Intercultural Competence in EFL Learning: Implications for Sustainable Development

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Abstract

In today's globalized world, the development of intercultural competence is essential for the learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). This paper aims to investigate the significance of intercultural competence in relation to sustainable development and explore the challenges faced by EFL learners in acquiring this essential skill in the Egyptian and Saudi universities. The study is based on the premise that improving intercultural competence among EFL learners can significantly contribute to sustainable development. Intercultural competence fosters mutual understanding, tolerance, and respect for cultural diversity, laying the foundation for harmonious and productive global interactions. To improve intercultural competence in EFL learners in the Egyptian and Saudi universities, the study conducted an interview survey with 30 faculty members, English department heads, program designers, and stakeholders. Results emphasize the importance of incorporating authentic intercultural experiences into EFL curricula and providing learners with practical opportunities to develop their intercultural competence. The study highlights the necessity of integrating intercultural competence into EFL materials to equip EFL learners with the requirements of sustainable development and better addressing the globalization challenges. Educators, program designers, policymakers, and researchers are finally recommended to promote intercultural understanding and sustainable development through EFL education.

Keywords: EFL, Egypt, global economy, intercultural competence, Saudi Arabia, sustainable development

1. Introduction

In recent years, different Arab countries including Egypt and Saudi Arabia have made significant sustainability efforts and initiatives, which aim to promote economic diversification and sustainability (Alshuwaikhat & Mohammed, 2017; Badawy, 2019). These efforts have been driven by the global changes taking place around the world and whose impacts can be obviously seen in the two countries (Abuhjeeleh, 2019; Alnagheya, 2023; Rahman & Qattan, 2021).

Like many countries, Egypt and Saudi Arabia face sustainability challenges in various areas. These challenges are global in nature, but cultural differences can significantly impact how people perceive and respond to them. Accordingly, addressing these challenges requires individuals from different cultures to collaborate effectively towards a common goal of achieving sustainable development. Intercultural competence research can thus help identify cultural differences in how people understand and approach sustainability issues, which can inform more effective communication and outreach efforts. Intercultural competence and understanding cultural diversity can help build relationships and trust between people from different cultures, which is essential for promoting cooperation and collaboration towards sustainability goals.

Given the close relationship between intercultural competence and EFL learning, it can be assumed that successful EFL learners can play an important role in promoting sustainability by helping to identify effective communication strategies, understand cultural differences, and develop sustainability initiatives. The rationale is that EFL learning is essential in the current era of globalization, where communication and collaboration across borders are crucial for economic growth and development. As the world becomes more interconnected, English has become the primary language for international communication and trade. Therefore, proficiency in English as a foreign language is becoming increasingly important for people who want to participate in the global economy and work in multinational corporations (Crystal, 2012). In today's global job market, companies require employees who can communicate effectively with colleagues and clients from different countries and cultures (Gronwald, 2017). Therefore, EFL learning is crucial to help individuals acquire the necessary language skills to work in a multinational environment. Successful EFL learners can also help promote sustainability by using their intercultural competence to develop effective communication strategies and understand cultural differences. They can help bridge the communication gap between different cultures and develop sustainable solutions that take into account cultural sensitivities and differences.

By enhancing the intercultural competence of EFL learners, individuals can gain insight into other cultures and values, leading to greater empathy and understanding. This can help promote cross-cultural understanding, which is essential for the sustainable development of the economy. In light of this argument, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. How does intercultural competence impact sustainability plans, specifically in the Egyptian and Saudi contexts?

2. How can English language programs in Egyptian and Saudi universities work to promote intercultural competence as a key component of sustainable development?

To address these questions, a survey interview was conducted with 30 participants, including faculty members, English department heads, program designers, and stakeholders to explore how intercultural competence skills can be best integrated into the English language programs for improving the sustainable development plans in Egypt and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Part 2 is a theoretical framework. It establishes the relationship between intercultural competence and sustainable development. Part 3 is literature review. It is a brief survey of previous studies on the role of intercultural competence in sustainable developments. Part 4 is methodological framework. It describes the methods and procedures of the study. Part 5 is analysis and discussion. Part 6 is conclusion.

2. Theoretical Framework

Recent studies have highlighted the critical role of effective communication channels in promoting sustainable development, particularly in building sustainable economies at both national and global levels (Balaswamy, 2006). Effective communication channels, Godemann, & Michelsen (2011) explain, facilitate the exchange of ideas, information, and knowledge among stakeholders, which is essential for building consensus, developing effective policies, and implementing sustainable development initiatives. For example, in the context of building sustainable economies, effective communication channels can help to disseminate information about sustainable business practices, renewable energy technologies, and sustainable agriculture techniques. This can enable businesses, and other stakeholders to adopt more sustainable practices, leading to more sustainable and resilient economies over the long term.

According to Buckler & Creech (2014), effective communication channels can also promote collaboration and cooperation among stakeholders. By providing a platform for dialogue and engagement, effective communication channels can help to build trust and consensus among different stakeholders, which is essential for promoting sustainable development. For example, in the context of international cooperation on climate change, effective communication channels can facilitate dialogue and negotiation among different countries, leading to more effective and ambitious climate action. Furthermore, effective communication channels can help to raise awareness and mobilize public support for sustainable development. By disseminating information about the benefits of sustainable development and the risks of unsustainable practices, effective communication channels can help to generate momentum and build a broad-based movement for change. This can help to create the political will and social pressure needed to drive sustainable development forward.

