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## **Integrating intercultural competence in the FL classroom: Strategies and perspectives of educators**

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**ABSTRACT:** *In recent years, there has been an increasing demand to make students interculturally competent, preparing them to become global citizens. Individuals must have relevant intercultural and communicative competencies to function effectively in multicultural and multilingual environments. One common way to enhance intercultural competence (IC) is through teaching a foreign language (FL). FL teachers promote the acquisition of intercultural competence through a range of teaching materials and techniques; however, there is insufficient research documenting their experiences. This paper explores teachers' beliefs and practices regarding the integration of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) among adult FL learners. 60 FL instructors from 17 countries, who taught 16 FLs at 29 universities and colleges across the USA, participated in this study. Data were collected through a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews with educators, which were analyzed using a mixed-methods approach. The Likert-scale items were analyzed using descriptive statistics, and the open-ended responses were analyzed using thematic analysis. Byram's (2020) ICC framework was applied for analyzing the data, suggesting that educators explore all the ICC dimensions, including knowledge, discovery skills, interaction skills, interpreting and relating skills, and critical cultural awareness, to simulate conditions that encourage learners to practice communicating in multilingual and multicultural settings. Respondents reported that learners' knowledge of the FL culture plays a significant role in their success in learning the target language. They also observed that the use of intercultural input enhanced FL learners' pragmatic understanding, vocabulary, and speech production. Consequently, they frequently use cultural themes in instructional materials and assessments, which they believe have helped develop learners' overall FL skills.*

**Keywords:** Intercultural Communicative Competence, FL teaching and assessment methods, Teacher beliefs, Teacher Role

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## INTRODUCTION

Economic liberalization across the globe affected the policies in every field, including foreign affairs, trade, defence, and education. Notably, the developments in education for the last few decades have underlined the significance of global competence in increasing the outreach of new knowledge. One of the efforts towards enhancing the international competence of graduates is to offer a wide range of FL courses in universities worldwide. Teaching an FL is one way to enhance global competence, as it involves not only teaching linguistic proficiency but also developing the capacity to function in different cultures (Singh & Jack, 2021). It is commonly believed that teaching culture is an inseparable part of language education (Byram, 1997; Kramsch, 1993; Brooks, 2011; Cullen-Tran, 2024) and cannot be considered as a separate skill. Over the years, there have been significant changes in the approaches towards FL education in the form of acceptance of cultural breadth. This has affected the FL pedagogy and learning outcomes considerably. One of the fundamental changes since the integration of cultural dimensions in language pedagogy is that the goal of an FL class is no longer to acquire communicative competence alone, which refers to the awareness of the rules of language use in various contexts (Hymes, 1992). An essential extension of an FL classroom is to develop intercultural competence (IC), which refers to “the ability of a person to behave adequately in a flexible manner when confronted with actions, attitudes, and expectations of representatives of foreign cultures” (Meyer, 1991).

One way to facilitate IC in an FL classroom is to use the target language in authentic contexts. In a study conducted by Park et. al. (2021), they argued that authentic exposure while learning another language helps learners understand natural speech, expressions, and accent. Practicing in meaning-oriented communication settings better prepares learners for real-world situations. The authenticity of language use involves the use of socio-cultural knowledge in the process of communication. Understanding the interlocutors’ sentiments across contexts is essential to achieving honest communication. To develop a sense of identity in a foreign culture, learners need to practice interconnectedness between culture and negotiate with their existing beliefs (Lu & Sun, 2025). Therefore, speakers need to be aware of the language's cultural norms. Intercultural communication and FL education researchers have highlighted the significance of adequate social skills, knowledge, and attitudes regarding the relevant culture.

One of the most famous models often referred to by FL educators to support IC is Byram's (1997, 2020) model of intercultural communicative competence (ICC). According to this model, five key factors are crucial while communicating across cultures: knowledge, attitudes, interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and political education incorporating critical cultural awareness.

