

EFL Teachers as Intercultural Educators: Transitional Roles and Identity

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ABSTRACT

To date, EFL teachers are ever more anticipated to become intercultural educators, supporting intercultural communicative competence for both teachers and students in language classrooms filled with cultural diversity. Using a mixed-methods design, the study integrates quantitative data from a self-report survey with interviews, as it looks into how EFL teachers convert their roles from typical English teachers to so-called facilitators of communication across cultures. With purposive sampling, 22 EFL teachers from various educational levels and teaching contexts took part in the study. The findings reveal significant differences in the extent to how well-equipped EFL teachers are about intercultural education, and it depends as much on their previous experiences with other cultures. From the interviews, changes in teacher identity, emotional challenges, and the need for support from schools have some influence on their self-perceptions as cross-cultural collaborators. Moving away from delivering content to embracing more reflective discussions with students, most EFL teachers found that being interculturally communicative requires new teaching methods and involves personal development and global citizenship. This transition is found to be a process of learning, developing, and finding new purpose in EFL teaching. Teacher training that offers multicultural experience, reflective practices, and emotional support is therefore suggested.

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INTRODUCTION

Today, individuals across professions are increasingly likely to work in multicultural environments or workplaces with people from different backgrounds and cultures. Thus, the ability to communicate effectively across cultures is no longer a luxury but a necessity. English as a lingua franca in international business nowadays has a central role in global communication. Traditionally, English education has focused on equipping language learners with practical language skills. However, the scope is changing gradually. As communication becomes more intercultural, EFL teachers are expected to help EFL learners further explore cultural learning as well as linguistic one. This requires a change from teaching language rules, reading and writing, and vocabulary to enhancing understanding, empathy, and intercultural awareness. For many language teachers, this represents a significant change in how they see themselves, teach others, and even connect with their students and peers.

This transition from English teaching to intercultural education is not without challenges. Teachers must not only have knowledge of interculturalism but also develop emotional intelligence and the proper pedagogy needed to lead to the understanding and appreciation of culture in multidisciplinary contexts. They have to move from being language experts to becoming English and culture facilitators who support learners to reflect on their own cultural norms and acceptance and acknowledge those of people from different backgrounds and cultures.

Despite the growing demand for intercultural competence in language learning, little research has focused on how EFL teachers experience becoming intercultural educators. Using a mixed-methods approach, this study examines their experiences and insights that show how this change affects them, not only as professionals but also as individuals.

English teachers worldwide are expected to integrate intercultural content into their teaching, and schools and universities need to provide necessary support. (UNESCO, 2013). This includes professional development, mentorship, and recognizing what intercultural teaching requires (Li, 2025). By examining the experiences of EFL teachers integrating intercultural perspectives into their teaching, this study contributes to intercultural education and offers insights for teacher education, institutional policy, and professional development policy. Concerning these, this study is set out with the following two research questions:

1. How do EFL teachers experience integrating intercultural education in their teaching?
2. What factors influence EFL teachers' integration of intercultural education into their teaching?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Moving from simply teaching English to teaching with an intercultural perspective requires an understanding of the interconnections among language, culture, and communication. Intercultural competence refers to the ability to communicate effectively and properly with people from other cultures, based on shared understanding and respect (Deardorff, 2006). For many years, EFL researchers and teachers have stressed that language and culture cannot be separated. Byram (1997) points out that teaching a language without its culture restrains learners' ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in different social contexts in real life.

The Development of Intercultural Competence in English Learning

English education has traditionally focused on the communicative needs of learners, emphasizing practical language use in academic and at times professional contexts. Learners are often taught to read and understand texts, write essays or summaries, give presentations, and conduct and direct classroom discussions in English. These practices are usually based on Western standards, particularly those of North America and Europe. While this could be effective in certain settings, this approach often neglects the cultural diversity as present in today's world and assumes that Western practices are universally applicable and acceptable.

As the global settings and academic environments are becoming more multicultural, the confines of traditional English teaching methods are more evident. Learners often experience difficulties in expressing themselves and in understanding non-verbal and indirect communication, and managing culturally sensitive contents. These challenges draw upon the need for English education to develop into a more holistic mode, which integrates intercultural competence together with both linguistic and academic skills.

