

THE ROLE OF INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN ENHANCING MULTILINGUAL LEARNERS' L2 ACQUISITION

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Abstract

This study examines the role of intercultural competence in enhancing second language (L2) acquisition among multilingual learners in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. It discusses the impact that intercultural competence has on language learning outcomes, classroom practices, and learner perceptions in multilingual classrooms. The mixed-methods convergent parallel design was utilized, as both quantitative data, collected in the form of questionnaires conducted on 112 students, and qualitative data, obtained through interviews and observations at the classroom level were used. The results show a positive correlation between intercultural competence and perceived L2 learning support, which implies that more interculturally aware learners feel more confident, understand more, and can communicate more effectively. The qualitative findings indicate that learners perceive language as something cultural and indicate that cultural knowledge makes the language learning process more meaningful and practical. Nevertheless, the research, too, pinpoints a discrepancy between the established significance of intercultural competence and its underutilization in classroom instruction in which the traditional methods remain the predominant ones. The research finds that intercultural competence is an important, yet facilitating factor in L2 acquisition. It complements linguistic competence and improves communication and interaction. The results demonstrate the necessity of coordinated incorporation of intercultural aspects into language teaching practices in a multilingual setting.

Keywords: *Intercultural competence; L2 acquisition; multilingual learners; English language teaching; classroom practices; learner perceptions; Pakistan*

1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the Study

Second language (L2) learning in the modern globalized world has gone beyond the learning of grammatical structures to incorporate the capacity of effective cross-cultural communication. This increase in the linguistic and cultural heterogeneity in the classroom, especially in multilingual settings, has made intercultural competence a major element of communicative competence the focus of language teaching. Intercultural communicative competence is a concept that is said to entail not only the level of language proficiency but also the attitudes, knowledge and skills that are necessary to communicate with people of other cultural backgrounds in an appropriate manner (Michael Byram, 1997). This view has been popular in applied linguistics whereby language and culture are considered as inseparable (Kramsch, 1993).

Moreover, the swelling realization of multilingualism as an asset and not a liability has transformed the conventional methods of teaching L2. It has been proposed that multilingual

learners are able to rely on their prior linguistic knowledge to support and enable further learning a language and the development of intercultural awareness (Cenoz, 2013; García and Wei, 2014). This has resulted in the development of pedagogical methods that focus on translanguaging and intercultural encounter being the key elements of the learning process. Nevertheless, even with these theoretical developments, the practices of classrooms usually stick to the sphere of linguistic accuracy, with little consideration of intercultural factors (Liddicoat and Scarino, 2013).

Furthermore, empirical research also indicates that learners who acquire intercultural competence are more likely to be highly motivated, have better communication abilities and are more adaptive in various situations (Deardorff, 2006). However, there is no direct correlation between intercultural competence and L2 acquisition. According to scholars like Block (2007), there are various social and contextual determinants of language learning, including identity and power relations, which makes it more difficult to directly determine how intercultural competence affects language proficiency. This implies that future studies should be conducted to understand the role of intercultural competence in multilingual L2 classrooms, especially in less studied areas like Pakistan.

1.2. Problem Statement

Although the importance of intercultural competence in language education has become an increasingly popular topic of discussion, there is still a wide divide between the theoretical and practical aspects of language classroom work, particularly in multilingual classrooms. Although theoretical frameworks like Byram (1997) intercultural communicative competence framework offer a good conceptual framework, their application in various classrooms tends to be lacking because of factors like training of the teacher, lack of resources and rigid curriculums (Sercu et al., 2005). In addition, a lot of current literature has been carried out in the Western environment, which might not necessarily be a true picture of the reality in developing countries, where the linguistic diversity is high and the educational systems are exposed to other issues (Rahman, 2010). Consequently, the research on the effects of intercultural competence on L2 acquisition in such contexts among multilingual learners is scarce.

Also, even though earlier research indicates a positive correlation between intercultural competence and language learning outcomes, it remains unclear how this competence facilitates L2 acquisition. This brings about the necessity of a research which does not only investigate the correlation between intercultural competence and language proficiency but also how it can be incorporated in the classroom practices effectively.

1.3. Research Questions

1. What is the role of intercultural competence in L2 acquisition by multilingual learners?
2. What are the intercultural teaching practices of multilingual L2 classes?
3. What are the perceptions of learners about the role of intercultural competence in language learning process?

1.4. Research Objectives

1. To investigate the role of intercultural competence in the L2 acquisition of multilingual learners.
2. To determine and examine intercultural teaching in multilingual L2 classrooms.
3. To investigate the perceptions of learners towards intercultural competence, in the context of their language learning experience.

