EFL teachers' perception and practice of intercultural competence in Palestine

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Our study aims to explore Palestinian EFL teachers' perception and practice of intercultural competence (IC) as well as the relationship the variables have with the teachers' international exposure and previous training in IC. A nation-wide survey was used to collect data from 360 Palestinian EFL teachers. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyse the collected data. Findings show that while Palestinian EFL teachers have adequate knowledge of IC, their attitudes towards IC and culture teaching practices are moderate. Besides, the overwhelming majority of teachers lack international exposure and adequate training in IC. Additionally, teachers' knowledge and practices of IC are positively correlated with international exposure and training in IC. However, teachers' attitudes are correlated only with international contacts, with no association with overseas experiences and training in IC. This study underscores the significant role EFL teachers can play in fostering students' IC.

Introduction

Intercultural competence (IC) was defined by Spitzberg and Changnon (2009) as "the appropriate and effective management of interaction between people who, to some degree or another, represent different or divergent affective, cognitive, and behavioral orientations to the world" (p. 7). The emergence of IC as a concept came in response to the increasing role of English as an international language across the world, which according to Crystal (2003) makes English a global language par excellence. The current situation is best described by Strevens (1992), who claimed that "most ESL/EFL today relates to NNS [non-native speakers] populations requiring English for their internal purposes, or for dealing with other NNS populations, without the presence or intervention of native speakers" (p. 41). Thus, EFL teachers are now required to have the potential to promote students' IC, which needs to be acquired by the teachers themselves before they can transmit it to their students.

The concept of IC emerged following a significant shift in the definition of culture. To understand this shift, it is important to follow the main definitions of culture, which were proposed by prominent scholars in the field of foreign language teaching (FLT). Starting with Brooks (1969), who defined culture as "the way a given people think and believe and live, with special emphasis upon the link between the individual and the total group of which he is a part" (p. 322). Moving forward in time, Saville-Troike (1978) stated that "culture includes all of the rules for appropriate behavior which are learned by people as a result of being members of the same group or community, and also the values and beliefs

which underlie overt behaviors and are themselves shared products of group membership" (p. 5). From the previous two definitions, it can be inferred that culture was still viewed as a collective identity of a certain homogenous community without any reference to individual differences in the same community.

With the advent of the 1980s, writers have shifted from defining culture as a collective identity (e.g., Debyser, 1968; Saville-Troike, 1978), to paying more attention to individual cultural differences that make every individual in the same community a unique cultural experience. One of the most prominent definitions that reveals this trend was introduced by Clifford (1991) and restated beautifully by Atkinson (1999), who describes culture as "traveling—unrooted, permeable and permeating, ever-developing and changing, and inherently unstable" (p. 632). As a result, scholars' interests have shifted from promoting the acquisition of cultural aspects of the target culture (i.e., English in this context) to developing a group of intercultural abilities, skills and attitudes that would enable EFL students to interact successfully in any cross-cultural encounter regardless of the interlocutors' nationalities.

Thus, the term *cultural competence* was replaced by the term *intercultural competence* (first proposed by Byram in 1988). According to Byram (1997), IC includes a number of *savoirs*: "knowledge (*savoirs*), skills (*savoir comprendre*, *savoir apprendre/faire*), attitudes (*savoir être*) and critical cultural awareness (*savoir s'engager*)" (p. 88). Whereas *savoirs* means "knowledge of social groups and their products and practices in one's own and in one's interlocutor's country, and of the general processes of societal and individual interaction" (Byram, 1997, p. 58), *savoir comprendre* and *savoir apprendre/faire* refer to "skills of interpreting and relating", and "skills of discovery and interaction", respectively (Byram, 1997, p. 98). As for *savoir être*, it refers to "curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's own" (Byram, 1997, p. 91). While *savoir s'engager*, which literally means *know how to get engaged* refers to one's "ability to evaluate, critically and on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries" (Byram, 1997, p. 101).

Accordingly, the current study aims to gain insights into Palestinian EFL teachers' perceptions, attitudes and teaching practices related to IC. It also tries to explore teachers' international exposure and previous training in teaching culture as potential factors in improving teachers' IC and their classroom practices related to teaching culture. It is worth mentioning that throughout the study the term *intercultural competence* will be used instead of the term *intercultural communicative competence*. In doing so, the intercultural component of intercultural communicative competence is being highlighted, which is the very essence of the current study.

Literature review

This literature review focuses on the contexts, methods and outcomes of the research study carried out on the EFL teachers' potential for promoting students' acquisition of IC. Thus, the review aims to assess the current state of research in the field in Palestine as well

as critically analyse the methods and findings of the literature in order to identify a research gap to investigate for the current paper.

