

Cultural Intelligence among Iranian Foreign Language Undergraduates: An Exploratory Study

Mahdi. Dahmardeh^{1*}, Fatimah. Hejaziyan²

¹ Associate Professor of Applied Linguistics and Education, Tehran University, Tehran, Iran

² Visiting lecturer at Sabzevar University of Medical Sciences and Hakim Sabzevari University, Sabzevar, Iran

* Corresponding author email address: dahmardeh@ut.ac.ir

Article Info

Article type:

Original Research

How to cite this article:

Dahmardeh, M., & Hejaziyan, F. (2026). Cultural Intelligence among Iranian Foreign Language Undergraduates: An Exploratory Study. *Quarterly Journal of Research and Planning in Higher Education*, 32(1), 123-145.



© 2026 the authors. Published by Institute for Research and Planning in Higher Education (IRPHE), Tehran, Iran. This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) License.

ABSTRACT

This descriptive study investigates Cultural Intelligence or Cultural Quotient (CQ) among Iranian undergraduates in their final year of foreign language studies, covering a diverse range of target languages (Arabic, Chinese, English, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Russian, and Spanish). A total of 270 participants from public universities in Iran, both male and female, across various foreign language majors, participated in the study. Using an adapted version of Triandis' (2006) CQ questionnaire, participants' CQ was measured across four dimensions: cultural knowledge, strategy, motivation, and behaviour. Administered in Persian, the study revealed that participants exhibited cultural awareness and a willingness to adapt communication styles. However, areas for improvement were identified, such as the limited verification of cultural knowledge and a tendency towards Iranian cultural superiority. The study found no significant differences in CQ levels across students studying different foreign languages, suggesting that the target language may not be the primary factor influencing CQ development. However, further research is needed to explore the role of individual factors, such as motivation and openness, and to compare language learners with non-language learners to better understand the relationship between foreign language learning and CQ.

Keywords: Cultural Intelligence or Cultural Quotient (CQ); Foreign Language Learning; Iranian University Students; Cultural Awareness; Cultural Knowledge

Introduction

Learning a foreign language goes beyond grammar and vocabulary; it requires understanding the associated culture. Language and culture are inseparable, influencing each other and shaping effective communication (Nault, 2006; Dahmardeh & Kim, 2021; May, 2022). Modern language education focuses on linguistic skills and intercultural communication (Bunch, 2013; Zhang & Li, 2019). Cultural Intelligence (CQ) is crucial for navigating diverse cultural environments. It includes cultural knowledge, mindfulness, skills, and metacognition (Earley & Ang, 2003). CQ enables effective interaction across cultures and is vital in today's globalized world (Livermore, 2011; Grosch et al, 2023). Language learning involves processes like enculturation, acculturation, and deculturation, reflecting the balance between native and new cultures (Ullah, 2020). Integrating intercultural competence into language teaching promotes cultural appreciation and reduces displacement risk (Dahmardeh & Mohammadi, 2023).

Despite growing CQ research, gaps exist. Most studies focus on Western contexts, neglecting countries like Iran, where social and political factors limit cultural exposure. Research rarely examines how different foreign languages impact CQ, especially comparing culturally distant languages like Japanese or Chinese versus seemingly more popular ones like French or Spanish. Gender's role in CQ development is unclear, particularly in societies with distinct gender norms like Iran (Azizi et al, 2015). Additionally, motivational and reflective CQ aspects need more exploration.

This study addresses these gaps by examining CQ among Iranian university students learning foreign languages, including Arabic, Chinese, and European languages. It explores how language choice and gender affect CQ development in Iran's unique environment. Results will inform language education improvements, including programs fostering intercultural interaction and self-reflection. Identifying gender differences may help tailor education to meet diverse student needs.

This research contributes new insights into CQ development in non-Western settings, offering valuable guidance for global and local language teaching policies.

Methodology

This study examined cultural intelligence among senior undergraduates enrolled in foreign language programmes at public universities in Tehran. Cultural intelligence was defined according to Earley and Ang (2003) and was operationalised into four dimensions: strategy, knowledge, motivation, and behaviour following Triandis (2006). Two research questions guided the work. First, what levels of cultural intelligence characterise senior language students in this context. Second, whether cultural intelligence differs according to the target language studied.

Data were collected from 270 senior undergraduates representing nine language groups: Arabic, Chinese, English, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Russian, and Spanish. The sample included 150 female and 120 male students. An adapted twenty item cultural intelligence questionnaire was translated into Persian and piloted for clarity. Scale reliability was acceptable with Cronbach alpha values reported for each dimension. Exploratory factor analysis reproduced a four-factor structure consistent with the theoretical model.

