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## Assessing Intercultural Competence in Pakistani Students: An Analysis of O-Level English Language Examination

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the intercultural competence of Pakistani students who appear in Cambridge O-Level English language examination conducted in Pakistan by British council twice a year. English language is a core subject and is coded with 1123 for Cambridge International Examination (CIE). For this subject, two papers are taken i.e. paper-I was about reading comprehension and paper-II was about writing a composition. To analyze the extent to which intercultural competence assesses alongside linguistic competence amongst students through exam papers, forty-four exam papers (2013-2023) are analyzed by using Byram's (1993) checklist that constitutes eight categories of intercultural competence. Fairclough's (2003) model of discourse analysis has been used as a theoretical framework. For analytical framework, topics, themes, and the content of both the papers are thoroughly read and then are put under the eight categories of assessing intercultural competence proposed by Byram (1993). The findings of one-sample t-test indicate that the categories of Byram's checklist have negative effect on the content of the papers of O-Level. The results clearly display the absence of assessment of intercultural competence of students because less content on local culture was given in the exam papers.

**Key Words:** Cambridge International Examination (CIE), intercultural Competence, English Language Exam, Globalization, Linguistic Competence

### Introduction

The globe is comprised of assorted societies and cultures. This implies that these societies have their own outlook to show their social tendencies (Deardorff, 2011). Students belonging to these societies at all levels such as school, college, and university students, are representatives of these assorted societies where culture alludes to a lifestyle of a given local area and flourishes to its extent by grooming people living in the society with its own convictions, social skills, beliefs, traditions activities and artifacts. Social fitness depends on how people act upon intercultural stimulus in each social gathering. This social fitness when inculcated among students brings cultural competence among them (Shliakhovchuk, 2021). The National Education Association of America, as cited in Ladner (2019), defined cultural competence as "having an awareness of one's own cultural identity and views about difference, and the ability to learn and build on the varying cultural and community norms of students and their families." Byram (2020) defines intercultural competence as "Knowledge of others; knowledge of self; skills to interpret and relate; skills to discover and/or to interact; valuing others' values, beliefs, and behaviors; and relativizing oneself."

According to Gillespie (2019), the notion of intercultural competence has been commonly understood by people as developing an awareness of knowledge, beliefs, and ethnic values of people from their own as well as other cultures who are in contact with each other one or the other way. It is the ability to understand and interact with people from other cultures. Intercultural competence is indeed very important for maintaining relationships in the global world, where people from other backgrounds and cultures relate to

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one another in any way. In this way, students of this globalized world need to have a sound understanding of their own as well as other's cultures. Students are viewed as socially capable when they can take part in social conduct that does not repudiate the social tendencies of acquiring cultural competence. Socialization improves social mobility and facilitates the correspondence and perceptions of students about the world that surrounds them. For example, in a writing competition, a Pakistani student would like to choose and express those topics which are about his local culture because he is quite familiar with his own culture, but the point is if he is able to compare his own culture with the culture of other countries or not? In this regard, people love to perceive their own cultural legacies and inceptions more easily than others (Rosenblatt, 2016), but intercultural competence requires a student to be familiar with at least one or two other cultures. Keeping in view the importance of intercultural values and social skills, students should know and see things from a global perspective, even as local citizens. Therefore, this research is designed to check their understanding of local and global outlooks in the age of globalization that would reflect their intercultural competence.

In Pakistani schools, we have classes with less culturally diverse students in terms of students sitting there from other countries rather students from within Pakistan and belonging to different local cultures. At secondary school level, we have two streams of education which include Matriculation and Cambridge. The curriculum is also different. In Matriculation, the schools follow books prescribed by textbook boards such as Sindh or Punjab while Cambridge affiliated systems are following curriculum assigned by Cambridge University England. The examination systems are also different. They include exams taken by affiliated boards for Matriculation while Cambridge International Examination (CIE) conducts exams for O-Levels through British Council in Pakistan. There are many schools affiliated with both the systems and are teaching the above-mentioned curriculum while assessing them through their respective examination board.

English is a core subject coded with 1123 in the Cambridge International Examination (CIE), which has two papers. Paper one constitutes reading comprehension, and paper two is about writing. We can see diverse topics to be given to students to assess their reading comprehension and writing skills. The O-level exams are conducted twice a year; one in May-June and the other in October-November. The exam papers are set according to the curriculum designed by Cambridge University.