Research studies about EFL teachers' IC were mainly conducted in non-native English-speaking countries. The literature reviewed exhibited a clear interest in this field in three countries: Indonesia (Hapsari, 2021; Hasanah & Gunawan, 2020; Kidwell, 2021; Megawati et al., 2020; Munandar & Newton, 2021), Turkey (Atay et al., 2009; Gedik Bal & Savas, 2020; Iswandari & Ardi, 2022; Saricoban & Oz, 2014), and Iran (Banafsheh et al., 2016; Ghavamnia, 2020; Mostafaei Alaei & Nosrati, 2018; Safa & Tofighi, 2021; Shirazi & Shafiee, 2017). Other studies were also conducted in other contexts, such as Algeria (Boudouaia et al., 2022), Ecuador (Fernández-Agüero & Chancay-Cedeño, 2019), Vietnam (Hoa & Vien, 2019), Finland (Larzén-Östermark, 2008), Spain (Sercu et al., 2005), Cambodia (Bon, 2022; Nhem, 2020), Greece (Petosi & Karras, 2020), China (Gu, 2015; Zou & Park, 2022), Colombia (Cuartas Álvarez, 2020), Kazakhstan (Smakova & Paulsrud, 2020), Yemen (Ahmed et al., 2019), and Thailand (Imsa-ard, 2023).

Very few studies have had an international scope where EFL teachers from various countries were surveyed to explore similarities and differences in their perception and practice of IC (e.g., Sercu, 2006). Only one study (Abu Alyan, 2011) was conducted within the Palestinian context. It targeted EFL university teachers rather than schoolteachers. Findings revealed that culture was still viewed in relation to nationality with no attention paid to multiculturality as a characteristic of contemporary societies. Besides, teachers' practices in the classroom aimed to enhance students' linguistic competence rather than their IC (Abu Alyan, 2011).

The studies reviewed used survey questionnaires and/or semi-structured interviews in most cases as either the only or the major research instruments for data collection. While very few studies used nation-wide surveys (Atay et al., 2009; Gu, 2015), the majority of the studies surveyed a limited number of teachers that did not exceed 100 participants (Bon, 2022; Fernández-Agüero & Chancay-Cedeño, 2019; Ghavamnia, 2020; Kidwell, 2021; Megawati et al., 2020; Petosi & Karras, 2020). Additionally, some scholars were successful in depicting a more comprehensive picture of the teachers' perception and practice of IC using multiple methods. These methods included classroom observations, narrative frames and interviews (Munandar & Newton, 2021); classroom observations, interviews and material examination (Nhem, 2020); interviews, lesson observations, professional learning community sessions, and journal entries (Kidwell, 2021); and diaries, focus groups, and questionnaires (Young & Sachdev, 2011).

Based on the aims and methods used for data analysis, the reviewed research studies could be divided into two types: descriptive and explanatory. While descriptive research aims to give a clear image of teachers' perceptions, skills, attitudes and classroom practices related to teaching culture and IC (e.g., Bon, 2022; Safa & Tofighi, 2021; Sercu, 2006), explanatory research aims to test the effect of several factors, such as intercultural sensitivity and studying abroad, on teachers' IC level and their culture teaching practices (e.g., Dejaeghere & Zhang, 2008). Most of the reviewed research articles, however, were found to combine both types of research in the same research reports (e.g., Banafsheh et al., 2016; Hapsari, 2021; Saricoban & Oz, 2014).

The majority of studies conducted to measure EFL teachers' perception of IC concluded that teachers have adequate knowledge of IC and positive attitudes towards culture teaching (Ahmed et al., 2019; Ghavamnia, 2020; Hapsari, 2021; Imsa-ard, 2023; Iswandari & Ardi, 2022; Megawati et al., 2020; Mostafaei Alaei & Nosrati, 2018; Petosi & Karras, 2020; Safa & Tofighi, 2021; Saricoban & Oz, 2014; Young & Sachdev, 2011; Zou & Park, 2022). Few studies, on the other hand, showed opposite findings (Gu, 2015; Hasanah & Gunawan, 2020; Larzén-Östermark, 2008; Sercu, 2006; Sercu et al., 2005).

Less research has been conducted to explore teaching practices used by EFL teachers in the classroom to teach IC. These studies have revealed that although teachers acquired a good knowledge of and positive attitudes towards incorporating IC in their lessons, their practices in the classroom were not consistent with these findings (Ahmed et al., 2019; Atay et al., 2009; Banafsheh et al., 2016; Megawati et al., 2020; Munandar & Newton, 2021; Nhem, 2020; Safa & Tofighi, 2021; Smakova & Paulsrud, 2020; Young & Sachdev, 2011). Few studies have shown consistency between teachers' beliefs towards and practices of IC (Gu, 2015; Hasanah & Gunawan, 2020; Kidwell, 2021; Shirazi & Shafiee, 2017).

