff's

(2012, 2016) claim that most studies in measurement and assessment of ICC use self-reporting instruments, presenting only "half of the picture" and focusing on results rather than on process, it was decided to evaluate the readiness of TEFL program master students to implement ICA through project work. In this way, the measurement is provided from a different perspective. Therefore, to answer RQ1, a group project assignment, 'The potential of the EFL textbook in developing ICC', was given to master students as a main data collection tool to check their ability to evaluate the cultural content of one unit of "New English File" Intermediate. Notably, before the project assignment, these master students had taken lectures about the Intercultural paradigm of TEFL, ICC, its structure, and the main theories and practices of developing ICC in English lessons during the "Special Issues of TEFL Pedagogy in Higher Education" course. A checklist was adapted from Lei and Soontornwipast (2020) to equip the participants with an EFL textbook evaluation criteria, as it was developed for English majors and university contexts (Appendix 1).

After completing the assignment, the master students were to defend their projects and explain their findings to two experts in the ICC field. These experts developed the assessment rubric for evaluating projects and presentations based on the checklist and content of the coursebook unit (Appendix 2). Before completing the assignment, the students were asked to fill in the Google form seeking their biodata and some background information to clarify the analysis.

To investigate the practices and attitudes of EFL teachers towards implementing ICA in teaching English (RQ2), an online survey was conducted among university EFL instructors who agreed to participate in our study by filling in the form (Appendix 3). In accordance with the theoretical model of ICC (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006; Fantini, 2009), called "attitudes", those include the EFL instructors' awareness, openness, and readiness to implement ICA. The questionnaire items were adapted from Sercu et al.'s questionnaire (2005) regarding intercultural foreign language teaching and Corbett's (2003) and Chlopek's (2008) views on implementing an intercultural approach to FLT. A textbook evaluation checklist for master students, adapted from Lei and Soontornwipast (2020), was examined by two experts in teaching ICC. It was first tested by evaluating the coursebook unit and then improved. Before distributing the second research instrument among a larger population of EFL teachers, a pilot study was conducted by sending the survey form to 13 EFL teachers to ensure reliability and validity. After revision, the online survey was sent to the university's TEFL instructors. Moreover, the reliability of the survey was assessed through Cronbach's Alpha value, indicating a great internal consistency of 0.914 for 26 items.

Two samples of the population were involved. First, a purposive non-probability sample of 45 1st year master students in the TEFL program who agreed voluntarily were employed to participate in the study. The primary criteria for selection of the master's students were: 1) their educational background in the bachelor program; 2) their initial experience of English language teaching from intercultural perspectives; 3) potential candidates for teaching English at university after obtaining their master's degree; and last 4) the diversity of their home universities, that is crucial for gaining an insight into the state of preparedness of the master students to implement ICA in context of Kazakhstani higher education. The second sample included 36 EFL instructors and was also a convenience sample. The main criterion for respondents was to be in-service EFL teachers at the universities of Kazakhstan. The choice of these populations for RQ1 and RQ2 is explained by our assumption that master students' preparedness to implement ICA in TEFL largely depends on the practices and attitudes of the university EFL instructors toward ICA. Before starting the data collection procedures, the purpose of the study was explained to the master students and instructors of EFL regarding their willingness to participate voluntarily. Then, the confidentiality and anonymity of participants were also provided.

Two types of analysis were employed in this study: data of the project assignment completed by master students was analysed qualitatively. In addition, the Likert scale questionnaire was analysed by university EFL teachers using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences), version 29.0.0.0 (241). The descriptive and inferential analysis helped highlight and explain EFL teachers' attitudes and practices.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Master students' demographics and evaluation of their projects

First, information on the master students' demographics is displayed in the aggregate form. All participants were Kazakhs, 44 female and one male, studying online full-time (Table 1).