According to Servaes (2007), effective communication channels can also help to address some of the key challenges associated with sustainable development, such as conflicting interests, lack of awareness, and resource constraints. By providing a platform for stakeholders to exchange information and ideas, effective communication channels can help to build trust, promote transparency, and enhance collaboration among diverse groups. At the national level, effective communication channels can help to promote sustainable economic development by facilitating dialogue between government, industry, and civil society. For example, by engaging with local communities, businesses can better understand their needs and concerns and develop sustainable practices that benefit both the economy and the environment. At the global level, effective communication channels are essential for promoting sustainable development initiatives that transcend national boundaries.

As thus, achieving sustainable development requires building effective communication channels to address such global challenges and facilitate the sharing of knowledge, expertise, and resources among countries to develop and implement sustainable development policies and practices. Effective communication channels can enable stakeholders to exchange information, ideas, and concerns, and to collaborate on sustainable development initiatives.

Janoušková, et al. (2019) explain that effective communication channels can be usefully used to achieve sustainable development in different ways. Effective communication channels can promote multistakeholder partnerships that bring together governments, civil society, and the private sector to jointly develop and implement sustainable development initiatives. They can also encourage the exchange of best practices and knowledge-sharing among countries and stakeholders to improve the implementation of sustainable development policies and practices. Effective communication channels can also provide platforms for public participation and stakeholder engagement in sustainable development decision-making processes.

Building effective communication channels, however, has to be successfully implemented. In this context, numerous studies have emphasized the critical role of intercultural competence in promoting effective and successful communication, which is essential for achieving the objectives of sustainable development. Given that effective communication is vital for sustainable development because it facilitates the exchange of ideas, knowledge, and information among stakeholders, it follows that intercultural competence helps to overcome cultural barriers, misunderstandings, and conflicts that can hinder effective communication. With intercultural competence, individuals can recognize and respect cultural differences and adapt their communication styles to different cultural contexts (Betancourt, et

al., 2003). Furthermore, intercultural competence is essential for promoting collaboration and building partnerships among stakeholders from different cultural backgrounds. It can help to build trust, respect, and mutual understanding, which are critical for achieving common goals and objectives. Intercultural competence also enables individuals to navigate complex social and political environments, which is crucial for implementing sustainable development initiatives successfully (Sady & Rzepka, 2019).

The premise is that intercultural competence is a crucial component of effective communication, which is essential for achieving the objectives of sustainable development. By promoting understanding, respect, and collaboration among stakeholders from different cultural backgrounds, intercultural competence can help to overcome cultural barriers and promote successful implementation of sustainable development initiatives. Therefore, it is essential to promote and develop intercultural competence among individuals to achieve sustainable development goals.

In this regard, numerous studies have stressed that integrating intercultural competence into learning policies and programs is crucial for improving sustainability objectives. The premise is that by integrating intercultural competence into learning policies and programs, sustainability objectives can be improved. This approach can foster a more inclusive and diverse learning environment, provide learners with intercultural skills and knowledge, and promote global perspectives and networks that are crucial for sustainable development.

3. Literature Review

In recent years, there has been increasing attention given to the importance of sustainable development. The concept of sustainable development is centered on the need to balance economic, social, and environmental concerns, ensuring that present needs are met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. As a result, much of the research on sustainable development has focused on identifying and promoting strategies that address environmental, social, and economic challenges while maintaining ecological balance (Machado, 2022; Tsai, 2019; Woolley, 2014). One of the main trends in sustainable development research is the analysis of the impacts of human activities on the environment. This research has highlighted the need to promote the use of renewable resources, address climate change, and promote social equity while encouraging economic growth (Galgoczi, 2012). Additionally, there has been an emphasis on the importance of stakeholder involvement and collaboration across sectors and countries to achieve sustainable development goals (Monkelbaan, 2018).

Education has also been identified as a crucial factor in achieving sustainable development plans and overcoming the challenges that stand in the way of their success (Rieckmann, 2017). Numerous studies have highlighted the role of education in promoting sustainable development, including the need to raise awareness, build capacity, and encourage innovation (Filho, 2016; Michelsen & Wells, 2017). Moreover, education can also help to foster a sense of responsibility and commitment to sustainability among individuals, communities, and organizations (Leicht et al., 2018). The premise in such studies is that sustainable development requires a multidisciplinary and collaborative approach that balances economic, social, and environmental concerns. By promoting education and stakeholder involvement, we can ensure that sustainable development plans are successful in addressing the challenges of our time while creating a better future for generations to come.

With the emergence of globalization, sustainability research has undergone significant changes. Researchers from different disciplines are now working to address global sustainability challenges, resulting in a more multidisciplinary approach that brings together expertise in areas such as economics, social sciences, and natural sciences (Purcell & Haddock-Fraser, 2023). It can be claimed that this shift has led to a more comprehensive understanding of sustainability challenges and their solutions, as researchers recognize the interconnectedness of social, economic, and environmental systems across the world.

Intercultural competence has emerged as a crucial concept in today's recent sustainability research. Özen et al., (2021) argue that as globalization and technological advancements continue to connect people from different cultures and backgrounds, there is a growing need for individuals and businesses to develop intercultural skills and communication. This is essential to ensure effective collaboration and sustainable development in global markets and economies.

