



Integrating Religious Sensitivity into Intercultural Communicative Competence among English Language Learners

Rufina Kamalova*, Kudratbek Makhmudov

Chirchik State Pedagogical University, Chirchik, Uzbekistan

*Correspondence: E-mail: tursunaliyevvarufina@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is essential for English language learners navigating today's globalized and multicultural environments. While language proficiency is fundamental, true competence also requires cultural awareness, empathy, and adaptability, including sensitivity to religious values. This article explored the integration of religious understanding into ICC, highlighting its role in preventing miscommunication and fostering respectful dialogue. Drawing on technology-enhanced learning, such as AI tools and virtual simulations, the study presented strategies for developing learners' capacity to interact across cultural and spiritual boundaries. Examples from German-Uzbek communication illustrate how differing norms, time orientation, and religious customs shape interactions. The paper emphasizes the role of educators in facilitating ICC through reflective practices, immersive experiences, and religious literacy. By including religion as a vital cultural dimension, the study advocates for a more holistic approach to intercultural education that prepares learners for ethical, inclusive, and spiritually respectful global communication.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the era of globalization, learning a language involves more than mastering grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation; it demands the ability to communicate appropriately and effectively across diverse cultural and spiritual contexts. Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) has emerged as a central concept in language education, enabling learners to function in multilingual and multicultural settings. ICC is particularly important for English language learners (ELLs), who often use English not only with native speakers but also with individuals from different linguistic, cultural, and religious backgrounds (Deardorff, 2011).

Beyond traditional cultural knowledge, religion plays a significant role in shaping values, communication styles, and social behaviors. Misunderstandings can easily occur when interlocutors are unaware of each other's religious norms, such as taboos, rituals, dress codes, and gender interactions. Therefore, religious sensitivity is not an optional addition to ICC. It is a critical component that supports respectful engagement and prevents cultural offense (Stewart, 1972).

The development of ICC among ELLs requires deliberate pedagogical strategies. These include fostering empathy, active listening, adaptability, and openness to unfamiliar beliefs and practices (Deardorff, 2006). Integrating authentic cultural and religious content into the language curriculum can help students develop a deeper understanding of themselves and others. Furthermore, educators must address the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of ICC, promoting critical self-reflection and encouraging students to suspend judgment in intercultural encounters.

This paper explores how ICC can be expanded to include religious competence, especially in contexts involving learners from diverse faith traditions. It highlights the challenges ELLs face when navigating cultural-religious boundaries and proposes technology-enhanced methods (such as virtual reality and intercultural simulations) to support experiential learning. Using the example of German-Uzbek interactions, it illustrates how linguistic, cultural, and religious differences influence communication dynamics. The study ultimately argues that including religion within ICC frameworks is essential for preparing students to participate ethically and effectively in today's pluralistic world.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

ICC has become an essential concept in language education, emphasizing not only linguistic proficiency but also the ability to engage respectfully and effectively across cultural boundaries. It involves openness, knowledge of cultural norms, interpretative skills, interactional abilities, and critical cultural awareness.

Despite its comprehensive nature, many ICC frameworks tend to underrepresent religion as a core component of culture. Religious beliefs shape communication styles, gender expectations, decision-making, and social behaviors. Including religious awareness within ICC frameworks enhances empathy, reduces bias, and supports deeper mutual understanding (Stewart, 1972).

Studies show that learners from religiously homogeneous communities may face difficulties when encountering unfamiliar religious norms or practices. Without guidance, this can lead to communication breakdowns and cultural misunderstandings. Religious expressions—such as indirect communication in Muslim-majority cultures or assertiveness in secular Western societies—require careful interpretation in intercultural settings.

The integration of technology has enabled more authentic engagement with cultural and religious differences. Through virtual exchanges, artificial intelligence simulations, and global

online platforms, learners can explore religious customs and beliefs in a practical and immersive manner (Abdollahi-Guilani *et al.*, 2012; Mirzaei & Forouzandeh, 2013). These tools allow for real-time dialogue with peers of different faiths, fostering sociolinguistic and pragmatic awareness in a low-risk environment.