According to this model, knowledge refers to understanding the course of social interaction, cultural references, and their significance in meaning-making while communicating. Attitude encompasses the willingness to accept new knowledge and practices from a different culture and interact with openness. Skills of interpreting and relating denote the capacity to understand new contexts while communicating and using cultural symbolism for better communication rather than leading to misunderstanding. Acquiring new cultural knowledge and integrating it into everyday communication effectively by understanding the socio-cultural challenges indicates diversity and interaction skills. Finally, the ability to critically evaluate one's own and others' beliefs and practices indicates critical cultural awareness. This model provides a holistic understanding of the aspects of intercultural competence, including cognitive, affective, and behavioral areas.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Intercultural competence, according to Chen and Starosta (2000), is the capacity to choose cultural meanings and engage in appropriate and productive communication behaviors that acknowledge linguistic and cultural diversity. They highlight aspects of ICC, such as recognizing diverse cultural identities, compromising on cultural characteristics, and creating acceptable and efficient communication patterns. ICC enables an individual to recognize cultural differences, thereby aiding in selecting and avoiding specific cultural references while communicating in a different cultural setting. Hence, developing learners' ICC requires educators to help students see the world from other people's perspectives, improve their communicative skills and knowledge, and be sensitive to other people's cultures and their own.

Researchers believe that one of the most effective ways of developing ICC among learners is cross-cultural experiential learning, as it expects learners to critically consider their own culture and the implicit value systems that guide their assessments of the world around them. (Chao, 2014; Wilson, 1986; Susilo & Yang, 2019). Byram et al. (2002) asserted that exposing learners to real-world tasks and activities where they have to communicate across cultures will help enhance intercultural awareness and knowledge about other cultures and communication styles. Keeping this in perspective, they added the intercultural dimension in language learning goals as this will make learners reflect on their communication abilities and modify their intercultural attitudes. The concept of intercultural dimension in FL education has existed in Europe for some time and was addressed in the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages as the value of interculturality and plurilingualism. Furstenberg (2010) believes that the

goal of a FL should be more than communicative competence to develop students' intercultural competence. Most learners learn an FL as they anticipate a close interaction with the users of that language for various reasons such as education, commerce, employment, personal interests, etc. Hence, they intend to interact more deeply with their interlocutors rather than only engage in verbal exchanges. One way to foster ICC in the FL classroom is to create an inclusive environment where linguistic and cultural diversity will be acknowledged and appreciated. Teaching methods should have space for learners' diverse experiences and encourage learners to share their contexts, enhancing learning and communication (Achieng, 2021). Deardorff (2006) advised using cultural immersion and simulation techniques such as study abroad programs or virtual exchange to facilitate learning and acquisition of ICC. Through such programs, learners directly interact with the people in the target language community and learn the cultural norms most authentically. Project-based learning is another strategy that can be used to deepen learners' ICC (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013), and learners can be assigned tasks to research another culture and language. Furthermore, using authentic materials such as reading texts, audio-visual aids, and real-life situations from the target culture in the FL classroom could help develop learners' pragmatic awareness and functional competencies in the target language culture. Similar to teaching, the assessment of ICC also becomes a crucial aspect of FL classroom activities as it is increasingly acknowledged as one of the significant objectives of FL instruction. Language educators use ICC as a parameter because it helps them determine learners' abilities to interact in cross-cultural situations, provides a reliable basis for observing their growth, encourages learning, and indicates areas that need improvement (Sinicrope, Norris, & Watanabe, 2007).

Teachers can adopt various methods for assessing ICC in the FL classroom. First, they can observe how learners behave in a multicultural setup in terms of their attentiveness to others' speech, acceptance of diverse perspectives, empathy, and flexibility of opinions. Some tasks that may help the teacher in this process are group discussions and group projects. Learners can be given assignments that involve presentations on specific cultural topics and can also reveal their understanding of intercultural issues. Teachers can evaluate students' comprehension of cultural nuances, the depth of their research, and their ability to communicate cultural information accurately and respectfully. Another effective method is to motivate learners to evaluate their knowledge, attitudes, skills, beliefs, and judgments about other cultures. This can be done periodically to track the changes in these aspects.