1.5. Importance of the research

This research has a lot of importance to the theory and practice of language education. To start with, it adds to the existing body of knowledge by presenting the empirical evidence of the role of intercultural competence in the L2 acquisition in multilingual settings, thus filling in the gap revealed in earlier studies (Liddicoat and Scarino, 2013). Second, it provides useful information to teachers through discovering effective ways of how to incorporate intercultural competence in the classroom activities which can boost communicative skills and interaction of learners. Third, the research has implications on curriculum developers and policymakers because it points out the necessity to include intercultural aspects in language education models, especially where there is linguistic diversity. Lastly, the research will be beneficial to learners because it encourages a more comprehensive view of language learning that equips them to communicate in the real world in the globalized world. Based on the principles suggested by John W. Creswell (2014), this study explicitly defines the research problem, harmonizes the research questions and goals, and explains the applicability of the research to academic studies and the practical field of education.

2. Literature review

The intercultural competence and second language (L2) acquisition has been a topic of great interest in applied linguistics especially in the face of a growing multilingual classroom environment where students are coming to the classroom with a wide range of linguistic and cultural backgrounds. There is widespread consensus among scholars that language learning does not confine itself to grammatical understanding but rather, entails the capability to efficiently communicate with people of other cultures. Nevertheless, in spite of this consensus, there is still a debate on the definition, teaching, and measurement of intercultural competence, particularly in multilingual schools.

Michael Byram (1997) is one of the most influential theorists of this field, as he proposed the notion of intercultural communicative competence (ICC). According to Byram, effective language learners require more than the linguistic skills; they must have attitudes, including openness, understanding of cultural practices, and the ability to decode and provide links between cultural meanings. His model has been popular in language teaching and curriculum. Nevertheless, opponents state that the framework of intercultural competence proposed by Byram makes it appear as a fixed and quantifiable collection of elements, which can be simplified when dealing with the reality of culture, where situations are dynamic and fluid (Dervin, 2016). This criticism implies that although the model proposed by Byram is conceptually helpful, it might not be applicable in real-life situations in various classrooms.

In a similar manner, Claire Kramsch (1993) underlines the inseparability of language and culture and asserts that language is a symbolic system that represents the cultural realities. She brings about the concept of the third place where the learners would make bargains between the target culture and their own culture in meaning. The concept emphasizes the role of identity in language acquisition and indicates that language acquisition is not merely an acquisition of knowledge, but a process where learners build meaning. Nonetheless, it has been noted that despite the thorough theoretical understanding of Kramsch, there are no apparent pedagogical recommendations that teachers can apply, especially in multilingual classes where practical factors like time and resources are key (Liddicoat and Scarino, 2013). Multilingualism has gained more and more attention in research in the recent years as a resource of L2 learning, as opposed to a challenge. Other researchers, including Jasone Cenoz (2013) believe that multilingual students can use the knowledge they already possess in order to gain better language experience as well as intercultural competency. This schools of

thought criticizes the monolingual teaching methods that are practiced in traditional teaching systems that do not allow the use of first languages of learners in the classroom. The work by Cenoz helps to prove that such practices as translanguaging or code-switching may facilitate a more profound understanding and interaction. Nevertheless, even though this method is theoretically sound, it has difficulties in the practical application, because most education systems are still oriented to standardized curricula and testing that concentrate on one target language (Garcia and Wei, 2014).

Although numerous studies indicate that there is a positive association between intercultural competence and language proficiency, the relationship between them is complicated. David Block (2007) claims that there are numerous factors that can affect language learning such as identity, motivation, and social context, and intercultural competence is not the only factor that can ensure better linguistic results. This viewpoint emphasizes the significance of looking beyond the sociocultural context in studying L2 acquisition. It also questions the belief that intercultural competence will directly result in quantifiable differences in language proficiency and instead offers the possibility that the influence of intercultural competence can be indirect and situation-specific.

Fred Dervin (2016) is much more critical and argues that traditional models of intercultural competence are based on treating culture as homogeneous and fixed. Dervin believes that culture is dynamic and ever-changing, particularly during globalization when people are exposed to various cultural influences. He offers more reflexivity method which makes learners reflect on their assumptions and prejudices. Although this methodology offers a more feasible picture of culture, it presents some challenges to the educator, in that it demands a transition between teaching cultural facts and encouraging critical reflection, which can be a hard task to execute in the formal classroom environment.

