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## Intercultural Sensitivity of EFL Learners at a State University

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### ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this explanatory sequential mixed method study was to identify the level of English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' intercultural sensitivity (IS) and reveal underlying factors that might have impact on learners' IS. Participants were 113 EFL learners studying in the preparatory school of a state university. IS scale created by Chen and Starosta (2000) was implemented. Interviews were also conducted with nine volunteer students. Quantitative data were analyzed via SPSS whereas qualitative data were analyzed through MAXQDA program. The descriptive findings indicated that students' IS level was above the average based on theoretical scoring. Interviews also supported the findings of the scale, and unveiled some underlying reasons for having high scores for each sub-scale. Learners' suggestions for further development of their IS were also revealed. Therefore, this study might provide some insight for language instructors and administrators who are willing to develop language learners' IS.

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Many scholars defined intercultural competence (IC) as the sets of skills to be able to have efficient and appropriate communication with the individuals from other cultures (Deardorff, 2006; Byram, 2000; Moeller & Faltin Osborn, 2014).

Byram (1997) listed the necessary components for intercultural competence as attitudes, knowledge, skills of relating and interpreting, skills of discovery and interaction and critical cultural awareness. Attitudes include respecting individual from other cultures, being open and eager to learn about other cultures, and developing positive attitudes towards other cultures. Knowledge component involves knowledge about cultural practices and products of the other cultures. Skills of relating and interpreting are the abilities to interpret a text from another culture and being aware of similarities and differences between cultures. Skills of discovery and interaction are the abilities to perform skills and attitudes while communicating with foreigners in real situations.

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Bhawuk and Brislin (1992) described intercultural sensitivity (IS) as being mindful to notice others, being eager to learn about other cultures, and alter one's own behavior based on the cultural differences. On the other hand, Bennett (1986) regarded intercultural sensitivity as a developmental process and argued that it involves six stages of development.

According to Bennett (1986) the developmental process begins with the denial of differences and ends with integration stage. In the first stage, denial, the individual is not open to differences in other cultures, or even unaware that there are differences. In the defense stage, there is a rejection of differences and at this stage individuals develop some stereotypical ideas against other cultures and believe that their culture is superior to the other cultures. The minimization stage is also the last stage of egocentrism and the individuals at this stage believe that everyone has certain common values and they disregard the differences. Ethnorelative stages start with acceptance. Individuals accept differences, and openness to differences is observable at this stage. In the adaptation phase, individuals are aware of the differences of other cultures and at the same time they can behave according to these differences and adapt to the environment. The last stage is integration, which is the last stage of openness to cultural diversity. The individual is not only sensitive to different cultures but also in the process of being a constant part of the difference. Furthermore, an individual at this stage evaluates situations in its own cultural framework and ready to acquire values of different cultures, but does not accept all the values of any culture as its entirety.

Chen and Starosta (1997) defined IS as 'the ability to develop positive emotion towards understanding and appreciating cultural differences that promote appropriate and effective behavior in intercultural communication' (p.5). Chen and Starosta (2000) also made some clear distinctions between the terms cultural awareness, intercultural sensitivity, and intercultural adroitness, and all these three constituted the umbrella term, intercultural competence. Cultural awareness was the cognitive dimension whereas IS was the affective one. Cultural adroitness, on the other hand, was the behavioral dimension.

Considering the discussion on the definition of the concept of intercultural competence, it is obvious that IS is a prerequisite for the development of intercultural competence though it is only the affective component when compared to other dimensions.

### *1.1. Statement of the Problem*

Thanks to the mobility and migration, the interaction between societies, and cultures increase at an alarming level and the aim to keep the peace and harmony in this new intercultural community becomes vital (Lukesova, 2015). 'As schools become more culturally diverse, promoting intercultural education becomes more imperative' (Busse & Krause, 2016, p.83). Universities in Turkish context have international students owing to the exchange programs; therefore, multi-cultural contexts are created and intercultural competence gains prominence in tertiary education (Günçavdı & Polat, 2016). As a result, learners at universities are required to enhance both their linguistics competence and intercultural communicative competence to deal with the certain barriers that they may face in their communication with individuals from other societies (Ho, 2009). As Moeller and Osborn (2014) suggested, 'linguistic ability alone does not guarantee effective communication.' (p. 681). Developing IC in addition to the language provides a complete entrance ticket to a new society, which allows participation and interaction eliminating prejudices and stereotypes for the participants of these programs (Fantini, 2012).

Considering all these, the goals set for language teaching do not emphasize only linguistics over the past two decades. The focus is primarily on the acquisition of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) (Tolosa, Biebricher, East & Howard, 2018). Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2001) is currently considered as the guiding principle for the general aim of foreign language education. The students are expected to become intercultural speakers, be able to understand how different cultures relate considering their similarities and differences and see themselves from an

“external” perspective in their interaction with the individuals from other cultures (Larzén-Östermak, 2008).

Consequently, the language classrooms are the places where learners and teachers essentially deal with multilingual and multicultural practices. Therefore, this provides the ideal conditions to develop ICC to survive in multicultural contexts (Baker, 2011). This also necessitates a change in our primary goal as a teacher, which is more important than ever. Our sole aim should not be limited to helping students to enhance their communicative competence but the foreign language curriculum is required to expand its scope by including ICC even making it the primary objective of the language education (Furstenberg, 2010). In order to develop students’ ICC, we primarily need to develop their intercultural sensitivity, which is the affective dimension of IC, specifically the desire to accept differences among cultures, respect other societies, and be open to other cultures, their practices and products.

