Bridging the Gap: Integrating Intercultural Communication into Language Curricula at the University of Tripoli to Meet Global Labor Market Demands

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ABSTRACT

This study reveals a deficit in language-related degree programs pedagogy at the University of Tripoli in relation to graduates' aspired employment areas. Drawing on Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory and Mezirow's transformative learning framework, the paper examined program evaluations of expected graduates from the Departments of English, French, Italian and Spanish in order to find out how aware are they of the strengths and weaknesses of their programs, thus, their own strengths and weakness as graduates from the specified departments; and how well-prepared for the labor market do they feel. Questionnaires were distributed to the targeted participants and internal consistency of the binary-response instrument employed was assessed using the Kuder-Richardson Formula 20 (KR-20), yielding limited but expected reliability coefficients attributable to the exploratory nature of the study. The study found that most participants are satisfied with the academic knowledge provided during their years of study in their respective programs; however, a large proportion indicated lack of practical skills development, which was further linked to inadequate development of interactive skills including interpersonal skills, cultural competence and emotional intelligence - a pattern consistent with findings documented across comparable North African university contexts. Building on the findings, and in response to a gap similarly identified across the region, the paper suggests incorporating an intercultural communication course into all language-related degree programs considering the merits of such an initiative which include creating graduates who can function and interact successfully in a continuously globalizing world.

Keywords: Cross-Cultural Competence (CCC); Cultural Intelligence (CQ); Intercultural Competence (IC); Emotional Intelligence (EQ); Transformative Learning

الملخص

تكشف هذه الدراسة عن قصور في مناهج برامج شهادة الليسانس في تخصص اللغات مقارنةً بمجالات العمل التي يطمح إليها خريجون هذه البرامج. استنادا على نظرية الأبعاد الثقافية لهوفستيد ونظرية التعلم التحويلي لميزيرو، تناولت الدراسة تقييمات للبرامج من قبل الطلبة المتوقع تخرجهم من أقسام اللغة الإنجليزية والفرنسية والإيطالية والإسبانية بهدف معرفة

مدى إدراكهم لنقاط القوة والضعف لبرامجهم الدراسية، وبالتالي نقاط قوتهم وضعفهم كخريجين من هذه الأقسام ومدى شعورهم بالاستعداد لسوق العمل. تم توزيع استبيانات على المشاركين المستهدفين كما تم تقييم الاتساق الداخلي لأداة القياس ذات الاجابات الثنائية باستخدام معادلة كودر ريتشاردسون 20 التي اسفرت عن معاملات ثبات محدودة متوقعة نتيجة لطبيعة البحث الاستكشافية. استنتجت الدراسة أن معظم المشاركين راضون عن المعرفة الأكاديمية التي تلقوها خلال سنوات دراستهم في برامجهم؛ إلا أن نسبة كبيرة منهم أشارت إلى محدودية في تنمية المهارات العملية، وهو ما يرتبط بدوره بمحدودية في تنمية المهارات التفاعلية بما في ذلك المهارات الشخصية والكفاءة الثقافية والذكاء العاطفي – وهو نمط يتفق مع ما وثّقته دراسات مماثلة في سياقات جامعية بشمال أفريقيا. بناءً على هذه النتائج، واستجابةً لوجود هذه الفجوة التي رُصدت على المستوى الإقليمي، تقترح الدراسة إدراج مقرر في التواصل بين الثقافات لكافة طلبة تخصص اللغات نظرًا لمزايا هذه المبادرة التي تشمل تخريج كوادر قادرة على العمل والتفاعل بنجاح في عالم يتجه نحو العولمة باستمرار.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الكفاءة عبر الثقافات؛ الذكاء الثقافي؛ الكفاءة بين الثقافات؛ الذكاء العاطفي؛ التعلم التحويلي

Introduction

Most students choose to study languages to teach or to work in some sort of a multinational context such as foreign/ private companies, business or diplomacy. In order to function effectively in these contexts, linguistic competence would most likely not be enough for achieving effective communication and to establish healthy work relations (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003). This is because these places are expected to bring together people from different cultural backgrounds. Therefore, in order to communicate and interact effectively, one would have to have good cultural knowledge and awareness of "Self" and "the Other" in order to avoid the creation of a socially deconstructed work environment which is expected due to miscommunication, exclusion and discrimination issues resulting from cultural differences (Garcia-Bulle, 2022). Hence, in order to achieve effective communication, inclusion, collaboration and to effectively operate within any culturally diverse context, *cross-cultural competence* (CCC) is needed.