As educators, we need to explore innovative and workable pedagogical strategies to meet the needs of our learners in the classroom as well as examination or assessment procedures. This research will introduce a new strategy and an idea of assessing cultural competence not in the classroom but through the content and topics that are included in the exam papers to check students' cultural competence along with linguistic competence. To develop cultural competence among the students of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the age of globalization, we need to probe into different educational models (Kaihlanen, Hietapakka, & Heponiemi, 2019) and knowledge of assessment criterion that aims to increase cultural competence.

## Research Questions

1. What kind of cultural content according to Byram's cultural categories is present in exam papers of English language of Cambridge O-Levels?
2. What score value does each category of the cultural content possess according to Byram's checklist?
3. How does each feature of cultural categories link with intercultural competence?

In the context of intercultural competence and its assessment in 21st century school students, Micheal Byram proposed a framework for developing and then assessing intercultural competence in students through the content of textbooks in 1993. This research follows his framework and applies it to the topics and themes present inside the exam papers of English Language coded with 1123 taken from the year 2013 to 2023.

## Literature Review

While reviewing literature on intercultural competence, it has been found that most research has been seen conducted on intercultural competence in the field of nursing and health care. For instance, Alizadeh and Chavan (2016) assert that cultural competence constitutes different dimensions such as cultural

awareness, cultural knowledge, and cultural skills as they identified different models of cultural competence in healthcare sector and tried to gauge their efficacy. Similarly, Shen (2014) reviewed cultural competence models and cultural competence assessment instruments developed and published by nurse researchers since 1982. Therefore, Balcazar and Ritzler (2009) have emphasized the development of a certain conceptual framework of cultural competence that can be used by students and researchers.

Integrating the notion of intercultural competence and intercultural communication in the field of education seems quite relevant and has been touched upon by number of educationists and the researchers to integrate the concept into mainstream teaching and learning processes (Holliday, 2010). In the area of English language, according to Hinkel (2005), textbooks are an effective tool for teaching and learning cultural competence. Habib & Saleem (2016) worked on the textbooks of English used in the federal schools of Pakistan and explored how a text of a textbook promotes national and religious Muslim identities. They suggested that textbook discourse at primary and elementary level in Pakistan primarily projects Pakistani and Islamic identity. In the context of cultural content in the textbooks, Kramersch (2013) is of view that the cultural content in English language classroom should not be reduced to four F's which includes foods, folks, fairs, and facts. So, seeing the importance of teaching, learning and evaluation of cultural competence among students, Byram (1993) emphasized the inclusion of cultural content such as a checklist of cultural categories to evaluate the cultural content in the textbooks. The checklist Byram developed in 1993 has eight categories which included:

- a. Social Identity and Social Group
- b. Social Interaction
- c. Belief and Behavior
- d. Social and Political Institutions
- e. Socialization and the Life Cycle
- f. National History
- g. National Geography
- h. Stereotypes and National Identity

The checklist proposed by Byram (1993) proved to be a comprehensive theoretical basis for this research because of its eclectic nature which covers all the aspects of a culture. Cambridge International Examinations (CIE) tends to check students' cultural and intercultural competence through the exam paper of the English language along with the assessment of critical thinking skills by giving questions on which students are required to demonstrate some democratic deliberations (Lim, 2011). He asserts the idea of including everyday problems and social issues into the curriculum because, in his view, a global student requires the skill to understand and demonstrate his knowledge critically if he is exposed to content and material that is based on his own cultural background to which later he can compare his culture with the foreign cultures (Lim, 2012). This can only happen inside the class and the assessments or examinations. So, intercultural competence is important for students to inculcate during schooling (Scherr, 2007). Students interact with each other in schools along with shared meanings that modify their thinking style of being a members in their social interactions to bring intercultural competence (Jenkins, 2006). Faraz and Shahzad (2023) expound that students of the 21st century are continuously being influenced by the culture and language used in video games during their leisure time. So, cultural and intercultural interactions provide them input while being in classes, exam rooms or playtime.