In addition to their main investigation (i.e., teachers' beliefs about and attitudes towards IC), some of the previous studies dedicated part of their research to exploring the effect of certain factors on teachers' IC level and culture teaching practices. Results of such explanatory research studies have exhibited an apparent disparity concerning the association of some variables with teachers' perception and practice of IC. For instance, while gender was found to be positively associated with teachers' level of IC in Ahmed et al.'s study (2019), it was not the case in Saricoban and Oz's study (2014). Similarly, teaching experience revealed a positive correlation with teachers' IC (Zou & Park, 2022). However, it did not show any association in the studies conducted by Ahmed et al. (2019) and Banafsheh et al. (2016). Other variables, such as professional development training (Dejaeghere & Zhang, 2008), intercultural sensitivity (Hapsari, 2021; Mostafaei Alaei & Nosrati, 2018), study abroad and overseas experience (Hismanoglu, 2011; Merino Jular, 2007; Saricoban & Oz, 2014; Williams, 2005; Zou & Park, 2022) exhibited a positive correlation with teachers' IC level. On the other hand, academic achievement was not associated with teachers' level of IC (Ahmed et al., 2019; Saricoban & Oz, 2014).

In summary, the above literature review was conducted following a concept-centric approach, which—unlike the author-centric approach—aimed to synthesise rather than summarise previous research on EFL teachers' perception and practice of IC. The review focused principally on the contexts, methods and outcomes of past research, with the aim of identifying contextual, methodological, or outcomes-oriented gaps in the literature. Accordingly, two contextual gaps were identified in the literature, as follows:

1. Research on EFL teachers' perception and practice of IC in Palestine was limited to university teachers, with no prior studies conducted on EFL schoolteachers.
2. Nation-wide studies were scarce and the contexts of studies were limited to certain schools or cities.

Driven by the aforementioned gaps in the literature, our current study will include a representative sample of all EFL teachers who work in Palestinian state schools in Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

Research questions

The present study aims to report on the Palestinian EFL teachers' IC level and their teaching practices of culture as an integrated part of language teaching. It also explores international exposure and training in teaching culture as potential factors in improving teachers' IC and classroom practices related to teaching culture. Accordingly, three research questions were formulated:

1. What are the Palestinian EFL teachers' perceptions, attitudes and teaching practices related to teaching culture and IC?
2. What are the Palestinian EFL teachers' levels of international exposure and training in IC?
3. To what extent can the teachers' current level of IC and culture teaching practices be associated with international exposure and previous training in IC?

Method

This study used a survey to collect data from the selected participants. The choice of survey was driven by the need for a research instrument that would enable us to collect data from a large sample of participants without having to travel to meet them in person. The choice made was not prompted by seeking convenience as much as it was a reality that was imposed on the researchers, as Gaza and East Jerusalem were unreachable destinations for political reasons. In addition to these factors, Gillham (2008) confirmed that surveys are excellent research tools that "provide suggestive data for testing a hypothesis" (p. 6), which provided the basis for exploring the third research question. Thus, a survey was deemed the most sensible choice as regards the type of data needed and the constraints imposed on the researchers.

Participants

The sample of participants included 360 Palestinians teaching English at state schools in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza (referred to as Palestine throughout the study). The sample size was determined using Cochran's (1977) equation for calculating the sample size based on the number of the original population under study (i.e., 5216). 358 was the minimum number of participants needed to meet the desired statistical constraints, with 5% of margin of error, and 95% of confidence level. To guarantee their representativeness, the participants were selected using the stratified random sampling whereby the population was divided into mutually exclusive strata (i.e., directorates of education) before they were randomly selected with help from the Palestinian Ministry of Education.

The majority of the participants were aged 25 to 35 years (n = 134, 37.2%) and 36 to 45 years (n = 116, 32.2%) (Table 1). Another 82 (22.8%) teachers were aged 46 to 55 years, while a very small number of participants were aged under 25 years (n = 13, 3.6%) and over 55 years (n = 15, 4.2%). Regarding their academic qualifications, 262 (72.8%) participants had a bachelor degree in English (the highest number out of the overall number of participants), followed by masters degree holders (n = 82, 22.8%). Very few participants had a postgraduate diploma (n = 9, 2.5%), PhD (n = 4, 1.1%), CELTA (n = 2, 0.6%) or a two-year diploma (n = 1, 0.3%). The received data concerning participants' years of teaching showed a close distribution of the participants over the specified categories. 78 (21.7%) participants had experience of 1 to 5 years, 77 (21.4%) teachers served 11 to 15 years, 73 (20.3%) taught English for over 20 years, 70 (19.4%) informants had experience of 6 to 10 years, while the remaining 62 (17.2%) served 16 to 20 years.

