



Intercultural English Language Teaching in Georgian Higher Education: A Qualitative Study of English Language Instructors'

By

Marina Ostrianska, PhD^{1*}, Dr. Zurab Mushkudiani², MA, Kevin Martin³

¹International Black Sea University, <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-3188-7630>

²Georgian International University

³Middlesex County STEM Charter School



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Abstract

Over the past decade, the Georgian higher education landscape has changed due to a range of factors. The primary cause of that transformation was the internalization, expansion, and accreditation of the education programs. English language instruction has been reconfigured to focus not just on students' language proficiency but also on integrating the specific issues related to a culturally diverse classroom.

Teachers' perspectives and relevant knowledge of intercultural language instruction inform the content and activities distributed to language classes. Furthermore, English language teachers' expectations and competence help foster student engagement, motivation, satisfaction, and academic achievement. Given these circumstances, there is limited insight into how to put intercultural English language teaching into practice in the Georgian context. To close the identified gap, this study employed a qualitative method. Focus group interviews were conducted to gain deeper insights into the issue. The participants were 30 English-language instructors from public and private higher education institutions (HEIs). The findings confirm that teachers view IELL as a positive approach that contributes to student engagement, motivation, satisfaction, and academic achievements. Students perceive intercultural content integrated into their language classes positively. Thus, despite obstacles that arise during IELL due to learners' communication styles, language proficiency levels, unequal participation, and classroom behavior, teachers advocate for its value in an intercultural learning environment.

However, the findings confirm that IELL requires coordinated and systematic improvement aligned to curricular, institutional, and professional levels.

Keywords: Intercultural English Language Teaching, English as a Foreign Language, Higher Education, Multicultural Education, Teacher Experiences, Georgia

Abbreviations:

- **IELL** - Intercultural English Language Teaching;
- **EFL** - English as a Foreign Language;
- **HEIs** – Higher Education Institutions;
- **ICC**– Intercultural Communicative Competence;
- **IC** – Intercultural Competence

Introduction

Georgia has always been culturally heterogeneous since ancient times. In recent years, various factors have significantly influenced the Georgian higher education sector. The list of higher education programs was expanded, and the

programs were internalized and accredited, allowing students from Georgia and abroad to enroll in various programs. Subsequently, those factors mandate that teachers be oriented not only to learners' language outcomes but also to the transformation of internal and external culture-related issues in multicultural learning environments.

*Corresponding Author: Marina Ostrianska, PhD



In the 1950s, the initial phase of intercultural language teaching was characterized by English-language linguistic rules and was linked to the norms, values, and communication practices of English-speaking nations. Later, in the 1990s, more attempts were made in order to expand the cultural context through English-language teaching. Nevertheless, that alignment was primarily directed toward English-speaking countries, as before (Corbett, 2022). After the 1990s, the development of intercultural language instruction went through theoretical consolidation. That turning point was characterized by the development of the Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) Framework, conceptualized by Byram (1997), which underlined the need to acquire the skills for cultural diversity navigating via empathy, critical thinking, and adaptability, and then empirically established by Deardorff (2006), called the '*Model of Intercultural Competence*'. According to the model's author, it consists of four basic components: foundational attitudes, knowledge, and skills; and external and internal outcomes (which is its unique feature). In parallel, in accordance with Self-Determination Theory (SDT), learners' motivation increases in circumstances when their three psychological needs are satisfied as follows: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Thus, intercultural pedagogies support the theory by enhancing learner voice, collaborative interaction, and meaningful cultural exchange. On occasions when students' cultural identities are acknowledged and dialogic participation is encouraged, IELL may reinforce intrinsic motivation and enhance academic engagement.

According to the Guide for the Development of Language Education Policies in Europe, language learners have to be taught a repertoire that enables them to connect their linguistic and cultural knowledge (Beacco & Byram, 2007). Critical and socially responsive approaches have become more popular in the 2010s and subsequent years. Contemporary intercultural language education increasingly addresses issues of identity, equity, and power by focusing on critical intercultural communication studies (Holliday, 2011) and culturally responsive pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995). This huge transformation is an indicator of a trend away from culture as information and toward culture as negotiation and critical involvement.

