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Original Research

Study of the Growth of Intercultural Skills Among Iranian Students of the German Language

Elham. Arezoofar[1] , Parastoo. Panjeshahi[2]* , Armin. Fazelzad[2]

[1] PhD Student, Department of German Language Education, Central Tehran Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran
[2] Assistant Professor, Department of German Language Education, Central Tehran Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran

* Corresponding author email address: Par.panjeshahi@iauctb.ac.ir

This research examines the impact of changes in teaching methods on the development of intercultural skills among Iranian students of the German language. Using a paired t-test to compare student scores from the first and second years, the study demonstrated that the applied changes in teaching methods had a positive and significant effect on improving students' intercultural skills. The results indicate that student scores in the second year were significantly higher than in the first year, and this improvement reflects the successful impact of the new teaching methods. The findings emphasize that the implementation of innovative teaching methods and diverse group activities, particularly those related to different cultures, can contribute to strengthening intercultural skills. Additionally, the importance of periodic evaluations and teacher training as key factors in the continuous improvement of educational programs is highlighted. This research suggests that the continuous updating of teaching methods and providing more opportunities for cultural interaction can help enhance intercultural skills and improve the quality of language education.

Keywords: intercultural skills, teaching methods, students, German language, cultural interaction.

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1. Introduction

In today's world, intercultural interactions and globalization have expanded significantly, consequently increasing the need for learning foreign languages and intercultural skills. German, as one of the major global languages, taught as a second or foreign language in many countries, has gained a special place among Iranian language learners. However, understanding and mastering a foreign language alone is not sufficient for establishing effective and constructive communication with individuals from different cultures. Therefore, intercultural skills, which consist of three main components: cultural awareness, cultural interaction, and cultural sensitivity, are of particular importance (Wang & Shen, 2024).

Intercultural skills allow language learners not only to acquire language proficiency but also to gain a deeper understanding of other cultures and enhance their abilities to navigate multicultural situations. These skills include recognizing and respecting cultural differences, the ability to understand and interpret various cultural behaviors, and the capability to communicate effectively and without conflict with people from diverse cultural backgrounds (Ramstrand et al., 2024).

In Iran, although interest in learning German as a foreign language has increased in recent years, it seems that educational programs focus more on grammatical and

lexical aspects of the language and do not pay sufficient attention to teaching intercultural skills. This lack of focus may lead to problems in cultural interactions, stemming from misunderstandings and cultural stereotypes. For example, the use of incorrect and stereotypical portrayals of other cultures in educational content can result in misperceptions and cultural prejudices, which ultimately reduce effective and constructive interactions between individuals from different cultures (Eslami Visari, 2023).

The absence of sufficient training in cultural interactions and the lack of diverse educational programs that address culture and intercultural skills can negatively affect learners' ability to communicate effectively and understand others. This issue not only diminishes language abilities but also contributes to cultural stress and unpreparedness when facing intercultural situations. Therefore, designing educational programs that focus on both language teaching and enhancing intercultural skills appears to be necessary. Since many recent studies have shown that integrating language instruction with cultural education can improve cultural understanding, acceptance, and communication skills, this research aims to examine and analyze the growth of three components of intercultural skills—cultural awareness, cultural interaction, and cultural sensitivity—among Iranian students of the German language. This study, aiming to assess the development of intercultural skills among Iranian German language learners and provide strategies for its improvement, seeks to create a suitable platform for enhancing intercultural skills and increasing positive and constructive interactions at the international level.

2. Theoretical Foundations

Intercultural skills refer to a set of abilities and individual characteristics that enable people to act effectively and respectfully in multicultural environments. These skills include cultural awareness, cultural interaction, and cultural sensitivity. The following sections discuss each of these components:

2.1. Cultural Awareness

Cultural awareness refers to the knowledge and deep understanding of the characteristics, beliefs, behaviors, and values of different cultures. This component helps individuals to have an accurate understanding of other cultures and avoid cultural assumptions and biases. Cultural awareness involves knowledge of the history, language, customs, and social values of other cultures and enables individuals to engage in intercultural interactions effectively (Hang & Zhang, 2023).