Table 1. General identification information

Item	f	Prosentase (%)
Age		
20-24	9	20%
25-29	30	66.7%
30-39	6	13.3%
Gender		
Male	1	2.2%
Female	44	97.8%
Occupational status		
Currently working	32	71.1%
Currently not working in the educational sphere	13	28.9%
Previous qualifications		
Foreign language: Two Foreign Languages	36	80%
Foreign Philology	4	8.9%
Translation studies	5	11.1%

Note: n = 45

The following two questions were dedicated to exploring the respondents' teaching experience and whether they have studied a course on intercultural communication (Table 2).

Table 2. The respondents' teaching experience and ICA learning experience

Item	f	Prosentase (%)
Teaching experience		
Less than a year	11	25%
1-4 years	30	65.6%
5-10 years	4	9.4%
10+ years	0	0%
IC course experience		
Yes	36	80%
No	1	2.2%
Not sure	8	17.8%

Note: n = 45

According to the data depicted in Table 2, most master students (71.1%) currently work in the educational sphere, 65.6% of them having experience in teaching for 1-4 years and 25% working in teaching positions for less than a year. The percentage of those who worked more than 5 years is rather low (9.4%). Among all participants, 80% have studied some intercultural communication course previously, while 17.8% are not sure of having taken such courses. Overall, this indicator corresponds with the data on the bachelor programs respondents graduated from (80% of the students are TEFL program graduates). It is safe to assume that courses on intercultural communication are included in TEFL program curriculums rather than "Foreign philology" and "Translation studies" programs.

To explore to what extent master students in the TEFL program can evaluate the cultural context of an English coursebook, they completed the group project assignment "The potentials of the EFL textbook in developing ICC" and presented their findings. The students were provided with a checklist (Appendix 1) to find evidence for IC attributes and analyse them. Two experts in

the ICC field evaluated their presentations according to the assessment rubrics provided in Appendix 2. The following are the evaluation results.

First, 33.4% of master students succeeded in completing their projects. Regarding the dimension "Cultural topics", they could identify a comprehensive range of culture-oriented topics present in the book with clear evidence. They provided a thorough and insightful analysis of each identified cultural topic, demonstrating a deep understanding of their significance in language learning. Regarding "Cultural information", they highlighted that it was adequately integrated into the coursebook unit; however, the textbook contains more information about English-speaking countries and less about non-English-speaking countries. Moreover, the master students identified information regarding non-verbal communication that is presented but poorly provided with appropriate pictures. As for "Activities and exercises", the participants provided an in-depth analysis of them, pointing out those that develop an understanding of intercultural issues. Thus, this group of master students demonstrated readiness for implementing ICA in their teaching practice.

Second, 46.6% of master students demonstrated insufficient knowledge and skills in identifying all ICC attributes in the coursebook, influencing their ability to prepare and present their project. Although they also offered an appropriate level of analysis of the cultural topics, cultural information, and activities, they could not provide evidence for some items in the checklist from the coursebook. Also, some students could not relate the activities to the target culture and interpret intercultural issues, thus leading to a "Medium" evaluation.

Third, the third category of master students (20%), who showed the worst results, provided basic analysis for some cultural topics and showed a limited understanding of intercultural issues. They also had difficulties defining information related to all big "C" cultures and could not indicate small "c" cultural dimensions.

Demographics of the EFL teachers and results of the teachers' survey

An online Likert scale questionnaire was administered to EFL teachers at the university to identify the university's EFL teachers' practices and attitudes toward implementing ICA in their English classrooms.