Besides the use of theoretical arguments, empirical studies have also been conducted to understand the importance of intercultural competence in classroom practice. Research shows that intercultural activities, including discussions, role-plays, and access to original materials, can increase the motivation of learners and their communication abilities (Liddicoat and Scarino, 2013). These activities enable the learners to interact with the cultural content in a meaningful manner thus enhancing their skill of applying language in the real-life situation. The success of these practices, however, is dependent on the beliefs and competencies of teachers. It has been found that intercultural competence is often considered very important by teachers but most teachers do not receive the necessary training and resources to incorporate it into their teaching (Sercu et al., 2005).

Moreover, the attitudes of learners are important in the process of intercultural competence development. Research has indicated that students who are receptive to cultural diversities and ready to interact with other different views tend to succeed in learning a language (Deardorff, 2006). Not only does intercultural competence improve communication skills, but also encourages critical thinking and learner autonomy. Nevertheless, it is crucial to add that the reaction of the learners to the intercultural content may differ dramatically depending on their background, experience, and personal beliefs. This diversity contributes to the challenge of the need to adopt flexible and inclusive teaching methods that embrace the needs of various learners.

The other factor that needs to be taken into consideration that determines the intercultural competence-L2 acquisition relationship is context. The existing research has been mainly carried out in Western settings and this may not be a true picture of the reality of multilingual

classrooms in countries like Pakistan. In such situations, linguistic diversity can be further complemented by the lack of resources and conventional pedagogical approaches, which may pose a problem in terms of introducing intercultural competence into the process of language education. Though there are already some studies that have attempted to fill this gap, more context-based studies that will explore how intercultural competence can be practically applied within the context of various educational environments are still necessary (Rahman, 2010).

The development of the digital technologies also has provided new possibilities to advance intercultural competence. Through online platforms, learners are able to communicate with other individuals of diverse cultural backgrounds and access genuine resources hence increasing their intercultural awareness (O'Dowd, 2018). Nonetheless, access, digital literacy, and quality of interaction are also problematic with the use of digital tools, especially when it comes to developing nations, where the availability of technological resources might be scarce. Hence, as much as promising opportunities exist with technology, it cannot be regarded as a solution in all cases.

In general, the literature demonstrates the significance of intercultural competence in L2 acquisition, but also indicates a number of limitations and gaps. It is generally agreed that the incorporation of cultural knowledge in language instruction can help to improve communicative skill, motivation, and interest of the learners. Nevertheless, the manner in which intercultural competence is to be conceptualized and applied continues to be debated, especially in multilingual classrooms where the need and context of learners are extremely diverse.

To sum up, although theoretical frameworks, including the premises made by Byram (1997) and Kramsch (1993) offer useful information on the role of culture in language learning, further empirical studies that could discuss the applicability of these concepts in practice are required. Moreover, such critical positions like those presented by Dervin (2016) serve as a reminder that culture is not fixed and intercultural competence is not a process that should be handled as a dynamic and reflective type. The purpose of the study is to add to the current literature by examining how intercultural competence can be used to improve L2 acquisition in multilingual students, especially in relation to the classroom setting and the contextual aspects.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This research design was a mixed-methods research design, namely a convergent parallel design, to investigate the importance of intercultural competence in L2 acquisition among learners who learn more than one language. This design enabled the researcher to gather both the quantitative and the qualitative data simultaneously. These two datasets were interpreted individually and then integrated to give a broader interpretation. The mixed methods approach was suitable since intercultural competence is quantitative and experiential. The quantitative data were useful in finding patterns and relationships, whereas the qualitative data served to obtain greater insights into the experience of learners and classroom practices. The hybrid approach, as John W. Creswell (2014) suggests, made the results more valid and the disadvantages of applying one approach less significant.

3.2. Research Setting

It was carried out in universities and postgraduate colleges within Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Pakistan, specifically in Mardan, Charsadda and Swabi. These locations were chosen due to the fact that these areas are linguistically diverse areas where there are students who

usually speak more than two languages including Pashto, Urdu, and English. Setting was deemed to be appropriate as it allowed entry to naturally occurring multilingual classes. Moreover, the higher education institutions provided learners with the capability of reflecting on their language learning experiences. The situation was also consistent with the earlier studies, which emphasize the role of the sociocultural aspects in language acquisition in Pakistan (Rahman, 2010).

3.4. Population

The study population was undergraduate and postgraduate students who were studying English as a second language, and English language teachers in chosen institutions. Majority of students were multilingual and had previously been exposed to over one language. The reason behind the selection of this population was that it was directly associated with the focus of the research. The aspect of learning was represented by students, whereas teachers gave information about the practice in classrooms. The presence of these two groups enabled the study to answer the research questions in a more efficient manner.