Within the last decade, changes and reforms in Georgian higher education have placed an emphasis on quality assurance, program accreditation, and international collaboration, which have logically led to an increase in the intercultural student contingent within HEIs. Thus, educational classrooms became a place for cultural intersection and interchange. However, the success of intercultural language teaching and learning depends first on teachers, who set goals, select topics and educational materials, design relevant activities, and conduct appropriate assessments. However, the efficiency of teachers' work greatly depends on the administration of the educational institution. As stated by Mittelstet (1992), "high-level administrative support and institution-wide commitment" are essential components of EFL instruction. They have the

authority to approve courses that deal with teaching intercultural languages. It's also crucial to plan staff training in the appropriate direction. The development of intercultural language teaching can be aided or hindered by considering (or disregarding) the emphasis placed on intercultural language teaching by EFL departments when evaluating their work. Last but not least, the foundation of intercultural language instruction's success is students' engagement and interest (Quynh et al., 2021). Teachers play an essential role in IELL, serving as mediators by bridging theoretical principles and classroom realities. Their perceptions directly influence whether the intercultural teaching objectives will be put into practice or will remain just as theoretical aspirations.

Despite the benefits of intercultural pedagogical approaches, research exploring intersections in Georgian higher education remains limited. For addressing this issue, the current research explores the perceptions, experiences, and expectations of English language teachers across public and private Georgian HEIs. This study aims to explore how English language instructors conceptualize intercultural pedagogy, how they apply it, what obstacles they encounter, and what hinders its implementation, how they assess its impact on learners' engagement, motivation, satisfaction, and learning outcomes. The current study's findings could have implications for Georgia's institutional policy reform and teacher professional development.

Materials

A semi-structured interview protocol consisting of 14 open-ended questions was developed to explore English language teachers' perceptions and practices regarding intercultural English language teaching. In addition, a consent form and a digital audio recording device were the interview materials. Participants were informed about voluntary participation, confidentiality, and anonymity issues. Phone recording was used for the interview, and the recording was subsequently transcribed using transcription software.

Methods

The current research was designed as a qualitative study and aimed to investigate English language teachers' perceptions, experiences, and expectations regarding IELL in Georgian HEIs. Focus group interviews were conducted to collect data with English language teachers from public and private HEIs in Georgia.

English language instructors who participated in the study offered a variety of courses related to English language learning and diverse institutional contexts. For the interviews, thematic and narrative analyses were used. For some interview questions, thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns and categories (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For others, narrative analysis was used to explore how teachers experienced and reflected on intercultural English-language instruction. The combination of thematic and narrative analyses provided the researchers with the opportunity to classify the information using pattern-based categorization and to understand teachers' experiences deeply.

Results

The current research analyzed 15 semi-structured interview questions. For Q1, Q2, Q3, Q5, and Q13, thematic analysis was applied to ensure depth and brevity. The full thematic analysis for Q1 is presented in Appendix 1. The tables related to Q2, Q3, Q5, and Q13 are not included in this article for brevity reasons (although the analysis was conducted in the same manner through applying a thematic coding matrix, transcript excerpts, and keyword frequencies). For Q4, Q6, Q7, Q8, Q9, Q10, Q11, Q12, and Q14, narrative analysis was applied to summarize thematic patterns.

Thematic Analysis of the Interview Q1

The interview Q1 was: "Could you please share with me information about your teaching experience as an English language teacher (e.g., years of teaching, academic level, etc.)?"

The interview transcript excerpts, with themes and sub-themes identified through thematic analysis, are presented in Appendix 1, Table 1.1.

The most interesting answer to question 1 was:

I₁. I have extensive experience teaching English because, upon graduating from university in 1970, I began teaching. So, I have a lot of experience, let's say. I teach mostly at the university level. For two years, I worked at school number three, but then I left, and I'm only here now. So, I think teaching English is a great responsibility, since everyone is interested in learning English nowadays, as it's a global language. So, I have been teaching various subjects, but lately I've been focusing on pronunciation, fiction, and a few others. Okay, well, first of all, you should love what you are doing. If you love teaching, you should love students. And I can say openly that I really do. I love both English and my students. Though I have been teaching for so many years, imagine that every time I come here to give my lecture, I'm always preparing for that. I always try to do something. Maybe I will change something, and we get some innovations, you know. Over the years, we have received many training sessions, delivered by Georgian specialists and foreigners. And they greatly help us improve our teaching methodology and many, many other things as well. So I would like to say that teachers should always be working on themselves when entering the lecture hall. So, I feel happy. I love my profession and my students. Sometimes, when I enter the group and the classroom, I see smiling faces, and I read something pleasant in their eyes. So that gives me energy, that gives me pleasure. And I should do something better every time I go to them.

The thematic analysis of the answers yielded 3 themes (teaching experience, teaching scope and academic focus and professional development), 9 sub-themes and 46 keywords, the most popular of which were: 'years' (25 mentions by 16 interviewees), 'for...years' (9 mentions by 9 interviewees), 'academic' (8 mentions by 8 interviewees), 'undergraduate' (7 mentions by 7 interviewees), and 'years of experience' (4 mentions by 4 interviewees).