Intercultural communication has been developed through several frameworks over time. Hall (1976) presents notions of high-context and low-context cultures which show how meaning is important in understanding culture. In high context cultures, communication depends on indirect messages, mutual understanding, and non-verbal signs. In low context cultures, however, messages are more explicit, direct, and independent. Knowing this difference helps learners understand why communication patterns that appear natural in one culture may be unexpected, unclear or confusing in another.

Hofstede (1980) introduces cultural dimensions theory which offers another perspective of cultural significance. He identified six dimensions that differentiate culture, including power distance, individualism and collectivism, masculinity and femininity, uncertainty avoidance, long term orientation, and indulgence and restraint. This helps explain why people from different backgrounds perceive decision-making, leadership, or even classroom engagement differently. For example, in high power distance cultures, learners may be unwilling to ask teachers in class because of power relations, while in low power distance cultures, open discussions and classroom questioning are typical and even expected. Generally speaking, Hofstede's model is often applied, but it has also been criticized for looking at cultures too roughly and disregarding diversity within (Dervin, 2020).

Recently, Deardorff (2006) introduces a notion of intercultural competence that integrates attitudes, knowledge, and skills. The proposed model emphasizes that intercultural competence intensifies over time through reflection and recurring intercultural interaction. This argument is against the belief that such skills can be fully learned in class, instead demonstrating the importance of continuous development throughout a teacher's academic experience.

For EFL teachers, the rationale for adopting intercultural competence is profound as to teach intercultural competence; they must incorporate it into themselves first. Continuous personal development, self-reflection, and willingness to change are thus required. EFL teachers often meet challenges when moving towards intercultural education since they must change to a more complex and diverse curriculum that cultivates cultural dimensions. Moreover, their duties are also different. The supposed intercultural EFL teacher

is to have new pedagogical approaches to engage with learners in the new era who have become more autonomous and individualistic. This also involves supporting teachers' emotional aspects of learning such as addressing their concerns, dealing with possible objections, and promoting mental wellness.

Research on teacher identity reflects what the teacher experiences in transitioning this way. Beijaard et al. (2004) indicate that professional identity is active and often formed through experience and interaction. As teachers engage in intercultural teaching, their perception of self often grows. They start to question their own cultural beliefs and develop an understanding of their role. Thus, this can be both empowering and disturbing.

There is still limited empirical research that closely examines the experiences of EFL teachers making this transition. Most existing studies focus on student learning outcomes or on institutional policy while the professional journeys of EFL teachers themselves remain underexplored. This study addresses that gap by highlighting teachers' voices, pointing at the challenges they face and the strategies they use in adapting to new demands of ICC.

The literature also shows that EFL teachers need to acquire intercultural competence, not only as a learning goal in class, but also as part of their professional development. This adaptability calls for new knowledge, skills, and attitudes, supported by schools as well as individual commitment. According to Deardorff (2006), intercultural competence is an ongoing process of learning, and it is not unamenable. Likewise, Baker (2015) purports that intercultural competence is crucial to communication as it takes flexibility and exposure into various cultural contexts. What these viewpoints show is that language teaching nowadays is not just about teaching grammar or enhancing fluency, but it is about supporting learners in communicating effectively with people from different cultural backgrounds.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study used a mixed-method design combining a survey and interviews. Using both methods made it possible to triangulate the results and better understand how the EFL teachers planned, implemented, and reflected on their work with intercultural content in their teaching practices.

The research applied an explanatory sequential design. This design was opted for to follow up the survey results with interviews for further explanation. First, an online survey was distributed to 22 EFL teachers from different educational settings. The survey examined how the teachers brought intercultural topics into their lessons, the methods they used, and the difficulties they faced.

Afterwards, eight teachers were invited for interviews. They were chosen based on their willingness to join, the various teaching experiences reported in their survey answers, and their different teaching levels: two private English tutors, three school teachers, and three university teachers. In the interviews, the teachers were probed on their cultural classroom practices, explaining how they adapted teaching materials, and sharing how they promoted interaction with students from different cultural backgrounds.