Findings

Descriptive statistics indicated higher mean scores for motivation and adaptive behaviour relative to verified cultural knowledge in several language groups. Group level patterns varied. Some language groups reported stronger self-reported adaptation while others reported lower scores for verified knowledge of target cultures. A one-way analysis of variance tested between group differences in overall cultural intelligence. The ANOVA result did not reach statistical significance which was interpreted as no systematic difference attributable to language group within the sampled population.

Findings were related to theoretical and empirical work on intercultural competence and language learning. The observed profile was interpreted as compatible with accounts that emphasise the role of individual motivation and prior contact more than formal language choice in shaping cultural intelligence. Practical implications were discussed for curriculum design and teacher education. The limitations included reliance on self-report measures, a single city sample, and cross-sectional design. Recommendations for future research included longitudinal and mixed method designs that combine questionnaire data with

classroom observation and performance-based measures to examine how curricular input and pedagogical practice relate to cultural intelligence development.

Conclusion

Iranian university students studying foreign languages demonstrated a reasonable Cultural Intelligence (CQ), showing strong cultural awareness, adaptability, and motivation, largely aligning with Earley and Ang's (2003) theory. However, limited verified cultural knowledge suggests a need for pedagogy focused on critical cultural awareness, a key aspect of Byram's (1997) model. The students' balance of cultural pride with openness to foreign cultures reflects an integration strategy (Berry, 1997). Importantly, CQ development was found to be influenced more by individual factors like motivation and openness than by the specific language studied. While most students showed positive attitudes, differences were noted among language groups, highlighting varied approaches to cultural learning. The study concludes that cultural pride, openness, and dedication are crucial for CQ. It recommends integrating authentic cultural content, fostering critical reflection on cultural assumptions, and creating interaction opportunities to develop the global skills essential for success in today's world.

References

- Alahdadi, S., & Ghanizadeh, A. (2017). The dynamic interplay among EFL learners' ambiguity tolerance, adaptability, cultural intelligence, learning approach, and language achievement. *Iranian Journal of Language Teaching Research*, 5(1), 37-50. https://www.sid.ir/en/VEWSSID/J_pdf/51013520170103.pdf
- Ang, S., & Van Dyne, L. (2008). Conceptualization of Cultural Intelligence: Definition, Distinctiveness, and Nomological Network In S. Ang, & L. Van Dyne (Eds.), *Handbook of Cultural Intelligence: Theory, Measurement, and Applications*. In (pp. 3-15). M. E. Sharpe. <https://www.scirp.org/reference/referencespapers?referenceid=3759550>
- Azizi, Z., Fatemi, A. H., Pishghadam, R., & Ghapanchi, Z. (2015). Investigating the relationship between Iranian EFL learners' cultural intelligence and their home cultural attachment. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, 6(3), 575-585. <https://doi.org/10.5901/mjss.2015.v6n3s1p575>
- Berry, J. W. (1997). Immigration, acculturation, and adaptation. *Applied Psychology: An International Review*, 46(1), 5-34. <https://doi.org/10.1080/026999497378467>
- Bunch, G. C. (2013). Pedagogical language knowledge: Preparing mainstream teachers for English learners in the new standards era. *Review of Research in Education*, 37(1), 298-341. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X12461772>
- Byram, M. (1988). Foreign language education and cultural studies. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 1(1), 15-31. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07908318809525025>
- Byram, M. (1997). *Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence*. Multilingual Matters. https://books.google.com/books/about/Teaching_and_Assessing_Intercultural_Com.html?hl=fr&id=0vfg8JJWhTsC
- Chen, G. M., & Starosta, W. J. (2000). Communication and global society: An introduction In G. M. Chen & W. J. Starosta (Eds.), *Communication and Global Society*. In (pp. 1-16). New York: Peter Lang. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600820050085732>
- Crowne, K. A., & Lo, K. (2023). Reexamining social intelligence, emotional intelligence, and cultural intelligence, for congruence and divergence: does social intelligence still exist? In *Handbook of cultural intelligence research*. In (pp. 45-58). Edward Elgar Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781800887169.00012>
- Dahmardeh, M., & Kim, S. (2020). Cultural Competence: Interculture, Transculture, and Metaculture. *EPISTEME*, 23, 155-179. <https://e-episteme.org/journal/view.php?doi=10.38119/cacs.2020.23.7>
- Dahmardeh, M., & Mohammadi, P. (2023). Analysis of intercultural competence and gender representation in Iranian EFL coursebooks. *Journal of Foreign Language Research*, 13(2), 45-62. <https://doi.org/10.22059/jflr.2022.352261.1000>
- Deardorff, D. K. (2006). Identification and Assessment of Intercultural Competence as a Student Outcome of Internationalization. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 10, 241-266. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315306287002>
- Dewaele, J. M. (2010). Multilingualism and affordances: Variation in self-perceived communicative competence and communicative anxiety in French L1, L2, L3 and L4. *IRAL-International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching*, 48(2-3), 105-129. <https://doi.org/10.1515/iral.2010.006>
- Earley, P. C., & Ang, S. (2003). *Cultural intelligence: Individual interactions across cultures*. Stanford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780804766005>
- Fantini, A., & Tirmizi, A. (2006). *Exploring and Assessing Intercultural Competence*. World Learning Publications. https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1815&context=csd_research
- Gardner, R. C. (1985). *Social Psychology and Second Language Learning: The Role of Attitudes and Motivation*. London: Edward Arnold. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0083787>
- Gedik Bal, N. (2022). Cultural Intelligence of English Language Learners and Their Perceived Strengths and Weaknesses in Intercultural Communication. *Teaching English as a Second Language Electronic Journal (TESL-EJ)*, 26(2), 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.55593/ej.26102a3>
- Grosch, I., Boonen, J., & Hoefnagels, A. (2023). Cultural intelligence and the role of international classroom composition: Insights from Dutch higher education. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 96, 101866. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2023.101866>