Table 3. Demographics of EFL teachers

Item	f	Prosentase (%)
Age		
20-24	5	13.9%
25-29	8	22.2%
30-39	15	41.7%
40-49	4	11.1%
50+	4	11.1%
Gender		
Male	13	33.3%
Female	24	66.7%
Previous qualifications		%
TEFL	20	55.6%
Foreign Philology	6	16.7%
Translation studies	6	16.7%
Other programs	4	11.1%
ICA learning experience		
Yes	30	83.3%
No	4	11.1%
Not sure	2	5.6%
Overseas experience		
Yes	21	58.3%
No	15	41.7%

Note: n = 36

The questionnaire comprised an informed consent form seeking the respondents' agreement to participate; seven questions on participants' demographics and background information; and three more sections including 15 Likert scale items for identifying the respondents' attitudes, eight items on the teachers' practices in implementing ICA and a list of activities used in the classroom. Table 3 shows the quantitative data analysis. The results reveal that most EFL teachers comprise female representatives (66.7%). The majority (23 out of 36) of respondents are between 25 and 39. According to the data, there is quite an equitable distribution between graduates with a TEFL background (20) and those from diverse non-pedagogical linguistic programs (16). Considering this indicator in conjunction with another variable - having a learning experience related to intercultural communication is important. Most of the respondents (83.3%) claim to have such experience.

Survey respondents (58.3%) reported diverse international study or work experiences, with representation from various countries. The breakdown includes two individuals who studied or worked in the USA, 4 in the UK, 1 in Turkey, 1 in Indonesia, 1 in Estonia, 2 in Switzerland, 1 in Slovakia, 1 in Serbia, 1 in South Korea, 1 in Russia, 2 in the Netherlands, 1 in Malaysia, 1 in Malta, 1 in Germany, 1 in France, 1 in China, 1 in Canada, and 1 in Cyprus. This diversity highlights a broad range of global exposure among the teachers and surely contributes to ICA awareness among them.

The next part of the survey was dedicated to exploring the attitudes of EFL teachers towards ICA (Table 4). During the data analysis process, it is crucial to note that the coding in parts 3 and 4 of the survey in SPSS is presented with one indicating "Strongly disagree" and five representing "Strongly agree." With this in mind, calculating a weighted average of 4.17 leads us to the following conclusions: a) the respondents expressed a notable consensus with the first statement on the importance of teaching culture: the level of agreement was the highest (M=4.64, SD= 0.487); Moreover, no responses were indicating neutral, disagree, or strongly disagree sentiments regarding this statement, highlighting the perceived significance of cultural instruction alongside language learning. Similarly, strong agreement is observed for items #2-3, #5-11, and #15, indicating high respondents' awareness of the benefits of ICC and their positive attitudes toward integrating ICA. The fact that the standard deviations are less than 1 indicates a high level of agreement among respondents, suggesting that their answers closely align with the statements provided; b) however, some teachers agreed to disagree with statements #4, #12, #13, and #14 expressing divergence of opinions (Means are lower than the weighted average). It suggests there is uncertainty among respondents regarding the potential of ICA to challenge and break down stereotypes rather than perpetuate them, as well as the possibility of teaching a foreign language and culture in an integrated way.

Table 4. EFL teachers' attitudes towards ICA

#	Item	Strongly agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neither agree nor disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly disagree (%)	Mean	SD
1	In a foreign language classroom, teaching culture is as important as teaching a foreign language.	63.9	36.1	-	-	-	4.64	.487
2	Implementing an intercultural approach in TEFL enhances learners' interest in mastering English and proves beneficial.	55.6	41.7	2.8	-	-	4.31	.560
3	English language classes should strongly emphasise the inclusion of foreign cultures.	41.7	50.0	5.6	2.8	-	4.33	.710