In order to develop an effective curriculum and instruction that will equip the students with the skills, primarily intercultural sensitivity needed for the 21st century global citizen, we are also in need of assessments that can guide us to detect where the students start to this process (Mahon and Cushner, 2014). Therefore, this study aimed to detect the IS level of the language learners, explore some factors that might have impact on their development of IS and their recommendation regarding this IS development process. In line with the aims of the study, the research questions were formulated as given below.

- (1) What is the IS level of EFL learners at a state university in Turkey?
- (2) Which factors do EFL learners think contribute to their IS level?
- (3) What are the EFL learners’ suggestions to increase the level of IS of language learners in the program?

## **2. Literature Review**

Even though there are many studies that emphasize the significance of ICC in language learning and teaching, the number of the studies that primarily aimed to identify the IS level of students and develop some strategies for them is limited. When the studies conducted in other contexts were considered, Peng (2006) conducted a comparative study on the IS of multinational staff and college students in China. Chen and Starosta’s (2000) intercultural sensitivity scale (ISS) scale was used. The results indicated that English major students did not have too much challenge in interpretation of the messages, which indicated their being more attentive in intercultural situations. Respect for cultural differences was affected by interaction enjoyment and interaction engagement for English and non-English major students. Jackson (2011) conducted a case study involving advanced language learners who attended a study abroad program. Students were Hong Kong University students studying in England. Students’ understanding of cultural differences enhanced and learners developed their socio-pragmatic knowledge and intercultural sensitivity during this sojourn experience. The study implied that language development and intercultural development did not develop at an equal rate or speed.

The studies conducted in Turkish context varied based on the participant profile. Some studies focused on only English language learners at preparatory schools in universities whereas the other studies involved university students in general. There were also studies conducted to detect IS level of future English language teachers who study at the Foreign Language Education Departments.

Considering the studies conducted to the university students, Penbek, Yurdakul and Cerit (2009) measured IS level of university students at two universities in Izmir, Turkey. The students included sophomores, juniors, and seniors. The sample did not include freshman and preparatory school students. The results indicated that as students transferred to upper classes and had intercultural communication with individuals from different cultures in an international setting, there was an increase in students’ respect for cultural differences (Penbek, Yurdakul, & Cerit, 2009). Günçavdı and Polat (2016) investigated

the IC level of international students at Kocaeli University. Fantini's (2007) 53- item Likert scale was exploited and the results indicated that students had high level of competence in every sub-skill of intercultural competence. European students had the highest level of IC and Asian and African students followed them subsequently.

With respect to the studies implemented to foreign language learners, Küllü-Sülü (2014) investigated the impact of having native English speaking teachers (NESTs) on the level of language learners' IS in six different universities. The results indicated that having NESTs did not have a significantly more effect on learners' overall IS level though the students who had NESTs had higher scores for the sub-scales. Demirkol (2019) also conducted a study on the IS level of EFL students at a state university and primarily investigated the effect of having international and Turkish EFL teachers on learners' intercultural sensitivity level. The results indicated that even though both group of learners had higher score for the IS, there was not a significant difference in their overall IS level. However, students who were regularly taught by international teachers had slightly higher scores for three subscales which were interaction enjoyment, interaction attentiveness, and respect for cultural differences. Çiloğlan and Bardakçı (2019) also carried out a study to detect any relationship between the IS scores and language proficiency and gender. The ISS scale was implemented to 325 language learners at a state university. Results illustrated that male and female students' IS level did not vary significantly. However, a significant difference was detected between IS level of students who had different language proficiency.

In relation to the studies conducted to pre-service language teachers who study at foreign language education departments, Cubukcu (2013) conducted a study with 65 pre-service English teachers. The results revealed that the trainees were mainly in the acceptance and adaptation stages of Bennett's (2003) developmental stages. Pre-service teachers also had positive attitude towards the different cultures and they were able to detect the differences and can take actions to adapt themselves. Aslım-Yetis and Kurt (2016) carried out a study on the IS level of pre-service English teachers. Turkish pre-service English teachers had high level of IS according to the findings. Öz (2015) also conducted a study on the level of Turkish undergraduate English major students and the IS level of the students was found to be high. All in all, studies summarized above indicated that Turkish students' IS level was generally high and there was not a significant difference between overall IS level of students who were trained by native English speaking teacher or international teachers and Turkish EFL instructors.

### **3. Methodology**

#### *3.1. Context*

The study was conducted at School of Foreign Languages (SFL) at a state university in Ankara, which is located in the center of Turkey. The university has English as a medium of instruction, so learners are expected to become proficient in English and get 75 out of 100 in proficiency exam before they start their undergraduate studies. The department has a few native speakers of English and international instructors. In preparatory program, students have 25 hours of teaching weekly. The school has many facilities such as a library and self-access center for independent and collaborative learning. Self-access center has many clubs and social activities where students learn from each other and interact with international teachers.

#### *3.2. Participants*

Participants were 113 English language learners in preparatory school. They were informed about the fact that participation is on voluntary basis and they can stop filling out the questionnaire for any reason and at any time. Before they filled in the questionnaire, they signed the consent form. The students

who volunteered for the interviews by leaving their phone numbers and email addresses were contacted and interviewed. Thus, the sampling strategy for the interviews was convenience sampling.