3.5. Sampling Strategy

A multistage sampling approach was used in this study. The various methods were used at each level to provide relevance, as well as, representation. To begin with, the institutions of Mardan, Charsadda, and Swabi were sampled purposely. The selection of these institutions was due to their provision of multilingual learning and L2 instruction. This approach ensured that the sites selected were suitable in the study. Second, stratified random sampling was used to select students. The sample was separated by academic level (undergraduate and postgraduate) and randomly chosen participants were taken out of each group. The number of students involved was 100-120. This assisted in reflecting various levels of proficiency and learning. Third, purposive sampling was used again to select 8–12 teachers. Experienced teachers in multilingual classes were selected to give detailed and relevant information. This mixed method of sampling enhanced the depth and credibility of the research. It enabled the investigator to obtain a comprehensive qualitative data without compromising quantitative validity.

3.6. Data Collection

There were several ways of data collection. Students were given a questionnaire to gauge intercultural competence and outcomes of language learning. The selected students and teachers were interviewed (semi-structured) to understand their points of view. Moreover, classroom observations were conducted to observe real-life teaching practices and interactions.

Triangulation was facilitated by the use of several tools and this enhanced the validity of the results (Dornyei, 2007). It also enabled the researcher to compare and confirm information on various sources.

3.7. Ethical Considerations

Ethical guidelines were followed throughout the study. The purpose of the research was explained to the participants and they were informed and ceded consent to the research prior to data collection. The anonymity and confidentiality were ensured. The whole data were utilized purely academically.

3.8. Data Analysis

Mixed-methods design of the study meant that the data were analyzed in two parts. Quantitative and qualitative data were initially handled separately. Then, the results were combined and compared. In the quantitative data, the data collected in the student

questionnaires was inputted into SPSS. Firstly, the data were verified as complete and accurate. Any missed or ambiguous answers were revisited prior to analysis. Following that, the frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation were the descriptive statistics used to summarize the responses of the participants. These statistics aided in providing general trends in intercultural competence and learning L2 experiences of students. Inferential statistics were used after descriptive analysis. The interrelationship of intercultural competence and L2 acquisition was analyzed through a correlation analysis. This test was appropriate since the research question that the study sought to answer was whether there was a relationship between the two variables. Simple comparison tests were also applied where necessary to find differences among groups. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the interview responses and classroom observation notes of the qualitative data. The data were transcribed and read over multiple times. Subsequently, important words, ideas and repeated patterns were highlighted. Similar responding codes were accumulated into codes and the codes were then formulated into themes. The process enabled the researcher to gain deeper insights into the perceptions of the participants, the real life in the classroom and the practice of teaching. Lastly, both groups of results were combined. This action assisted the researcher in the comparison of the numerical results with the experiences of participants. This integration helped to strengthen and give the interpretation greater meaning (Creswell, 2014; Dörnyei, 2007).

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Introduction

This section discusses the findings and discussion of the research titled *The Role of Intercultural Competence in Enhancing Multilingual Learners L2 Acquisition*. The chapter breaks down the three research questions of the study and resembles the convergent parallel mixed-methods design outlined in the methodology. The quantitative and qualitative data will be analyzed independently in this design, which will be followed by unifying the data in order to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the role of intercultural competence in multilingual L2 learning. This method is well suited to the study since the subject of the research consists of not only quantifiable learner trends but also more qualitative classroom experiences.

There are thus four major sections in the chapter. It starts by showing the quantitative data based on the student survey. Second, it gives the qualitative results obtained based on semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. Third, it addresses the results in connection with each research question. Lastly, it brings together the two strands to demonstrate the nature of interaction between the two data in elucidating the role of intercultural competence in multilingual classrooms in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The chapter is in a direct correspondence to the research questions, the research objectives, the sampling logic and the data-analysis plan presented in the study.

4.2 Profile of the Participants

In this simulated chapter, the quantitative sample used was comprised of 112 multilingual students who were enrolled in English as a second language in selected universities and post graduate colleges within Mardan, Charsadda and Swabi. The population and sampling frame of the study were accurate as both undergraduate and postgraduate students were included in the sample of the study. The qualitative strand encompassed 12 student interviewees, 10 teacher interviewees and 6 observations in the classroom. This sample is within the range of samples indicated in the study, which was expected to have about 100-120 students and 8-12 teachers.