4	To teach culture or introduce an intercultural dimension to foreign language teaching, my students have to possess a sufficiently high level of proficiency in the foreign language.	36.1	19.4	19.4	25.0	-	3.67	1.219
5	Learners should cultivate proficiency in both language and intercultural competence during English language classes.	47.2	44.4	5.6	2.8	-	4.36	.723
6	The EFL students should know how to communicate verbally with people from the target language culture.	44.4	47.2	5.6	2.8	-	4.33	.717
7	The EFL students should know how to communicate non-verbally with people from the target language culture.	47.2	47.2	2.8	2.8	-	4.39	.688
8	Learners' ought to foster positive attitudes toward foreign cultures in English language classes.	44.4	50.0	2.8	2.8	-	4.36	.683
9	In English language classes, it is vital to nurture learners' curiosity, openness, and willingness to learn about foreign cultures.	44.4	50.0	2.8	2.8	-	4.36	.683
10	In English language classes, learners should be educated on effective and appropriate communication with individuals from different countries.	47.2	47.2	2.8	2.8	-	4.39	.688
11	English language classes should provide instruction on strategies for effective intercultural communication to learners.	50.0	44.4	2.8	2.8	-	4.42	.692
12	Teaching a foreign language and culture in an integrated way is impossible.	30.6	22.2	8.3	33.3	5.6	3.39	1.379
13	In the foreign language classroom, students can only acquire additional cultural knowledge. They cannot acquire intercultural skills.	38.9	19.4	19.4	16.7	5.6	3.69	1.305
14	The intercultural approach reinforces students' already existing stereotypes of other peoples and cultures.	30.6	19.4	22.2	19.4	8.3	3.44	1.340
15	The intercultural approach should enhance pupils' understanding of their own cultural identity.	55.6	38.9	2.8	2.8	-	4.44	.809

The contradicting views regarding item 4 (M=3.67, SD=1.219) might demonstrate insufficient knowledge of some aspects of (ICC; c) overall, the respondents reflected a keen understanding of ICA's significance, acknowledging its pivotal necessity in the TEFL field. Part 4 of the survey was designed to explore the practices of EFL teachers in implementing ICA, and the results are demonstrated in Table 5.

Table 5. Practices in the implementation of ICA in EFL classrooms

#	Item	Strongly agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neither agree nor disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly disagree (%)	Mean	SD
1	The cultural content is explicitly integrated into my EFL course book(s).	33.3	52.8	8.3	5.6	-	4.14	.798
2	The cultural content is implicitly integrated into my EFL course book(s).	30.6	36.1	11.1	22.2	-	3.86	1.073
3	The cultural content of the textbook(s) that I use meets my expectations.	30.6	36.1	13.9	19.4	-	3.75	1.131
4	I am familiar with the country and culture associated with the foreign language and with the students' culture to explain obscure cultural points.	30.6	36.1	13.9	19.4	-	3.78	1.098
5	I develop my students' intercultural skills through designing and delivering intercultural activities.	33.3	27.8	19.4	19.4	-	3.75	1.131
6	When I have limited teaching hours, culture teaching must give way to language teaching.	22.2	44.4	13.9	13.9	5.6	3.64	1.150
7	As a foreign language teacher, I should present a positive image of the foreign culture and society.	30.6	36.1	19.4	13.9	-	3.83	1.028
8	As a foreign language teacher, I should present a realistic image of a foreign culture, including both positive and negative sides.	38.9	52.8	8.3	-	-	4.31	.624

Based on the frequency data analysis, the weighted mean average is 3.88. The respondents seem to have a notable agreement with statements #1 and #8 (M=4.14, SD=.798 and M=4.31, SD=.624 respectively), claiming to have explicit cultural content in EFL manuals they use and asserting the need to present a realistic image of foreign cultures. On the other side, the level of disagreement is notably higher regarding statements #3, #4, and #5 (SD indicators equal more than 1), proving that even though the results of part 3 indicate a high level of ICA awareness among the respondents, they reflect uncertainties in understanding the nuanced integration of ICA in foreign language teaching. Specifically, a dispersion of opinions regarding the satisfaction with the cultural content of their textbooks indicates that while some teachers express contentment (66.7%), others appear to be uncertain (13.9%) or dissatisfied (19.4%) with the alignment of textbooks to their expectations. There is also a small variance in respondents' levels of familiarity with the country and culture associated with the foreign language (M=3.78, SD=1.098). Statement

#5 also caused a moderate dispersion of views (M= 3.75, SD=1.131), which signals educators' uncertainty on their understanding of ICA implementation. Even though the majority of the respondents agreed with statement #6 on the prioritization of language teaching over culture teaching when faced with limited hours, a notable proportion (13.9%) remained neutral, and 19.5% of the teachers disagreed with the idea.