## Research Design

Based upon the research questions, this research combines quantitative analysis in the form of a one-sample t-test through SPSS and qualitative analysis in the form of discussion, interpretation, and description of the data.

## Data

The data constitutes forty-four exam papers in the English language coded with 1123 in the Cambridge International Examination (CIE) taken from the year 2013 to 2023. There are two exam papers taken for this subject every year. Paper I is Reading Comprehension, and paper II is writing a Composition. Paper-I



further consists of two parts where two reading inserts (passages) are given to students, and one is required to be summarized while the second requires answering questions given at the end of the passage. So, the inserts for reading have two different topics. Similarly, paper II two also has two sections, in which section one is about directed writing while section two is about creative writing. The genres of creative writing include essay, narrative, descriptive, and argumentative while for directed writing, the genres include letters and speech writing. O-level exams are taken twice a year, i.e., once in May/June and a second time in October/November.

### Theoretical Framework

Fairclough's model of discourse analysis has been used as a theoretical basis for this research, whereas Byram's (1993) checklist has been used for analyzing the cultural content included in forty-four exam papers. According to the three-dimensional model proposed by Fairclough (1992), this research follows three steps, which include a description of the eight categories of Byram's checklist, an interpretation of those categories regarding the content included in exam papers and an explanation of the score value of each category in the light of cultural competence. The criterion constitutes these eight categories of Byram.

- a) Social identity and social group (social class, regional identity, ethnic minorities)
- b) Social interaction (differing levels of formality in a social interactive event, as outsider and insider)
- c) Belief and behavior (moral, religious beliefs; daily routines)
- d) Social and political institutions (state institutions, health care, law and order, social security, local government)
- e) Socialization and the life cycle (families, schools, employment, parties etc.)
- f) National history (historical and contemporary events)
- g) National geography (geographical factors of a country)
- h) National identity (what is the "typical" symbol of national stereotypes)

### Data Analysis

Data for content analysis constitutes 44 past papers on the English language for Cambridge O-Level. After the papers were collected from the official website of CIE, we read them thoroughly to find topics and themes to assign cultural categories according to Byram's checklist, and then we found out the percentages for each category. Statistical data analysis (SPSS) is also used in this study to validate the results because it is a method of executing several statistical strategies to have an objective result. The reason for choosing the quantitative paradigm is that most of the researchers collect information from questionnaire/ survey data or observational data. Since we have observational data, we use this technique to uncover the patterns and determine results based on them. It makes the procedures quick, systematic and takes less time than manual analysis. After that, descriptive analysis was done for taking out the frequencies and percentages for sorting out the categories of Byram's checklist. The test of normality served the purpose of determining normal distribution in the data and finally, for checking the validity of categories, one-sample t-test was undertaken for gaining the significant value. For one-sample t-test we proposed the hypothesis i.e.

**H<sub>0</sub>:** There is a significant positive effect of categories in Byram's checklist on cultural content in the exam papers.

**H<sub>1</sub>:** There is no positive significant effect of categories of Byram's checklist on cultural content in the exam papers.

To test these hypotheses, we performed a one-sample t-test to determine the effect of those categories on the cultural content included in the exam papers.

### Data Analysis and Results

First, we performed the descriptive analysis in which we showed the frequencies, percentages, valid percentages, and cumulative percentages of Byram's categories used in the topics and themes of papers as shown in table 1. We also present our data in bar graph to know the patterns of eight cultural categories that further helped us to assess intercultural competence among Pakistani students as shown in figure 1. After that we performed normality tests presented in table 2 to check the validity of data whether it is valid for parametric tests or not. For this purpose, we used Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro Wilk tests.

Kolmogorov-Smirnov test is used to determine that the sample data comes with specific distribution (Darling, 1957; Razali & Wah, 2011) while Shapiro Wilk test is proved to be best for to check the normality of data. The Shapiro wilk test is valid for the normality test because it tends to show the sample data as drawn from normality distributed population, as in this case we have forty-four samples of papers.