Table 1: Participants' age, academic qualifications and years of service (N = 360)

Variable	Category	N	%
Age	Below 25	13	3.6
	25-35	134	37.2
	36-45	116	32.2
	46-55	82	22.8
	Over 55	15	4.2
Academic qualifications	CELTA	2	0.6
	Postgraduate diploma	9	2.5
	BA in English	262	72.8
	Masters	82	22.8
	PhD	4	1.1
	Other (two-year diploma)	1	0.3
Years of service	1-5	78	21.7
	6-10	70	19.4
	11-15	77	21.4
	16-20	62	17.2
	Over 20	73	20.3

Research instrument

A twenty-five-item survey was created to collect the required data. Six experts in the field of teaching English as a foreign language validated the survey before it was sent to the Comitè Ètic d'Investigació en Persones, Societat i Medi Ambient de la Universitat Rovira i Virgili (CEIPSA), which approved the survey (approval number: CEIPSA-2021-TD-0026), before it was sent to the selected participants.

The survey questionnaire comprised five sections (see Appendix). While in section 1 participants were asked to choose the options that described their age, academic qualifications and years of service, in sections 2 and 3 they were asked to express their opinions on 9 statements using a five-point Likert scale: *strongly disagree, disagree, neither disagree nor agree, agree* and *strongly agree*. Since section 4 was designed to measure the

frequency of teaching practices related to culture teaching rather than the level of agreement, the five-point Likert scale provided for this purpose presented different answer options, i.e., *never*, *rarely*, *sometimes*, *often* and *always*. The last section (section 5) consisted of direct questions about teachers' previous training in teaching culture.

Data collection

The survey completion started in April and lasted until May 2022. First, Google Docs was used to create the survey in English. Then, individual invitations including the survey link were sent to the selected participants. Among the 375 recipients of the survey link, only 13 teachers did not fill in the survey, while 360 teachers completed and submitted the form successfully.

Data analysis

The collected data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics, v. 25. Two types of statistical analysis were run to answer the three research questions: descriptive and inferential statistics.

Descriptive statistics (research questions one and two)
Mean and standard deviation values were calculated and interpreted as high, moderate or low using Saricoban and Oz's (2014) framework (Table 2). The ranking refers to the teachers' level of IC and frequency of culture teaching practices in the EFL classroom. Accordingly, the means occurring between 1.0–2.4 are indicative of low level of IC/limited use of culture teaching techniques, while the means occurring between 3.0–5.0 indicate high level of IC/constant employment of teaching practices. On the other hand, simple counts of frequencies and percentages were used to highlight the differences between the teachers as regards to their overseas experiences, international contacts and previous training in teaching culture.

Table 2: Criteria for assessment of IC level and use of culture teaching techniques
(Saricoban & Oz, 2014)

Answer options	Mean	Level/frequency
Strongly agree/Always	4.5–5.0	High
Agree/Often	3.5–4.4	
Neither disagree nor agree/Sometimes	2.5–3.4	Moderate
Disagree/Rarely	1.5–2.4	Low
Strongly disagree/Never	1.0–1.4	

Inferential statistics (research question three)
The Chi-square test of independence was run to investigate whether there is a statistically significant relationship between international exposure and training in teaching culture on the one hand, and teachers' beliefs, attitudes and classroom practices related to IC and teaching culture, on the other hand. The choice of the Chi-square test of independence (developed by Pearson, 1900) to inspect the variables for correlation was determined

based on the types of variables that were tested for possible correlation. According to Franke et al. (2011), the Chi-square test of independence is used when both variables are categorical and belong to a single sample. Other correlation tests, such as the Pearson correlation coefficient, were not chosen because they are used with other types of data (i.e. parametric data).