Recent studies have shown that cultural awareness enhances individuals' ability to understand and interpret different cultural behaviors. This awareness is especially important in educational and work environments that involve diverse cultures. Furthermore, cultural awareness can improve academic and professional performance by enabling individuals to work more effectively in international teams. Recent research emphasizes that educational programs should focus on developing cultural awareness. These programs include teaching about cultural history, linguistics, and social differences so that students and employees can better cope with cultural differences. In this regard, the use of modern educational tools and practical experiences can also help increase cultural awareness (Zhang & Zhou, 2023).

In general, cultural awareness, as a core component of intercultural skills, helps individuals to act with greater understanding and respect in multicultural environments and avoid cultural missteps. This component contributes to fostering positive and effective interactions between cultures and deepening intercultural relationships.

2.2. Cultural Interaction

Cultural interaction refers to the ability to communicate effectively with individuals from different cultures. This component includes communication skills and social interaction that help individuals engage with others with respect and mutual understanding. Successful cultural interaction requires strong communication skills and a deep understanding of cultural differences (Zhang & Zhou, 2023; Zhao et al., 2023).

Recent research has shown that cultural interaction can improve work and educational relationships in multicultural environments. Specifically, communication skills such as active listening, clearly expressing opinions, and respecting cultural differences are key traits in cultural interaction. These skills help individuals to act effectively in international negotiations and interactions and prevent misunderstandings. In recent

studies, cultural interaction has been identified as a key factor in the success of international projects and multinational collaborations. The ability to understand and respect cultural differences in multicultural environments can improve the quality of work and increase job satisfaction. Additionally, the ability to manage cultural conflicts and find appropriate solutions when faced with cultural differences is another important aspect of cultural interaction.

Moreover, research has shown that cultural interaction can promote a sense of solidarity and cooperation in multicultural teams. These positive interactions contribute to creating a diverse and inclusive work and educational environment, leading to individual and professional growth in these settings (Zhao et al., 2023).

2.3. Cultural Sensitivity

Cultural sensitivity refers to the understanding and responsiveness to the emotions, needs, and behaviors of individuals based on their cultural backgrounds. This component includes the ability to gain a deeper understanding of others' cultural experiences and interact with them empathetically and respectfully. Cultural sensitivity helps individuals communicate effectively and respectfully, considering the cultural backgrounds of others (Sercu, 2023).

New studies have shown that cultural sensitivity can improve interpersonal relationships and reduce conflicts in multicultural environments. This skill is particularly important in sensitive situations where cultural differences may lead to misunderstandings. The ability to understand and appropriately respond to the emotions and cultural needs of others contributes to creating a positive and supportive environment in teams and classrooms. Cultural sensitivity is also recognized as a key skill in promoting social and professional success. Individuals with high cultural sensitivity are better able to build stronger and more effective relationships with others in multicultural settings and can avoid cultural misunderstandings and conflicts. This skill helps individuals interact with others respectfully and with mutual understanding, contributing to the creation of diverse and inclusive environments (Mu & Yu, 2023).

In conclusion, cultural sensitivity is recognized as an important component of cultural education and contributes to increasing individual and social abilities in multicultural environments. Given the rise in global interactions, developing and strengthening cultural sensitivity has become one of the main goals in educational and professional systems.

3. Literature Review

Among domestic research, Ghorban Dardinejad and Bayat (2016) examined the impact of teaching intercultural background knowledge on the reading skills of Iranian language learners. The statistical population included all female language learners (5,000 individuals) at English language institutes in Sabzevar. The research results indicated a significant impact of intercultural background knowledge on learners' reading skills. Awareness of certain subcultures in English-speaking countries, such as relationships, etiquette, and pet care, significantly influenced the ability to read texts related to these subcultures. Furthermore, cultural background knowledge regarding official holidays in English-speaking countries was considered of secondary importance (Ghorban Dardinejad & Bayat, 2016).