Although educators should include teaching and assessing ICC in FL instructions, several challenges must be considered. Gonen and Saglam (2012) raised the issue of language teachers ignoring the intercultural component as a part of language study planning. Teachers are more concerned about learners' proficiency in language skills rather than their competence in using the language as a medium to connect different cultures. One reason for ignoring the intercultural component in language classrooms is its rare representation in the curriculum. FLs are often considered a vehicle for employment rather than an instrument of nurturing intercultural understanding in higher education

institutions. Further, language teachers are frequently obliged to follow a strict timeline to complete the course syllabus, which is usually skill-based, and less or no time is dedicated to discussing ICC. Another major issue for the absence of ICC in FL classrooms, as Sercu (2006) pointed out, could be that the teachers lack specific training in integrating intercultural knowledge into their lessons. Teachers' knowledge of FL culture is crucial for discussing it with learners without forming biases or misinterpreting cultural practices. Deardorff (2009) pointed out inadequate standardized assessment tools for assessing ICC. This severely affects the principles of reliability and validity in the assessment. Teachers' subjective judgments may also raise issues in the fairness of the evaluation (Fantini, 2009). Furthermore, teachers may find it difficult to provide critical and constructive feedback, as cultural sensitivities may play a role (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013).

Teachers play a vital role in applying intercultural communication approaches in FL curricula and are the best judges of their usefulness. However, teachers' opinions in this regard have not been adequately considered (Atkinson, 1999; Paige et al., 2003). It is a well-established fact that teachers' beliefs impact their teaching practices to a great extent. Their understanding, perspectives, and experiences are essential in selecting and eliminating FL cultural practices in classroom instruction. If the teacher is a non-native speaker of the target language, he/she may lack the socio-cultural context (Borg, 2015). On the other hand, a teacher who is a native speaker of the target language may skillfully weave in linguistic and cultural references to help learners become advanced language users. Teachers' choice of teaching methodology is equally important in determining the effectiveness of intercultural communication practice in the language classroom. Therefore, teachers' roles as important stakeholders in FL teaching and assessment should be examined closely to understand the factors they think are effective in developing ICC among learners. Consequently, in this study, we try to answer the following research questions:

### **Research Questions**

- RQ1: How do FL educators facilitate intercultural knowledge in their FL classroom?
  - RQ2: How does knowing learners' culture help educators teach FL?
  - RQ3: What role does intercultural awareness play in the FL learning process?
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### **METHOD**

In this study, 60 foreign language instructors from 32 colleges and universities

across the USA participated voluntarily. They represented 19 countries and 17 languages, including French, German, Arabic, Spanish, Urdu, Hindi, Italian, Swahili, etc. 46% of the participants in the study were independent FL instructors, 28 % of them were co-teaching and assisting the FL instructor in preparing teaching and assessment materials, and 26% were only assisting the primary instructor in teaching and assessment process. All the participants were native speakers of the respective FLs and had completed their master's degrees in the areas related to language education, literature, and linguistics.

### **Ethical considerations**

Participants were informed about the purpose and nature of the study, and their participation was voluntary. The questionnaire's introduction clearly stated that participants' anonymity and confidentiality were ensured, and that no personally identifiable information was collected or reported in this study.

### **Data collection and analysis**

For this descriptive study, the data were collected using a structured questionnaire with 24 questions related to participants' profiles (5), their practices of using culture in the FL classroom (8), and their perspectives on the development of ICC (11). Two items related to participants' practices were borrowed from a study by Atay et al. (2009). The questionnaire was a mix of open-ended and closed questions. The close-ended questions used the Likert scale and check boxes mainly. The questionnaire was administered using Google Forms. The data obtained through the closed-ended questions was analyzed quantitatively using descriptive statistical analysis, including calculating means, frequencies, and standard deviation to summarise the trends in participants' beliefs about intercultural practices in the teaching of FL. On the other hand, the data generated from the open-ended question was analyzed qualitatively. Coding of themes and identifying patterns of participants' experiences allowed the extraction of meaningful insights and the identification of key themes that emerged from the participants' narratives.

## **RESULTS**

While the first section of the questionnaire was about participants' profiles, the second section focused on understanding teachers' beliefs and practices regarding integrating ICC in their FL classrooms. The first question was asked on a Likert scale of 1(Never) to 5 (Always), framing how often the participants use 'culture' as a theme in their classrooms?' The analysis showed that 79% of the participants chose very often and always as their response to this question. However, only 2% of participants mentioned very little, and 18% suggested that they use it sometimes while teaching the FL. The mean value (4.14) and the standard deviation (.77) suggest that most participants are interested in using cultural themes while teaching.