Educators also play a central role in promoting intercultural and interfaith competence. Teacher training programs increasingly emphasize religious literacy as part of broader cultural education. Classrooms that welcome open, respectful dialogue on spiritual and cultural values are better equipped to prepare students for real-world encounters (Stewart, 1972).

Reflection-based strategies (such as journaling, intercultural dialogues, and critical incident analysis) support learners in developing awareness of how their beliefs influence their communication patterns. These methods allow students to build tolerance and develop the ability to shift perspectives, which is crucial in diverse societies (Deardorff, 2006).

In conclusion, incorporating religious understanding within ICC not only broadens the cultural competence of English language learners but also fosters more ethical, inclusive, and respectful global communication. This integration reflects the complexity of modern interactions and prepares learners for culturally and spiritually diverse environments.

3. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative-descriptive approach to explore the development of ICC among ELLs, with a special emphasis on religious diversity and sensitivity. The methodology was grounded in the belief that authentic communication skills (especially those required in intercultural and interreligious contexts) are best understood through experiential data and reflective analysis.

Participants were 30 undergraduate English language learners from Chirchik State Pedagogical University who came from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds. Their experiences and perspectives were explored through focus group discussions, semi-structured interviews, and interactive classroom observations conducted over six weeks. These instruments enabled the collection of in-depth qualitative data reflecting students' awareness, challenges, and adaptability in religiously and culturally diverse communicative settings.

The focus group discussions encouraged participants to share their perceptions of intercultural and interfaith communication, while interviews delved deeper into individual encounters with religious or cultural misunderstanding. Classroom observations were used to monitor how learners applied ICC principles during task-based learning activities, including simulations of real-life scenarios such as greeting rituals, conflict resolution, and decision-making influenced by cultural and religious norms.

To integrate technology, students also participated in virtual exchange projects with peers from international universities (Jackson, 2015). These sessions took place using platforms such as Zoom and Tandem, where participants engaged in culturally and religiously themed conversations guided by prompts. Learners were instructed to reflect on similarities and differences in religious values, customs, and communication behaviors they observed during these sessions.

Data were analyzed using thematic coding, focusing on patterns that emerged in learners' descriptions of religious and intercultural experiences. Key themes included empathy, awareness of religious communication norms, and adaptability in linguistically and spiritually diverse contexts. The analysis aimed to identify both strengths and areas for development in ICC and interfaith sensitivity among the participants.

This method enabled a holistic understanding of how religious and cultural values intersect with language learning, revealing the significance of inclusive language pedagogy in preparing learners for real-world, intercultural engagement.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Emergence of Interreligious Sensitivity in ICC Development.

Data from interviews and focus group discussions revealed that religious identity significantly shapes intercultural communicative competence among ELLs. Most participants acknowledged that their religious background influenced how they interpreted and responded to culturally diverse communication. For example, participants from predominantly Muslim backgrounds expressed heightened sensitivity toward topics involving food customs, dress codes, and gender-based interaction, which often differ across religious traditions.

Several students noted that their encounters with Christian, Buddhist, or secular peers during virtual exchanges exposed them to new perspectives. These interactions, though sometimes uncomfortable, encouraged reflection and the suspension of judgment, a core tenet of affective competence in ICC. Notably, participants who reported greater religious awareness demonstrated higher levels of empathy and adaptability in cross-cultural communication (Stock, 2012).

The findings suggest that religious context does not hinder intercultural competence; rather, it adds a nuanced layer of meaning to how students process, interpret, and respond to communication (Antonio and Ofori, 2015). When religious identity is acknowledged and respected, learners are more open to dialogue and understanding. These results align with previous studies emphasizing the role of interfaith literacy in global competence development (Barrett, 2021).