The last part of the survey was dedicated to the frequency of ICA activities used by the respondents in their teaching. The results reveal that with a weighted average of 2.56, the teachers tend to conduct informative activities more frequently than interactive and explorative ones (Table 6).

Table 6. ICA activities implemented by the respondents

Activities	Never (%)	Seldom / Rarely (%)	Often (%)	Always (%)	Mean	SD
Informative (sharing, interpreting and relating information about the country and culture of the target language);	11.1	25.0	38.9	25.0	2.78	.959
interactive (discussions, role plays, simulations, debates);	16.7	30.6	36.1	16.7	2.53	.971
explorative (researching some aspect of the foreign culture through PBL, TBL);	27.8	25.0	30.6	16.7	2.36	1.073

To sum up, the data analysis reveals that even though the teachers unanimously agree on the significance of ICA in foreign language education, some cannot implement it in practice. Moreover, the experience of working/studying abroad tends to contribute to general awareness and positive attitude toward the target culture, thus leading to conducting more informative types of activities rather than explorative ones.

Discussion

In contrast to prior studies, the present study aims to unpack the university English as a foreign language teachers' practices and attitudes towards intercultural approach and identify the prospective EFL teachers' level of preparedness to implement ICA. The study's results demonstrate the insufficient level of prospective EFL teachers' preparedness to implement ICA, which was revealed via evaluation of the culture-laden material and activities in the textbook. A possible explanation for such findings may be the lack of adequate training, as some master students claim they have not taken any courses related to teaching intercultural communication during their bachelor program because it is elective in the Kazakhstani curriculum. On the one hand, the inclusion of such course is strongly advised by previous studies (Romanowski, 2017); on the other hand, similar to the findings of Safa and Tofighi (2021), the courses on ICC mediate the development of theoretical awareness of ICC but do not lead to the development of practical skills in implementing ICA. Although 1⁄3 of the master students in our study showcased high results in evaluating the coursebook unit, most participants could not identify and reveal culture-bound information in the texts and activities. These findings suggest providing future EFL teachers with both theory and practice of implementing ICA on the EFL syllabus design and material evaluation level, focusing more on developing practical skills. In this regard, our study agrees with the findings of Pinzon and Norely (2020) and Lei and Soontornwipast (2020), highlighting the crucial role of such skills as understanding and evaluating the ICC attributes in the EFL coursebooks. Moreover, the results of the current study corroborate the findings of Asakereh, Yousofi and Weisi (2019) and Taş (2010), who strongly recommend that textbook publishers reconsider and enhance the presentation of the socio-cultural reality of English language use and multicultural issues in the content of textbooks. Another important finding of the present study is that, surprisingly, despite the awareness and openness of the university EFL instructors towards ICA, they also lack proper readiness to introduce ICA into practice, which indicates the traditional view of EFL teaching. Thus, it is consistent with the findings of Kılıç (2013) regarding the uncertainty of the university English language instructors in introducing

intercultural teaching into their courses. The results are also in accord with previous studies on teachers' perceptions of ICA and the level of their readiness to implement it (Bouslama & Benaissi, 2018; Ghavamnia, 2020; Zamanian & Saeidi, 2017). Similar to Safa and Tofighi (2021), the participants of this investigation, regardless of their status, whether they were pre- or in-service teachers and their amount of teaching experience, did not significantly differ in their awareness and readiness to implement ICA. The lack of a clear understanding of the implementation mechanisms could stem from various factors, including insufficient training, limited access to relevant resources, and a lack of emphasis on practical application in teacher education programs. It is essential to address these implementation challenges so in-service and future educators can enhance their capacity to provide students with a more comprehensive and culturally enriched language learning experience.

