

## DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE IN TOURISM STUDENTS THROUGH ESP: A MIXED-METHODS STUDY IN AN EMERGING EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

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### **Abstract**

This study investigates the development of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) among tourism students through English for Specific Purposes (ESP) instruction in the context of higher education in Uzbekistan. With the increasing demand for intercultural communication skills in the global tourism industry, the integration of intercultural components into ESP curricula has become a critical yet underexplored area, particularly in emerging educational contexts.

A mixed-methods research design was employed involving 76 undergraduate tourism students at Fergana State University. The study implemented a 12-week ESP instructional intervention incorporating intercultural elements through simulation-based activities and project-based learning, supported by role-plays and authentic tourism scenarios. Quantitative data were collected using pre- and post-tests to measure changes in students' ICC levels, while qualitative data were obtained through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews.

The results demonstrate a statistically significant improvement in students' intercultural communicative competence, particularly in the domains of intercultural attitudes, interaction skills, and cultural awareness. The findings suggest that integrating simulation and project-based learning into ESP instruction provides meaningful opportunities for authentic intercultural engagement and enhances students' readiness for real-world professional communication in tourism settings.

This study contributes to the literature by proposing an integrated ESP-ICC instructional framework tailored to a developing educational context and offers practical implications for curriculum design, pedagogical innovation, and tourism education.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Tourism is one of the most dynamic and rapidly expanding global industries, characterized by continuous intercultural interaction between service providers and international tourists. In this context, English functions as a global lingua franca, enabling communication across diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. However, successful communication in tourism goes beyond linguistic proficiency and requires intercultural communicative competence (ICC), which enables individuals to effectively interpret, negotiate, and respond to cultural differences in real communicative situations.

According to Byram's model of intercultural communicative competence, ICC consists of five key components: attitudes (openness and curiosity), knowledge (of social groups and cultural practices), skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness. This framework has become one of the most influential theoretical foundations in intercultural language education. Despite its significance, many English for Specific Purposes (ESP) programs continue to prioritize linguistic accuracy and functional language use, while giving insufficient attention to intercultural dimensions.

In the context of Uzbekistan, particularly in tourism-related higher education programs, ESP instruction is mainly focused on vocabulary acquisition, grammar, and situational dialogues. Although students may achieve adequate linguistic competence, they often struggle in authentic intercultural interactions with foreign tourists, especially in unpredictable service encounters. This highlights a persistent gap between classroom-based language learning and real-world professional communication demands in the tourism industry.

Recent pedagogical research emphasizes that integrating intercultural elements into ESP instruction can significantly enhance students' communicative performance. In particular, simulation-based learning and project-based learning have been identified as effective approaches for creating authentic, student-centered learning environments. These methods allow learners to engage in realistic tourism scenarios, collaborate in problem-solving tasks, and develop both linguistic and intercultural competencies in a meaningful context.

However, empirical studies investigating the combined use of simulation and project-based learning within ESP instruction for the development of ICC remain limited, especially in emerging educational contexts such as Uzbekistan. Moreover, there is a lack of structured instructional models that operationalize ICC development based on Byram's framework within ESP classrooms.

Therefore, this study aims to examine the impact of a 12-week ESP instructional intervention, conducted exclusively within classroom settings, incorporating simulation and project-based learning activities on the development

of intercultural communicative competence among tourism students at Fergana State University.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. To what extent does ESP instruction integrated with simulation and project-based learning influence students' intercultural communicative competence based on Byram's ICC model?
2. Which components of ICC (attitudes, knowledge, skills, and critical cultural awareness) demonstrate the most significant improvement after the intervention?
3. How do students perceive the effectiveness of simulation and project-based learning in enhancing their intercultural communication skills within ESP classes?