4.2. Challenges in Intercultural Communication Across Religious Lines.

Despite these positive insights, the study also uncovered notable barriers to effective intercultural communication rooted in religious misunderstanding or lack of awareness. Some learners admitted to relying on stereotypes or oversimplified views about other religions, leading to discomfort or hesitation in dialogue. For instance, a participant noted difficulty discussing holidays like Christmas or Diwali, fearing unintentional offense due to limited understanding of their religious significance.

Moreover, nonverbal miscommunication emerged as a common challenge in interfaith contexts. For example, gestures perceived as respectful in one culture (such as bowing or avoiding eye contact) might be interpreted differently in another religious context. In classroom observations, learners were sometimes hesitant to engage with peers whose religious practices (such as wearing a hijab or making the sign of the cross) were unfamiliar. These moments revealed the importance of cultivating interreligious competence as part of ICC, an area often overlooked in standard curricula.

The discussions supported the idea that interreligious misunderstanding is often unintentional and can be addressed through guided exposure, structured reflection, and teacher facilitation. Educators must therefore create safe spaces for discussion, normalize religious diversity, and promote the interpretation of difference not as a threat, but as enrichment (Deardorff, 2006; Leung *et al.*, 2014).

4.3. Role of Technology in Enhancing Interreligious Dialogue and ICC.

The study further explored the use of digital tools in simulating real-life intercultural and interreligious communication. Learners engaged in structured virtual dialogues with peers from Germany, Malaysia, and Indonesia, discussing topics ranging from greetings and food customs to moral values influenced by religion. The tools used (Zoom, Google Meet, and Tandem) allowed synchronous interaction that mimicked authentic intercultural communication.

Notably, participants praised the anonymity and structure of online exchanges for reducing anxiety, especially when discussing sensitive religious topics. For instance, learners felt more confident asking about prayer practices, fasting, or religious celebrations via chat or video when structured prompts guided the interaction. This confirms prior research that highlights how technology-mediated environments reduce face-threatening acts, making it easier to approach complex topics (Godwin-Jones, 2013).

Students also highlighted the role of reflective journals in processing interfaith conversations. Many entries reflected newfound appreciation for shared values across religions, such as hospitality, gratitude, and modesty. Others documented personal growth in managing discomfort or clarifying misconceptions. These findings suggest that technology not only facilitates access to cultural diversity but also provides a platform for critical self-reflection, which is essential to ICC development.

4.4. Intercultural Religious Scenarios in Real-Life Applications.

Classroom simulations modeled after real-life scenarios further demonstrated how learners negotiate intercultural encounters involving religion. In one role-play, students acted as participants in a multicultural conference where dietary restrictions and prayer schedules were discussed. Observations showed that students who had engaged in earlier virtual exchanges exhibited more tact, using phrases like “I respect that” or “Could you please explain your tradition?” This behavior reflected the internalization of affective and behavioral ICC components.

Interestingly, participants who had prior exposure to religious diversity (either through travel or mixed communities) performed better in adapting communication. For example, one student easily accommodated a classmate’s request for prayer space, while another offered to modify a food menu for a hypothetical halal guest. These instances highlight that ICC development is enhanced through experiential and relational learning, particularly when religious dimensions are explicitly included.

Participants also reflected on real-world examples where failure to recognize religious norms led to communication breakdown. One participant recounted a moment during a video exchange with a student from India, where unintentionally scheduling a session during a religious observance created discomfort. This incident became a case study in timing, awareness, and communication planning, demonstrating that cultural and religious literacy must go hand in hand.

To support this discussion, Table 1 presents practical examples of how ICC is demonstrated in various real-life settings, including those that intersect with religious practice.

Table 1. Practical Examples of Interreligious and ICC in Real-Life Contexts.