Using both the survey and interviews helped the study present findings that reflect teachers' actual work and experiences in integrating intercultural learning into English teaching.

Participants

To ascertain diversity and engagement with intercultural education, the participants were purposively selected on the basis of teaching level, professional experience, and willingness to participate. 22 EFL teachers, comprising 11 secondary school teachers, six university instructors, and five private tutors, participated in the survey. All of them had EFL teaching experience in professional and/or academic contexts, from one year to 22 years. Eight were then recruited for further follow-up interviews. The interviewees embodied a combination of gender, different years of teaching experience, and teaching contexts and had reported to incorporate intercultural components into their English teaching.

Instruments, Procedures and Analysis

The survey was developed to evaluate EFL teachers' perceptions of their experience in integrating intercultural teaching into their teaching practices as well as other challenges they face. It consisted of 25 Likert-scale items (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree), classified into four sections: confidence in managing cultural classroom discussions; awareness of cultural assumptions; familiarity with intercultural concepts; and ability to support experiential learning and reflective practice. The survey was designed based on Deardorff's Process Model of Intercultural Competence (2006). It underscores the evolution of attitudes, knowledge, and skills that support effective cultural teaching. Both instruments were validated through Index of Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) by three experts in ELT, and necessary revisions were made based on their feedback to ensure content validity.

The survey was handed out electronically and responses were collected anonymously. The quantitative data from the survey were analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the findings across the four main areas of the questionnaire. A paired-samples t-test ($p < .05$) was then applied to see whether the teachers rated themselves differently in diverse areas of intercultural competence.

After the survey, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight teachers, including two non-Thai participants, for whom English was used during the interview. Each interview lasted about 25 to 40 minutes and was held on Zoom. With the participants' consent, all interviews were recorded and transcribed. Member checking was carried out by sending the summarized themes to the participants to verify that the interpretations accurately reflected their views.

The qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis was based on the four main areas in the survey and on what the teachers shared and expanded on during the interviews. This process made it possible to see how the teachers explained their work and experiences in integrating intercultural elements into English teaching.

FINDINGS

This section includes findings from both the survey and the follow-up interviews. It is divided into three parts. First, a summary of the descriptive data from the survey is presented, followed by the results from the paired-samples analysis. Last, insights gained from the teacher interviews are introduced.

Survey Results

A total of 22 EFL teachers took part in the survey. The objective of using the survey was to explore how they viewed their ability to include intercultural aspects in their English classes. The questionnaire was based on Deardorff's (2006) process model of intercultural competence and focused on four main areas: confidence in leading cultural discussion; awareness of one's own cultural beliefs and biases, understanding of intercultural concepts; and ability to guide students to think about culture through reflection.

The findings showed that most teachers felt comfortable discussing cultural topics in class and were aware of cultural influences on communication. However, many were not familiar with established frameworks such as Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions or Hall's (1976) concept of high- and low-context communication. Familiarity with intercultural frameworks such as Hall's and Hofstede's models is deemed important because they help explain communication across cultures. In practice, the teachers tended to depend on their own experience and intuition rather than on formal theoretical models when dealing with cultural diversity in the classroom.

Table 1. **Descriptive Statistics of Intercultural Competence Aspects (N = 22)**

Aspect	Mean	SD	Interpretation
<u>Managing cultural discussions</u>	3.72	0.61	<u>Moderate to high confidence</u>
<u>Awareness of cultural assumptions</u>	3.95	0.54	<u>Relatively strong self-awareness</u>
<u>Familiarity with intercultural concepts</u>	3.35	0.67	<u>Lower familiarity, room for growth</u>
<u>Accommodating experiential practice</u>	3.68	0.59	<u>Moderate capacity, but inconsistent</u>

Among the four aspects, the highest average score ($M = 3.95$) was related to awareness of cultural beliefs and biases. This indicates that many teachers could recognize how their own background might form classroom communication and learning. They also noticed when some approaches might not be culturally suitable for every student in mixed groups.

In contrast, the lowest mean score of 3.35) was in familiarity with intercultural concepts and models. This shows that while the teachers appeared confident in noticing cultural differences, they were less certain about applying or using formal theories to explain or internalize those differences. In other words, their intercultural competence seemed to rely more on intuition than on systematic knowledge.