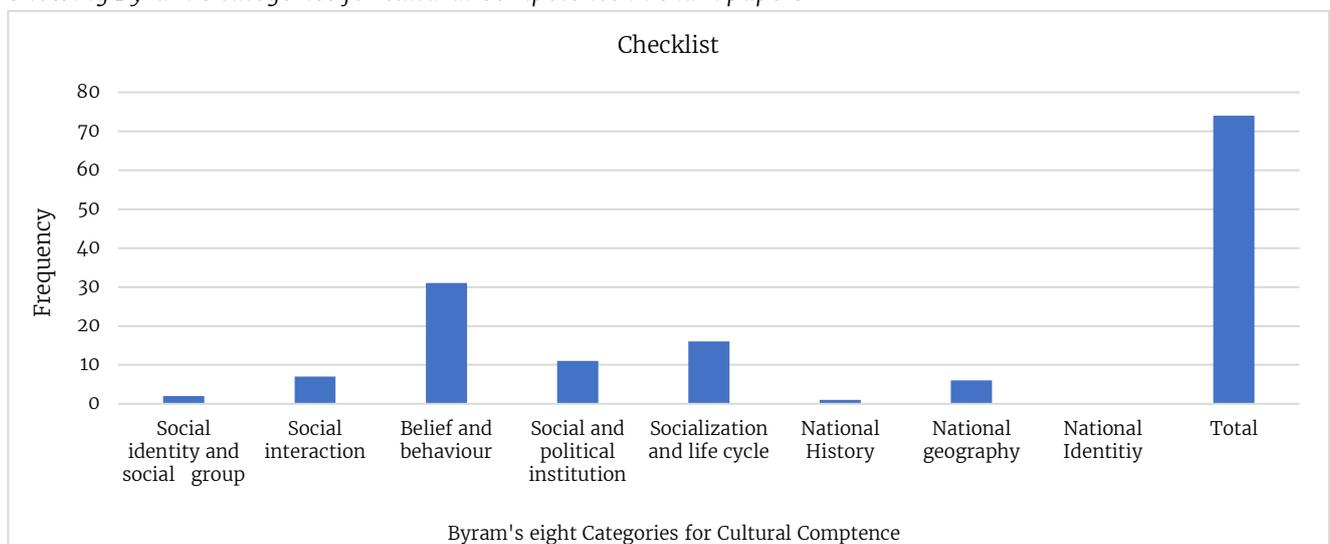
After the normality test, we performed one-sample t test as shown in table 3 & table 4. One-sample t-test is used to test that population mean is significantly affecting the hypothesized value. We performed one-sample t-test to know significance value of Byram’s eight categories which shows the effect of these categories on cultural content of exam papers.

**Table 1**  
Frequency of Byram’s eight categories found in exam papers

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Social identity and social group	2	2.7	2.7	2.7
Social interaction	7	9.5	9.5	12.2
Belief and behavior	31	41.9	41.9	54.1
Social and political institutions	11	14.9	14.9	68.9
Socialization and life cycle	16	21.6	21.6	90.5
National History	1	1.4	1.4	91.9
National Geography	6	8.1	8.1	
National Identity	0	0	0	0
Total	74	100.0	100.0	100.00

The table above shows all eight categories of Byram's checklist, i.e. social identity and social group with frequency of 2, social interaction with 7, belief and behaviour with the frequency of 31, Social and political institution with 11, Socialization and life cycle with 16, history with 2, National geography with six and National Identity with 0 frequency. The total frequency becomes 74 for all categories. SPSS automatically removed the category named National Identity because it has zero frequency and cannot be added to further analysis because it may affect the validity of the sample data, but it is written in the table to show its zero occurrences. Another way of presenting the results is given in the form of a graphical representation, as given below in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**  
Showing Byram’s categories for cultural Competence in exam papers



**Tests of Normality**

In addition to the descriptive analysis represented in Table 1 and Figure 1, statistics normality tests are also handed down to find out if sample data is well designed by a normal distribution and to calculate how probable it is for a random variable to prime the sample data to be normally distributed. It is usually



performed to check the validity of the sample data. Normality and validity of data allow us to do parametric tests on the data. In Table 2 we performed a test of normality on the frequencies of the Byram's categories shown in Table 1.

**Table 2**

Tests of normality

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov <sup>a</sup>			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
frequencies	.206	7	.200*	.866	7	.170

\*. This is a lower bound of the true significance.