To conclude the first interview question, it is clear that English language teachers predominantly have a long teaching experience, predominantly within higher education contexts. Language instructors deliver different courses like general English (3), academic English/ English for Academic Purposes (2), pronunciation (1), fiction (1), ESP (1), American culture (1), and English/American literature (1). The diversity of the delivered courses and the extensive experience of English language teachers provide a powerful foundation for pedagogical flexibility and significant potential for integrating intercultural English language learning/teaching across Georgian HEIs.

Thematic Analysis of Q2

The interview Q2 was: "Do you have experience working with students from culturally diverse backgrounds?"

The most interesting answer to question 2 was:

I_{9.P.U.}: Yes, I have extensive experience working with culturally and linguistically diverse learners. I work in the international education sector, where English is the language of instruction, and students come from varied cultural, linguistic, and educational backgrounds. This diversity is a defining feature of my teaching context and has shaped my instructional strategies, classroom management approaches, and assessment practices.

The thematic analysis of the answers yielded 3 themes (experience with culturally diverse students; cultural diversity scope and nature; pedagogical implications of cultural diversity) and 29 keywords, the most popular of which were: 'cultural' (12 mentions by 7 interviewees), 'experience' (9 mentions by 3 interviewees), 'background' (8 mentions by 6 interviewees), 'different' (8 mentions by 6 interviewees), 'diverse' (5 mentions by 5 interviewees), 'educational' (5 mentions by 4 interviewees), 'culturally' (4 mentions by 4 interviewees), 'extensive experience' (3 mentions by 3 interviewees) and 'diversity' (3 mentions by 3 interviewees).

To sum up, based on the analysis of the second interview question, there is evidence that most English language teachers have experience working with students from diverse cultural backgrounds, particularly within private and internationalized higher education contexts. Students' cultural diversity was tracked through the presence of both international students and regional diversity across Georgian HEIs' classrooms. As several state university teachers reported limited experience (1) of working with culturally diverse students and teaching only Georgian students (1), the general findings indicate that English language instructors have teaching experience with culturally diverse students across educational contexts.

Thematic Analysis of Q3

The interview Q3 was: "What does IC mean to you, and how important is it to the intercultural classroom?"

The most interesting answer was:

I_{9.P.U.}. To me, Intercultural Competence (IC) refers to the ability to communicate effectively, respectfully, and ethically with individuals from different cultural backgrounds, while

being aware of one's own cultural assumptions. IC encompasses attitudes (openness, curiosity, respect), knowledge (cultural awareness), and skills (interaction, mediation, reflection). In an intercultural classroom, IC is essential rather than optional. It supports inclusive learning environments, reduces misunderstandings, promotes mutual respect, and enables meaningful communication. Without IC, linguistic proficiency alone is insufficient for successful interaction in culturally diverse educational settings.

The thematic analysis of the answers yielded 3 themes (IC is an effective and respectful communication, language–culture inseparability, and IC is a foundation for inclusive learning environments), 25 keywords, the most popular of which were: 'communicate/communication' (18 mentions by 12 interviewees), 'respect/respectful' (14 mentions by 9 interviewees), 'culture' (11 mentions by 8 interviewees), 'understand/understanding' (8 mentions by 8 interviewees), 'effective/effectively' (8 mentions by 8 interviewees), 'language' (8 mentions by 7 interviewees), 'different cultural background' (7 mentions by 7 interviewees), 'important' (7 mentions by 7 interviewees), 'awareness' (7 mentions by 6 interviewees), 'ability' (7 mentions by 6 interviewees), 'values' (4 mentions by 4 interviewees), 'interaction' (3 mentions by 3 interviewees), 'openness' (3 mentions by 3 interviewees), 'appropriately' (3 mentions by 3 interviewees), 'inseparable' (3 mentions by 3 interviewees), 'safe environment' (3 mentions by 3 interviewees), 'empathy' (3 mentions by 3 interviewees), and 'misunderstandings' (2 mentions by 2 interviewees).

To summarize the 3rd interview question, the findings indicate that English language teachers perceive IC as an effective and respectful form of communication, founded on an inseparable connection between language and culture. Teachers consistently view IC as an essential part of language learning rather than optional. IC provides educators with an opportunity to create an inclusive, tolerant, and safe learning environment while supporting meaningful interaction across intercultural learning contexts.

Narrative Analysis of Q4

The interview Q4 was: "Do you apply IC in your teaching? If yes, can you describe how? If not, can you give reasons why?"