The ability to promote student reflection ($M = 3.68$) ranked moderately, lower than confidence in handling class discussions but higher than knowledge of intercultural theories. This shows that while teachers were able to help students think about their cultural experiences, they rarely linked these discussions to formal concepts or frameworks. Overall, the survey results suggest that the teachers demonstrated self-awareness and a practical sense of how to deal with cultural issues, yet their theoretical grounding in intercultural studies remained limited.

Differences Across Competence Aspects

The descriptive statistics provided an overview of the teachers' self-perceptions. Then, further analysis was needed to indicate whether there were differences between the four

aspects. Paired-samples t-tests were conducted to compare the teachers' responses across the different aspects of intercultural competence. This made it possible to understand how the teachers perceived themselves and whether there were any gaps between the four aspects: awareness, discussion skills, reflective practice, and theoretical familiarity.

From the investigation, a statistically significant difference was found in the teachers' awareness of cultural assumptions and familiarity with intercultural frameworks ($p < .05$). This reflects a contrast between self-awareness, which was considered strong, and intercultural knowledge, which was weaker.

Other comparisons of the cultural aspects did not have statistically significant results; however, the mean scores indicate minor variations across the different aspects of competence. The teachers reported somewhat greater confidence in encouraging student reflection than in applying formal intercultural theories; nonetheless, this difference was not statistically significant. Likewise, the gap between confidence in leading culturally sensitive discussions and awareness of cultural biases was minimal, indicating a close relationship between the teachers' self-awareness and their ability to lead classroom discussions. This means that when the teachers are aware of their own cultural perspectives, they also appear more capable of guiding conversations in ways that are more understanding and balanced. At the same time, their weaker familiarity with formal intercultural frameworks shows that this confidence in practice does not necessarily come from structured theoretical knowledge. Likewise, there was no statistically significant difference between awareness and reflective practice and between discussions and framework familiarity as shown in Table 2, which presents the pairwise comparisons of different aspects of intercultural competence.

Table 2: Pairwise Comparisons of Intercultural Competence

Comparison	Mean Difference	t-value	p-value	Sig.
Awareness vs. Framework familiarity	0.60	2.17	0.04	*
Discussions vs. Reflective practice	0.04	0.21	0.83	NS
Discussions vs. Awareness	-0.23	-1.52	0.14	NS
Reflective practice vs. Framework familiarity	0.33	1.63	0.12	NS
Awareness vs. Reflective practice	0.27	1.30	0.20	NS
Discussions vs. Framework familiarity	0.37	1.95	0.06	NS

Note: * = $p < .05$; NS = $p \geq .05$ (not significant)

A closer examination of the quantitative results shows that three of the competence aspects: awareness of cultural assumptions, confidence in leading culturally sensitive discussions, and the ability to encourage student reflection appear to develop concurrently. The results reveal that the teachers who understand their own cultural background tend to manage classroom discussions more effectively. They are able to handle misunderstandings constructively and encourage students to share different perspectives with respect and clarity. This kind of cultural self-awareness also enables the teachers to guide students toward thinking about and evaluating their own cultural experiences. Overall, the findings

suggest that awareness of one’s culture, skill in classroom interaction, and the ability to promote reflection come as combined qualities rather than separate abilities.

In contrast, the low rating for knowledge of intercultural theories highlights an area that needs further improvement. Although the teachers relied confidently on their personal experiences and practical wisdom to deal with cultural matters, they felt less certain when it came to applying theoretical models such as those of Hofstede or Hall. This remark indicates that their intercultural competence is based more on experience rather than in formal study. While experiential knowledge is valuable, the absence of a clear theoretical base may make it difficult for them to explain cultural differences systematically or transfer their understanding to new settings. In short, the teachers show strong practical awareness, but they would benefit from professional training that connects theoretical understanding with classroom application.