The next item in the second section of the questionnaire was aimed at comprehending how participants visualize the definition of teaching culture in an FL classroom. They were given seven statements to rate, which they thought should be included in the teaching culture. The Likert rating scale ranged between 1 and 5, where 1 means they do not agree and 5 means they strongly agree.

**Table 1**

**Descriptive Statistics and Reliability of Teachers' Perceptions of Culture Integration in FL Teaching**

| No. | Statement (Short Label)                             | ICC Dimension                    | M    | SD   |
|-----|-----------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|------|------|
| 1   | Knowledge of history, politics, and institutions    | Knowledge                        | 3.77 | 1.06 |
| 2   | Everyday life and practices                         | Knowledge                        | 3.94 | 1.17 |
| 3   | Cultural products (music, literature, cinema)       | Knowledge                        | 4.00 | 1.11 |
| 4   | Developing positive attitudes toward target culture | Attitudes                        | 3.91 | 1.08 |
| 5   | Awareness of cultural differences                   | Interpreting and relating skills | 4.27 | 1.06 |
| 6   | Understanding one's own culture                     | Critical cultural awareness      | 3.48 | 1.28 |
| 7   | Intercultural communication skills                  | Discovery and interaction skills | 4.25 | 1.09 |

Overall Cronbach's  $\alpha = .82$

Note. M = mean; SD = standard deviation;  $\alpha$  = Cronbach's alpha. ICC = Intercultural Communicative Competence.

The data in Table 1 suggest that the FL instructors have a strong, consistent orientation toward integrating cultural dimensions into their instruction. The internal consistency of the scale, measured using Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha = .82$ ), indicates positive reliability, indicating that the questionnaire items coherently measure participants' perceptions of ICC integration in the FL classroom. This reliability validates the interpretation of descriptive statistics.

The mean scores, which exceed the midpoint of the Likert scale, indicate strong agreement among participants regarding the importance of including culture as a theme in their instructions. Particularly, the items with the highest mean scores like '*raising awareness of cultural differences*' (M = 4.27, SD = 1.06) and '*fostering the development of intercultural communication skills*' (M = 4.25, SD = 1.09), can be seen as evidence of FL instructors placing interactional and skill-based dimensions of the ICC framework at the highest priority. This can also be seen as an indicator of a shift from the traditional method of knowledge transmission toward more interactive, experiential, and contextual approaches to FL teaching. Further, the strong agreement in the statements related to the ICC dimensions of cultural practices (M=3.9) and products (M=4.00) suggests that the instructors preferred to make FL learning more authentic and relatable to the

cultural contexts. Participants also acknowledged the importance of factual cultural knowledge, such as history and politics ( $M=3.77$ ), indicating the integration of target culture knowledge into FL teaching.

In the next part of the questionnaire, the respondents were asked how often they used the mentioned strategies to enhance learners' cross-cultural knowledge in the FL classroom. They had to rate the strategies on the Likert scale of five points: one meant never, and five meant always. (see Table 2)

**Table 2.**  
**Descriptive Statistics of Teachers' Practices Across Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) Dimensions**

| No. | Statement (Short Label)                    | ICC Dimension                    | Mean | SD   |
|-----|--------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|------|------|
| 1   | Introduce aspects of foreign culture       | Knowledge                        | 3.51 | 1.04 |
| 2   | Encourage independent cultural learning    | Discovery Skills                 | 3.37 | 1.21 |
| 3   | Use movies and documentaries               | Discovery Skills                 | 3.72 | 1.21 |
| 4   | Share personal intercultural experiences   | Interaction Skills               | 3.92 | 1.19 |
| 5   | Students discuss living in foreign culture | Interaction Skills               | 3.35 | 1.35 |
| 6   | Invite people with foreign experience      | Interaction Skills               | 2.52 | 1.28 |
| 7   | Compare own culture with foreign culture   | Interpreting and Relating Skills | 3.52 | 1.32 |
| 8   | Use visuals to represent culture           | Knowledge                        | 2.84 | 1.38 |
| 9   | Facilitate intercultural interaction       | Interaction Skills               | 2.89 | 1.43 |
| 10  | Discuss biases and stereotypes             | Critical Cultural Awareness      | 3.18 | 1.36 |

The analysis of teachers' responses suggests that their teaching practices largely aligned with the ICC dimensions according to Byram's ICC framework; interaction skills occurred most frequently. The mean score for the ten items, ranging from 2.52 to 3.92, indicates variability in the adoption of intercultural practices.