The interview transcript excerpts, with themes and subthemes identified through thematic analysis, are presented in Appendix 1.

The analysis of the 4th interview question confirms that English-language instructors mostly apply IC in their practice. Many teachers reported integrating IC primarily through discussions, cultural comparisons, reflective tasks, and diverse materials. Teachers pointed out that when a respectful and inclusive climate is created, students are more open to sharing their own cultural perspectives. That environment fosters critical reflection and empathy in language learners. Several interviewees shared concrete examples of intercultural application. For example, the interviewees I.1.S.U., I.2.S.U.,

and I.4.P.U. provided literary or text-based examples of intercultural application. These responses demonstrate that students' cultural backgrounds affect their perceptions, meanings, and engagement with texts. While interviewees I.6.P.U., I.8.P.U., I.10.P.U., I.11.P.U., I.12.P.U., I.15.P.U., and I.17.P.U. shared the experiences of communicative/social intercultural integration. Therefore, they link language learning to authentic intercultural communication.

Based on the current question findings, some degree of variability and limitation was identified. This is because several teachers reported that they do not apply (I. 13. P.U.) or do not actively (I. 7.) apply IC. Several others stated that IC application is indirect (I. 16. P.U.) or limited (I. 9. P.U.). Additionally, I. 16. P.U. mentioned limited training on IC as a factor that influences its application.

To conclude, the received results demonstrate that IC is recognized among English language teachers and applied widely. However, the integration of IC is frequently practice-based rather than systematically structured within higher educational institutions. Subsequently, teachers need more formalized support from the HELs to apply IC more intentionally and systematically.

Thematic analysis of Q5

The interview Q5 was: "Do your English language lessons incorporate intercultural content?"

The most interesting answer was:

I.1.S.U. For example, the listening task that we usually do. We usually have them; they are all like, as. Like people of different nations with different accents. And when there are texts, they're usually, I don't know, not only like British, but sometimes Spanish, sometimes Spanish. Right. For example, they are talking as if a Spanish guy is talking, then the French one. Yes. And I think this is an intercultural element. So this intercultural content is included here? Yes, it is included. Okay. In one of our sessions, for example, when we're talking about job interviews, there was a Japanese applicant and an Indian applicant, and they had to discuss their qualities. And I remember students connected their features with the culture. For example, the Japanese were very polite, and so they talked about this one. They get to choose the best one. I am running a few minutes late; my previous meeting is running over.

The thematic analysis of the answers yielded 3 themes (intercultural content integration; teaching materials and practices; intercultural content integration purposes;), and 22 keywords, of which the most popular were: 'discuss/discussions' (11 mentions by 9 interviewees), 'intercultural' (11 mentions by 7 interviewees), 'global' (8 mentions by 5 interviewees), 'texts' (7 mentions by 7 interviewees), 'global' 6 mentions by 5 interviewees), 'intercultural content' (5 mentions by 5 interviewees), 'listening' ((4 mentions by 4 interviewees), 'videos' (4 mentions by 4 interviewees), 'contexts' (3 mentions by 3 interviewees), 'understanding' (3 mentions by 3 interviewees), 'intercultural elements' (2 mentions by 2

interviewees), 'reading' (2 mentions by 2 interviewees) and 'authentic' (2 mentions by 2 interviewees).

To sum up, the findings of this interview question demonstrate that intercultural content is actively integrated into English language classes. English language instructors integrate the content via authentic materials and interactive tasks that help students to reflect on cultural similarities and differences. Logically, the frequency of intercultural content integration depends on the institutional context and the course and its focus. Findings indicate that teachers perceive intercultural content as a core component rather than an additional one. English language instructors believe that integrating intercultural content could be essential for learners' cultural awareness and empathy development, and for their ability to communicate effectively in the interconnected world.

Narrative analysis of Q6

The interview Q6 was: Do you incorporate intercultural activities into your classes? In the case of a positive answer, outline which ones are integrated.

Based on the analysis of the 6th interview question, it is clear that the majority of English language teachers incorporate intercultural activities into their classes. Many teachers defined the applied activities as follows: role-plays, debates, group discussions, case studies, comparative tasks, and project-based learning. For this reason, all of them confirm the application of interactive and student-centered methods. As teachers reported, application of the identified activities assists students to explore cultural differences and similarities, to analyze real-life scenarios, and to reflect on stereotypes. Therefore, by confirming existing practices, teachers demonstrate their preparedness and effort to combine students' language proficiency performance with intercultural awareness during language teaching.