Findings

RQ 1: Teachers' beliefs, attitudes and teaching practices related to IC

The mean values in the knowledge of IC section as shown in Table 3, indicate that the teachers' level of agreement is high for all the four statements (M = 3.83, SD = .796; M = 3.94, SD = .995; M = 3.68, SD = .982; M = 3.58, SD = .821), with weighted average 3.756 and overall standard deviation .6046. According to the criteria shown in Table 2 above, this indicates that Palestinian English teachers have adequate knowledge of IC.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics for teachers' beliefs,
attitudes and teaching practices related to IC

Section of survey	Survey statement (abbreviated) and number (see appendix for unabbreviated statements)	Mean	SD	Level of agreement/ frequency
Knowledge of IC	8 ... aware of 'intercultural competence' ... intercultural awareness, skills, attitudes, and knowledge.	3.83	.796	4
	9 The cultural content of EFL textbooks must include not only the visible side of culture ... but also ...	3.94	.995	4
	10 ... we must avoid promoting stereotypes through the teaching of fixed cultural aspects.	3.68	.982	4
	11 ... exercises about tourist attractions in London in an EFL textbook ... superficial if it does not have a ...	3.58	.821	4
	Mean and standard deviation	3.756	.6046	
Attitudes towards teaching culture and IC	12 The *English for Palestine* textbooks should include more aspects of Palestinian local culture.	1.83	1.115	2
	13 The only culture ... present in the English textbooks is British culture because we teach British English.	3.98	.957	4
	14 ... other cultural aspects ... in *English for Palestine* texts ... should only represent ... English-speaking countries.	3.48	1.109	3
	15 ... a larger representation of other international cultures in the English for Palestine textbooks.	3.86	.793	4
	16 ... positive attitudes about international cultures must be a priority in the EFL Palestinian classroom.	3.64	.904	4
	Mean and standard deviation	3.357	.4218	

Culture teaching practices	17	I pay attention to the cultural dimension of the texts included in the English textbooks and use it as an ...	3.71	.888	4
	18	I use specially designed supplementary materials to teach intercultural aspects in my English classes.	3.19	.953	3
	19	... extracurricular activities (e.g., showing films and ...) to get my students acquainted with other cultures.	3.13	1.124	3
	20	A part of my exam questions aims at assessing learners' cultural competence.	2.76	1.010	3
	21	I try to refute certain stereotypes about foreign cultures by means of discussion.	3.12	.964	3
	22	I encourage my students to evaluate their own cultural beliefs and practices and try to tolerate the cultural ...	3.55	1.020	4
		Mean and standard deviation	3.244	.6437	

Regarding teachers' attitudes towards teaching culture and IC, one statement was ranked low (M = 1.83, SD = 1.115) and another one was ranked moderate (M = 3.48, SD = 1.109), while the other three statements were ranked high (M = 3.98, SD = .957; M = 3.86, SD = .793; M = 3.64, SD = .904). Overall, the weighted mean (3.357) and standard deviation (.4218) indicate that the teachers' attitudes towards teaching culture and IC are moderate.

Concerning the teachers' use of classroom techniques to teach culture, only one third of the survey statements (i.e., 2) received a high ranking, since their means were higher than 3.5 (M = 3.71, SD = .888; M = 3.55, SD = 1.020), which is the point beyond which a mean indicates a high frequent use of culture teaching techniques. The other four items indicated a moderate frequency (M = 3.91, SD = .953; M = 3.13, SD = 1.124; M = 2.76, SD = 1.010; M = 3.12, SD = .964), which rendered the weighted mean (M = 3.2435, SD = .64372) to reflect a moderate frequency in the use of culture teaching practices by Palestinian English teachers.

RQ 2: Teachers' international exposure and training in teaching culture

Among the 360 participants, only 43 (11.9%) reported staying in a foreign country for work or study, while the remaining 317 (88.1%) did not have such experience. As for their stay period, 22 teachers reported staying in a foreign country for more than a year, while the remaining 21 teachers spent only a few weeks or months. When asked whether the participants maintained regular contact with any international friends or relatives, 102 (28.3%) teachers responded positively, while 258 (71.7%) denied. Only 59 (16.4%) participants stated they had received training in teaching culture, while the remaining 301(83.6%) were not trained in teaching culture (Table 4).

Table 4: Teachers' overseas experiences, international
contacts and culture teaching training

Survey item	Yes	No
Item 4. Overseas experiences	43 (11.9%)	317 (88.1%)
Item 6. Regular contact with international friends	102 (28.3%)	258 (71.7%)
Item 24. Previous training in teaching culture	59 (16.4%)	301 (83.6%)

RQ 3: Impact of international exposure and training on teachers' IC level and classroom practices

Results of the Chi-square test of independence (Table 5) for the relationship between teachers' knowledge of IC and their overseas experiences, international contacts and training in teaching culture show that there is a significant association between the independent and dependent variables, χ^2 (4, N = 360) = 10.32, p = 0.035 (overseas experiences), 15.65, p = 0.004 (international contacts), and 12.75, p = 0.013 (training). Since all the three p values are less than 0.05, which is the criterion for significance, we expect Palestinian English teachers to have greater knowledge of IC when they have more international exposure and culture teaching training.