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

Here we can see in the column of Kolmogorov-Smirnov as cited in Razali & Wah (2011), the degree of freedom (df) is seven, it shows the total categories present in the test. Since we have eight categories of Byram's checklist, SPSS eliminates the 8th category named National identity because the frequency was zero. Next, we have Significant value (sig.) which is 0.200\* it shows that our data is smaller than two hundred samples and Kolmogorov-Smirnov test is only valid when the sample data is larger than two hundred. Shapiro will test is specially designed in SPSS for checking the normality of sample data. That is why we moved to Shapiro-Wilk test because we have only seventy-four samples of papers and eight categories of Byram's checklist included in those papers and we have to check the normality of our sample data. Here we can also see that degree of freedom is seven which shows seven categories were included in the test. Significant value is 0.170 so it shows that the data is normal because we test the normality in 0.05 sig. level and here, we get 0.170 so,  $p\text{-value}: 0.170 > \alpha: 0.05$  This equation shows that we can accept that the data comes from normal distribution and the data is valid for the parametric tests.

### One-Sample t-Test

Next, we performed a one-sample t-test. We have already checked the assumption of t-test, i.e., Normally distributed. The purpose of the one-sample t-test is to determine that the categories of Byram's checklist have a positive effect on the content of O-level papers. For this purpose, we proposed the hypothesis as mentioned above so that we could accept or reject them to make a decision.

### Hypothesis:

H<sub>0</sub>: There is a positive effect of categories of Byram's checklist on Papers

H<sub>1</sub>: There is no positive effect of categories of Byram's checklist on Papers.

Level of significance:  $\alpha=0.05$

### Results

**Table 3**

One-sample statistics

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
frequencies	7	10.57	10.374	3.921

**Table 4**

One-sample Test

	Test Value = 0					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
frequencies	2.696	6	.036	10.571	.98	20.17

Here the SPSS calculated the t value=2.696 with a mean of 10.57 and a standard deviation of 10.374, shown in the table of one-sample statistics. The next column shows the degree of freedom (df) is 6 (7-1=6). The next column shows significant values, i.e., Sig. = 0.036. From this value we can see that our p-value is smaller than our  $\alpha$  so equation will be  $p\text{-value}=0.036 < \alpha=0.05$

This equation shows that we should reject our  $H_0$ , i.e., there is a positive effect of categories in Byram's checklist on papers. So, the results show that we should accept  $H_1$  and decide that categories of Byram's checklist have a negative effect on the content of papers. In this regard, we can clearly see that all of the categories of cultural competence have unequal distribution on the content of papers because there is a huge difference between the category of belief and behavior constituting frequency of 31 in comparison to history and social interaction consisting 2 occurrences and national identity with zero occurrence. The exam papers are covered by the third category of Byram's check list i.e., belief and behavior, as shown above in the data and in figures 1 and two. The category of belief and behavior constitutes 41.9 percent, occurs 31 times out of 74. The basic tenets of this category according to Byram (1993) include one's own experience with his community, importance of faith, norms, traditions, and education. By taking regular routine activities within a social group and their beliefs in localized culture, this category of Byram's list is explored. This category was included in paper-II mostly by giving students the opportunity to write on their moral and religious values exposed through everyday activities, the impact of westernization in terms of movies, pop culture and dressing on their own culture as questions given in the papers of 2013, 2020 and 2016. The power of media and intercultural exchange programs resulting from globalization was given in paper 2023. Topics like challenges and stresses faced by young people and differences between what older generations think about younger generations was included in paper I of 2022. The value of promising, neighborhood, community service, human rights, extremism, and social networking were given in number of papers to check the category of belief and behavior that further checks the cultural competence through these topics. The topics of dreams and popularity linked to the world of various cultures, music, films, brands, and food products of the Western world are found to be more prevalent in papers of 2017, 2021 and 2015 than the examples of these topics from their own cultures.

The second category from Byram's checklist, named 'Socialization and Life cycle', seen in exam papers, occurred sixteen times with a percentage of 21.62. Topics under this category include areas in which there is a socialization process, e.g., family, college, job, offices, military services, and parties. The contexts for this category included in papers were like places of entertainment, media, technology, schools, language used in schools, bullying, handling victories and defeats, use of I-phones, ticket collection and online bookings for cinemas, courage of failure, gardening and cooking contexts, hobbies, behaving and culture exchange through online gaming, social media chat boxes, comparison with their grandparents, teamwork and interviewing for jobs could also be seen in previous paper-1 and II from 2013 to 2023 under this category.