Interview Findings

Interviews with eight participants made it possible to explore how intercultural teaching was carried out and understood in everyday classroom situations. While the survey summarized what the teachers believed about their own cultural competence, the interviews revealed how they described their teaching experiences, the difficulties they faced, and the realities of their working environment that influenced what they could do in class. Through thematic analysis of the interview data, three central themes were identified: (1) shifts in teacher identity, (2) emotional difficulties in addressing intercultural topics, and (3) the role of school support in shaping practice. These themes illustrate the complication of intercultural teaching as influenced not only by teachers’ individual awareness and classroom strategies but also by their emotional responses as well as the environments in which they work. Holistically, the interviews provide perspectives that complement and supplement the quantitative findings. Table 3 presents the main themes derived from the interviews.

Table 3: Themes from Teacher Interviews

Theme	Description	Illustrative Evidence
Identity transformation	Described moving from “knowledge giver” to “facilitators of intercultural discussion.”	“I used to see myself as mainly teaching grammar, but now I think about how students see themselves in relation to others.”
Emotional challenges	Reported feelings of some anxiety and uncertainty when dealing with intercultural issues.	“Sometimes I worry about saying the wrong thing, or that students may misunderstand me because of cultural responsiveness.”
School support	Emphasized the role of leadership, training, and resources in encouraging intercultural teaching	“When my school encouraged us to discuss intercultural topics in the classroom, it was a relief and good support I felt.

Identity Transformation

Some interviewees reported that their professional role had shifted from primarily transmitting language knowledge to building intercultural awareness. This change was not simply as a pedagogical alteration, but as a redefinition of what it meant to be an EFL teacher in present-day language classrooms. Many participants began to see their work as facilitating intercultural discussion and helping students explore their own viewpoints.

As one participant explained: *"Intercultural teaching makes me reflect on myself, my own identity, and how I deal with diversity in real life."*

This suggests that teachers saw intercultural teaching as not only influencing their classroom practice but also shaping their identity as a teacher. For some, this was described as a steady process of professional growth, where increased engagement with cultural issues led to deeper reflection on personal beliefs, values, and assumptions. This theme therefore illustrates how intercultural teaching became part of a wider professional identity change for teachers, linking language teaching and learning with the development of openness and global citizenship.

Emotional Challenges

Some teachers (n=5) also acknowledged emotional efforts to deal with intercultural issues. Despite acknowledging that intercultural teaching was important, they noticed that it involved a degree of risk. A few participants noted some worry about offending students by mistake, being misunderstood, or lacking the proper language to address sensitive issues.

One teacher reflected: *"When students ask about cultural stereotypes, I feel anxious. I want help them think critically, but I am afraid of making mistakes myself."*

What is found is that intercultural teaching required the teachers to address challenges that went beyond the teaching of English. Two participants explained that concerns about getting it wrong or not knowing what to say sometimes reduced their willingness to engage with sensitive or controversial issues. At the same time, two others emphasized that these challenges were part of the pedagogical process for both teachers and students. Thus, it is possible to interpret that intercultural competence involves not only cognitive knowledge and instructional practice but also an affective dimension that molds classroom interaction.

School Support

From the interviews, the role of institutional context was seen as influential in forming how the teachers engaged with intercultural teaching. It has been found that the teachers working in environments where intercultural issues were actively encouraged and supported through professional training, or supportive leadership reported feeling empowered to incorporate such content into their practice.

As one teacher explained: *"When my school encouraged us to involve intercultural topics in our classroom practice, it felt easier. Without that, it can feel like you're working alone."*

On the other hand, some interview participants in less supportive contexts described encountering barriers including limited time in classrooms, focus on content not culture, and lack of school encouragement and a supportive system. For these teachers, efforts to

introduce intercultural perspectives were often experienced as an individual endeavor rather than a shared responsibility. Based on this finding, school support can determine whether intercultural teaching develops as a collective effort or remains an individual initiative. This shows the importance of having support systems, where leadership, training, and curriculum flexibility work together to help teachers move from working alone to building more consistent and purposeful intercultural practices.

Overall, the findings show that EFL teachers under study are quite aware of cultural issues and can instigate some reflection in their students, but many still lack a foundation in intercultural theories. This gap weakens their ability to design intercultural activities with confidence and coherence. The interviews show that teachers' professional identities change as they respond to intercultural needs. Also, emotional challenges affect how they teach, and schools can either support or limit their efforts. Overall, intercultural competence is not a fixed skill but an ongoing process for EFL teachers, which is shaped by reflection, emotional experience, and support from the school.