Several teachers reported that students' intercultural exchange occurs during classroom discussions, when culturally diverse students share their experiences and views, for example, related to the educational system, holidays, traditions, or social norms. Others reported the application of authentic materials, videos, and global topics with the aim to stimulate reflection and promote empathy (I.2.S.U, I.3.S.U, I.5.S.U, I.6.P.U, I.12.P.U, I.13.P.U, I.15.P.U, I.17.P.U, and I. 20. P.U). However, radically opposite experiences were also fixed. A small number of teachers reported limited or irregular application (I.8.P.U., I.11.P.U., I.13.P.U., and I.19.P) or incidental (I.2.S.U., I.3.S.U., and I.4.S.U) application of any of the intercultural activities during English language classes.

To conclude, the evidence indicates that intercultural activities are widely used in English language classes across Georgian HEIs. The implementation of those activities primarily occurs through discussion-based, comparative, and experiential practices. Mainly, the application of intercultural activities is practice-driven, which means there is a need for a structured intercultural framework to support English language

instructors in intercultural language teaching, given the specifics of their HEIs and courses.

Narrative Analysis of Q7

The interview Q7 was: "In your experience, what problems may arise in teaching English to a multicultural group?"

The analysis of the 7th interview question indicates several key difficulties that may arise in culturally diverse learning spaces. According to the interviewees, the obstacles can arise from learners' communication styles, language proficiency levels, unequal participation, and classroom behavior. English language teachers outlined that misunderstandings can be caused by indirect versus direct communication, humor, stereotypes, or culturally sensitive topics such as religion or politics. A couple of teachers mentioned that students from similar backgrounds often cluster together, which can lead to unequal participation (I.2.S.U., I.3.S.U., I.4.S.U., I.5.S.U., I.7.P.U., I.8.P.U., I.10.P.U., I.11.P.U., I.12.P.U., I.13.P.U, I.15.P.U., I.16.P.U, I.17.,P.U., I.18.P.U., I.19.S.U).

Some of the interviewees recognized that teachers and students may occasionally become cautious with the aim of avoiding offending others. Consequently, this behavior can lead to the restriction of an open discussion (I.1.S.U., I.4.S.U., I.5.S.U., and I.6. S.U), so that there is a need to be careful with words when discussing sensitive topics such as religion, disability, or political background, otherwise it may lead to discomfort or tension (I.11.P.U., and I.15.P.U). However, those obstacles are reduced over time through familiarity with each other and trust (I.2 S.U., I.4 S.U). A few of the teachers emphasized the importance of culturally responsive teaching strategies as well as proactive classroom management. The interviewees suggested a need for more systematic pedagogical support in culturally diverse contexts (I.11.P.U., I.12. P.U., I.16.S.U., and I.19.S.U).

Narrative Analysis of Q8

The interview Q8 was: "What strategies of regulation of relations do you apply in intercultural classes? How do you group students for group projects, small groups, and pair work?"

The analysis of the 8th interview question indicates that the majority of English language teachers employ intentional strategies to regulate relationships within groups and prefer to manage grouping in multicultural classrooms. The most frequently used practice among the interviewees is setting up of clear classroom norms (I.2.P.U., I.3.P.U., I.5.P.U., I.7.P.U., I.9.S.U., I.14 S.U).

Interviewees outlined that the core principles of effective communication in intercultural environments are respectful behavior, empathy, and the promotion of dialogue. For promoting more effective intercultural exchange within the groups, teachers advocated for using grouping techniques, which means that:

- The groups are mostly formed as mixed-cultural and mixed-ability ones (I.1 P.U., I.2 P.U., I.3 P.U., I.5 P.U., I.6 P.U., I.7 P.U.; I.12 P.U., and I.13 P.U.);

- Groups are formed in a way to avoid fixed divisions (I.6 P.U., I.8 P.U.);
- Groups are monitored to ensure equal participation by students (I.3.P.U., I.7.P.U).

Some teachers address the value of mixed grouping, as it can foster peer learning, interaction, and preparation for future communication in culturally diverse contexts (I.7.P.U., I.12 P.U., I. 13 P.U.). Simultaneously, some of the teachers confirmed students' resistance to participating in culturally mixed groups. Therefore, students occasionally prefer to participate in monocultural or comfort-based groups (I.8.P.U., I.12 P.U).

To sum up, these results indicate that the majority of English language instructors value planned and structured grouping methods in multicultural classrooms. However, to implement those strategies in an effective way, it is necessary to strike a balance between inclusivity and learners' comfort. The findings of the current question underline the importance of proactive classroom management and applying culturally sensitive techniques.