Table 1  
Demographics of Questionnaire Participants: Gender

Proficiency Level	<u>Gender</u>		Total N
	Male	Female	
Pre-intermediate (A2)	7	10	17
Intermediate (B1)	16	15	31
Upper-intermediate (B2)	26	39	65
Total N	49	64	113

Questionnaire was applied to all the students available in the classrooms in preparatory school. Since it was the second semester, most of the students were studying in the upper intermediate level. There were 49 male and 64 female students in total as it can be examined in Table 1.

Students' ages ranged between 18 and 34. Most of them were at the age of 18 and 19 as they were preparatory school students, but there were also repeat students, who were above 20. Besides, few students were also adult learners. Only 18 students have been abroad whereas 95 students have not had an overseas experience.

Table 2  
Demographics of Interview Participants: Age and Gender

	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Age</u>
Participant 1	Female	20
Participant 2	Male	20
Participant 3	Male	18
Participant 4	Female	20
Participant 5	Male	20
Participant 6	Male	22
Participant 7	Female	20
Participant 8	Female	20
Participant 9	Male	19

Four interview participants were female whereas five of them were male students. Interview participants' ages ranged from 18 to 20, which can be seen in Table 2.

### 3.3. Research Design

This particular study was based on pragmatism as a research paradigm, which presumes that the researchers choose any methodology that is best to investigate the research problem. In view of this research paradigm, this particular study adopted an explanatory mixed method design suggested by Creswell (2014). The details and procedure for such a mixed design can be examined in Figure 1 below.



Figure 1. Research design: Sequential explanatory mixed methods

As it can be scrutinized in Figure 1, the primary data collection process started with a quantitative instrument, which was IS scale. In the second step, the analysis of the quantitative data was carried out. Qualitative data (i.e. semi-structured interviews) were collected to explain the findings obtained in the first stage. In the following stage, qualitative data were analyzed and the results were interpreted based on the research questions that were asked in the first place.

### 3.4. Data Collection Procedure

The data were collected in the second semester of the 2018-2019 academic period. In order to implement the questionnaire, necessary permission was taken from the director of the School of Foreign Languages and it was implemented to the volunteer students that were available in their classes during the implementation of the questionnaire. Students were provided with a consent form in which they were explained that participation to the study was voluntary and they could leave the study at any time for any reason. The students who were volunteered for the interviews by writing their mail addresses and phone numbers at the end of the questionnaire were reached via emails and phone calls and the interview schedule was created for them.

### 3.5. Data Collection Tools

#### 3.5.1. Questionnaire

A likert scale developed by Chen and Starosta (2000) and adapted to Turkish by Küllü-Süllü (2014) was used in the study. Some sample statements from the IS scale can be examined in Table 3 below.

Table 3  
ISS sample items

Subscale	Sample item
1. Interaction Engagement	I avoid those situations where I will have to deal with culturally-distinct persons.
2. Respect for Other Cultures	I respect the ways people from different cultures behave.
3. Interaction Enjoyment	I get upset easily when interacting with people from different cultures.
4. Interaction Confidence	I feel confident when interacting with people from different cultures.
5. Interaction Attentiveness	I am very observant when interacting with people from different cultures.

It was detected that the questionnaire had internal consistency and reliability estimate was .84 for the overall scale based on Cronbach's alpha level. Cronbach alpha for interaction engagement was .583,

for respect for cultural differences it was .605, and for interaction confidence it was .788. For interaction enjoyment it was .698 and finally for interaction attentiveness, Cronbach alpha was .165.

### 3.5.2. Semi-structured interviews

Interview schedule was created considering the subscales in the questionnaire. One particular question was written for each subscale and two general questions regarding the possible factors effective on their level of intercultural sensitivity were asked in the interviews. The questions prepared for the interviews were translated into Turkish as students varied in their language proficiency. Both Turkish and English questions were checked by two language instructors and based on the feedback provided by the instructors, they were reformulated.

### 3.6. Data Analysis

The questionnaire data were analyzed in IBM SPSS Statistics 20. For the demographic questions Descriptive Statistics were used. Some statements were reverse coded before the reliability test was run. The total score for each subscale was calculated for each participant. Mean scores for each subscale were also found by using Descriptive Statistics. Students' level of IS was interpreted based on the theoretical scores of IS scale based on Banos (2006) which can be examined in Table 4 below.

Table 4  
Theoretical Scores of ISS Scale Based on Banos (2006)

	Minimal Theoretical Score	Medium Theoretical Score	Maximal Theoretical Score
Interaction Engagement	7	21	35
Respect for Other Cultures	6	18	30
Interaction Enjoyment	3	9	15
Interaction Confidence	5	15	25
Interaction Attentiveness	3	9	15
Total	24	72	120

In order to compare male and female students' IS scores; Independent Samples T Test was run. One-way ANOVA was conducted to explore any difference between pre-intermediate, intermediate and upper-intermediate level students. Qualitative data collected through interviews were initially transcribed verbatim and coded in MAXQDA program. The codes, categories and themes were identified through constant comparison methods suggested by Corbin and Strauss (2008).

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Research Question 1: What is the IS Level of EFL Learners at a State University in Turkey?