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that the EFL teachers in this study are beginning to see their work differently. Many no longer view themselves only as language teachers but also as educators responsible for helping students understand cultural differences. Most teachers recognized that their own cultural background shaped the way they teach and felt generally confident when leading or monitoring classroom discussions on cultural topics. However, their understanding of well-recognized intercultural theories remained limited. The interviews also showed that these changes in practice were connected to how the teachers see themselves professionally, respond emotionally to their teaching duties, and receive encouragement from their schools. The findings support previous research by illustrating how the teachers adapt their roles in everyday teaching.

Identity Change as a Process

One key finding of this study is the steady change in how the teachers perceived their professional identity through their work with intercultural teaching. Instead of seeing themselves only as English teachers, many started to recognize their role in helping students think about culture and reflect on their own experiences. This supports earlier research showing that a teacher's sense of identity develops through day-to-day classroom practice and the social setting where teaching takes place (Tao & Gao, 2020; Huang, 2021). The participants explained that engaging with intercultural topics led them to consider their own beliefs and teaching habits. This process aligns with Teng's (2021) view of reflexive identity building, where teachers develop their awareness of who they are while helping students learn.

The teachers' reflections also point to a more blended approach to teaching. Their responsibilities extended beyond language instruction to include fostering students' cultural understanding and critical thinking (Wang, 2020; Chen & Wright, 2021). In taking on this broader role, teachers acted not only as providers of language input but also as facilitators who helped students manage different perspectives. Such development involves both

professional growth and personal change, showing that intercultural language teaching links the two in a closely connected way (Byram & Wagner, 2020).

Emotional Challenge of Intercultural Teaching

One theme that occurred is the emotional challenge that EFL teachers must deal with when undertaking intercultural teaching. Many teachers felt sensitive and unsure when they had to address especially multifaceted cultural issues. This is in agreement with past studies in which intercultural teaching includes strong emotional effort (Liu & Xu, 2021; Derakhshan et al., 2022). It takes into account sharing knowledge and managing feelings of worry, hesitation, and compassion.

The emotional demands of teaching English as teachers are often overlooked. Many teachers in this study admitted feeling stressed when faced with sensitive or difficult questions. According to Gu and Lee's (2022), intercultural dialogue in the classroom can feel uncomfortable but also create room for growth and learning. Some researchers even argue that showing susceptibility is a way to build intercultural competence, as it results in honesty and openness for students (Méndez García, 2021; Dervin, 2020). When EFL teachers share their own uncertainties, they help students see intercultural learning as an effort taken together rather than knowledge imparted from the teacher to the learner.

However, without sufficient school support, the emotional demands faced by the teacher can give rise to tiredness or even tension (Chen & Cheng, 2020). Several teachers in this study referred to feeling isolated when their schools offered little or no support. These teacher experiences bring about the need for teacher education programs to integrate emotional and reflective support to ensure that EFL teachers are not to face such challenges in isolation.

School Support and Constraints

The findings reveal that schools play an important role in shaping how intercultural practices develop. The teachers who felt supported by schools were more confident, while those in unsupportive settings often felt isolated. This reaffirms recent research that views intercultural education not only as an individual effort but also as a school responsibility (Zhang & Liu, 2021; Li & Song, 2022). Schools that promote cultural exploration and provide training give EFL teachers more opportunities to be intercultural educators.

At the same time, many participants were not familiar with main intercultural theories, which means that more training in this area should be prioritized. Because without understanding key theories, EFL teachers may not be able to interpret cultural issues effectively and lack tools to guide students toward deeper intercultural understanding. While self-reflection and practical experience are valuable, EFL teachers also need clear guidance through well-developed intercultural frameworks to build stronger competence. Studies show that programs blending theory with practice can importantly boost teachers' enthusiasm (Sercu, 2021; Porto et al., 2022). Schools should have sustainable support systems, such as learning communities or mentorship programs, that help EFL teachers to grow practically and professionally (Jackson, 2021; Baker, 2021)

Integrating Awareness and Frameworks

As indicated from the findings, many EFL teachers have strong self-awareness but limited knowledge of intercultural theories, which can make their teaching rely mostly on intuition. While personal awareness is certainly valuable, using it alone can lead to inconsistent approaches in the classroom (Xu, 2021; Gorski, 2022). This circumstance calls for the need for teachers to have access to knowledge that can facilitate their decision-making and help them address cultural differences with confidence.