CCC refers to "the ability to effectively communicate, interact, and work with people from cultures other than one's own" (Magala, 2005). CCC equips individuals with the awareness, knowledge and skills needed to navigate cultural differences and overcome cultural expectations in order

to achieve best outcomes through empathy, respect for diversity and adaptability (Magala, 2005). Several studies (Aljoundi, 2025; Omar, 2020) on English foreign language teaching in Libyan higher education have pointed out persistent cultural and institutional challenges which hinder students' communicative development including the absence of intercultural training and the dominance of teacher-centered, skills-separated approaches. At the University of Tripoli, language and translation specialization students mainly study subjects related to language proficiency, translation, linguistics and literature; and although these courses are significantly important, education at university level should be "inseparably linked to the cultivation of cross-cultural competence" (Karimova et al., 2024). Hence, cultural communication knowledge must be integrated into undergraduate language-related degree programs in order to help graduate students become successful professionals, competent communicators and global citizens (Okunishi & Tanaka, 2023). This needed transformation has already been highlighted by several studies conducted across North African university contexts (i.e., Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco) examining intercultural communication and the need to make curricular reforms to address intercultural components central to effective foreign language learning (Mehdaoui, 2023; Smaoui, 2021; Benattabou, 2020). Notably, however, no equivalent study has been conducted within the Libyan university context, which is a gap the present study seeks to address.

Literature Review

An important aspect of CCC is *cultural intelligence* (CQ). This includes the metacognitive processes (self-checking and adjusting cultural assumptions and expectations before and during an encounter) and the cognitive processes (understanding and acknowledging cultural differences and similarities) individuals go through when interacting in diverse cultural settings in order to adapt more effectively with people who are expected to think and behave differently (Ang et al., 2007). CQ highly correlates with *intercultural competence* (IC) which is "the ability to think and act in interculturally appropriate ways" (Hammer et al., 2003). Both CQ and IC explain the arguably effective interactivity of some people over others when it comes to interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds (Li, 2020). Thus, it would be reasonable to assume that in order for any graduate (not only those specializing in language-related

programs) to be successful in their future careers, they must possess high CQ and need to be equipped with good IC skills particularly if they aim to work or might need to work in a multicultural setting in today's continuously globalizing world. Consequently, being interculturally competent is significantly even more important for language-related specialization students since the aim of language is communication, and without CQ & IC communication would most likely fail.

According to Bennett (1986), in order for people to become more interculturally competent, they must progress from ethnocentric orientation (poor CQ) conceptualized in denying, defeating and minimizing other cultures to ethnorelative orientation (high CQ) conceptualized in willingness to accept, adapt and integrate with other cultures. This progression must, therefore, be achieved by language-related specialization students in order for them to become more interculturally competent and to help them develop higher CQ which should, consequently, enable them to function successfully in culturally diverse settings. In other words, language-related specialization graduates should firstly be made ready to *accept* that their own culture is only one of many other existing cultures and that cultures can be very or slightly different to one another. Secondly, they must learn how to *adapt* behaviors to the culture of the other through empathy, assimilation but also authenticity. Thirdly, they should become able to *integrate* comfortably in any given context by being able to detach from cultural constrains which form one's identity and expand "to include the moment in and out of different cultural worldviews" (Bennett, 2004). It would, thus, be best if this progression started and became familiar during the years in education prior to graduation through direct courses aimed at understanding, developing and enhancing CCC.

There are several factors related to cultural expectations and behaviors which can hinder the process of ultimately integrating in a culturally diverse environment. In their study focusing on how Japanese students adapt and integrate in France with their French peers, Okunishi & Tanaka (2023) examined *assertiveness*, which includes aspects such as expressiveness, sensitivity and indirectness of expressions; and *sociability*, which includes aspects such as physical contact in greetings, keeping

distance during interaction and punctuality as factors which caused miscommunication and maladaptation between the Japanese and the French as the two cultures have different cultural norms when it comes to the mentioned dimensions. Although the study focuses on the context of education, the findings can still be applied on any cultural setting in which people from different cultural backgrounds are expected to interact. Therefore, to help language-related specialization students have successful experiences when interacting and communicating with people from different cultural backgrounds, they need to be taught about the variations in interpersonal and cultural behaviors and how to interpret them in order to become equipped with the social support needed to help them make more appropriate behavior choices relevant to the cultural settings of interaction.