Narrative Analysis of Q9 and Q10

The interview Q9 was: "Could you please list the strengths of intercultural English Language Learning (ELL)?"; the interview Q10 was: "Could you please list the challenges of intercultural ELL?"

Since the interviewees mixed answers to questions 9 and 10 during those discussions, the question transcripts were merged in Appendix 25 and in the current sub-chapter analysis. The analysis of the 9th and 10th interview questions shows a predominance of positive views on intercultural language learning, highlighting its strengths. The values of IELL were mostly related to learners enhanced communicative competence, critical thinking, empathy, and global awareness. Some interviewees emphasize that IELL prioritizes effective communication rather than just grammar and vocabulary learning (I.6.P.U., I.15.P.U., and I. 17. P.U.). Others underline that intercultural classrooms promote paraphrasing, strategies of clarification, and pragmatic awareness by making stronger linguistic flexibility of language learners (I.1.S.U., I.3.S.U.). The interviewees (I.5.P.U., I.9.P.U., I.11.P.U., and I.14.P.U.) linked IELL to personal growth and respect for diversity by pointing out the significance of empathy, tolerance, and openness. The vital role of IELL in fostering global citizenship and helping students become part of an expanded international community was also emphasized by interviewees (I.4.P.U. and I.10.P.U.). In addition, several English language teachers emphasized that integrating intercultural content makes language learning meaningful, relevant, and aligned to authentic contexts. It also positively impacts student engagement (I.9.P.U., I.12.P.U.). Several teachers stated that IELL prepares learners for broader contexts, including academic, professional, international, and social ones. Therefore, it is evident that almost all participants view IELL as a valuable and contributory method in English language learning.

In parallel with outlining the IELL's strengths, the interviewees acknowledged some existing weaknesses. The most frequently mentioned challenges were: insufficient teacher training related to the issues of intercultural pedagogy (I.5.P.U., I.6.P.U., I.8.P.U., I.12. P.U., I.13.P.U., and I.16); limited time within rigid curricula and syllabus constraints, mentioned by I.5.P.U., I.9.P.U., I.10.P.U, I.12.P.U. A deficiency of suitable materials and structured institutional support was emphasized by I.8.P.U, I.12.P.U., and I.13.P.U. Some participants, specifically I.4.P.U, I. 9. P.U, and I.14. P.U emphasized how difficult it can be to address culturally sensitive topics such as politics, gender roles, and religion, which can cause anxiety, conflict, or tension among students. Furthermore, inequalities in students' intercultural awareness and limited knowledge of diversity (I.6.P.U, I.9.P.U, and I.11.P.U), as well as the challenge of assessing intercultural competency relative to traditional language skills (I.6.P.U), were additional challenges pointed out by the interviewees. One of the language instructors (I.17.P.U.) identified the broader socio-emotional and adaptation challenges that students encounter in cross-cultural settings.

To conclude, despite the challenges, the majority of English language instructors, including I.1.S.U., I.2, I.10.P.U., I.12.P.U., and I.15.P.U., clarified that the benefits of IELL outweigh its challenges. Therefore, teachers view IELL as an essential component of contemporary English language instruction across Georgian higher education institutions.

Narrative Analysis of Q11

The interview Q11 was: "Please say how students respond to the inclusion of intercultural content during classes".

Based on the analysis of the 11th interview question, it is clear that on the whole students positively perceive the presence of intercultural content in English language classes. Most of the interviewees (I.3.S.U., I.4.P.U., I.5.P.U, I.8.P.U, I.9.P.U, I.10.P.U, I.11.P.U, I.13.P.U, I.14.P.U, I.15.P.U, I.16.P.U, I.17.P.U, and I.18.P.U) confirmed that their students' reactions to the intercultural content are positive, engaged and motivated. Some of the teachers reported that putting into practice intercultural topics increases language learners' curiosity and participation. Several participants noted that intercultural topics increase students' curiosity, participation, and enthusiasm for sharing personal perspectives (I.4.P.U, I.5.P.U, I.9.P.U, I. 13. P.U). Some of the respondents reported that students are actively engaged in discussions about cultural interpretations, mental differences, and linguistic worldviews in the case when literature and language comparison tasks are included in the classes (I.2.S.U. and I.2.S.U.) Therefore, these activities not only encourage interest but also stimulate students' reflective thinking and comparative analysis of diverse cultural perspectives. In addition, a few English language teachers emphasized that students feel recognized and valued when their own cultural backgrounds are included in classroom discussions (I.7.P.U., I.9.P.U., and I.14.P.U.).