By addressing these questions, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on ESP and intercultural communication by proposing a pedagogically grounded instructional approach that integrates Byram's ICC model into ESP teaching practices. It also offers practical implications for curriculum development and teaching strategies in tourism education within similar educational contexts.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Intercultural Communicative Competence in Language Education**

Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) has become a central construct in contemporary language education, particularly in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) contexts. One of the most widely recognized theoretical frameworks of ICC is proposed by Byram (1997), who conceptualizes ICC as a multidimensional construct consisting of attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness. This model emphasizes that effective communication in intercultural settings requires not only linguistic proficiency but also the ability to mediate between cultures and interpret cultural meanings appropriately.

In recent decades, ICC has been increasingly integrated into foreign language curricula due to the growing demand for professionals capable of functioning in globalized environments. In tourism education, ICC is particularly significant, as tourism professionals frequently interact with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. However, research indicates that traditional language teaching approaches often fail to adequately develop intercultural dimensions, focusing instead on grammatical accuracy and functional language use.

### **English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in Tourism Education**

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is a learner-centered approach that focuses on the specific linguistic needs of learners in particular professional domains. In

tourism education, ESP aims to equip students with the communicative skills required for contexts such as hospitality services, travel management, guiding, and customer interaction.

Needs analysis is a fundamental component of ESP, ensuring that instructional content aligns with real-world professional requirements. Despite its practical orientation, ESP instruction in many higher education institutions remains limited to vocabulary acquisition, situational dialogues, and routine communication patterns. This often results in a gap between classroom learning and authentic workplace communication, where intercultural competence plays a crucial role.

Recent studies suggest that ESP programs should move beyond linguistic competence and integrate intercultural and pragmatic dimensions of communication to better prepare students for global tourism environments.

### **Simulation and Project-Based Learning in Language Instruction**

Simulation-based learning and project-based learning (PBL) have gained increasing attention in language education due to their effectiveness in creating authentic and experiential learning environments. Simulation activities allow learners to engage in realistic scenarios that mimic professional contexts, enabling them to practice decision-making, problem-solving, and communication under conditions similar to real-life situations.

Similarly, project-based learning emphasizes collaborative, task-oriented activities that require students to apply language skills in meaningful contexts. In ESP settings, PBL has been shown to enhance learner engagement, autonomy, and communicative competence by connecting classroom activities with real-world tasks.

In tourism education, these pedagogical approaches are particularly relevant, as they reflect the dynamic and interactive nature of the industry. However, their integration with intercultural communicative competence development remains underexplored.

### **Research Gap and Conceptual Positioning**

Although existing literature acknowledges the importance of ICC, ESP, and experiential learning methodologies such as simulation and project-based learning, there is still a lack of integrated instructional models that combine these three dimensions in a systematic way. In particular, limited empirical research has investigated how ESP instruction enriched with simulation and PBL can facilitate ICC development based on Byram's theoretical framework.

Furthermore, most existing studies have been conducted in well-established educational contexts, while there is a scarcity of research in emerging contexts such

as Uzbekistan, where tourism education is rapidly developing but still undergoing pedagogical transformation.

Therefore, this study addresses this gap by proposing and empirically testing a 12-week ESP-based instructional intervention incorporating simulation and project-based learning to enhance intercultural communicative competence among tourism students.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study employed a **mixed-methods research design**, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to investigate the development of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) among tourism students. The mixed-methods approach was selected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of both measurable changes in ICC levels and students' subjective experiences during the instructional intervention.

A quasi-experimental pre-test and post-test design was implemented to evaluate the effectiveness of the ESP-based instructional intervention.

### Participants and Context

The study was conducted at **Fergana State University, Uzbekistan**, involving **76 undergraduate students** enrolled in tourism-related programs. The participants were selected through convenience sampling, as they were already registered in ESP classes.

The participants were approximately at intermediate English proficiency level (B1–B2 according to CEFR). All students were informed about the purpose of the study and participated voluntarily.

### Intervention Design

The instructional intervention lasted for **12 weeks** and was fully integrated into regular **English for Specific Purposes (ESP) classes**.

The intervention was designed based on **Byram's (1997) intercultural communicative competence model** and included the following pedagogical components:

- **Simulation-based learning activities**, where students engaged in realistic tourism scenarios such as hotel reception, airport communication, and tourist assistance.