The results of the ISS demonstrated that the overall intercultural sensitivity level of EFL learners was above the average (M=93.43) based on the theoretical scoring (Minimum Score = 24, Middle Score = 72, Maximum Score = 120). This was the same case for each subscale (i.e. Interaction Engagement: M = 28.81, Respect for Others: M = 22.50, Interaction Enjoyment: M = 12.87, Interaction Confidence: M =17.85, Interaction Attentiveness: M= 11.40) as it can be examined in Table 5.



Table 5  
Level of IS of EFL Learners

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Interaction Engagement	113	19	35	28.81	2.70
Respect for Other Cultures	113	14	28	22.50	2.24
Interaction Enjoyment	113	7	15	12.87	1.77
Interaction Confidence	113	8	25	17.85	3.10
Interaction Attentiveness	113	6	15	11.40	1.43
Valid N (listwise)	113				

Normal distribution was detected for total IS scores considering the gender variable. Inferential statistics, Independent Sample T-Test was run. Male and female students' total IS scores did not have a significant difference ( $t(111) = -794, p = .429$ ) as it can be examined in Table 6 below.

Table 6  
Male and Female Students' IS Level

	Gender	N	Descriptives		Std. Error Mean				
			Mean	Std. Deviation					
IStotal	Male	49	92.73	8.93	1.28				
	Female	64	93.94	7.17	0.90				
Independent Samples T-test									
	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances	t-test for Equality of Means				95% Confidence Interval of the Difference			
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Equal variables assumed	2.137	.147	-.794	111	.429	-1.20	1.51	-4.20	1.80
Equal variables not assumed			-.772	90.36	.442	-1.20	1.56	-4.30	1.89

Although the number of the students in each level varied, the Levene's statistic of homogeneity variance and Shapiro Wilk tests indicated the groups were normally distributed. One-way ANOVA was conducted and there was not a significant difference between the pre-intermediate, intermediate and upper-intermediate groups in terms of their IS level ( $F(2, 110) = 2.008, p = .139$ ), which can be seen in Table 7.

Table 7  
IS Level of Students in Different Levels of English Proficiency

Test of Homogeneity of Variances				
Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.	
.447	2	110	.641	
Descriptives				
Level	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
IStotal				
Pre-intermediate (A2)	17	90.29	8.38	2.03
Intermediate (B1)	31	92.87	9.25	1.66
Upper-intermediate (B2)	65	94.49	7.03	0.87
Total	113	93.42	7.96	0.75

ANOVA					
IS total score	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	250.192	2	125.096	2.008	.139
Within Groups	6853.259	110	62.302		
Total	7103.451	112			

#### 4.1.2. Interaction engagement

When interaction engagement subscale is considered, the theoretical scoring suggests that minimum score is 7, middle score is 21 and maximum score is 35. As Figure 2 illustrates, the overall score for the interaction engagement was above the average ( $M=28.81$ ,  $SD=2.70$ ).

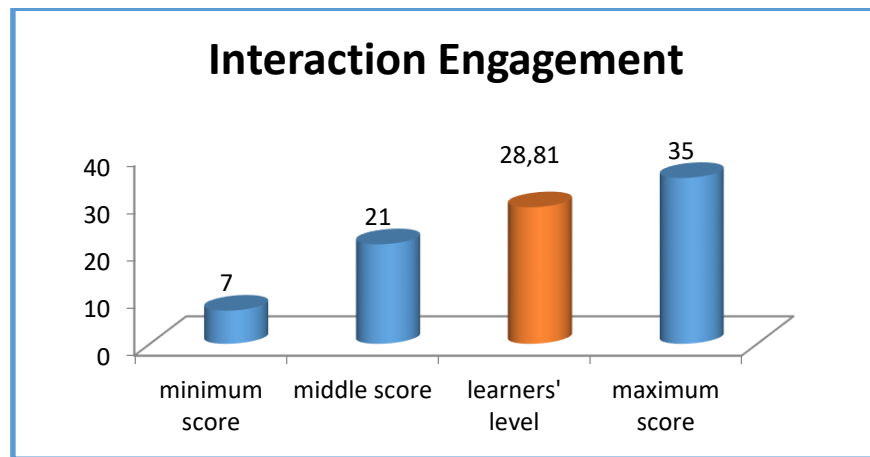


Figure 2. Interaction engagement

Interviews with 9 students from the same sample also consolidated the questionnaire findings. Students expressed their enjoyment of interaction with people from other cultures and explained the reasons for their engagement. Seven out of nine students specifically mentioned that they enjoyed themselves while interacting with people from other cultures. Five of them considered such intercultural communication as appealing. When the reasons of their engagement were further queried, they indicated that they enjoyed it because of the exploration of new things about other cultures such as their jokes, cuisines, concept of respect for elderly and greetings.

It would be better and more enjoyable for me if I interacted with more different people. I feel positive about learning different things from them as well as teaching them. I enjoy differences between cultures, specifically differences in their cuisines. I even look for different tastes in Turkey. I like the jokes and the humour. I like such kinds of differences and I enjoy learning about these (Participant 6).

P1, P3 and P8 also referred to having an opportunity to develop themselves; therefore, they found intercultural communication highly engaging. P3 and P7 believed that such an interaction also change and develop their world view in a positive way. P2 specifically expressed that she enjoyed comparing cultures and P8 believed that he broke down the prejudices during the interaction with individuals from other societies, which made the interaction quite engaging.