Next, the category of social and political institutions occurred sixteen times out of seventy-four and included topics such as part-time jobs, money making, working couples, round-the-clock shopping malls, sports and parks, travelling, transports, medicines, Healthcare, clinics, vaccination, judicial courts, and piracy. These topics and themes can be seen in the 2014, 2017, and 2018 papers.

The fourth category of Byram's checklist named as 'social interaction' is included in narrative writing questions in Paper-II from 2013 to 2023 such as on friendship, the interest of a young generation in religion, utilizing marketing strategies and the sale of brands. In other sections, emerging topics where social interaction takes place includes teacher-student interaction inside and outside the class, kids' popular stories of class disorder, class discipline destruction, crime, noise, and accidents could also have been seen in the paper-I of reading comprehension. A much-debated topic of technological incorporation into classroom teaching and student interaction with technology, COVID-19, value of internet over teachers in classrooms were also the themes included in many papers to check the cultural beliefs and behaviors.

The category of National history has occurred one time in all forty-four exam papers, with a percentage of 1.4. According to Byram (1993), this category includes national history and events which does not follow solely the history of Pakistan but in comparison the history of their countries such as England has been given in the comprehension passage. For example, in the comprehension text of paper-II (2014), the background history of Olympic Games was given. Similarly, the category of national geography has occurred six times which included the topics of earthquakes in Philippines and Japan, safari deserts and tornados of Atlantic Ocean. Finding suggests that no topic from the geography of Pakistan were included in the paper(s) and those related to geography and history were not about geography of Pakistan and



national history. Their nature was general like earthquake, weather, saving earth, global warming, dolphins, extinction of Orangutans, and history of Olympic Games. According to Weir (2019) the focus of tests used in the subject of English language due to the process of globalization, moves from localized context to global context which has been introduced as a newly coined term 'glocal'.

## Conclusion

According to the descriptive analysis of frequencies of Byram's eight cultural categories and one sample t-test to explore the quantity of cultural content, it is concluded that paper setters check linguistic competence by giving various topics randomly from different areas but they may not have included it as the objective of assessment to assess intercultural competence by giving questions that typically help assessing students' understanding of the local and foreign cultures. The normal distribution test and t-test of SPSS suggest that the domains and topics from each cultural category should be equally distributed in the questions given in the papers. The content with which students interact in their regular classes at school or during their exams teach values; religious, moral, theoretical, or social in comparison to the fields of National identity, geography, and national history. In this regard, Nieto (2001) states that the teaching of a language means teaching a complex system of cultural norms, principles, and ways of reasoning, attitude and acting. Similarly, if we talk about all cultural categories of Byram's checklist, we may see that the topics from the local culture of Pakistan are less visible in the past papers whereas mostly topics are taken from global culture. The process of globalization has influenced the topics and themes of the content of past papers. Realizing this fact that globalization is medium of change in several fields such as in the field of education, this influences communicative activities, discourse, teaching, learning and assessment strategies (Alptekin, 2002).

The cultural content in the past papers of English language of Cambridge O-Level is influenced by the impact of globalization in terms of technology use and multicultural education (Gay, 2013) related to globalization as seen themes and questions given in the papers. This research paper includes: "homogenization," "transformation," "urbanization," "management," "social interaction," "socialization" "identity," "local and global culture" "growth in technology", "marketing", "trade issues", "impact on the environment", "communication", "brand expansion and recognition" "global warming" "repair mechanism" "pop culture and music" etc. These terms recur in different places, perspectives, and relations to one another in the papers. In the light of the conclusion of this research it is recommended to the paper setters of CIE that they should include more topics from local culture to keep a balance in student understanding of global as well as local culture to check their cultural competence along with linguistic competence. If they include assessment of intercultural competence of students as one of their objectives, new models, and activities at the time of teaching can be added to the curriculum design (Deardorff & Berardo, 2023). Therefore, students at elementary level should be assessed not only for linguistic competence but also for intercultural competence by incorporating it as an objective of current examination system.

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