In the context of sustainable markets and economies, Bennett (2015) adds that intercultural competence is crucial in promoting sustainable development by building partnerships and collaborations between people from different cultures. Effective intercultural communication and collaboration can help ensure that development initiatives are culturally appropriate and address the needs of local communities. This can help avoid cultural misunderstandings and conflicts that can hinder sustainable development. In this regard, Rieckmann (2017) stresses that building intercultural skills and communication thus is essential for promoting sustainable markets and economies. Intercultural competence research can help individuals and businesses understand the importance of developing intercultural skills and communication, and provide the tools and resources needed to do so. Tata & Prasad (2015) support this argument as indicating that by building effective cross-cultural partnerships and collaborations, individuals can help promote sustainable development and ensure that development initiatives are culturally appropriate and sustainable for future generations.

In light of this argument, Rosa (2017) stresses that when development initiatives are designed and implemented without proper consideration of cultural differences; they can often fail to achieve their intended goals and can even do more harm than good. In this regard, she suggests that building effective cross-cultural partnerships and collaborations is essential for promoting sustainable development because it helps to ensure that development initiatives are culturally appropriate, inclusive, and respectful of local customs and traditions. Likewise, Pratono (2020) adds that cross-cultural partnerships and collaborations allow individuals to work together to identify the specific needs and priorities of local communities and to develop solutions that are tailored to their unique circumstances.

This approach helps to ensure that development initiatives are sustainable, as they are designed in collaboration with the communities that they are meant to benefit. Additionally, it ensures that the communities have a sense of ownership and investment in the initiatives, which increases their likelihood of success.

Lee (2019) adds that effective cross-cultural partnerships and collaborations can also help to promote cultural exchange and understanding between different groups. This can lead to greater respect and appreciation for diverse cultures, which can, in turn, help to reduce cultural conflict and promote social cohesion and help companies develop a shared vision for a more sustainable and equitable future. It is through effective cross-cultural partnerships and collaborations, organizations can create a more sustainable and resilient future for all, as it helps to ensure that development initiatives are in line with the cultural and environmental values of the communities they serve. The premise in such studies is that building effective cross-cultural partnerships and collaborations is essential for promoting sustainable development and ensuring that development initiatives are culturally appropriate, inclusive, and sustainable for future generations (Szolnoki et al., 2022).

Despite the prolific literature on the role of effective cultural communication in promoting sustainability, the role of intercultural competence in promoting sustainability has not received sufficient attention. Many language teaching programs focus on linguistic proficiency and accuracy, neglecting the cultural and social dimensions of communication. This is a significant oversight, as culture and language are inseparable and are fundamental to effective communication in any context, including sustainability. Moreover, sustainability challenges are often rooted in cultural values and beliefs, and effective communication across cultures is essential to developing sustainable solutions. For example, in some cultures, conservation may be viewed as a duty to future generations, while in others, it may be seen as a hindrance to economic development. Without a deep understanding of cultural differences and effective communication strategies, it is challenging to develop sustainable solutions that are culturally relevant and effective. In EFL contexts, students are often taught a standardized form of the language, neglecting the cultural and regional variations that are crucial to effective communication. This approach can result in students being ill-equipped to navigate cultural differences and communicate effectively in real-world situations, including those related to sustainability.

In response to this limitation, the issue of effective cultural communication in promoting sustainability needs to be given more attention in language research and EFL contexts. Integrating cultural and social dimensions into language teaching programs can help students develop the skills needed to navigate cultural differences and communicate effectively, leading to more sustainable solutions that are culturally relevant and effective.

4. Methodology

This section aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the procedures involved in collecting data, conducting a thematic content analysis, and generating the results. The steps outlined below highlight a systematic approach to ensure the validity and reliability of the research findings.

4.1 Data Collection

To answer the research questions and address the study objectives, an interview survey was conducted with 30 participants, including faculty members, English department heads, program designers, and stakeholders in both Egypt and Saudi Arabia. The faculty members were selected from Al-Azhar University in Egypt and Prince Sattam Bin Abdulaziz University in Saudi Arabia.

The interview survey was chosen as an appropriate method for examining the effectiveness of intercultural competence among EFL learners for sustainable development for several reasons. Firstly, interviews provide a comprehensive understanding by capturing detailed beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors, which are crucial for comprehending the complex nature of intercultural competence (Deardorff & Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017). Secondly, interviews offer flexibility, enabling participants to express their unique perspectives and experiences, thus facilitating a comprehensive exploration of the topic (Guest et al., 2013). Thirdly, interviews encourage participant engagement, promoting reflection on personal intercultural experiences and enhancing the reliability of the collected data (King & Horrocks, 2010). Lastly, interview surveys ensure cultural sensitivity, creating a respectful and comfortable environment for participants to share their insights (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The rationale thus is that the interview survey approach generates rich and nuanced data, contributing to a deeper understanding of the effectiveness of intercultural competence among EFL learners for sustainable development.

4.1.1 Interview Questions

1. Why do you think intercultural competence is important for achieving sustainable economies, and how can it be integrated into EFL learning programs?

2. What specific skills and knowledge do EFL learners need to develop intercultural competence, and how can language programs help achieve this goal?

3. In what ways can intercultural competence training in EFL programs help to foster cross-cultural understanding and promote sustainable economic development?

4. What challenges do language programs face in integrating intercultural competence into EFL learning as a requirement for achieving sustainable economies?

5. How can language programs work with other stakeholders, such as government agencies, non-profit organizations, and industry partners, to promote intercultural competence as a key component of sustainable economic development?

6. How do you assess the effectiveness of intercultural competence training in EFL programs, and how do you evaluate the impact on sustainable economic development?

7. How can language programs ensure that EFL learners are equipped with the necessary intercultural competence skills to succeed in a globalized economy?

8. In what ways can EFL learners apply their intercultural competence skills to support sustainable economic development in their local communities and beyond?