Unlike the previous findings, the results of the second correlation test (second row of Table 5) show that there is no significant association between teachers' attitudes towards teaching culture and their overseas experiences and received training in teaching culture, χ^2 (4, N = 360) = 8.34, p = 0.080 (overseas experiences), and 2.81, p = 0.590 (training). However, the third independent variable, i.e., international contacts, has a significant association with teachers' attitudes towards teaching culture, χ^2 (4, N = 360) = 20.07, p < 0.001. As a result, teachers are more likely to have positive attitudes towards teaching culture if they are in contact with other internationals. However, their attitudes do not seem to improve with overseas experiences and training in teaching culture.

Table 5: Results of the Chi-square test of independence (N=360)

Dependent variables	Overseas experiences	International contacts	Training in teaching culture
Teachers' knowledge of intercultural competence	χ^2 (4) = 10.32 p = 0.035	χ^2 (4) = 15.65 p = 0.004	χ^2 (4) = 12.75 p = 0.013
Attitudes towards teaching culture and intercultural competence	χ^2 (4) = 8.34 p = 0.080	χ^2 (4) = 20.07 p < 0.001	χ^2 (4) = 2.81 p = 0.590
Culture teaching practices	χ^2 (4) = 13.44 p = 0.009	χ^2 (4) = 23.49 p < 0.001	χ^2 (4) = 76.37 p < 0.001

The results of the third Chi-square test (Culture teaching practices row of Table 5) show that the same independent variables have a significant relationship with teachers' classroom practices, χ^2 (4, N = 360) = 13.44, p = 0.009 (overseas experiences), 23.49, p < 0.001 (international contacts), and 76.37, p < 0.001 (training). Thus, we conclude that exposure to international cultures and receiving adequate training in teaching culture are associated with teachers' practice of IC.

Discussion

The findings reported above reveal that teachers have a high level of knowledge of IC. However, both their attitudes and classroom practices related to teaching IC are found to be moderate. Additionally, only a small number of Palestinian EFL teachers were exposed to international cultures or received training in teaching culture. Further investigation revealed that while teachers' knowledge of IC and their culture teaching practices are correlated with international exposure and training in teaching culture, teachers' attitudes are only correlated with international contacts, with no association with overseas experiences and intercultural training.

The main reason for exploring EFL teachers' IC and the variables associated with it was to use the findings as the basis for enhancing teachers' abilities in teaching IC. Departing from this point, the findings of the current research may be discussed under three themes, which aim mainly to form a better understanding of IC development so that EFL teachers can become more compatible with teaching IC.

Teachers' perception and practice of IC: A knowledge-practice gap

Inconsistency between teachers' beliefs and behaviour has been shown in various studies (Ahmed et al., 2019; Atay et al., 2009; Banafsheh et al., 2016; Megawati et al., 2020; Mostafaei Alaei & Nosrati, 2018; Munandar & Newton, 2021; Nhem, 2020; Petosi & Karras, 2020; Safa & Tofighi, 2021; Saricoban & Oz, 2014; Young & Sachdev, 2011). However, consistency was also reported—although less frequently—in studies conducted by Gu (2015), Hasanah and Gunawan (2020), Kidwell (2021), Sercu (2006), and Shirazi and Shafiee (2017).

According to Cochran-Smith (1999), assuming that the more teachers know, the more they will be able to teach better, is a questionable issue. Various factors contribute to putting teachers' knowledge into practice. This does not underestimate the importance of knowledge, which also plays an immense role in enhancing the quality of teaching. Thus, the gap between teachers' knowledge and practice of IC suggests that enhancing teachers' knowledge of IC is insufficient by itself in making a visible change in teaching culture in the classroom. As a result, factors, such as stakeholders' and material developers' stances on the importance of teaching culture in the EFL classroom play a role in transferring teachers' knowledge into practice as well. Besides, one must take into consideration the different societal and educational contexts in which the studies were conducted in order to better understand their implications.

On the other hand, consistency between teachers' knowledge and practice of IC proposes the need for providing teachers with professional training that equips them with the most up-to-date methods and techniques of teaching culture, as this will surely make their teaching better. The findings of our research suggest that the gap between teachers' knowledge and practice is small. Therefore, both professional development opportunities and other variables related to the school environment, stakeholders and materials should be considered to enable teachers to be more competent in teaching IC.