Additionally, Ali et al. (2016) conducted a comparative analysis of cultural hegemony in the hidden curriculum of international English language teaching texts. In this study, using a library research method, the micro-components of cultural hegemony were extracted from educational texts based on expert opinions, and the content of widely-used English language textbooks in institutes was analyzed for cultural hegemony components. The findings indicated that some commonly used English language textbooks, such as the *American English File* series, were highly hegemonic compared to others, while the *Active Skills* textbook series, though hegemonic, had a lower level of hegemony (Ali et al., 2016).

Furthermore, Soudmand Afshar et al. (2018) evaluated and critiqued *Prospect* and *Vision 1* English textbooks from the perspective of intercultural and transcultural communicative competence. For this study, these textbooks were qualitatively and subjectively analyzed in terms of intercultural and transcultural competence. Subsequently, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 22 English teachers experienced in teaching these books. The interviews were recorded and then subjected to content analysis. The findings showed that these textbooks included some aspects of native culture, emphasizing grammar and language functions

but lacked focus on developing transcultural and intercultural competence (Soudmand Afshar et al., 2018).

Moreover, Ghaffari and Jahanbakhsh (2022) examined the attitudes of Iranian English teachers and students regarding critical cultural awareness in high school textbooks. The study's participants included 307 English teachers and 359 high school (secondary level) students from Qazvin. Initially, all participants responded to a questionnaire titled "Critical Cultural Awareness," and the data were analyzed for content elements, which identified three key factors that were used to evaluate participant responses. The results indicated that both teachers and students believed that cultural issues from all languages should be integrated equally into English textbooks (Ghaffari & Ahmadjanbakhsh, 2022).

Furthermore, Eslami Visri (2023) explored the impacts of student exchange and international programs on the development of students' linguistic and cultural skills. The findings suggested that student exchange programs are a key tool for preparing future generations for life and work in a global society. These programs not only help strengthen students' linguistic and cultural skills but also transform them into responsible, knowledgeable global citizens who play an essential role in promoting peace, cooperation, and sustainable global development (Eslami Visari, 2023).

Among international studies, Egitim (2024) examined the impact of foreign language teachers' intercultural competence on oral participation in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes. This two-phase, mixed-method descriptive-analytical study explored the potential relationship between foreign language teachers' intercultural competence and the oral participation of Japanese students from the students' perspective. The findings revealed that demonstrating intercultural competence through emphasizing teamwork, tolerating silence, using Japanese gestures, and sharing personal stories and experiences from Japanese culture could give students a sense of psychological safety, helping them express themselves better (Egitim, 2024).

Moreover, Wu et al. (2024) evaluated the acquisition of intercultural competence among international and domestic students in China through a "home internationalization" program. Guided by a theoretical discussion on the impact of home internationalization programs on students' intercultural competence

acquisition, reflective journals and semi-structured interviews were used to assess the goals, progress, and challenges faced by 10 international and 20 domestic students participating in an intercultural program. Thematic data analysis showed that challenges such as insufficient foreign language proficiency, a lack of social and cultural background knowledge, intercultural awareness, and intercultural communication skills disrupted the students' intercultural interaction. However, mutual support, group discussions, and critical reflection helped them engage in greater intercultural interaction and strengthen their intercultural competence. Suggestions for comprehensive program improvement were offered (Wu et al., 2024).

Additionally, Emerson et al. (2024) explored the perspectives of Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) students regarding the effectiveness of a unique educational strategy in developing cultural competence. This strategy was designed based on the results of an intercultural competence assessment and a personal intercultural competence development plan tailored for each student. During their senior internship, students set their intercultural competence development goals and wrote weekly reflections on their progress. This qualitative case study revealed three key themes—self-awareness, recognition of cultural influences, and growth goals—highlighting the development of intercultural competence among the students. The students stated that the cultural awareness program enhanced their intercultural competence and would contribute to their future professional development (Emerson et al., 2024).