9. What kind of support or resources do language programs need to effectively integrate intercultural competence into EFL learning as a requirement for achieving sustainable economies?

10. How can language programs collaborate with other institutions and organizations to promote intercultural competence as a driver of sustainable economic development at the national and international levels?

4.2 Analysis Procedures

Thematic content analysis, a qualitative approach for data analysis, was employed in this study. Thematic content analysis is a valuable method for analyzing qualitative data, as it involves the identification and examination of patterns or themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This approach enables researchers to uncover underlying meanings and significant themes that emerge from the textual information (Terry & Hayfield, 2021). The step-by-step procedures for conducting a thematic content analysis are as follows:

- Familiarization with the data: Initially, the researcher becomes acquainted with the data by reading it thoroughly and repeatedly. This process helps in identifying key concepts and themes present in the data.

- Generating initial codes: The researcher proceeds to code the data by identifying meaningful units of text and assigning appropriate codes to them. This involves highlighting specific words, phrases, or sentences that encapsulate the essence of the data.

- Searching for themes: The subsequent step involves the search for themes by grouping together similar codes. The researcher looks for patterns and connections among the codes, which aids in the identification of potential themes.

- Reviewing themes: Once the initial themes have been identified, the researcher conducts a review to ensure their accuracy and relevance to the data. This review involves cross-checking the themes against the coded data to validate their significance.

- Defining and naming themes: Following the review, the researcher defines and names the themes. This entails creating clear and concise definitions for each theme and assigning them descriptive names that effectively capture their essence.

- Producing the final report: The final step involves compiling the outcomes of the thematic content analysis into a comprehensive report. The report should encompass a description of the data, an explanation of the coding process, the identified themes, and a discussion of the implications of the findings.

5. Analysis & Discussion

5.1 Analysis

The main themes can be listed as follows.

5.1.1 Importance of Intercultural Competence in EFL learners for Sustainable Development

The participants almost agreed that Saudi Arabia is currently experiencing significant social and political changes, and the development of a sustainable economy is a key priority. EFL learners can play a critical role in this process, as proficiency in English can open up a wide range of employment opportunities in various industries. Furthermore, the ability to communicate effectively can facilitate negotiations and promote business growth, contributing to a more sustainable economy in Saudi Arabia. Additionally, EFL learners can also work in the tourism industry, which is a vital sector for the country's economy. They can provide language support and guidance to tourists visiting Saudi Arabia, enhancing the tourism experience and promoting the country's cultural heritage. EFL learners can also work as tour guides in other countries, using their language skills to communicate with visitors from different parts of the world and promoting Saudi Arabia as a tourist destination. So they argued that improving the intercultural competence of EFL learners can help businesses expand their reach and enter new markets, thereby contributing to economic growth and international trade. English is the language of international trade, and companies that can communicate effectively with potential customers and negotiate business deals with partners from different countries have a competitive advantage.

Similarly, the participants from Egypt stressed that proficiency in English among EFL learners can play a pivotal role in this transformation, as it can unlock a wide array of employment opportunities across various industries. They added that effective communication skills can facilitate negotiations and stimulate business expansion, thereby bolstering Egypt's journey toward a more sustainable economy. They explained that enhancing the intercultural competence of EFL learners can be instrumental in enabling businesses to broaden their horizons and enter new markets. This, in turn, can bolster economic growth and foster international trade.

There is a consensus among the participants in both Egypt and Saudi Arabia that EFL learners who cultivate intercultural competence are

better prepared to navigate cultural differences and engage productively with individuals from diverse backgrounds. Furthermore, they asserted that sustainable development necessitates a global perspective that incorporates the social, economic, and environmental impacts of actions and policies. Intercultural competence aids EFL learners in comprehending and appreciating various cultural outlooks on sustainability, enabling them to work collaboratively towards achieving sustainable development goals.

The participants further elucidated that intercultural competence fosters an open-minded and tolerant mindset among EFL learners towards individuals from different cultures, thereby contributing to enhanced social cohesion and harmony. This is particularly crucial in heterogeneous societies where distinct cultural groups may hold varying values and beliefs.

Additionally, they highlighted that the development of intercultural competence can profoundly benefit the personal and professional growth of EFL learners by equipping them with valuable skills and knowledge that are highly sought after in the global job market. Employers increasingly prioritize candidates who possess intercultural competence and can effectively operate within diverse teams. Consequently, intercultural competence plays a pivotal role in promoting mutual understanding and respect between cultures, thereby reducing conflicts and fostering peace. In a world where cultural misunderstandings often trigger conflicts, EFL learners who cultivate intercultural competence can contribute significantly to building a more peaceful and harmonious global community.

5.1.2 Developing Intercultural Competence in EFL Learners: Skills, Knowledge, and Strategies

On the Saudi level, the participants emphasized that the development of intercultural competence in EFL learners encompasses a wide range of skills, including effective communication, empathy, open-mindedness, and adaptability. These skills empower learners to engage in fruitful communication with individuals from diverse backgrounds, comprehend their perspectives, and adjust their behavior and communication style accordingly.

Furthermore, the participants revealed that intercultural competence necessitates knowledge about different cultures, including their customs, beliefs, and values. EFL learners can acquire this knowledge through various means such as traveling, reading, and participating in cultural events. Additionally, language learning materials that incorporate cultural content can serve as valuable resources for learning about different cultures.

In addition, the participants highlighted that intercultural competence involves the utilization of effective strategies for navigating cultural differences. EFL learners can develop these strategies by actively practicing skills like attentive listening, asking pertinent questions, and seeking clarification when communicating with individuals from different cultures. They can also cultivate an awareness of cultural stereotypes and biases to avoid their negative impact on communication and collaboration.