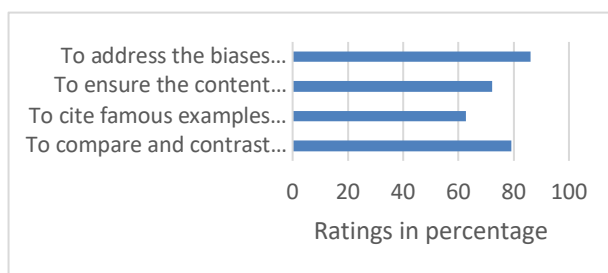
As native speakers of the FL in non-native environments, teachers preferred sharing their experiences while interacting with people in a foreign culture ( $M=3.92$ ,  $SD=1.9$ ). This strategy is commonly used in teaching and learning practices to make the process more personal and effective. Similarly, they also



preferred sharing what they had learned about a foreign culture that they had heard about and openly discussing biases and misconceptions about the FL culture. This may help them address stereotypes generally developed about a culture through non-standard information. Further, most respondents chose screening movies from the FL culture ( $M = 3.72$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ), pictures, and visuals as FL culture input as teaching strategies. Respondents also showed favourable agreement with strategies like promoting inquiry-based learning about the FL culture and enabling learners to use the FL to discuss and compare their culture with others.

The questionnaire included questions on the sources used by the respondents to provide FL cultural input and the type of activities they used to provide this input. Among the most preferred sources were YouTube videos, advertisements, news articles, and literature genres like short stories and poems. Among the activities that focused on FL development through the cultural inputs were speaking and writing activities based on the videos the students watched in the classroom, small-scale research projects about the FL cultural facts and making presentations, word games and interaction sessions, group presentations, and cultural exhibitions of the FL cultural artefacts, and performances on cultural themes such as singing or role plays.

The second section of the questionnaire aimed to understand how knowing learners' culture helps teach FL better. Respondents were asked the following question: How necessary is the teacher's knowledge of the learners' culture? The respondents rated their responses on a Likert scale of five points, with one indicating that they were not necessary at all and five indicating that they were essential. The descriptive analysis of the responses shows a mean score of 4.44 and a standard deviation of 0.62. The numbers show that respondents strongly believed their knowledge about learners' culture was essential while teaching them an FL. This would help them prepare activities where learners could compare and contrast cultural practices. Knowing learners' cultures would also help teachers understand and address cultural sensitivities in both cultures.



**Figure 1: How does the knowledge about learners' culture help teachers in FL teaching?**

As presented in Figure 1, respondents suggested that knowing learners' L1 cultural knowledge helped them in multiple ways in the process of FL teaching. They clarified misconceptions about the target language and used examples from both cultures to make the content familiar to the learners. They could compare

and contrast the cultural practices and beliefs of the FL culture with those of the learners' L1.

The last section of the questionnaire focused on the effects of intercultural awareness on learning the FL. Respondents were asked open-ended and Likert-scale rating questions to understand how learners' intercultural knowledge supports their FL learning. Upon being asked which FL skills learners improved faster after the intercultural awareness tasks in the classroom, respondents suggested areas such as reading comprehension, vocabulary development, speech length, pragmatic awareness, and pronunciation.

**Table 1. How effectively do students develop the following abilities in the FL if they know the FL culture?**

| Statements                                                            | 5        | 4        | 3        | 2        | 1        | Mean | SD  |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|------|-----|
|                                                                       | f<br>(%) | f<br>(%) | f<br>(%) | f<br>(%) | f<br>(%) |      |     |
| 1. Range of vocabulary use                                            | 18.6     | 44.2     | 25.6     | 7.0      | 4.7      | 3.7  | 1.0 |
| 2. Reading comprehension                                              | 7.0      | 30.2     | 39.5     | 16.3     | 7.0      | 3.1  | 1.0 |
| 3. Speech length                                                      | 25.6     | 37.2     | 27.9     | 2.3      | 7.0      | 3.7  | 1.1 |
| 4. Appropriacy (ability to produce contextually appropriate language) | 44.2     | 37.2     | 7.0      | 9.3      | 2.3      | 4.1  | 1.1 |
| 5. Pronunciation                                                      | 14.0     | 46.5     | 16.3     | 11.6     | 11.6     | 3.4  | 1.2 |