#### 4.1.3. Respect for cultural differences

The theoretical scoring for respect for cultural differences subscale suggests that minimum score is 6, medium score is 18 and maximum score is 30. In Figure 3, it was clearly demonstrated that the overall score for the interaction engagement was above the average ( $M= 22.50$ ,  $SD=2.24$ ).

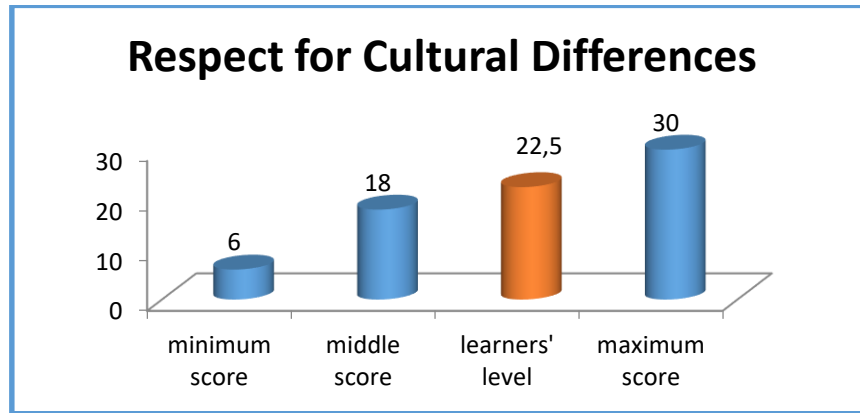


Figure 3. Respect for cultural differences

Interviews also revealed similar findings and all of the participants indicated that they had respect for other cultures and cultural differences. When students were asked for more details regarding the rationale for their feeling of respect, the desire to be respected by the others was the most frequently uttered reason ( $f=8$ ).

I respect them because, as I said, values and cultures can be different where they grow up, compared to where we grow up. When I put myself in their shoes, I don't like it when I'm not respected in a different place, because what I have learned is this culture and this is the reality for me. I act based on that and they also act based on their own culture (Participant 1).

P3, P4 and P9 also indicated that they respected other cultures as they were willing to learn about different values.

#### 4.1.4. Interaction enjoyment

The theoretical scoring for interaction enjoyment subscale suggests that minimum score is 3, medium score is 9 and maximum score is 15. In Figure 4, it was obvious that the overall score for the participants' interaction enjoyment was above the average ( $M= 12.87$ ,  $SD= 1.77$ ).

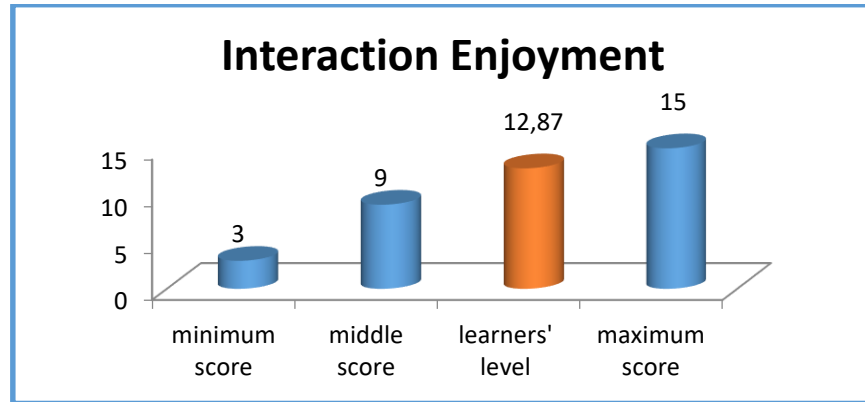


Figure 4. Interaction enjoyment

Interview results also revealed that all the interview participants were happy and excited to have intercultural communication with people from other societies. P3, P4, P5, P7 and P9 were happy to know new people whereas P3, P5, P6, P8 and P9 were also satisfied that they explored new things during the interaction.

Furthermore, P4, P5, P7 and P9 were happy and excited to discover new cultures. P1 and P8 indicated that they felt happy and excited as they made use of the target language that they were learning. P3 also referred to the possibility of having a positive attitude from others as the reason for his excitement whereas P4 indicated that correcting what they know wrong (i.e. African figures) made the interaction exciting.

#### 4.1.5. Interaction confidence

When interaction confidence subscale is considered, the theoretical scoring suggests that minimum score is 5, medium score is 15 and maximum score is 25. The results indicated that the overall score for the interaction confidence was above the average ( $M= 17.85$ ,  $SD= 3.10$ ), which can be examined in Figure 5.