- Hofstede, G. (1984). Cultural Dimensions in Management and Planning. *Asia Pacific Journal of Management*, 1, 81-99. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01733682>
- Karimi, F., & Hashemi, M. (2019). The relationship between cultural intelligence and students' attitudes toward studying abroad. *Journal of Research and Planning in Higher Education*, 25(2), 45-62.
- Kramsch, C. J. (1998). *Language and Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://www.scirp.org/reference/referencespapers?referenceid=1894705>
- Lee, J. S., & Lee, K. (2020). Role of L2 Motivational Self System on Willingness to Communicate of Korean EFL University and Secondary Students. *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research*, 49, 147-161. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10936-019-09675-6>
- Livermore, D. (2011). *The cultural intelligence difference: master the one skill you can't do without in today's global economy*. American Management Association. <https://davidlivermore.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/CQ-Difference-Chapter-1.pdf>
- May, S. (2022). Sociolinguistic and political theory perspectives on language rights In *The Handbook of Linguistic Human Rights*. In (pp. 39-54). <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119753926.ch3>
- Mohammadi, M., & Rahimi, A. (2020). The impact of cultural intelligence on academic performance among Iranian university students. *Journal of Research and Planning in Higher Education*, 26(1), 33-50.
- Nault, D. (2006). *Language learning in intercultural contexts*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Paige, R. M., Cohen, A. D., Kappler, K., Chi, H. T., & Lassegard, J. (2004). Developing cultural intelligence in SLA classrooms. In (Vol. 16, pp. 361-378).
- Petrov, A., Petrov, A., & Ivanova, V. (2018). SMART GUIDE - The Internet of Cultural Things In Proceedings of the International Scientific Conference on "Blue Economy and Blue Development". In (pp. 32-36). Burgas Free University. <https://www.cceol.com/search/article-detail?id=830350>
- Rahmani, S., & Zarei, A. (2021). The role of cultural intelligence in the internationalization of Iranian universities. *Journal of Research and Planning in Higher Education*, 27(3), 77-94.
- Sternberg, R. J., Co, C., Siriner, I., Soleimani-Dashtaki, A., & Wong, C. H. (2023). Cultural Intelligence Deployed in One's Own vs. in a Different Culture: The Same or Different? *Journal of Intelligence*, 11(11), 212. <https://www.mdpi.com/2079-3200/11/11/212>
- Triandis, H. C. (2006). Cultural Intelligence in Organizations. *Group & Organization Management*, 31(1), 20-26. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1059601105275253>
- Ullah, A. A. (2022). The culture of migration in Southeast Asia: Acculturation, enculturation and deculturation. *Journal for Cultural Research*, 26(2), 184-199. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14797585.2022.2097881>
- Valdes, J. M. (1986). *Culture Bound: Bridging the Cultural Gap in Language Teaching*. Cambridge University Press. <https://teslcanadajournal.ca/index.php/tesl/article/download/546/377/0>
- Zhang, Y., & Li, X. (2019). The relationship between intercultural communicative competence and foreign language learning anxiety: A meta-analysis. *System*, 83, 114-125.