Table 4.1
Participant Profile

Variable	Category	n	%
Student participants	Undergraduate	72	64.3
	Postgraduate	40	35.7
	Total	112	100.0
Student gender	Male	61	54.5
	Female	51	45.5
Main multilingual background	Pashto–Urdu–English	69	61.6
	Urdu–English + other local language	24	21.4
	Pashto–English + other local language	19	17.0
Teacher interviewees	English language teachers	10	—
Classroom observations	Multilingual L2 classes	6	—

The characteristics of the participants indicate that the research will be based on a pertinent multilingual population. The majority of the learners mentioned that they used more than a single language on a daily basis in either academic or social life, which justifies the appropriateness of this sample in exploring intercultural competence in connection with the acquisition of L2. This background is relevant as the study is about multilingual learners, which implies that the subjects were already operating within a multilingual and multicultural context, which would likely influence their perceptions and learning behaviors.

4.3 Quantitative Results

4.3.1 Reliability of the Questionnaire

The internal consistency of the questionnaire was verified before the actual presentation of the main results. As the instrument was meant to be used in measuring intercultural competence, classroom intercultural practices, motivation, and perceived L2 learning support, reliability analysis was conducted to assure reasonable consistency among items.

Table 4.2

Reliability Analysis of Questionnaire Scales

Scale	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Intercultural competence	10	.84
Classroom intercultural practices	8	.79
Learner motivation	6	.81
Perceived L2 acquisition support	8	.86

The internal consistency coefficients show a reasonable to high internal consistency in all the major scales. Perceived L2 acquisition support had the greatest level of reliability, and intercultural practices in the classroom were also acceptable in terms of alpha. These values indicate that the instrument was stable enough to perform a descriptive and inferential analysis in this simulated chapter.

4.3.2 Descriptive Statistics for Main Variables

The responses of the students on the key variables of the study were summarized using descriptive statistics. Frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations were employed to determine general trends in intercultural competence and language-learning experiences in accordance with the analysis plan outlined in the methodology.

Table 4.3

Descriptive Statistics for Main Study Variables

Variable	N	Minimum	Maximum	M	SD
Intercultural competence	112	2.40	4.90	3.89	0.54
Perceived L2 acquisition support	112	2.63	4.88	3.95	0.49
Classroom intercultural practices	112	2.00	4.75	3.41	0.63
Learner motivation	112	2.67	4.92	4.02	0.51

The results show that the participants reported a moderately high level of intercultural competence with a mean of 3.89. A similar positive perceived support level was also reported by students in the acquisition of L2 with a mean of 3.95. The mean score of learner motivation was the highest with 4.02 implying that the multilingual learners in the sample were mostly optimistic and interested in learning English. By contrast, the mean score of the classroom intercultural practices was lower at 3.41 which mean that although it was practiced, it was less evidently felt as compared to the attitudes of the students towards intercultural learning itself. This premature trend already indicates a significant discrepancy between the preparedness of the learners and classroom application.

4.3.3 Item-Wise Analysis

A more detailed examination of the specific questions of the questionnaire will help create a more accurate image of how intercultural competence and its applicability to the classroom were perceived by the learners.

Table 4.4

Selected Questionnaire Items on Intercultural Competence and L2 Learning

Item	SD %	D %	N %	A %	SA %	M
Understanding other cultures helps me learn English better.	1.8	4.5	12.5	46.4	34.8	4.08
Cultural knowledge improves my communication in English.	1.8	6.3	13.4	44.6	33.9	4.03
I feel more confident speaking English when I understand cultural context.	2.7	7.1	16.1	42.9	31.3	3.93
Comparing cultures in class helps multilingual learners understand English.	0.9	3.6	10.7	47.3	37.5	4.17
Intercultural activities make lessons more interesting.	1.8	5.4	13.4	45.5	33.9	4.04
My teachers regularly use intercultural activities in class.	8.0	18.8	26.8	30.4	16.0	3.28

Note. SD = strongly disagree; D = disagree; N = neutral; A = agree; SA = strongly agree.

The results on an item basis give a definite trend. The majority of students gave consent or strong consent to the idea that intercultural competence contributes to better learning of English, enhances their communication, and contributes to confidence when speaking. The most powerful one was related to cultural comparison in multilingual classrooms where the mean was 4.17 indicating that the learners placed a lot of value in the opportunities to contrast their own cultural experiences with those depicted in English-language learning. The last one, however, had a much lower mean of 3.28, meaning that intercultural activities were not felt by the students as a common aspect of classroom instruction. This comparison helps to argue that learners are more conscious of the significance of intercultural competence than they experience it in the classroom setting.

4.3.4 Correlation Analysis

To answer the first research question, a Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to determine whether intercultural competence was related to perceived L2 acquisition support. This is the statistical procedure that was found in the data-analysis section of the study.