- **Project-based learning (PBL) tasks**, including group projects on tourism service design, cultural tour planning, and problem-solving in intercultural contexts.

- **Role-play activities** reflecting authentic intercultural interactions between tourists and service providers.

The intervention aimed to develop not only linguistic competence but also intercultural awareness, attitudes, and interaction skills.

**Data Collection Instruments**

To ensure methodological triangulation, three types of instruments were used:

**1. Intercultural Communicative Competence Test (Pre-test and Post-test)**

A researcher-designed test based on Byram’s ICC framework was administered before and after the intervention to measure changes in students’ intercultural competence.

**2. Questionnaire**

A structured questionnaire using a Likert-scale format was used to assess students’ perceptions of their intercultural development and learning experience.

**3. Semi-Structured Interviews**

A subset of students participated in semi-structured interviews to provide deeper qualitative insights into their experiences with simulation and project-based learning activities.

**Data Analysis**

Quantitative data from pre-test and post-test results were analyzed using **descriptive statistics and paired-sample t-tests** to determine the significance of changes in ICC levels.

Qualitative data from questionnaires and interviews were analyzed using **thematic analysis**, focusing on recurring patterns related to intercultural attitudes, learning engagement, and perceived effectiveness of the instructional methods.

**Validity and Reliability**

To ensure validity, the instruments were reviewed by experts in applied linguistics and ESP methodology. Reliability of the ICC test was checked using Cronbach’s alpha coefficient. Triangulation of data sources (tests, questionnaires, interviews) was used to enhance the credibility of the findings.

**RESULTS**

**Quantitative Results: Pre-test and Post-test Analysis**

The effectiveness of the 12-week ESP-based instructional intervention was evaluated through pre-test and post-test measurements of students’ intercultural communicative competence (ICC).

A paired-sample t-test was conducted to determine whether there was a statistically significant difference between the pre-test and post-test scores.

**Table 1. ICC Pre-test and Post-test Results (n = 76)**

ICC Components	Pre-test Mean (M)	Post-test Mean (M)	Mean Difference	p-value
Intercultural Attitudes	2.91	3.78	+0.87	< 0.001

ICC Components	Pre-test Mean (M)	Post-test Mean (M)	Mean Difference	p-value
Cultural Knowledge	2.85	3.69	+0.84	< 0.001
Interaction Skills	2.73	3.81	+1.08	< 0.001
Cultural Awareness	2.88	3.74	+0.86	< 0.001
<b>Overall ICC Score</b>	<b>2.84</b>	<b>3.76</b>	<b>+0.92</b>	<b>&lt; 0.001</b>

### Interpretation of Quantitative Findings

The results indicate a **statistically significant improvement (p < 0.001)** in all measured components of intercultural communicative competence after the 12-week ESP intervention.

The most notable improvement was observed in **interaction skills (+1.08)**, suggesting that simulation-based activities and project-based learning significantly enhanced students' ability to communicate effectively in realistic intercultural tourism contexts.

Improvements in **intercultural attitudes and cultural awareness** also indicate that students developed a more positive orientation toward cultural differences and a deeper understanding of intercultural communication principles.

Overall, the findings confirm that integrating intercultural elements into ESP instruction has a substantial positive impact on students' ICC development.

### Qualitative Findings (Thematic Summary)

Analysis of questionnaire responses and semi-structured interviews revealed three main themes:

#### 1. Increased Confidence in Real Communication

Students reported feeling more confident when interacting with foreign tourists due to simulation-based practice.

#### 2. Authenticity of Learning Experience

Participants emphasized that project-based tasks created a realistic learning environment that closely reflected actual tourism situations.

#### 3. Development of Cultural Sensitivity

Students noted improved awareness of cultural differences and better understanding of appropriate communication behavior in intercultural settings.

### Summary of Results

Overall, both quantitative and qualitative data consistently demonstrate that the ESP intervention enriched with simulation and project-based learning significantly enhanced students' intercultural communicative competence.

### DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that integrating intercultural communicative competence (ICC) development into English for Specific Purposes

(ESP) instruction significantly enhances tourism students' intercultural skills. The statistically significant improvement observed in all ICC components confirms that language learning, when combined with intercultural pedagogy, becomes more effective in preparing students for real-world professional communication.

The most substantial improvement was observed in interaction skills, which can be attributed to the use of simulation-based learning and project-based learning activities. These methods created authentic communicative environments that allowed students to actively engage in realistic tourism scenarios. This finding is consistent with previous research suggesting that experiential learning approaches enhance communicative competence by bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application.

The improvement in intercultural attitudes and cultural awareness further supports Byram's (1997) theoretical framework, which emphasizes the importance of openness and critical cultural awareness in intercultural communication. The results indicate that students not only improved their ability to communicate in English but also developed a more positive and reflective attitude toward cultural differences.

From a pedagogical perspective, the findings confirm that traditional ESP instruction, which often focuses primarily on linguistic accuracy and functional language use, is insufficient for preparing students for intercultural communication in the tourism industry. The integration of simulation and project-based learning within ESP classes provides students with opportunities to engage in meaningful interaction, problem-solving, and decision-making in culturally diverse contexts.

The study also highlights the importance of context-specific language instruction in emerging educational environments such as Uzbekistan. In such contexts, students often have limited exposure to authentic intercultural communication outside the classroom. Therefore, structured classroom-based interventions become crucial in developing ICC.

Furthermore, the results support the argument that ESP instruction should move beyond a purely linguistic focus and incorporate intercultural dimensions as an essential component of curriculum design. The positive outcomes of this study suggest that combining Byram's ICC framework with experiential learning methodologies offers a powerful pedagogical model for tourism education.

However, this study is not without limitations. The sample size was limited to one institution, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the intervention was conducted over a relatively short period of 12 weeks. Future research could explore longitudinal studies and include multiple institutions to validate and extend these findings.

## 7. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study examined the development of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) among tourism students through English for Specific Purposes (ESP) instruction at Fergana State University, Uzbekistan. The research was designed as a 12-week mixed-methods intervention integrating simulation-based learning and project-based learning within ESP classroom instruction.

The findings demonstrate that integrating intercultural components into ESP instruction leads to a significant improvement in students' ICC, particularly in intercultural interaction skills, attitudes, and cultural awareness. The results confirm that language instruction alone is insufficient for preparing students for professional communication in the tourism industry, where intercultural interaction is a core requirement.

The study further validates Byram's (1997) intercultural communicative competence framework as a relevant theoretical foundation for designing ESP curricula that aim to develop both linguistic and intercultural abilities.

### **Pedagogical Implications**

The findings of this study have several important implications for English language teaching in tourism education.

First, ESP curricula should move beyond a purely linguistic focus and systematically integrate intercultural competence development. This can be achieved through structured pedagogical approaches such as simulation-based learning and project-based tasks that reflect real-world tourism contexts.

Second, language teachers should adopt learner-centered and experiential teaching methods that allow students to actively engage in meaningful communication rather than passively learning language structures. Such approaches enhance both motivation and practical communicative competence.

Third, curriculum designers and educational policymakers should consider incorporating ICC-based learning outcomes into tourism education programs to better align academic training with industry demands.

### **Theoretical Implications**

This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by empirically supporting the integration of Byram's ICC model within ESP instruction. It demonstrates that ICC development can be effectively operationalized in classroom settings through experiential learning methodologies. The study also extends current ESP literature by proposing a context-sensitive instructional approach applicable to emerging educational environments.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Despite its contributions, this study has certain limitations. The research was conducted with a relatively small sample size from a single institution, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the intervention period was limited to 12 weeks.

Future research is encouraged to conduct longitudinal studies across multiple institutions and explore the long-term impact of intercultural training within ESP programs. Further studies may also investigate the role of digital technologies, such as virtual simulations and AI-based learning tools, in enhancing ICC development.

### Final Remark

Overall, this study highlights the importance of integrating intercultural competence development into ESP instruction and provides empirical evidence that simulation and project-based learning are effective pedagogical tools for preparing tourism students for global professional communication.

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