Context	Descriptio	Illustrative Example
Business Communication	Navigating religious and cultural norms in formal workplace interactions	Understanding the difference between a handshake in German culture and respectful bowing or salaam in Muslim cultures
Academic Exchange	Adapting to diverse religious practices in multicultural learning environments	Scheduling group work around major religious observances like Ramadan, Easter, or Vesak
Healthcare Interaction	Respecting patients' religious beliefs in treatment and communication	Allowing time and space for prayer or understanding dietary restrictions based on faith
Hospitality and Tourism	Providing culturally and religiously sensitive services to international guests	Adapting hotel menus to accommodate halal or kosher needs, and respecting gender-based seating preferences
Online Language Exchange	Managing religious sensitivity in cross-cultural digital communication	Avoiding offensive slang or jokes about religious practices in intercultural video chats or forums
Social Media Engagement	Understanding religious diversity in global discourse on social platforms	Refraining from reposting memes that could misrepresent or mock the religious values of different groups
German-Uzbek Dialogue	Bridging differing religious-cultural values in intercultural partnerships	Germans prioritizing punctuality and clarity; Uzbeks emphasizing relational politeness influenced by Islam
Intercultural Conferences	Addressing faith-based needs during multinational events	Including prayer breaks or quiet spaces for reflection, acknowledging diverse expressions of spirituality

4.5. Educator's Role in Fostering Interreligious ICC

Teachers played a pivotal role in guiding discussions, mediating conflict, and contextualizing intercultural concepts. Structured debriefings after digital exchanges and simulations provided space for critical discussion. Educators encouraged learners to examine their assumptions, celebrate similarities, and approach differences with humility and inquiry.

One strategy that proved effective was the inclusion of authentic materials from various religious traditions—for example, using excerpts from the Qur'an, Bible, or Buddhist texts to discuss themes of peace, kindness, and justice in language lessons. Students responded positively to these materials, stating that they not only expanded vocabulary but also enriched their understanding of cultural values. This approach aligns with global citizenship frameworks that advocate integrating ethical and spiritual dimensions into education (see <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000232993>).

Moreover, guest speakers from different faiths were invited via Zoom to share experiences of intercultural communication. Learners were encouraged to prepare questions and conduct follow-up reflections. These sessions were rated highly for their real-world authenticity and for modeling respectful inquiry in cross-religious settings.

4.6. Limitations and Implications

While the study yielded significant insights, it also faced limitations. The sample was limited to one university, and digital access was a constraint for some learners. Additionally, the voluntary nature of reflection journals may have introduced self-reporting bias. Despite these limitations, the study presents a compelling case for systematically integrating religious dimensions into ICC curricula.

The implications are wide-reaching. Language programs must update their ICC components to include interfaith dialogue, guided by ethical communication principles. Teacher training should equip educators with skills to manage religious diversity, prevent stereotyping, and cultivate inclusive classroom practices. Policymakers should support intercultural education initiatives that align with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) on peace, justice, and strong institutions.

5. CONCLUSION

This study underscores the vital role of ICC in preparing ELLs to engage meaningfully in a culturally and religiously diverse world. The findings revealed that religious identity significantly influences how learners interpret and navigate intercultural communication. Rather than hindering interaction, religious awareness (when approached with openness) enhances empathy, adaptability, and mutual understanding.

Technology emerged as a key enabler in this process, providing learners with immersive and low-risk environments to engage in cross-cultural and interreligious dialogue. Through structured virtual exchanges, reflective journals, and intercultural simulations, students were able to critically examine their assumptions, broaden their perspectives, and refine their communicative behavior.

Educators play a central role in guiding this development. By incorporating authentic materials from diverse religious traditions and creating safe spaces for discussion, teachers help normalize difference and foster inclusive attitudes. Furthermore, integrating ethical and spiritual dimensions into language education promotes global citizenship and aligns with broader educational goals, including those outlined in the SDGs, particularly SDG 16 on peace, justice, and strong institutions.

Ultimately, ICC development should not be limited to linguistic or cultural aspects alone. It must include interfaith literacy and digital competence to prepare learners for real-world interactions across complex and sensitive contexts. By embracing this holistic approach, language education becomes a powerful tool for fostering tolerance, mutual respect, and global solidarity.

6. AUTHORS' NOTE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. Authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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