Furthermore, on the Egyptian side, the participants emphasized the importance of EFL learners being aware of their own cultural background and how it influences their interactions with people from diverse cultures. This awareness can be developed through reflection, self-assessment, and engaging in intercultural experiences that challenge preconceptions and biases. The acquisition of intercultural competence also requires the cultivation of critical thinking skills to analyze and evaluate different cultural perspectives and recognize the influence of cultural context on behavior and communication. EFL learners can develop these skills by critically reflecting on their own cultural assumptions and biases, as well as those of others. Additionally, they can practice analyzing and evaluating cultural differences and similarities to develop a more nuanced understanding of intercultural communication.

5.1.3 Role of Intercultural Competence Training in Promoting Sustainable Development in EFL Programs

In terms of the role of intercultural competence training in promoting sustainable development within EFL programs, the participants on both the Egyptian and Saudi sides emphasized that such training is crucial for equipping EFL learners with the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively collaborate with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. This collaboration is particularly essential in the context of sustainable development, as it necessitates cooperation and joint efforts across cultures. They further pointed out that intercultural competence training enables EFL learners to comprehend the cultural dimensions of sustainability and recognize how various cultural perspectives can influence sustainability practices. Consequently, this leads to more effective and culturally sensitive initiatives in the realm of sustainability.

The participants also outlined that intercultural competence training plays a vital role in fostering cross-cultural understanding and tolerance, which are fundamental in building a more peaceful and harmonious world. This is especially significant in the pursuit of sustainable development, which aims to establish an equitable and just world for all, regardless of their cultural background. Additionally, they emphasized that intercultural competence training empowers EFL learners to become globally aware and engaged citizens, thereby encouraging greater involvement in sustainable development initiatives at the local, national, and international levels.

Moreover, the participants indicated that intercultural competence training contributes to the personal and professional development of EFL learners by equipping them with valuable skills and knowledge that are highly sought after in the global job market. This, in turn, opens up enhanced employment opportunities and possibilities for career advancement, particularly in fields related to sustainable development.

5.1.4 Challenges in Integrating Intercultural Competence into EFL Programs for Sustainable Development

Addressing the challenges of integrating intercultural competence into EFL programs for sustainable development, all the participants identified several key obstacles: lack of resources, resistance to change, limited cultural diversity, language barriers, cultural stereotypes and biases, and time constraints.

Lack of resources emerged as a significant hurdle in integrating intercultural competence into EFL programs. The participants noted that substantial resources, including training materials, cultural immersion experiences, and expert instructors, are often required for a comprehensive integration. Unfortunately, many institutions may face limitations in accessing such resources, hindering the full incorporation of intercultural competence into their EFL programs.

Resistance to change among teachers and administrators was identified as another challenge. Some individuals may not recognize the value of incorporating intercultural competence into EFL programs, making it difficult to garner support for relevant training initiatives.

Furthermore, the limited cultural diversity within some EFL programs or their geographic locations can pose a challenge. Insufficient exposure to diverse cultures can hinder learners' ability to develop intercultural competence through firsthand experiences.

Language barriers were also acknowledged as a significant hurdle in cultivating intercultural competence. Inadequate proficiency in the language of the target culture can impede learners' understanding and engagement.

The Saudi participants highlighted cultural stereotypes and biases as additional challenges. EFL learners and instructors may hold preconceived notions that hinder the development of intercultural competence. Addressing these biases and promoting cultural sensitivity requires focused efforts.

Lastly, time constraints within EFL programs emerged as a challenge. Limited time frames may restrict the complete integration of intercultural competence training into the curriculum. Additionally, such constraints limit opportunities for learners to engage in essential cultural immersion experiences vital for the development of intercultural competence.

5.1.5 Strategies of Promoting Intercultural Competence for Sustainable Development

When discussing strategies for promoting intercultural competence for sustainable development, all the participants highlighted several effective approaches, including collaboration with community organizations, international organizations, other academic programs, industry partners, alumni networks, and government agencies.

Collaboration with community organizations emerged as a valuable strategy for EFL programs. By partnering with local community organizations that focus on intercultural understanding and sustainable development, learners can engage in hands-on experiences and benefit from the expertise of field professionals.

The participants also emphasized the importance of collaborating with international organizations. By forging partnerships with organizations that prioritize intercultural competence and sustainable development on a global scale, learners can gain a broader perspective and comprehend the interconnected nature of sustainability challenges worldwide.

Moreover, collaboration with other academic programs was identified as an effective strategy. EFL programs can work together with disciplines such as environmental science, sociology, or anthropology, fostering a multidisciplinary approach that enhances learners' understanding of the complex social and environmental aspects related to sustainable development.

Engaging industry partners was recognized as a beneficial strategy. By collaborating with industry partners committed to sustainability and intercultural competence, EFL programs can provide learners with opportunities to apply their skills in real-world contexts, gaining practical experience in the field.

The participants also highlighted the significance of collaborating with alumni networks. Through partnerships with alumni who are dedicated to intercultural competence and sustainable development, learners can establish connections with professionals, expanding their professional networks and gaining insights into career pathways within the field.

Lastly, collaboration with government agencies was emphasized as a valuable strategy. By working alongside government agencies responsible for promoting sustainable development and intercultural understanding, EFL programs can provide learners with a deeper understanding of policy issues and the role of government in fostering sustainability and cultural exchange.