Out of the five areas of FL development, appropriacy, which suggests pragmatic awareness, received the highest mean score (M=4.10, SD=1.10). Pragmatic and sociolinguistic awareness of a language is an indicator of speakers' familiarity with the target language culture. The participants also reported significant improvement in the range of vocabulary used and speech length (M=3.7, SD 1.0 & 1.10), suggesting that the cultural exposure also promotes new vocabulary acquisitions, which by default enhances the speech time of the participants. They also reported the effect on learners' pronunciation of the FL vocabulary (M=3.40, SD 1.20) which can be attributed to the exposure to the audio and video content in the FL. Finally, marginal growth was reported in reading comprehension (M=3.10, DS=1.1), suggesting that reading comprehension is mostly an individual activity and depends on learners' personal receptive abilities. Although these claims show overall positive growth in FL learners' language gains, they were not validated through analysis of their speech or writing samples due to time constraints.

In open-ended responses, respondents indicated that teaching an FL without a cultural context is a dry, mechanical practice. In their opinion, intercultural

competence is crucial for eliminating misunderstandings in the classroom and for helping students understand cultural nuances, which can affect communication and learning. They added that cultural inputs enhance language skills at a meta-level, even if they are not directly testable. Using various FL culture-specific elements like food, clothing, art, and cinema in the classroom provides ideal prompts for learners to use practical and everyday language, enhancing their communicative abilities.

## **DISCUSSION**

The study's findings suggest a positive orientation toward integrating cross-cultural communicative competence development into FL education. The majority of the participants in the study reported frequent use of culture-focused materials to enhance intercultural awareness and learners' communication abilities in the FL. One of the FL teachers' priorities, as seen in the data, was to make learners aware of cultural practices in the native FL communities. This helps them prepare learners to realize cultural differences and linguistic nuances required while communicating with people from the FL culture. To foster this, teachers suggested using diverse cultural content, such as cinema, music, literature, and educators' own cross-cultural experiences.

Teachers' personal experiences, their judgments of the learners' culture, and their understanding of the relationship between FL cultural practices and language use are some crucial resources in the FL classroom. Teachers transfer this cultural awareness to the learners by simulating communicative situations and creating opportunities for the learners to interact in the FL for factual purposes. This would include discussion sessions on movies, popular cultural celebrations, and sports. As the analysis shows, respondents strongly believe these activities have contributed to learners' overall development of FL skills.

The statistical analysis shows that the higher-order ICC dimensions, such as interaction skills and interpreting and relating skills, exhibit greater variability, suggesting inconsistent pedagogical application of these aspects within the sample group. On the other hand, dimensions like knowledge and discovery have greater consistency and acceptance among educators. These choices could also be determined by the FL learners' existing proficiency levels.

Overall, FL teachers prioritize the development of intercultural communicative competence as a key objective in language instruction. The study suggests that the development of ICC is crucial for learning FL; hence, it should be integrated into the FL curriculum as one of its objectives. Drawing on the ICC teaching and assessment framework (Byram, 2020), this study identifies which aspects of the ICC dimensions require greater focus and engagement from educators.

## **Implications**

The study offers significant applications for FL pedagogy, instructional design, and teacher development. Similarly, it provides practical insights for future research in intercultural education. First of all, by presenting educators' perceptions of its integration, the study shows that IC is no longer on the periphery; it is at the center of FL pedagogical objectives. Therefore, curriculum designers and policymakers can explicitly embed IC as a component in the teaching and assessment of FL. The study also suggests that institutions should support educators in successfully integrating IC by providing appropriate facilities. We advocate the use of authentic and reliable teaching resources that make FL education more experiential, meaning-oriented, and engaging. In bilingual and multilingual settings, educators can utilize local resources, such as teacher experience, as indicated in the study.

## Limitations

Despite its contributions in understanding FL teachers' perspectives and practices, this study has certain limitations that need to be recorded as well. First of all, this study relies solely on teachers' opinions, based on the ICC framework, and does not include data on their classroom practices. Further, although the study reports language growth among FL learners, it does not include direct data from the learners to validate the claims made by the FL educators. These can be seen as the potential areas for further research.

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*The author did not use AI at any stage in writing this paper and declared that it is entirely conceptualized and written manually.*

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