CONCLUSION

Thus, despite the favourable conditions for implementing ICA, which was set by Kazakhstani national educational policies, the universally recognised intercultural paradigm of EFL teaching does not seem to work efficiently. Covering in-service EFL teachers and TEFL master students in higher education, it is concluded that both need more practice-oriented training for implementing ICA. Therefore, for further research, it would be interesting to consider how practice-oriented intervention courses will impact the TEFL bachelor and master students' preparedness to implement ICA in EFL teaching to identify correlations between the university teachers' and students' perceptions of such courses. Furthermore, this study also attempted to enrich research experience on implementing ICA in Kazakhstani higher education. As a result, the generalizability was limited to the TEFL and Kazakhstani context; however, the use of the same research design may extend the inquiries to other countries where English is taught as a foreign/second language and in other contexts, for example, in teaching English for specific purposes to students of non-linguistic majors.

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Appendix 1: EFL textbook evaluation checklist focused on ICC attributes adapted from Lei, W.R & Soontornwipast, K. (2020)

Dimension	Subdimension	Items
ICC Attributes	Cultural topics	1. There is a sufficient variety of cultural topics.
		2. The cultural topics are explicitly presented in each unit.
		3. The topics are interesting and motivating.
		4. The topics are culturally appropriate for the students' real-life
		5. The textbook can help students identify cultural norms or values implicit in the language.
		6. The textbook contains language components that train students' ability to express their positions toward different cultural norms and values.
		7. The topics allow students to think critically
	Cultural information	8. The cultural information is integrated into the course.
		9. The materials are not culturally biased.
		10. The cultural information is presented with appropriate images.
		11. The same cultural topic is presented from different cultural perspectives.
		12. The textbook includes both the culture of English-speaking countries and the non- English-speaking countries.
		13. The textbook relates content to learners' culture and environment.
		14. The textbook includes much Kazakh culture.
		15. There is little "c" culture in the textbook, such as people's behaviours and beliefs in ordinary life, then big "C" culture, such as literature, art, institutions, and architecture.
		16. Non-verbal communication contents are included explicitly and implicitly in the textbook.
		17. The materials can develop tolerance, empathy and curiosity to otherness.
		18. The content contains real-life issues.
	Activities and exercises	19. The activities are meaningful and authentic.
		20. The activities foster cooperation.
		21. The activities foster independent learning
		22. The activities and exercises include assessments that help students or teachers to be aware of students' intercultural communication competence development.
		23. The activities and exercises include those that require students to understand and explain cultural differences.
		24. The activities and exercises include those that require students to relate the learning cultural topics to Kazakh cultural events or topics.
		25. The activities and exercises include those that require students to relate the learning cultural topics to other cultural events or topics.
		26. The activities and exercises include those that require students to compare different cultures.
		27. The activities and exercises include those that require students to solve cultural problems from a target culture perspective.
		28. The activities and exercises include those that require students to recognise, analyse and question cultural stereotypes.
		29. The activities and exercises include those that require students to participate in real intercultural communications.
		30. The activities and exercises include those that require students to express their opinions or ideas on cultural topics or differences.