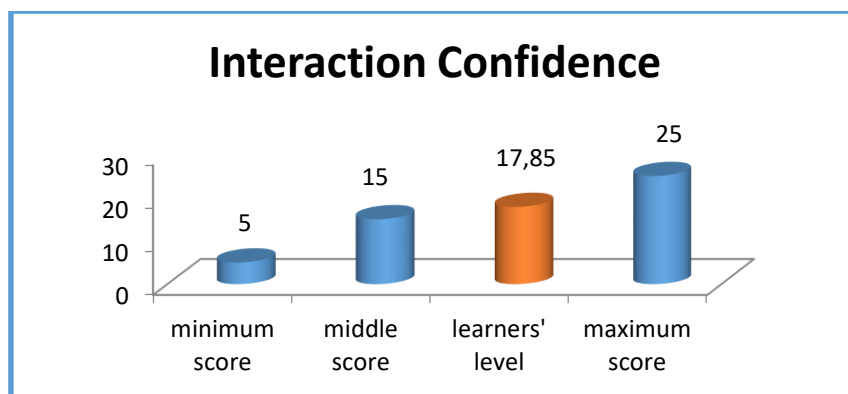


Figure 5. Interaction confidence

Interviews with nine EFL students also supported the quantitative findings and eight learners claimed that they felt quite confident when they interacted with people from other cultures. Personal characteristics were one of the primary contributors expressed by the learners. P1, P2, and P3 thought that they were not shy and P6, P7 and P8 believed they were easygoing in general, therefore they felt confident.

P8 and P9 argued that if there were no communication problems, specifically language proficiency, then they would feel more confident. P1 and P7 also admitted that their confidence might be limited only if they had difficulty in language use. P2 remarked that he was able to express himself and his native culture, so he felt confident enough. P6 also felt self-confident as he met with foreign teachers when he was a child.

#### 4.1.6. Interaction attentiveness

The theoretical scoring for interaction attentiveness subscale suggests that minimum score is 3, medium score is 9 and maximum score is 15. In Figure 6, it was obvious that the overall score for the participants' interaction attentiveness was above the average ( $M= 11.40$ ,  $SD= 1.43$ ).

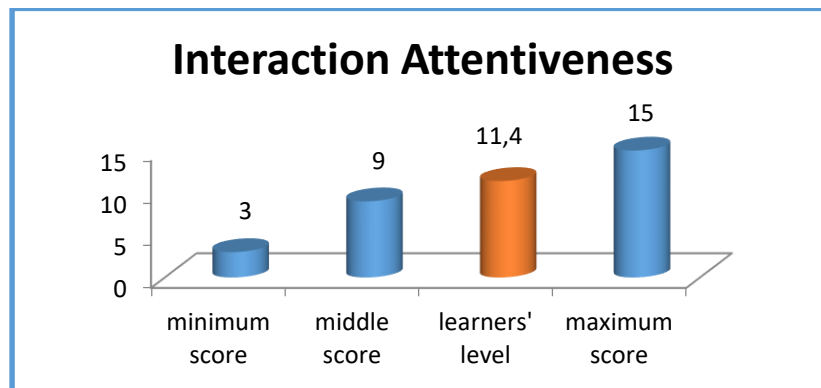


Figure 6. Interaction attentiveness

Interview results were also in line with the questionnaire findings. All the participants asserted that they were quite attentive during intercultural communication and they acted like an observer. Their reasons were various. P1, P2 P3, P4, P5 and P9 indicated that their primary reason for being watchful during the interaction with other people was to understand and interpret their attitudes and behaviors. P1, P2, P3 P7, P8 and P9 also enunciated that they were observant in order not to say something offensive, cause misunderstanding and lead to breakdown in communication.

First of all, it is important to observe their behaviors during the conversation, and of course it is important to know how they will react. In order not to tell them anything wrong, for example, something that is bad in their culture but not a shame in our culture and to avoid such misunderstandings, I communicate with people in a careful and observant manner. (Participant 9)

P2, P3, P4 and P6 expressed that they would like to know the interlocutors better especially what they like and dislike and to learn more about others' cultures. Finally, P2 and P3 admitted that they cared about others' attitudes, so they were careful during the interaction.

#### 4.2. Research Question 2: Which Factors Do EFL Learners Think Contribute to Their IS Level?

When students were asked to explain possible impacts that might have contributed to their high level of IS, they introduced certain reasons such as personal characteristics, their family and social backgrounds, the inspiration they gained from books and people, and language learning.

Personal characteristics included having empathy and tolerance towards others, respecting other cultures, being curious about geography, atlas, flags, and other cultures, and the desire to communicate with others, go abroad and know more about others.

When I was a child, I had an atlas with the flags of different countries and I would open and look at the flags of the world countries in different colors. I was curious about what was happening there, who was there, what kind of lifestyles they had. Of course, I started to do some research gradually as I got older. Even when I was a child, I knew all the flags by heart. And I have an interest in different countries and cultures, so my high level of intercultural sensitivity might result from that (Participant 5).

When contributors regarding the family and social background were considered, parents' encouraging students to know people from other cultures instead of dictating prejudices, growing up in a multilingual family, being raised by the society in a particular way, living in a touristic city, and meeting tourists were mentioned.

It might be because I have grown up in a bilingual, three-lingual family since I was a child. As you know, people in the east know local languages besides Turkish such as Kurdish, Zazaki and so on. Everyone in my family speaks Turkish, Kurdish and Zazaki very fluently. So, being with different languages and having grown up in a different linguistic family provide people with different thinking skills, which enables them to overcome all difficulties while communicating with other people (Participant 3).

I think that family education is primarily impactful. Some families raise their children badly and prejudiced against other cultures, yet my family never reflected this on me, and they even encouraged me to meet more people from other cultures (Participant 4).

P2 also mentioned that books that he read and the people from whom he was inspired contributed to his high level of intercultural sensitivity. P8 also maintained that learning English, having native speakers of English teachers and learning about their cultures also contributed to her IS level.