Moreover, Ganesan and Morales (2024) studied the experiences of a science teacher in promoting intercultural competence among students in multilingual classrooms. This research examined the development of intercultural competence through the lived experiences of a science teacher at a high school in the Midwestern United States. Data were collected through 11 semi-structured online interviews over eight months. The results indicated that the participant used several strategies to develop intercultural communication competence, particularly in supporting multilingual students. This article focused on four main themes related to the development of intercultural communication competence, and the findings were analyzed within the context of Byram's

multidimensional model to offer guidance for current and future work in this field (Ganesan & Morales, 2024). The literature review demonstrates that analyzing intercultural skills in language education, particularly concerning textbooks, places special emphasis on various cultural and geographical aspects. Various studies have shown that textbooks, such as *Beste Freunde*, introduce cultural and geographical features of the target country and provide diverse educational activities to enhance students' cultural understanding. These activities include introducing maps, festivals, traditions, and cultural figures designed to increase cultural and linguistic awareness. The analyses have shown that these activities can help strengthen intercultural skills, though limitations such as the shallow depth of content and the need for richer resources exist.

Previous research has focused on the varying impacts of cultural content in textbooks and teaching methods on learners' language acquisition, revealing the importance of combining practical activities with theoretical discussions to enhance intercultural skills. These studies have examined how content and activities influence students' cultural and linguistic understanding, though most have addressed superficial analyses and the mismatch between educational content and students' actual cultural needs.

In comparison with previous studies, the present research introduces significant innovations. First, we focus specifically on Iranian students and examine how German language textbooks impact their intercultural skills, thereby addressing the specific cultural and linguistic needs of this group. Second, our research uses advanced statistical methods to analyze changes in student scores over two academic years and to investigate the relationship between these changes and educational content and cultural activities. This comprehensive approach allows us to more precisely identify the actual impact of textbooks and teaching methods on students' intercultural skill development and propose necessary improvements in this area.

4. Methodology

In this research, two main methods were employed to analyze the impact of the *Beste Freunde* textbook on students' intercultural skills: content analysis of the textbook and an examination of the changes in Iranian

students' scores during their first and second years of learning German. A qualitative analysis was conducted to evaluate the content of *Beste Freunde*, a German language textbook specifically designed for beginner-level students. The book aims to teach the German language and improve students' linguistic skills while also introducing various aspects of German culture and geography. In volume A2.1, the book presents a simple map of Germany and its neighboring countries, familiarizing students with the geographical position of Germany. Although this map helps students better understand Germany's location and its neighbors, the cultural information and detailed explanations in this section are limited.

Throughout various lessons, the book addresses cultural aspects and German traditions. For example, lessons about common German cultural features, festivals, and traditions, along with the introduction of traditional music, such as the works of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, are included. These lessons, with the use of images and classroom activities, provide students with opportunities to become familiar with German culture. The book also introduces the geographical features of various German cities and the significance of national festivals, such as Oktoberfest. These pieces of information generally contribute to increasing students' cultural and geographical knowledge, though there is a need for further expansion and depth. The analysis examines how cultural and geographical information is presented in the book, evaluating the content of various chapters. The textbook content was analyzed based on specific criteria, including the accuracy of cultural information, diversity of activities, and the cultural interactions presented.

Each lesson's content and proposed activities were assessed to determine whether they effectively promote intercultural skills. Specifically, the study focused on how maps, cultural features, and traditions are introduced, along with the educational tools used in the textbook. To analyze the impact of teaching methods on students' scores, a paired t-test was utilized. This statistical test is employed to compare the means of two related groups at two different time points (the first and second years). Using this test, significant differences in students' scores before and after changes in teaching methods were evaluated. For this purpose, students' scores from two academic years were collected, followed by statistical

analysis to determine whether changes in scores were significantly related to changes in teaching methods and educational content.

5. Research Findings

The present study's analysis focused on integrating intercultural skills through the *Beste Freunde* textbook and examined its impact on students' understanding of German culture and geography. The results are presented as follows:

Page 1 (Volume A2.1): The textbook begins by introducing a map of Germany and its neighboring countries, such as Switzerland and Austria. This image helps students identify Germany's location in Europe and its neighboring countries. However, the map is generally simple, lacking images of cultural aspects or detailed explanations, which may limit the depth of intercultural learning.