Appendix 2: Assessment rubrics for experts to evaluate the master students' abilities to identify and analyse ICC attributes in the EFL textbook ("New English File" Intermediate level)

Dimension / Level	Low	Medium	High
Cultural topics	Students find evidence for less than two items from the checklist.	Students provide evidence for 3-5 items from the checklist.	Students identify a comprehensive range of cultural topics present in the book with clear evidence. The evidence is provided for more than five items.
	Students provide basic analysis for some identified cultural topics, showing a limited understanding of their impact.	They offer a good level of analysis for most identified cultural topics, showcasing an understanding of some of their implications.	They provide a thorough and insightful analysis of each identified cultural topic, demonstrating a deep understanding of their significance in language learning.
Cultural information	Students find evidence for less than three items from the checklist.	Students provide evidence for 4-8 items from the checklist.	Students identify a comprehensive range of cultural information present in the book with clear evidence. The evidence is provided for nine or more items.
	Students claim that the textbook poorly integrates the target language culture. Students have difficulties defining information related to all big "C" cultures and cannot indicate little "c" cultures. Students vaguely identify the material related to non-verbal communication presented explicitly in the textbook.	Students recognise that the textbook adequately presents cultural information with appropriate images and pictures, focusing more on big "C" than little "c" related to English-speaking countries. However, they demonstrate a partial understanding of elements of non-verbal communication included implicitly in the coursebook. The students identify some cultural information integrated into the texts.	Students consider that materials of textbooks develop tolerance, empathy and curiosity toward otherness, presenting topics from different cultural perspectives, focusing on little "c" rather than big "C". Despite this and the lack of info about students' native 'Kazakh culture, students indicate questions in the discussion part and other tasks that provide opportunities to reflect on learners' native culture and environment and give examples from students' own cultural experience.
Activities and exercises	Students provide evidence for less than four items from the checklist.	Students provide evidence for 4-8 items from the checklist.	Students identified a comprehensive range of activities and exercises present in the book with clear evidence. The evidence is provided for more than nine items.
	Students have difficulty in identifying the potential of activities and exercises that require learners to understand and explain cultural differences and solve cultural problems	Students' analysis of the activities is of good quality. They identify the potential of exercises that require learners to recognise, analyse and guess cultural stereotypes. However, students	An in-depth analysis of all potential activities and exercises that require learners to express their opinions and ideas on cultural topics, relate to learners' native culture and events, and understand and

from a target culture perspective. Students claim that activities and exercises are poorly culture-oriented and do not include tasks for developing intercultural knowledge, attitudes, and intercultural skills.	demonstrate a partial understanding of exercises on expressing opinions and ideas on cultural topics relating to learners' native culture and events.	interpret intercultural issues is provided.

Appendix 3: Questionnaire for EFL teachers

Dear teachers! Currently, I am working on identifying the university EFL instructors' practices and attitudes toward the Intercultural Approach (ICA) and the pre-service EFL teachers' level of preparedness to implement ICA in their teaching practice. Please answer sincerely, as only this will guarantee the investigation's success. All data collected in this survey will be held anonymously and securely. No personal data is asked for or retained. Your answers are very important for my research. Thank you.

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

You will be asked to complete the questionnaire, which includes mostly closed-ended questions designed to elicit information about your experience and attitude towards implementing the Intercultural Approach in your teaching.

TIME INVOLVEMENT: Your participation will take approximately 10 minutes.

RISKS AND BENEFITS: The risks associated with this study are minimal. The survey will be conducted anonymously. I do not collect your personal information, employer's name, email address, and IP address. The findings will be presented in an aggregate form to prevent the identification of individual participants. The names and reputations of your university will be protected. The main benefit to the EFL teachers participating in the study is the opportunity for self-awareness and reflection. By engaging with the survey questions, educators will be prompted to reflect on how they develop their students' intercultural competence.

PARTICIPANT'S RIGHTS: If you have read this form and have decided to participate in this project, please understand that your participation is voluntary, and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. The alternative is not to participate. You have the right to refuse to answer questions. The results of this research study may be presented at scientific or professional meetings or published in scientific journals.

Please tick the box below if you agree to participate in this study.
- ☐ I have carefully read the information provided.
- ☐ I have been given full information regarding the purpose and procedures of the study.
- ☐ I understand how the data collected will be used and that confidential information will be seen only by the researchers and will not be revealed to anyone else.
- ☐ I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason.
- ☐ With full knowledge of all the foregoing, I agree to participate in this study of my own free will.