Introducing frameworks such as Deardorff's process model or Hofstede's cultural dimensions into teacher training can help transform intuition into organized teaching strategies. For example, knowing about power distance can affect class discussions on authority, and understanding high and low context communication can help students interpret meaning. This approach also helps EFL teachers create lessons that respond to students' diverse cultural backgrounds and needs. As Kim (2023) suggests, theory does not limit teachers, but it gives them more ways to cope with diverse classroom situations.

Implications for Teacher Education and Professional Development

Practical implications from the findings suggest that teacher education programs should include direct intercultural training, rather than expecting teachers to handle it on their own. This means giving teachers opportunities to reflect on their experiences and learn frameworks that help them understand. How they feel about cultural situations is one vital aspect, but why these situations happen is another equally important (Porto et al., 2022). Second, teacher education should focus on the emotional side of intercultural teaching. Providing well-planned opportunities for reflection, peer discussion, and emotional support helps teachers deal with challenges positively. Recent studies show that when teachers can talk openly and reflect on their feelings, they can turn emotional challenges into professional growth (Teng, 2021; Jackson, 2021).

Finally, schools should encourage a culture of collaboration. When teachers receive support for intercultural activities or initiatives, they feel more confident. Professional development can include peer mentoring, intercultural workshops, and opportunities for cross cultural exchange (Li & Song, 2022; Kim, 2023). By promoting these supportive environments, schools help teachers grow both professionally and individually.

This study shed some light on three important areas. First, EFL teachers are taking on responsibilities which are not just about language teaching but mediating students to understand cultural perspectives. Second, the emotional aspect of this work is significant, as teachers often find intercultural teaching both challenging and worthwhile. Third, the role of the school is crucial, because its policies and atmosphere can either help or limit what teachers are able to do. The findings show that intercultural competence is not a goal once and for all, but a process that develops with time and experience. Supporting teachers in this process means linking theoretical knowledge with classroom practices, recognizing their emotional challenges, and ensuring that schools provide a setting where intercultural learning can naturally be cultivated.

CONCLUSION

Employing both surveys and interviews, the study examined teachers' self-perceptions along with their classroom experiences. The findings reveal that EFL teachers are aware of cultural

differences and to a certain degree confident in dealing with intercultural realities in the classroom. However, lacking a foundation in intercultural theories is what most teachers experienced. Also, as found, their development is contingent not only on professional skills, but also on emotions and the support they have from their schools.

Becoming an intercultural educator is not about using certain strategies, but it is about an incessant process of reflection and development. Teachers do not only impart knowledge; they, in fact, reshape their professional identities, which affects how they see themselves and connect with students. Thus, intercultural teaching involves both teachers' personal identities and their classroom practices.

The study also shows that this process is not uncomplicated. EFL teachers often feel uncertain when addressing cultural issues in the classroom. These feelings should be recognized rather than overlooked. Without the proper support, teachers may avoid intercultural topics, but with encouragement and collaboration, they would feel more confident and motivated to move forward.

Based on the findings, some recommendations emerge. First, teacher education programs should incorporate intercultural training directly, combining reflection with practical cultural frameworks. This would help teachers connect personal experiences with methodical approaches. Second, professional development should include the emotional aspect of intercultural teaching by involving sessions for reflection and peer discussion. Third, schools should take an proactive role in supporting intercultural education. A supportive environment can help teachers build confidence and make intercultural teaching a part of their work.

To conclude, becoming an intercultural educator comes with changes in identity, emotional awareness, and professional growth. Teachers need regular support from schools and opportunities to learn and reflect continually. By focusing on these needs and including intercultural perspectives in teacher development, schools can better prepare teachers to help students communicate effectively in today's diverse world.

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