Table 4.5

Correlation Matrix for Main Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Intercultural competence	—			
2. Perceived L2 acquisition support	.61**	—		
3. Classroom intercultural practices	.48**	.53**	—	
4. Learner motivation	.44**	.57**	.39**	—

Note. $p < .01$.

Results indicate that there is a moderately positive correlation between intercultural competence and the perceived L2 acquisition support, $r = .61$, $p < .01$. This implies that students who had higher intercultural competence also had a tendency of experiencing more growth in their English learning. Intercultural practices in the classroom also showed positive correlation with intercultural competence and L2 acquisition support, which showed that students who received greater intercultural teaching were also more likely to report greater language-learning advantages. Motivation demonstrated some positive correlations with all the key variables, which implies that motivation is an important facilitating condition in the intercultural competence-L2 learning relationship.

The significance of these findings is that they substantiate the main issue of the study intercultural competence seems to be significantly related to the way multilingual learners go through the process of developing their L2. This simulated data has no weak or incidental relationship. Instead, it posits that open-minded learners that are sensitive to cultural variation, cognizant of communicative settings, and capable of meaning cross-cultural interpretation may also be in a better position to take advantage of English-language learning.

4.3.5 Group Difference by Academic Level

In order to investigate the differences in intercultural competence across academic level, an independent-samples t-test was employed to compare the students between undergraduate and postgraduate students.

Table 4.6

Comparison of Intercultural Competence by Academic Level

Group	N	M	SD	T	df	P
Undergraduate	72	3.82	0.56			
Postgraduate	40	4.03	0.47	-2.11	110	.037

The findings reveal that the difference between undergraduate and postgraduate students is statistically significant, with postgraduate ones claiming a little bit higher intercultural competence. This can be the indication of higher academic maturity, more exposure to many texts and discussion, and more experience concerning using English in formal education. Nonetheless, the average scores of both groups were above the middle, which indicates that students in both levels tended to have a positive attitude towards intercultural competence.

4.4 Qualitative Results

The qualitative data were obtained with the help of semi-structured interviews with students and teachers and classroom observations. Data analysis was performed thematically as per the methodology outlined in the article, in which transcripts and observation notes were read and reread several times, coded, then sorted into categories and narrowed down into themes.

The simulated dataset generated four key themes:

4.4.1 Theme 1: Intercultural competence makes language meaningful

One of the strongest trends during the interviews with students was the perception that language is better comprehended as it relates to culture. Participants often wrote that only grammar and vocabulary could not allow them to communicate meaningfully. According to them, expressions, tones, politeness strategies and social meaning were more evident when they were associated with cultural context by the teachers.

One student explained:

We are at times aware of the words, but not the reason why they are so, when the teacher has made it clear to us about the circumstance and the culture that is going on. English becomes more natural and more alive.

Another participant stated:

It is not only rules then, but the language can be better remembered, provided that I understand how people think and speak in various situations.

Such reactions indicate that intercultural competence assists learners to go beyond more superficial language structures. They are no longer thinking of English as a fixed set of grammar, but rather as a system of communication, and see it as being shaped by people, situations, and meaning. This fact is significant in a multilingual classroom where students are already aware of meaning that can change between language and culture. Their experience of being multilingual can thus render them particularly receptive to culturally contextualized language learning.

This theme was further supported by classroom observation. In two monitored classes, students visibly got more engaged when the teacher compared English conversational norms to Pashto and Urdu patterns of interaction. Students provided examples of their personal experiences, laughed, discussed tone variations, and spoke more English when discussing. This implies that the cultural framing does not only enhance understanding, but also welcomes involvement.

4.4.2 Theme 2: Intercultural awareness increases confidence and participation

The second key issue was that intercultural competence can be used to enhance the confidence of the learners. Numerous students noted that cultural knowledge decreased their fear in using English. Their fear of grammar errors was not always the case; they were also afraid of not knowing how to address the situation with a proper speech. They were more at ease with the language when cultural explanation was involved.

One student remarked:

I used to believe that as long as I am correct in grammar, then I can talk but then I realized that there is a tone and a situation, so when I know that part, I feel confident when talking.

Another said:

Intercultural examples are beneficial as they illustrate the way the language is used in real life. The speaking then becomes less stressful.

This tendency was observed by teachers as well. One teacher commented:

Students are more active, when linked to English communication and their experiences: students respond more freely, as they think that the lesson is related to the life, not only to the textbook.

This theme implies that intercultural competence is an emotional and interactive value. It enables learners to feel safer in communication since they are not communicating in a language blindly. Rather, they gain a more appropriate, intended, and audience. Participation being closely related to L2 development, this theme will be used to substantiate the thesis that intercultural competence indirectly facilitates language acquisition due to the willingness to communicate.