Part 1. General information
1. Could you specify your age in complete years:
   - ☐ 20-24
   - ☐ 25-29
   - ☐ 30-39
   - ☐ 40-49
   - ☐ 50+
2. Your gender
   - ☐ Male
   - ☐ Female
3. Please indicate your previous qualifications
   - ☐ "Foreign language: two foreign languages",
   - ☐ "Foreign Philology"
   - ☐ "Translation studies"
   - ☐ Another program
4. Have you ever studied any course related to intercultural communication?
   - ☐ Yes
   - ☐ No
   - ☐ Not sure
5. Have you ever worked/studied abroad?
   - ☐ Yes
   - ☐ No
6. If yes, please specify the country and the reason for being abroad: *open-ended question
   _____

Part 2. Attitude towards implementing ICA
Please identify your attitude towards the following statements, which were
1 – Strongly agree,
2 – Agree,
3 – Neither agree nor disagree,
4 – Disagree,
5 – Strongly disagree.

No	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
1.	In a foreign language classroom, teaching culture is as important as teaching a foreign language.					
2.	Implementing an intercultural approach in TEFL enhances learners' interest in mastering the English language and proves to be beneficial.					
3.	English language classes should strongly emphasise the inclusion of foreign cultures.					
4.	To teach culture or introduce an intercultural dimension to foreign language teaching, my students must possess a sufficiently high level of proficiency in the foreign language.					
5.	Learners should cultivate proficiency in both language and intercultural competence during English language classes.					
6.	The EFL students should know how to communicate verbally with people from the target language culture.					
7.	The EFL students should know how to communicate non-verbally with people from the target language culture.					
8.	Learners' ought to foster positive attitudes toward foreign cultures in English language classes.					
9.	In English language classes, it is vital to nurture learners' curiosity, openness, and willingness to learn about foreign cultures.					
10.	In English language classes, learners should be educated on effective and appropriate communication with individuals from different countries.					

11.	English language classes should provide instruction on strategies for effective intercultural communication to learners.				
12.	It is impossible to teach a foreign language and a foreign culture in an integrated way.				
13.	In the foreign language classroom, students can only acquire additional cultural knowledge. They cannot acquire intercultural skills.				
14.	The intercultural approach reinforces students' already existing stereotypes of other peoples and cultures.				
15.	The intercultural approach should enhance pupils' understanding of their own cultural identity.				

Part 3. Practices in the Implementation of ICA in English Classrooms
Please identify your attitude towards the following statements, which were
1 – Strongly agree,
2 – Agree,
3 – Neither agree nor disagree,
4 – Disagree,
5 – Strongly disagree

No	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
1.	The cultural content is explicitly integrated into my EFL course book(s).					
2.	The cultural content is implicitly integrated into my EFL course book(s).					
3.	The cultural content of my textbook(s) meets my expectations.					
4.	I am familiar with the country and culture associated with the foreign language and the students' culture to explain obscure cultural points.					
5.	I develop my students' intercultural skills through designing and delivering intercultural activities.					
6.	When I have limited teaching hours, culture teaching has to give way to language teaching.					
7.	As a foreign language teacher, I should present a positive image of the foreign culture and society.					
8.	As a foreign language teacher, I should present a realistic image of a foreign culture, including both positive and negative sides.					

Part 4. ICA activities.
Please identify the frequency with which you use the following ICA activities, were
1 – Never,
2 – Seldom/rarely,
3 – Often,
4 – Always

No	Statement	1	2	3	4
	I use the following activities to implement an intercultural approach in TEFL classrooms:				
1.	informative (sharing, interpreting and relating information about the country and culture of the target language);				
2.	interactive (discussions, role plays, simulations, debates);				
3.	explorative (researching some aspect of the foreign culture through PBL, TBL);				

2. If you use other activities, please specify: *open-ended question
_____