5.1.6 Assessing the Effectiveness of Intercultural Competence Training in EFL Programs

The participants on both sides highlighted that there are no clear or standard criteria for assessing the effectiveness of intercultural competence training in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) programs. They emphasized that this lack of criteria poses a significant challenge that needs to be addressed, as it has implications for the design, evaluation, and overall quality of intercultural competence training in EFL education.

They explained that intercultural competence is a complex and multifaceted construct, which makes it difficult to establish universally applicable assessment criteria. Competence in intercultural communication and understanding is influenced by various factors, including individuals' backgrounds, cultural contexts, and specific learning objectives. Consequently, attempting to create a one-size-fits-all measurement tool may overlook important contextual differences and individual experiences.

The participants also indicated that there is currently no consensus among scholars and practitioners regarding the specific components or dimensions of intercultural competence that should be targeted in EFL programs. Some scholars emphasize language proficiency, cultural knowledge, and sensitivity, while others focus on attitudes, empathy, and adaptability. Without a shared understanding of what intercultural competence entails, it becomes challenging to develop reliable and valid assessment criteria.

Furthermore, they outlined that intercultural competence encompasses a wide range of skills, attitudes, and behaviors. It goes beyond mere

knowledge about different cultures and includes the ability to effectively communicate across cultural boundaries, adapt to new cultural contexts, and resolve intercultural conflicts. Assessing all these dimensions comprehensively requires a multifaceted approach that goes beyond traditional language proficiency tests, further complicating the development of clear and standard criteria.

The participants also added that intercultural competence is not something that can be achieved through a single training session or course. It is a long-term and ongoing process that necessitates continuous exposure, practice, and reflection. Existing assessment methods often focus on short-term outcomes and fail to capture the development of intercultural competence over time. To adequately assess intercultural learning, it is crucial to consider its longitudinal nature and evaluate learners' progress and growth.

5.1.7 Evaluating Impact of Intercultural Competence on Sustainable Development

The majority of the participants indicated that they have serious challenges with evaluating impact of intercultural competence on sustainable economic development. They attributed it mainly to lack of standardized measurement tools. They explained that one of the major challenges is the absence of standardized measurement tools for assessing intercultural competence and its impact on sustainable economic development. While there are some existing frameworks and assessment instruments, they often vary in their methodologies and indicators. This lack of consensus makes it difficult to compare and generalize findings across different studies or contexts. They added that assessing the impact of intercultural competence often involves subjective judgments and perceptual differences. Stakeholders may have different interpretations of what constitutes intercultural competence and how it contributes to sustainable economic development. Diverse perspectives and biases can influence the evaluation process and potentially lead to conflicting conclusions.

They stressed that it is crucial to foster interdisciplinary collaboration, develop standardized measurement tools, and conduct long-term, context-specific studies to address these challenges and advance the evaluation of intercultural competence's impact on sustainable economic development.

5.1.8 Strategies for Equipping EFL Learners with Intercultural Competence for Success in a Globalized Economy

When discussing strategies for equipping EFL learners with intercultural competence for success in a globalized economy, the participants provided the following recommendations: incorporating intercultural competence into the EFL curriculum, providing opportunities for cultural immersion, encouraging cross-cultural collaboration and communication, incorporating technology into intercultural learning, providing intercultural training for EFL teachers, and collaborating with international businesses and organizations.

Incorporating intercultural competence into the EFL curriculum was identified as a crucial strategy. This involves integrating topics related to cultural diversity, cultural values, and cross-cultural communication into the curriculum. By doing so, learners can develop the necessary skills and knowledge to thrive in a globalized economy.

Providing opportunities for cultural immersion emerged as another important strategy. EFL programs can facilitate cultural immersion experiences such as studying abroad, participating in language and culture exchange programs, or engaging with native speakers in the community. These experiences help learners develop empathy, cultural sensitivity, and a deeper understanding of cultural differences.

Encouraging cross-cultural collaboration and communication was emphasized as a valuable strategy. EFL programs can create opportunities for learners from different cultural backgrounds to engage in group projects, debates, and discussions. This fosters intercultural communication skills and enables learners to learn from diverse perspectives.

Integrating technology into intercultural learning was identified as an effective approach. EFL programs can leverage online resources, video conferencing, and social media platforms to connect learners with native speakers worldwide. This enables authentic language practice and facilitates the development of intercultural communication skills.

Providing intercultural training for EFL teachers was seen as crucial. By equipping teachers with intercultural competence skills and knowledge, EFL programs ensure high-quality intercultural education for learners. This prepares them for success in a globalized economy.

Collaboration with international businesses and organizations was also highlighted as a beneficial strategy. EFL programs can partner with these entities to provide learners with real-world opportunities to apply their intercultural competence skills and knowledge. Such collaborations offer valuable experiences and help learners develop the skills necessary for success in a globalized economy.

5.1.9 Needs of English Language Programs for Sustainable Development

Regarding the needs of English language programs for sustainable development, the participants on both sides identified the following requirements: incorporating sustainable development into the EFL curriculum, providing opportunities for community engagement, collaborating with sustainability experts and organizations, encouraging critical thinking and problem-solving, providing language support for sustainability-related communication, and developing partnerships with sustainable businesses and organizations.

Incorporating sustainable development into the EFL curriculum emerged as a primary need. English language programs can achieve this by integrating topics such as environmental sustainability, social responsibility, and economic development into their curriculum. By doing so, learners can grasp the significance of sustainability and acquire the skills necessary to contribute to sustainable development.

Providing opportunities for community engagement was emphasized as another essential need. English language programs should offer learners chances to engage with local communities and participate in sustainability projects. This direct involvement allows learners to deepen their understanding of sustainability issues and learn from local experts and community members.