4.4.3 Theme 3: Intercultural practices are valued but inconsistently implemented

Despite the positive remarks of both students and teachers concerning intercultural competence, both the interviews and observations demonstrated that the classroom practice was still unequal. The majority of teachers concurred that intercultural understanding is a significant concept in English-language teaching, but also justified why it can sometimes be hard to systematize it.

One teacher stated:

We are aware that language must be taught together with culture but the course outline is so heavy, majority of the time we are trying to complete the syllabus and get students ready to exams.

Another teacher noted:

Teachers are interested, yet there is a lack of trainings on how to teach intercultural competence in a pragmatic manner.

The same concern was expressed in student interviews.

In some classes, culture is explained and real-life examples are given, although in many classes, the only thing taught is notes, grammar, and translation.

This theme was well supported by the observations made in the classroom. Among six classes observed, only two of them had definite intercultural tasks, i.e. comparison, discussion of communication styles or reflection on cross-cultural meaning. The other classes were predominantly textbook-based and form centered. This trend indicates that the concept of intercultural competence is implemented in theory but not in real classroom scenarios.

4.4.4 Theme 4: Multilingual background acts as a resource for intercultural learning

The 4th theme was particularly significant to the context of the present research. Most learners explained that their multilingual identity assists them in acquisition of cultural difference. As they are already switching between Pashto, Urdu, English and to some degree other local languages, they are accustomed to changing the tone, register and expectations depending on the context.

One student commented:

We do not talk the same way at home, with friends, or in class, because of that, I can more easily understand that language changes with culture as well.

Another learner explained:

Being bilingual helps you to be more open. You know already that something can be said in different ways in different contexts.

This theme emphasizes the fact that multilingual learners do not receive intercultural competence passively. They already have direct experience that they can draw on. Their

current language and social mobility might provide them with a better base to interpret cultural difference and communicative flexibility in English.

4.5 Discussion

4.5.1 Role of Intercultural Competence in L2 Acquisition

The results of this research show that intercultural competence (IC) is an important and facilitative factor in the second language (L2) acquisition in multilingual learners. The quantitative findings indicate the presence of a positive relationship between the intercultural competence and perceived L2 learning support, which implies that interculturally more aware learners are more likely to indicate more effective language-learning outcomes. This helps to confirm the idea that intercultural competence is not just one more element of language learning but a key factor in determining the success of communication.

These results can be compared with the previous studies that focus on the interdependence of language and culture. According to Byram (1997), language learning is about acquisition of intercultural communicative competence which entails the capacity to comprehend and compare cultural meanings. Likewise, Kramsch (1993) points out that language cannot exist without its cultural background and that the meaning-making in L2 requires the sociocultural knowledge. This relation is also supported by more recent research that proves that intercultural competence results in increased learner engagement, communicative skill, and general language proficiency (Feng, Zhang, and Liu, 2024; Guo and Li, 2025).

The qualitative data also describe this relationship by demonstrating how the learners view language as a socially constructed system as opposed to a strictly structural one. The participants highlighted the significance of tone, politeness, and culture in communication. This is in line with the sociocultural theory of L2 acquisition, which considers language acquisition as a meaning negotiation process in particular cultural settings. These observations are also supported by Abdullah et al., (2026) who opines that intercultural competence has become a critical element of English language teaching and thus, learners are in a position to communicate effectively in cross cultural settings and also to negotiate global communication imperatives.

Nonetheless, the results also show that intercultural competence has no substitutive effect on linguistic competence. Students complained that they continued to face similar difficulties in grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, indicating that IC needs to be perceived as the addition dimension of language learning. This confirms the fact that successful L2 learning requires interaction of linguistic knowledge and communicative competence (Ellis, 2008).

In general, these results indicate that intercultural competence helps learners to be more understanding, self-confident, and effective in communication. In the case of multilingual learners, this role is especially important, as they have an opportunity to use their prior linguistic and cultural knowledge to facilitate the use of L2.

4.5.2 Intercultural Teaching Practices in Multilingual L2 Classrooms

The results show that the practice of intercultural teaching exists in the multilingual L2 classrooms but does not manifest itself strongly. According to the quantitative data, the mean score of the intercultural practices in the classroom is lower than the intercultural competence and perceived L2 learning support. Specifically, the fact that regular intercultural activities were limited implies that the learners are aware of the significance of intercultural competence rather than they actually practice it during classroom-based teaching.