To summarize, students' responses to intercultural content are positive. Some interviewees mentioned that occasional

hesitation and discomfort were experienced by students (I.12.P.U., I.13.P.U., and I.18.S.U.). As I.16.P.U. reported, students can be cautious when discussing culturally sensitive topics or traditions unfamiliar to them. Occasionally, misunderstandings can take place due to students' limited experience in intercultural communication (I.3.P.U.). However, as students become accustomed to open dialogue and respectful interaction, their reactions diminish over time.

To sum up, the current findings of the questions are evident: generally, intercultural content is positively perceived by students, and it contributes to increased engagement, learners' openness, empathy, and awareness. The initial students' uncertainty does not hinder the general positive perception of intercultural content by English language learners.

Narrative Analysis of Q12

The interview Q12 was: "Do you receive any institutional support, professional development training, or resources related to intercultural English Language Learning (ELL)?"

The analysis of the 12th interview question illustrates that teachers primarily lack institutional support for IELL, or that support is inconsistent across Georgian HEIs. The majority of the English language teachers (I.1, I.2, I.3, I.7, I.8, I.11 P.U., I.11 S.U., I.12, I.15, and I.16) reported that they do not receive any support from the institutions. Some interviewees outlined that some professional development opportunities exist, but they are not systematically focused on IELL (I.4.P.U., I.5.P.U.). The teachers' competence in the field of IELL is based mainly on their own initiative, experience, or intuitive practice rather than on structured institutional guidance and support (I.5, I.11, I.14). Some of the interviewees underwent some professional development, particularly related to international or workshop-based contexts. However, that experience was based mainly on their own initiative (I.9.P.U., I.10.P.U., and I.13.P.U.). Hence, a huge gap between the recognized necessity of support for IELL and its systematic implementation was identified.

Thematic analysis of Q13

The interview Q13 was: "Could you explain how intercultural language teaching affects learners' motivation, satisfaction, engagement, and academic achievements?"

The most interesting answer was:

I.9.P.U. Motivation – some get more motivated and engaged, while some find it challenging and try to fit in with the majority and avoid speaking their mind. Satisfaction – some are very satisfied and seek differences, while some people are less satisfied and prefer to be in monocultural classes. Engagement – I would say that the engagement of the students is the same in any kind of class as they are asked to do some pair work, some groupwork and so on. Academic achievements – this is a personal issue; it is almost never related to culture. If a student is a good student and studies well, vocabulary, grammar, is engaged, and culture does not play a big role in achievement.

The thematic analysis of the answers yielded 3 themes (IELL's impact on motivation and engagement, IELL's impact on satisfaction and inclusive learning environment, and IELL's impact on academic achievement) and 21 sub-themes (keywords), from which the most popular were: 'motivation' (15 mentions by 15 interviewees), 'culture/cultures' (12 mentions by 5 interviewees), 'academic performance/achievement' (10 mentions by 10 interviewees), 'increases' (8 mentions by 8 interviewees), 'satisfaction' (8 mentions by 8 interviewees), 'engagement' (9 mentions by 7 interviewees), 'improve/improves/improved/' (7 mentions by 6 interviewees), 'meaningful' (5 mentions by 5 interviewees), 'authentic' (4 mentions by 4 interviewees), 'real-world' (3 mentions by 3 interviewees), 'own culture/cultural background' (3 mentions by 3 interviewees), 'respect' (2 mentions by 2 interviewees), 'critical thinking' (2 mentions by 2 interviewees), "relevant/relevance" (2 mentions by 2 interviewees) and 'communicative/communication skills' (2 mentions by 2 interviewees).

Generally, the analysis of the 13 interview questions predominantly indicates a positive impact of IELL on student engagement, motivation, and satisfaction. The positive influence is observed when lessons are meaningful and authentic, and when they are aligned to real-world communication. Teachers emphasized that intercultural language integration fosters critical thinking, communicative competence, and deeper comprehension of material, which can positively contribute to improved academic achievement. Simultaneously, some English-language instructors emphasized that students' academic performance depends on individual learners' characteristics and on an assessment system that prioritizes grammatical accuracy rather than intercultural competence. Consequently, it is clear that IELL is viewed by teachers as beneficial. However, the impact of intercultural language instruction may be altered due to diverse institutional contexts and learners.