Lesson 20, Page 14: This lesson addresses common characteristics of individuals and introduces traits typically associated with Germans, such as punctuality and reliability. It also provides an opportunity to introduce German stereotypes, such as beer and sauerkraut, through images.

Lesson 21, Page 16: The textbook introduces German festivals and traditions, offering an opportunity to recreate the atmosphere of these festivals in the classroom. This activity includes displaying clothes, foods, and music associated with the festivals, giving students a more authentic sense of German culture.

Lesson 21, Page 18: This lesson briefly mentions Oktoberfest, suggesting that this festival be introduced using films or real images. Additionally, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart is introduced, which helps students become acquainted with traditional and classical German music, enhancing historical and cultural understanding.

Lesson 28, Page 8: This page introduces cognitive aspects of German culture, including images of Munich and information about the city of Cologne. It is suggested that the teacher enrich this unit with more examples and perspectives to make intercultural learning more effective.

Page 20: In this section, students are encouraged to search the internet for information about the attractions of their chosen city. This activity can engage all three

intercultural skills, leading to more successful learning, as students conduct research based on their interests.

Page 25: This unit presents the characteristics of a German girl of the same age as the students. These characteristics include appearance, name, and experiences, which can be taught practically through group activities and research, fostering a deeper understanding of individual differences.

Page 38: This section covers prominent German music and artists, such as Bach and Beethoven. It is noted that music is an important part of German culture and should be included in teaching about German culture.

Page 56: This lesson discusses topics such as the environment, scientific research, and inventions, encouraging students to explore and improve their surroundings.

Lesson B1.1, Page 20: Becoming familiar with Germany's 16 states helps students better understand the country and its people. This page includes questions about politics, history, geography, and culture, which should be taught comprehensively.

Page 38 of *B1.1*: This section covers Germany's geography, emphasizing that geography and natural and historical features should be incorporated into cultural education.

The German Education System: The German education system is not centrally organized and depends on the individual states. Each state has its own laws and curricula that guide the teaching process.

German Unity Day: October 3 is German Unity Day, recognized as an important federal holiday and should be included in German language lessons.

Cultural Exchange Opportunities: Students can explore topics such as punctuality, meal times, and music through cultural exchange to better understand cultural differences.

Intercultural Examples: Examining the concept of "time" and its cultural differences shows that intercultural education should include role-playing and tangible examples.

Word Translation: Some words, such as *Abendbrot* (a light evening meal), have specific meanings in German that cannot be fully translated into other languages.

Specific Cultural Words: Words such as *Heimweh* (homesickness) and *Fernweh* (longing to travel) reflect specific cultural emotions and experiences in Germany that should be considered.

ISSLP
Interdisciplinary Studies in Society, Law and Politics

Arezoofar et al.   Interdisciplinary Studies in Society, Law, and Politics 3:4 (2024) 79-87

Unique Idioms: Idioms like *Fremdschämen* (feeling embarrassed on behalf of others) and *Geborgenheit* (a feeling of comfort) require a deeper understanding of culture, which can only be conveyed through cultural examples.

Extra Efforts: Words such as *Verschlimmbessern* (trying to improve something but making it worse) and *Vorfreude* (joyful anticipation) need a deeper understanding of cultural aspects.

Word Usage: Words such as *Zugzwang* (the pressure to make a move) and *Zeitgeist* (the spirit of the times) have specific cultural influences that should be incorporated into German language education to help students gain a better understanding of German culture.

6. Examining the Significant Difference Between First and Second-Year Scores Among Students

To investigate any significant difference between the first and second-year scores among students, we used a paired t-test. The paired t-test, also known as the dependent or matched-pair t-test, is used to determine whether there is a statistically significant difference in the mean of the dependent variable between two related groups. This test is also referred to as the paired sample t-test or the dependent t-test. In the paired sample t-test, the members of the sample are examined at two points in time. The test evaluates the difference in the means of the measured trait. In the paired sample t-test, each individual is observed twice in two different conditions (typically before and after).

The descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1. Based on the results, the mean student score in the first year was 3.05, which improved to 2.05 in the second year. In other words, the scores were satisfactory in the first year, while in the second year, the scores increased to a "good" level. Additionally, Table 2 shows the inferential statistics related to the paired t-test, indicating that the t-value for the difference between the first and second years is 3.34, with a significance level of $p = 0.003$. From this statistical finding, it can be concluded with 99% confidence that the observed mean difference in Table 1 is real and not due to chance. Therefore, it can be said that the mean scores in the first and second years differ significantly. As a result, the teaching method used in the second year was effective and influenced the students' scores and results.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Student Scores in the First and Second Years

Scores	Mean	Frequency	Standard Deviation
Year 1	3.05	20	1.28
Year 2	2.05	20	0.76

Table 2

Paired t-Test to Examine the Significant Difference in Student Scores Between the First and Second Years

Mean Score Differences	Standard Deviation of Score Differences	t-Value	Degrees of Freedom	Significance Level (p)
1.00	1.34	3.34	19	0.003

7. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study examined the impact of changes in teaching methods on the development of intercultural skills among Iranian students learning German. The results of this study clearly demonstrate that the applied changes in teaching methods have had a positive effect on improving the students' intercultural skills. These findings emphasize that the new teaching methods have effectively enhanced students' cultural and communication abilities, raising their scores to a higher level. These results highlight the importance of continuous updating and modification of teaching methods to address the cultural and linguistic needs of students.

To sustain and strengthen this positive trend, it is essential that intercultural teaching methods be regularly and systematically reviewed and improved. One of the key suggestions is to incorporate modern educational techniques and introduce diverse group activities into the curriculum. These measures can help strengthen students' intercultural skills and provide

more opportunities for cultural interaction. In particular, activities that actively engage students and offer them practical cultural experiences can have a significant impact on their learning.

Organizing workshops and activities related to various cultures can also help students become practically acquainted with different aspects of other cultures. These activities, such as cultural exchanges and collaborations with language learners from different countries, provide an opportunity for experiential learning and direct interaction with other cultures. Real cultural interactions can strengthen intercultural communication skills and deepen the understanding of cultural differences and similarities.

To ensure the continuous quality and improvement of education, it is recommended that regular evaluations, similar to the tests used in this study, be conducted. These evaluations can help identify strengths and weaknesses in educational programs and facilitate their ongoing improvement. Through these evaluations, teachers and educational administrators can receive the necessary feedback and implement changes to improve the quality of education.

Teacher training and professional development also play a critical role in enhancing students' intercultural skills. Holding training courses and professional development workshops for teachers can strengthen their abilities in teaching and interacting with students. These training programs may include modern teaching techniques, managing multicultural classrooms, and advanced communication skills, helping teachers more effectively promote intercultural skills among students.

Based on the results of this study, it can be concluded that the development of intercultural skills should be prioritized in educational programs. This focus includes designing and implementing educational programs that emphasize different cultures and provide practical opportunities for cultural interaction. By implementing these suggestions, it is hoped that the improvement of students' intercultural skills will continue and contribute significantly to enhancing the quality of language education and cultural exchange.

In this regard, close collaboration between teachers, students, and educational administrators is also crucial. Creating a supportive and encouraging educational environment, where all parties actively participate in the process of learning and developing intercultural skills,

can lead to greater success in educational programs. This collaboration can involve the exchange of ideas, regular feedback, and participation in joint cultural activities.

Furthermore, emphasizing the importance of learning foreign languages and different cultures as an essential component of educational programs can motivate students and foster their enthusiasm for intercultural learning and interaction. This emphasis may be particularly important in the early stages of education to familiarize students with the significance of these skills from the outset.

Finally, attention to the specific cultural and linguistic needs of students and the design of educational programs that align with these needs can lead to a more effective and inclusive learning environment. By focusing on the continuous improvement of teaching methods, thorough evaluation of programs, and the enhancement of teachers' skills, it is possible to strengthen students' intercultural skills and prepare a more capable and ready generation for interaction in an increasingly multicultural and globalized world.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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