Lack of international exposure and intercultural training

Limited international exposure of Palestinian EFL teachers could be due to political restrictions, which make travelling difficult for those Palestinians who do not have a passport other than the Palestinian one. According to Aljamal (2014), Palestinians have to provide many documents confirming they have sufficient money and willingness to return home before they can obtain a visa to travel to another country. They also do not have an airport of their own. So, Palestinians who live in Gaza need to cross the borders with Egypt first before they can travel from Egyptian airports, while Palestinians who live in the West Bank use Jordanian airports to travel to other countries.

Fortunately, the Internet has made it possible for those who cannot afford to travel, or do not want to go through all the difficulties mentioned above, to have intercultural exchanges with people from all over the world. However, travelling offers a better experience (Korhonen, 2004), as it places people in the middle of the target culture where they have to find ways to settle in, make contacts, and experience life as it is in a new country. Thus, travelling seems to play an essential role in enhancing peoples' knowledge and attitudes towards other cultures. As a result, new strategies should be explored to compensate for the teachers' limited freedom of movement, or at least minimise its effects on them.

Undoubtedly, the necessity for intercultural training in the Palestinian context is evident. Planning an effective intercultural training program requires setting specific and clear goals based on the trainees' needs (Black & Gregersen, 1991). Additionally, if intercultural training is to meet its goals, it should be based on a specific model of IC that explains the target components (cognitive, affective and behavioural). For example, King and Baxter Magolda's (2005) intercultural maturity model, which describes the phases of development through which IC is expected to develop from initial to mature levels, can be used to first assess trainees' level of IC and then guide the creation of an intercultural training program.

Knowledge acquisition versus attitude change

The results obtained by means of inferential statistics are partly in line with a number of studies which suggested that intercultural training (e.g., Dejaeghere & Zhang, 2008), and international exposure (e.g., Hismanoglu, 2011; Merino Jular, 2007; Saricoban & Oz, 2014; Williams, 2005; Zou & Park, 2022) may have an effect on teachers' knowledge of IC. As for teachers' attitudes, the impact of international exposure was evident in Penbek et al. (2012), Shaftel et al. (2007), and Williams (2005). In contrast, teachers who received intercultural training either developed their intercultural attitudes (e.g., Dejaeghere & Zhang, 2008), or exhibited minor changes in their attitudes (e.g., Korhonen, 2004). The correlation between the variables mentioned above confirms the importance of international exposure and training in developing teachers' IC. However, incongruence poses questions related to the difference between attitude change and knowledge acquisition (Korhonen, 2004), the type and length of intercultural training that the teachers received (Graf, 2004), and the time spans of teachers' international experiences (Salisbury et al., 2013).

The findings reveal a relevant point about attitude change, which seems to require more than just exposure by means of knowledge-based training and travelling. In other words, getting familiar with a specific body of knowledge is not the same as changing one's attitudes towards it, which seems to involve the implementation of other strategies for the change to occur (Korhonen, 2004). Eagly and Chaiken (1993) defined attitude as "a psychological tendency, expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor" (p. 1). Thus, attitude involves a preference for certain ideas, people, cultures or objects, which according to Petty et al. (1997), requires negotiation and persuasion skills to be changed. It is also worth noting that one's attitude towards a specific issue would certainly determine the person's behaviour as regards the same issue. This is evident when looking at the findings related to teachers' intercultural attitudes and practices related to intercultural competence teaching, as both were moderate.

Consequently, one has to consider the complexity of the process of changing attitudes, which requires a prolonged period to be effectively realised (Salyer, 1993 as cited in Graf, 2004). According to Graf (2004), different components of IC require different techniques and time spans to develop. For instance, getting trainees familiar with IC requires less time and simpler techniques compared to changing their attitudes or classroom practices. While factual knowledge about IC can be transmitted easily through lecturing, introducing trainees to new intercultural attitudes and practices may require the implementation of various techniques such as *interactive narratives* or *interactive documentaries*, proposed by Kramsch (1993). Thus, it is recommended that intercultural training programs should be well-planned and distributed over various sessions.

Similarly, the different time spans (Shaftel et al., 2007) and purposes (Williams, 2005) of teachers' international experiences may have contributed to the discrepancy between the results of the current study and previous studies related to the effect of intercultural exposure and intercultural attitudes. Confirmed by the results of a study conducted by Shaftel et al. (2007), longer stays are more likely to have a greater impact on participants' intercultural attitudes, as they may have bigger chances to experience life in the foreign country than short stayers. Likewise, Williams (2005) explained "that the experience of being abroad in and of itself is not enough" (pp. 369-370). He elaborated that what counts in the experience is the amount and type of social interaction which people were involved in during their time in the foreign country. In other words, it is what happened during the international stay, rather than the mere fact that the international stay has actually took place that determines the outcomes (Williams, 2005).