When they were further inquired about the impact of their foreign language learning context, each and every interview participant highlighted that having foreign instructors in the preparatory program contributed to their development of intercultural sensitivity.

We have many foreign teachers and while speaking to them, they are already demonstrating their culture. For example, some of our teachers brought their own chocolate and candies. This is something that can be considered as part of their culture. So, I think it is very important that we have foreign teachers (Participant 9).

Six of the interview participants also mentioned the impact of having foreign friends in their classrooms. P3 even articulated that having friends from other cities also contributed to their IS.

We have teachers from many different countries and foreign students have started to come, as well. Since our common language is English, we can communicate very easily and the subjects we chat are generally about sharing a piece of one's own culture. And we have the chance to learn things that we have not heard before and that we cannot find on the Internet at first hand. And maybe we realize that we have a lot more in common. It

opens up new doors, perhaps even in terms of learning other languages, and this is becoming a threshold by learning their cultures first. (Participant 8).

P2, P5 and P6 believed that studying in this preparatory school provided them with self-confidence regarding the language use and the intercultural communication. Nonetheless, three of the participants also did not consider the schools' contribution to IS adequate and they asserted that the focus is more on the language in preparatory school. Consequently, they suggested that it might be developed further.

#### *4.3. Research Question 3: What are the EFL learners' Suggestions to Increase the Level of IS of Language Learners in the Program?*

P1, P4 and P5 suggested that there might be more international students coming to the school to study English. P2, P8 and P9 also recommended that there might be regular and bigger cultural activities similar to the one realized a few months ago.

The event in Ramadan Month can be organized twice a month or once a month because there are many people we met through the program...Every day we hosted people from different cultures and countries. I recognized their culture. After the dinner, a spokesman came out and told about their culture. They explained everything from the economic situation of the countries to the political history. Then we saw their traditional clothes and watched their traditional dances. We also showed them when they wondered about ours. We showed something to each other. For example, we had Somalia day here. While they were doing their own dance, we went out and were trying to dance in belly dance music, and they were trying to imitate us. It was a very good social atmosphere at that moment. In my opinion, this can be done on a regular basis (Participant 2).

P2, P5 and P7 suggested that there might be some cultural activities in which foreign students in other universities in Ankara are involved. P8 even suggested conducting some projects with the universities in other countries. P1 and P2 also suggested having exchange programs and even trips to other countries.

Student exchange programs can be expanded. We already have a limited number of students in our school. I think university can provide more information about exchange programs and guide us for such programs (Participant 1).

P1 and P6 believed that teachers should keep what they are doing in their lessons. P6 specifically thought that students should be provided with some suggestions regarding books, documentaries, films, comedies, and stand-up shows. P1 also emphasized the importance of integrating foreign students and having cultural comparisons in the classroom.

On the other hand, P3 also suggested a revision in the curriculum. He recommended that role plays might be practiced during the lessons and debate topics might be revised to include more intercultural issues. P1 also requested more variety in self-access centre activities and P2 also proposed the introduction of other foreign languages in addition to English at regular intervals.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. *The EFL Learners' High Level of Intercultural Sensitivity*

The findings of the study were in line with the studies carried out in Turkish context. The IS of the EFL learners was high regardless of the subscales just as revealed in other studies (Aslım-Yetis & Kurt, 2016; Cubukcu, 2013; Demirkol, 2019; Küllü-Sülü, 2014; Öz, 2015; Penbek, Yurdakul & Cerit, 2009).

The results of the study regarding the factors that are impactful on the learners' IS were in line with the Küllü-Sülü (2014) study as the family background was an important contributor in both studies. Küllü-Sülü (2014) and Demirkol (2019) concluded that students' IS level did not vary much between the students having native speakers of English teachers or international instructors and Turkish EFL instructors. A slight difference in sub-scales such as interactional enjoyment, interaction attentiveness and respect for cultural differences was noted in their studies.

In this particular study when students were asked how English preparatory program might have contributed to their development of IC, students mainly referred to the opportunity to have courses from international teachers. Göbel and Helmke (2010) also affirmed the existence of a positive relationship between teachers' cultural contact and the quality of intercultural teaching in language classes. Since international teachers work in various cultural contexts, they might be integrating more intercultural issues in their classes, and that might be the reason why students believe that international teachers have a great impact on their IC. However, further research is needed regarding the contribution of the international teachers as Küllü-Sülü's (2014) and Demirkol's (2019) study indicated that there was not a highly significant difference between the overall IS level of the students who were trained by international or native English speaking teacher and Turkish EFL instructors.

Another finding of the study was that there was not a significant difference between the IS level of students who had different level of language proficiency. The findings of Çiloğlan and Bardakçı (2019) were not necessarily compatible with the results of this particular study as they detected a significant difference between the language achievement scores and IS level of language learners. Therefore, the assumption that the more proficient the students were in English, the higher their level of IS would be should be queried further. Moreover, just as Çiloğlan and Bardakçı (2019) indicated, a significant difference between the IS level of male and female participants was not detected.