Narrative Analysis of Q14

The interview Q14 was:

Based on the analysis of the 14th interview question, a consensus that IELL requires systematic improvement across Georgian HEIs related to curricular, institutional, and professional levels was identified. Many of the interviewees reported a need to integrate intercultural objectives into curricula (I.6.P.U., I.7.P.U., I.11.P.U., I.13. S.U., I.14. P.U., I.15. P.U., and I.17. P.U.). The necessity for structured and targeted teachers' training in issues related to inclusive pedagogy and IC was recognized (I. 6.P.U., I.7.P.U., I.9.P.U., I.10.P.U., I.11.P.U., I. 13.S.U., I.14.P.U., and I.16. P.U.), which directly reflects the previously identified gap in the analysis of the 12th interview question. Next, some of the teachers reported on the development of appropriate teaching material that could reflect learners' diverse realities (I.3.P.U, I.9.P.U, I.10.P.U, I.13.S.U., and I.14. P.U.), via the applying of authentic resources, such as articles, podcasts, stand-up performances, and real-life intercultural communication examples (I.4.P.U., and I.10.P.U.). The following core recommendation concerned the need to broaden international

collaboration and exchange opportunities (I.5, I.11, I.13, I.16), which comprises inside and outside students' collaboration projects, debates, role-plays, cultural events, and interdisciplinary initiatives (I.12.P.U., I.14.P.U., I.15.P.U., and I.17.P.U.). The interviewees I.1.S.U. and I.3.S.U. advocated for the importance of preparing students for English language learning as a global *lingua franca* while indicating the existing reality in modern contexts, like taking into consideration local diversity in Georgian cities such as Kutaisi.

To conclude, based on the reported experiences, it is clear that intercultural English language learning/teaching requires a structured, up-to-date policy, curriculum reform, English language teachers' professional development, the extension of authentic materials, and expanded opportunities for students' intercultural engagement.

To conclude, the current research indicates that English language teachers across Georgian public and private HEIs primarily recognize the value and significance of IELL. They conceptualize IC as respectful and effective communication among culturally diverse contexts. Teachers confirm the integration of intercultural content and activities during English language classes via authentic materials, experiential activities, and dialogue. The study's findings indicate that IELL positively impacts student motivation, engagement, satisfaction, and learning outcomes when their cultural identities are acknowledged and bridged to authentic communication. On the other hand, the research indicates the presence of some tensions. Firstly, it is an assessment system that doesn't prioritize intercultural issues (outcomes). Secondly, it is a deficiency in English language teachers' professional development, and finally, it is a non-systematic, uncoordinated policy regarding IELL.

To conclude, it is clear that Georgian HEIs are in a transitional stage of IELL: this is evidence of pedagogical awareness, the necessity, and the benefits of IELL, but some structural and curricular changes are necessary to provide sustainable and system-wide integration of IELL across higher education institutions.

Discussion

Based on the findings of the current study, it is clear that English language teachers across Georgian HEIs mostly recognize the value and significance of IELL. Teachers define IC as an effective, respectful, and ethnically grounded communication across diverse cultural representations. The research participants' determination of IC aligns with Byram's (1997) ICC framework and Deardorff's (2006) model, which emphasize attitudes such as openness and respect, knowledge such as cultural awareness, and skills such as interaction, mediation, and reflection.

Teachers incorporate intercultural elements into classes mostly via authentic materials, comparative discussions, role-plays, case studies, and project-based tasks. By putting those activities into practice, they conceptualize the inseparability of language and culture as a socially situated practice that

transcends the grammatical system (Byram, 1997; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013; Kramsch, 1993). Those views are connected with several contemporary perspectives on English as lingua franca by Jenkins (2007) and Seidlhofer (2011), and IC theory (Holliday, 2011), which accentuate that effective communication relies on pragmatic competence, cultural awareness, and adaptability (Taguchi, 2015). The study's findings align with SDT, which interprets that intrinsic motivation and engagement occur on occasion when learners experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Thus, when learners' cultural identities are acknowledged and lessons are linked to real-world contexts, classroom participation becomes more meaningful.

However, the current study's findings emphasize the presence of challenges, particularly within assessment systems that prioritize grammar and vocabulary over intercultural skills. Several recent studies show that aligning assessment with IC objectives remains a challenge in English language classrooms (Lestari & Yusuf, 2025), and that more comprehensive IC assessment tools are being developed precisely because conventional assessments marginalize intercultural skills (Mardones, 2024; Hernández-López, 2024). Additionally, as stated by Allen (2022) and Hicham et al. (2025), there is a need for diversified assessment methods, of using a variety of assessment techniques, such as situational judgment tests or culture-based tasks.

Furthermore, the existing intercultural practices across Georgian HEIs remain teacher-driven rather than institutionally organized. Systematic implementation is hindered by rigid curricula, a deficiency of teachers' professional development, and inadequate policy support. According to de Wit and Altbach (2021), curriculum alignment and a coordinated institutional strategy are more important for sustainable intercultural integration than relying on teacher initiative.

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