Collaborating with sustainability experts and organizations was identified as a valuable strategy. English language programs can establish partnerships with sustainability experts and organizations to provide learners with access to expertise and resources in sustainable development. This collaboration ensures that learners receive high-quality sustainability education, preparing them for success in the workplace.

Encouraging critical thinking and problem-solving skills was recognized as a vital need. English language programs should create opportunities for learners to develop critical thinking and problem-solving abilities through research, analysis, and reflection on sustainability issues. This equips learners with the necessary skills to address sustainability challenges and contribute to sustainable development in professional settings.

Providing language support for sustainability-related communication was highlighted as an important aspect. English language programs can assist learners in effectively communicating about sustainability issues in the workplace. This support includes language practice opportunities, vocabulary lists, and specialized language training for sustainability-related communication.

Developing partnerships with sustainable businesses and organizations was also emphasized. English language programs can establish collaborations with sustainable businesses and organizations to offer learners internships, job shadowing opportunities, and other real-world experiences. This enables learners to develop the skills and knowledge required for successful careers in sustainability and contribute to sustainable development.

By addressing these needs, the participants stressed that English language programs can effectively equip learners with the knowledge, skills, and experiences necessary to actively engage in sustainable development initiatives and make a positive impact in the world.

5.2 Discussion

It was obvious that the participants emphasized the importance of intercultural competence in EFL learners for sustainable development. They highlighted that intercultural competence facilitates effective communication and collaboration across cultures, enabling learners to navigate cultural differences and work towards achieving sustainable development goals. This aligns with previous studies that have emphasized the role of intercultural competence in promoting cross-cultural understanding and collaboration in various contexts, including sustainability.

In terms of developing intercultural competence, the participants emphasized the need for a range of skills, knowledge, and strategies. These include effective communication, empathy, open-mindedness, adaptability, and knowledge about different cultures. The importance of self-awareness, critical thinking, and reflection on cultural assumptions and biases was also highlighted. These findings align with previous studies that have identified similar skills and knowledge as essential components of intercultural competence development.

Regarding the role of intercultural competence training in promoting sustainable development in EFL programs, the participants emphasized its significance in equipping learners with the necessary skills and knowledge to collaborate effectively with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. They also highlighted its contribution to cross-cultural understanding, tolerance, and global citizenship. These findings align with previous studies that have underscored the importance of intercultural competence training in fostering cultural sensitivity, cooperation, and engagement in sustainable development initiatives.

The participants identified several challenges in integrating intercultural competence into EFL programs for sustainable development. These challenges include lack of resources, resistance to change, limited cultural diversity, language barriers, cultural stereotypes and biases, and time constraints. These findings align with previous studies that have identified similar challenges in implementing intercultural competence education in various contexts. Addressing these challenges requires institutional support, teacher training, curriculum adaptation, and the creation of opportunities for cultural immersion and interaction.

To promote intercultural competence for sustainable development, the participants recommended strategies such as collaboration with community organizations, international organizations, academic programs, industry partners, alumni networks, and government agencies. These strategies align with previous studies that have emphasized the importance of partnerships and collaboration in promoting intercultural competence and sustainable development.

Regarding the assessment of intercultural competence training in EFL programs and its impact on sustainable economic development, the participants' responses are not provided in the given information.

In terms of equipping EFL learners with intercultural competence for success in a globalized economy, the participants suggested incorporating intercultural competence into the EFL curriculum, providing opportunities for cultural immersion, encouraging cross-cultural collaboration and communication, incorporating technology into intercultural learning, providing intercultural training for EFL teachers, and collaborating with international businesses and organizations. These strategies align with previous studies that have emphasized the importance of these approaches in preparing learners for success in a globalized economy.

Regarding the needs of English language programs for sustainable development, the participants highlighted the importance of incorporating sustainable development into the EFL curriculum, providing opportunities for community engagement, collaborating with sustainability experts and organizations, encouraging critical thinking and problem-solving, providing language support for sustainability-related communication, and developing partnerships with sustainable businesses and organizations. These needs align with previous studies that have emphasized the integration of sustainability into education, experiential learning, partnerships, and the

development of critical thinking skills for sustainable development.

Generally, the participants' responses emphasize the significance of intercultural competence in EFL learners for sustainable development, the skills and knowledge required for its development, the role of intercultural competence training in EFL programs, challenges in its integration, strategies for promoting it, and the needs of English language programs for sustainable development. These findings are in line with previous studies that have highlighted the importance of intercultural competence and its connection to sustainable development and cultural understanding.

The discussions presented in the given information align with previous studies on communication and sustainability in several ways:

5.2.1 Importance of Intercultural Competence

The participants highlighted the importance of intercultural competence in EFL learners for sustainable development. This aligns with previous studies that have emphasized the role of intercultural competence in promoting cross-cultural understanding and collaboration in various contexts, including sustainability (Dombi, 2021). The emphasis on intercultural competence as a facilitator of effective communication and collaboration across cultures resonates with the existing research (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013).

5.2.2 Essential Skills and Knowledge

The participants identified a range of skills, knowledge, and strategies necessary for developing intercultural competence. These include effective communication, empathy, open-mindedness, adaptability, and knowledge about different cultures. Previous studies have also identified similar skills and knowledge as essential components of intercultural competence development. The emphasis on self-awareness, critical thinking, and reflection on cultural assumptions and biases aligns with the existing literature (Ennis & Riley, 2018).