### 5.2. *How to Develop EFL Learners' Level of Intercultural Sensitivity*

As Baker (2011) noted, English as the lingua franca emphasizes the requirement of an understanding of communicative practices of other societies in a variety of cultural environments and to effectively communicate across various cultures. During the last decade certain attempts were made to develop learners, especially pre-service English language teachers' ICC with some courses offered and cultural programs designed (Hismanoğlu, 2011). However, IC is not only necessary for future language teachers, but also for any language learner who wants to have a place in international fields. As Gregersan-Hermans (2017) advocated, all graduate students whether they desire to find a career in communication or not need to be able to function as a global citizen and be ready for the changes globalization bring about in their future careers.

Deardorff (2011) suggested '*internationalizing the campus*' by attaching a global and intercultural dimension to students' experiences in order to develop students' IC. She also advocated that co-curricular activities integrated in the curriculum can also supply learners with attitudes and competences to become intercultural. In Arı and Mula's (2017) study, it was also proposed that both official and non-official activities that necessitate active engagement and collaboration between students from various cultures



should be done in order to develop IC. In this study, participant EFL learners also had similar recommendations. Cultural activities that bring both Turkish EFL learners and foreign students from other universities in campus projects might work for this specific context as well.

*Exchange programs* were also suggested by EFL learners. Terzuolo (2018) found out that study abroad experience had a significant impact on learners IS development. However, being abroad does not entirely develop IC of the learners. There are many other factors having impact on that. Especially the duration of the stay was a significant factor. Students who had been abroad for a longer period was found cognitively more intercultural competent in Behrnd and Porzelt's (2012) study, so the length of the stay abroad was more significant than going abroad. However, it might not be possible for everyone to have longitudinal sojourn, so more exchange programs should be offered for both students and prospective teachers besides some conferences and lectures in which renowned experts participate (Han & Son, 2011).

Learners ideally become prepared for a global world especially when the linguistics and intercultural competence incorporated in a language classroom (Moeller, & Nugent, 2014). Students also suggested having some *intercultural topics in their in-class debates or some tasks* such as role plays that are practiced in language classrooms. Busse and Krause (2016) reported that analysis of critical cases and acting out these cases was beneficial in the development of students' intercultural sensitivity. Gregersan-Hermans (2017) also advocated that the challenge of raising intercultural competent graduates would continue unless the administrators committed long term and continuous systems to increase learners' level of IC by integrating IC in the curriculum.

Robotjazi (2008) maintained that a textbook was sometimes considered as a training agent in the sense that teachers and students learn how to progress and what feedback is necessary. Therefore, having intercultural issues in the course books and extra materials have a great role in intercultural learning and teaching. Baker (2011) also recommended analysis of the texts and the visuals in the course book so that students get awareness regarding the representations of different cultures even his or her own culture in the course book. Gregersan-Hermans (2017) also recommended the use of some rubrics for intercultural competence which will guide curriculum developers and show evidence for the students' development needs.

To conclude, specific learning outcomes for knowledge, attitudes, skills and behaviors are needed for the language learners at different levels in terms of language proficiency and cultural sensitivity. 'It is also important to measure intercultural competence for a period of time as opposed to one point in time.' (Deardorff, 2006, p. 257)

## 6. Conclusion

### 6.1. A brief Summary of the Study

This study investigated the Turkish EFL learners' intercultural sensitivity level and underlying factors behind their current level of IS. It also probed into some alternative ways to enhance learners' IS by consulting learners' own recommendations. ISS was utilized in order to detect the level of IS of learners and interviews were conducted with nine students.

Overall findings indicated that the participant EFL students had high level of IS. Male and female students did not vary in terms of their IS level, and students' being in a different language proficiency class did not have an impact on their IS level.

The qualitative findings revealed from interview data also demonstrated that personal characteristics, family and social background, having foreign teachers and friends at university contributed to students' IS level. Learners suggested having intercultural communicative activities such as festivals in the campus where foreign students and Turkish students come together. They also

recommended exchange programs and projects with universities abroad. Revision in the curriculum and materials was also suggested by one of the participant EFL learners.

### *6.2. Implications*

Teachers' role in the development of students' intercultural sensitivity is paramount. Therefore, they might be provided with in-service modules or workshops where they can get familiar with the methods and strategies to promote IS.

Furthermore, curriculum and material developers might also emphasize the intercultural competences in the program and the materials. Students might be provided with assignments and projects that include intercultural issues. Themes chosen for writing and speaking tasks in class might incorporate topics that prevent stereotyping and ethnocentrism.

Testing members can also incorporate intercultural issues into speaking rubrics. Furthermore, portfolio tasks might include reflections on learners' intercultural experiences. Administrators can put more effort to provide students with more exchange programs if possible and monthly cultural activities can be designed in which foreign students come together with Turkish learners of English.

### *6.3. Limitations of the Study and Suggestions for Further Research*

This explanatory sequential mixed method study is limited in terms of the number of participants and the context the research was conducted. The results of the study cannot be generalized to the whole population as it only investigated a particular university setting. It was also limited in terms of scope as no comparisons regarding their age, sociocultural background and overseas experiences were done. It only investigated the IS level and the underlying reasons of the learners' high level of IS. In order to reach the underlying factors that lead to high level of IS, qualitative inquiry was benefitted with the help of semi-structured interviews rather than comprehensive statistical analysis.

Some factors (i.e. study abroad, and sociocultural background) that might be influential on the level of IS might be investigated. Comparative studies in other contexts (i.e. private universities, and high schools) might also be conducted. There might be further studies that benefit from particular sets of activities to develop learners IS and impact of these interventions might be investigated in the long run.

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