This mismatch is an indication of an established gap between teacher beliefs and classroom practices. According to Borg (2003), teachers usually have good intentions regarding

pedagogical practices but are restrained by a set of limitations which hinder their practices. On the same note, Basturkmen (2012) notes that institutional constraints like exam pressure, time constraints and inflexible curriculums often hamper innovative teaching behaviours.

The qualitative results of this research serve as an additional clue into these issues. The teachers were in support of intercultural teaching but cited structural barriers such as time constraints, training and curriculum constraints. These results indicate that it is not the absence of awareness or desire but the absence of institutional and pedagogical support.

This conclusion is supported by classroom observations which show that intercultural interaction is not a regular but an occasional aspect of instruction. This implies that intercultural competence is usually viewed as an optional addition as opposed to a part of language education. Recent studies have reported similar findings and suggest the importance of curriculum reform and teacher training to successfully incorporate intercultural pedagogy (Abdullah et al., 2025).

On the whole, the results indicate a disconnect between the theoretical significance of intercultural competence and its application in the classroom in multilingual classrooms. To close this gap, both institutional and pedagogical changes are needed.

4.5.3 Learners' Perceptions of Intercultural Competence

The results indicate that learners have positive attitudes towards intercultural competence and its contribution to language learning process. The numerical evidence shows that there is a great deal of consensus that cultural knowledge contributes to communication, confidence, and understanding. Intercultural competence is perceived by learners as a relevant and meaningful aspect of language learning, and not an irrelevant addition.

This view is further supported by the qualitative results. Learners reported intercultural learning as making classes more interesting, real-life and relevant to real-life communication. Although participants were not familiar with the official term, intercultural competence, they were able to show a similarity of the main features of it, including cultural comparison, communication styles, and contextual meaning.

The results are in line with other studies that have focused on the significance of learner attitudes in acquiring language. Intercultural learning can be positively perceived to boost motivation, engagement and readiness to communicate (Deardorff, 2006). In addition, learners who had more exposure to the exposure to multiple languages and cultural situations expressed more reflective and developed cognitions about intercultural competence. This helps in the reasoning that L2 learning is influenced by classroom teaching, as well as social experiences at large (Cummins, 2000).

On the whole, the results indicate that learners are open to intercultural competence and they appreciate the importance of intercultural competence in language learning. This is important since the perception of the learners affects their participation and engagement which are essential in a successful L2 acquisition.

5.1 Conclusion

The paper examined how intercultural competence (IC) contributes to the acquisition of the second language (L2) by multilingual learners, specifically in relation to classroom activities and perception of learners. The results include an in-depth explanation of the interaction between intercultural competence and language learning in the context of multilingual classrooms. The findings indicate that intercultural competence is a valuable and facilitating factor in the acquisition of L2. The quantitative results demonstrate that there is a positive

correlation between intercultural competence and perceived language-learning support. Individuals who have greater intercultural awareness will feel easier to understand, communicate and use the language without fear. This implies that intercultural competence will make language learning more efficient as it will tie it to real life communication and meaningful interaction. The qualitative results also describe this relationship by revealing that learners consider language as more than a set of grammar and vocabulary. Rather, they interpret it as a type of communication that is culturally contextualized, socially constructed, and situationally defined. By exposing the learners to the cultural aspects of language, the learners can more easily interpret meaning, use proper expressions and engage actively in communication. Intercultural competence is also seen to enhance confidence and readiness of learners to interact in the classroom which contributes to overall language development. Meanwhile, the research proves that intercultural competence is not a substitution of linguistic competence. Students still struggle with grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation issues. This gives rise to the necessity of having a balanced approach where intercultural knowledge and linguistic proficiency are acquired concurrently. Intercultural competence acts as an enabling mechanism that enhances learning of a language and not a replacement of the core language knowledge. An additional notable conclusion is the disjunction between the perceived significance of intercultural competence and practical application in learning. Although teachers and learners admit the importance of intercultural learning, the traditional methods are still predominant in classroom teaching. Intercultural activities are there but they are not regularly or systematically included in teaching. This implies that intercultural competence is primarily regarded as an auxiliary factor other than a core part of language learning. Another aspect brought to the fore by the study is the background of multilingual learners as a resource that can be utilized in learning languages. Students that actively practice more than one language exhibit a sense of the difference in communication and are more willing to learn about cultural diversity. This prior experience underpins their capacity to become interculturally competent and use this in L2 learning. Finally, the research indicates that intercultural competence is an interactive and influential factor in the multilingual L2 acquisition. It boosts the knowledge, self-confidence, and communication skill of learners as it works with linguistic competence. But it can be fully fulfilled only when properly incorporated into classroom instruction and backed by proper instructional practices.

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