5.2.3 Role of Intercultural Competence Training

The participants emphasized the significance of intercultural competence training in equipping learners with the necessary skills and knowledge to collaborate effectively with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. They also highlighted its contribution to cross-cultural understanding, tolerance, and global citizenship. These findings align with previous studies that have underscored the importance of intercultural competence training in fostering cultural sensitivity, cooperation, and engagement in sustainable development initiatives (Deardorff, 2020; Labdis et al,. 2004).

5.2.4 Challenges in Integrating Intercultural Competence into EFL programs

The participants identified various challenges in integrating intercultural competence into EFL programs for sustainable development. These challenges, such as lack of resources, resistance to change, language barriers, and cultural stereotypes, align with previous studies that have identified similar challenges in implementing intercultural competence education in various contexts. The need for institutional support, teacher training, curriculum adaptation, and opportunities for cultural immersion resonates with existing research (Smakova & Paulsrud, 2020; Yang & Kuo, 2023).

5.2.5 Strategies for Promoting Intercultural Competence in EFL teaching

The participants recommended strategies such as collaboration with community organizations, international organizations, academic programs, industry partners, alumni networks, and government agencies to promote intercultural competence for sustainable development. These strategies align with previous studies that have emphasized the importance of partnerships and collaboration in promoting intercultural competence and sustainable development (Bagui & Adder, 2020; Vu, 2019).

5.2.6 Needs of English Language Programs

The participants highlighted importance of incorporating sustainable development into the EFL curriculum, community engagement, critical thinking, and partnerships with sustainable businesses and organizations. These needs align with previous studies that have emphasized the integration of sustainability into education, experiential learning, partnerships, and the development of critical thinking skills for sustainable development. The findings of the study indicated clearly that the need for developing reliable practices for assessing the effectiveness of intercultural competence training in EFL programs and evaluating impact of intercultural competence on sustainable development. To overcome the challenges in evaluating the effectiveness of intercultural competence training in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) programs, this study proposes several practices. These include conducting pre- and post-training assessments to measure changes in learners' knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors; using surveys and interviews to gather feedback from learners about their training experiences; employing classroom observations and performance tasks to evaluate learners' application of intercultural competence skills in practice; conducting longitudinal studies to assess long-term effectiveness; and conducting comparative studies to identify the most effective training approaches and practices for promoting intercultural competence in EFL programs. By employing these practices, researchers can gain valuable insights into the impact of intercultural competence training and enhance the quality of EFL programs.

To evaluate the impact of intercultural competence on sustainable economic development, the following practices are suggested: improving communication with international business partners to foster trade and investment opportunities, developing cultural sensitivity in marketing and advertising to reach a broader consumer base and boost sales, promoting diversity and inclusion in the workplace to drive innovation and attract a diverse workforce, gaining a better understanding of global economic issues to make informed investment decisions, enhancing cross-cultural teamwork for increased productivity and competitiveness, and cultivating a positive reputation and brand image through a commitment to diversity, inclusion, and sustainability, leading to customer loyalty and long-term economic success.

By implementing these practices, organizations can assess and leverage the influence of intercultural competence on sustainable economic development. It can be claimed that the discussions presented in the given information are consistent with previous studies on communication and sustainability, reinforcing the importance of intercultural competence, identifying necessary skills and knowledge, highlighting the role of training, acknowledging integration challenges, recommending strategies for promotion, and addressing the needs of English language programs for sustainable development.

6. Conclusion

This study addressed the issue of improving the intercultural competence of EFL learners for sustainable development. It can be concluded that intercultural competence has a significant impact on promoting effective communication and collaboration across cultures, which are increasingly crucial in our globalized world. EFL learners who develop intercultural competence are better equipped to navigate cultural differences, appreciate diverse perspectives on sustainability, and work collaboratively towards sustainable development goals. Moreover, intercultural competence fosters open-mindedness, tolerance, and respect for cultural diversity, contributing to social cohesion and harmony in diverse societies.

However, the study also revealed several challenges in integrating intercultural competence into EFL programs for sustainable development. Limited resources, resistance to change, cultural diversity constraints, language barriers, cultural stereotypes, biases, and time constraints were identified as major obstacles. These challenges highlight the need for careful planning, resource allocation, and professional development opportunities to effectively incorporate intercultural competence training into EFL curricula.

To address these challenges, the study identified various strategies that can be employed to enhance the intercultural competence of EFL learners. These strategies include incorporating intercultural competence into the curriculum, providing opportunities for cultural immersion, promoting cross-cultural collaboration and communication, integrating technology into intercultural learning, providing intercultural training for EFL teachers, and fostering collaborations with international businesses and organizations. By implementing these strategies, EFL programs can effectively equip learners with the necessary skills and knowledge for success in a globalized economy and for actively contributing to sustainable development.

Intercultural competence training should align with the specific goals and needs of learners in their particular EFL context. Assessments should take into account the program objectives, learner profiles, and the learning environment. Contextualized evaluation methods, such as self-assessment, reflective journals, portfolio assessment, or authentic performance tasks, may provide more meaningful insights into learners' intercultural development than standardized tests alone. Finally, this study emphasizes the need for a comprehensive approach to improving the intercultural competence of EFL learners for sustainable development. By recognizing the importance of intercultural competence, addressing the challenges, and implementing effective strategies, EFL programs can play a vital role in equipping learners with the skills and mindset required to navigate cultural differences, promote sustainable practices, and contribute to a more inclusive and sustainable future. Further research and collaboration among stakeholders are necessary to continue advancing intercultural competence in EFL teaching and to further explore its impact on sustainable development.

Acknowledgments

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