Therefore, it can be said that enhancing teachers' intercultural attitudes not only involves providing teachers with knowledge-based training but also requires the use of negotiation and persuasion skills, which should be part of the trainers' competence. This requires a well-planned training program, designed to take place over a relatively long period if fruitful outcomes are expected to take place.

Conclusion

The current research study aimed to highlight the significance of EFL teachers' IC as a central factor in enhancing EFL students' intercultural communication skills. The study used a survey, completed by 360 Palestinian EFL teachers currently in service. Findings have shown that Palestinian EFL teachers have adequate knowledge of IC. However, their attitudes towards IC and classroom practices related to culture teaching were moderate. Additionally, their overseas experiences, international contacts and training in IC were found to play a significant role in developing teachers' perceptions and teaching practices related to IC. However, overseas exposure and training showed no association with teachers' intercultural attitudes.

Based on the findings of the current study, supervisors, stakeholders and teacher trainers are urged to provide adequate training that would improve teachers' intercultural attitudes and classroom practices related to teaching IC. They also must find ways to encourage teachers to take part in international activities both online and in person if possible. Palestinian universities are also encouraged to equip pre-service teachers with the necessary knowledge and skills of IC by making courses in IC available or at least tackling IC in courses related to culture in the EFL classroom.

The current research raises questions about the quality of intercultural training as to what components of IC (cognitive, affective, and behavioural) are targeted in the training, as well as its length and approach. Similarly, the impact of international exposure should be reconsidered in relation to its length, the amount of interaction it provides, as well as its purpose.

Disclosure statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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Appendix: Survey

Personal information

1. What is your age?
Below 25   25-35   36-45   46-55   Over 55
2. What qualification(s) do you have?
Postgraduate Diploma   Celta   BA in English   Masters   Ph.D.
     Other (please specify) …………………………
3. Please, state your years of service as an English teacher.
1-5   6-10   11-15   16-20   Over 20
4. Have you ever stayed in a foreign country to study or work?
Yes   No
5. If yes, please provide the country(s) name(s) and duration of your stay.
     ……………………………………………………………
6. Do you have any international friends/acquaintances that you keep in touch with regularly?
Yes   No
7. If yes, please state where they come from and how often you get in touch with them.

Teachers' knowledge of intercultural competence

Please indicate your level of agreement with each of the following statements on a 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree) scale.

8. I am aware of what 'intercultural competence' implies, i.e. intercultural awareness, skills, attitudes, and knowledge.
9. The cultural content of EFL textbooks must include not only the visible side of culture (e.g., literature, monuments, etc., but also the invisible aspects of that culture (i.e., norms, lifestyles, beliefs, and values).

10. Today's world culture is dynamic and ever-changing. Therefore, we must avoid promoting stereotypes through the teaching of fixed cultural aspects.
11. The presence of classroom exercises about tourist attractions in London in an EFL textbook can be considered superficial if it does not have a follow-up activity that goes beyond tourist information and does not include any cultural or historical aspects.

Teachers' attitudes towards culture teaching

Please indicate your level of agreement with each of the following statements on a 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree) scale.

12. The *English for Palestine* textbooks should include more aspects of Palestinian local culture.
13. The only culture that should be present in the English textbooks is British culture because we teach British English.
14. If other cultural aspects are to be included in the *English for Palestine* textbooks, they should only represent the cultures of English-speaking countries.
15. There should be a larger representation of other international cultures in the *English for Palestine* textbooks.
16. Promoting positive attitudes about international cultures must be a priority in the EFL Palestinian classroom.

Teachers' classroom practices

Please indicate how often you do each of the following practices in class by choosing one of the options provided below (never, rarely, sometimes, often, always).

17. I pay attention to the cultural dimension of the texts included in the English textbooks and use it as an opportunity to teach culture.
18. I use specially designed supplementary materials to teach intercultural aspects in my English classes.
19. I organise extracurricular activities (e.g., showing films and inviting international speakers) to get my students acquainted with other cultures.
20. A part of my exam questions aims at assessing learners' cultural competence.
21. I try to refute certain stereotypes about foreign cultures by means of discussion.
22. I encourage my students to evaluate their own cultural beliefs and practices and try to tolerate the cultural beliefs and practices of others.
23. If you use other methods/strategies to teach cultural aspects in the EFL classroom that have not been mentioned above, please specify them here.

General comments

24. Have you received any training workshops on how to teach cultural aspects in the EFL classroom (e.g., from the Palestinian Ministry of Education or other entities)?
    Yes   No
25. If yes, please mention who held the workshop and whether you applied the knowledge in your regular EFL classes.
26. What is your general opinion about including culture in the EFL classroom?

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