Moving on to another angle, it is important to point out that learning about culture supports language proficiency since "culture is communication and communication is culture" (Hall, 1959). In an interaction, the participants are expected to involve not only linguistic input but also their own cultural beliefs and values in order to achieve mutual comprehension. Consequently, culture should be understood as "the very core of language teaching" (Smakova & Paulsrud, 2020), and as Byram (1997) puts it "teaching for linguistic competence (in the foreign language) cannot be separated from teaching for intercultural competence". Therefore, and particularly at university level, foreign language learners must go through the different stages/ processes for developing cultural competencies in knowledge, awareness, attitudes, and skills along with learning and using a foreign language (Smakova & Paulsrud, 2020). Consequently, language-related specialization students must not only learn through traditional aspects of language focusing on developing linguistic proficiency through teaching grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation as they should also learn the meaningful and communicative use of the language (Smakova & Paulsrud, 2020). In other words, before graduating and entering labor market, students must understand that "language does not serve just as a tool to send or receive information; rather, it represents social behavior in particular cultural settings"; and that failure in understanding a cultural context or a social behavior (verbal or non-verbal) can result in miscommunication or even stop the interaction from happening (Smakova & Paulsrud, 2020).

Intercultural knowledge integration in language specific undergraduate degree programs is particularly crucial for students learning languages in the Libyan context in order to ensure that students do not only develop linguistic proficiency before graduation but also the knowledge needed to navigate cultural differences in professional contexts. This is relevant considering the fact that, similar to Arab cultures, the Libyan culture scores high on *power distance* (acceptance of hierarchical inequality) and *uncertainty avoidance* and is considered a *collectivistic* not *individualistic* culture by Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions theory which explains the differences between national cultures in terms of the mentioned dimensions. This further points out that the cultural values of Libyan language graduates may conflict with the workplace norms of many Western or multinational environments they aspire to work in. Although Hofstede's framework has been criticized for its tendency to treat national cultures as static and homogeneous (McSweeney, 2002), it still offers a fundamental starting point for identifying the broad cultural patterns that language graduates must learn to recognize, negotiate, and work across if they are to meet the demands of the global labor market. Similarly, Mezirow's (1997) transformative learning framework further suggests that intercultural competence cannot be developed only through linguistic instructions as it also requires carefully designed learning experiences that challenge students to *confront* cultural assumptions, critically *reflect* on cultural differences, and consciously *reconstruct* their understanding of communication across cultural boundaries. In the Libyan university context, language-related degree programs seem to priorities grammatical accuracy and textual knowledge over the kind of reflective, experience-based learning that transformative pedagogy demands which, as the present study will revel, requires curricular reform.

CCC and all that it enfolds is crucial not only for those specializing in language and translation aspiring to work in business or diplomacy as it is also as important for those who aspire to teach in the future. On this regard, and as Nagymzhanova et al., (2024) further explain, educators may fail to understand and interpret the actions, behaviors or attitudes of some students who come from different cultural backgrounds which would hinder the learning process and negatively affect the learning experience of the student. All this, as the authors explain, is due to the cultural clash

which results when the teacher is not familiar with the nonverbal cues, gestures, physical movement and learning styles of the culture the student comes from. CCC is further linked to *emotional intelligence* (EQ) which is "the ability to be aware of one's emotions and the emotions of others" (Goleman, 1995). EQ can naturally develop in students who are provided with adequate cultural education and those who have developed CCC as EQ implies positively perceiving, sympathizing and empathizing with the "other" through the stages of progressing from ethnocentric to ethnorelative orientation (as explained above) (Nagymzhanova et al., 2024). Thus, in order to diminish cultural conflict and ensure friendly environment at work or in classroom settings, CCC is key. In fact, although students who expect to work in culturally diverse environments are expected to think more critically about interactions and are more prone to accept cultural knowledge, any person who develops CCC will become more able to communicate more effectively in "every sphere of society" (Nagymzhanova et al., 2024). Therefore, it would be reasonable to emphasize that all undergraduate students should be provided with effective intercultural courses in order to help them develop personal and interpersonal awareness, knowledge and sensitivity which would enable them to master certain skills and adapt certain behaviors to achieve effective communication in a culturally diverse labor market continuously affected by globalization.

Methodology

The targeted participants for this study were seventh and eighth semester students (expected graduates) studying at the department of English, French, Italian and Spanish language. The total number of participants was 70 divided as: 36, 20, 9 and 5 from the Department of English, French, Italian and Spanish respectively. The reason why there were more participants from the Department of English is attributed to the fact that there are generally more students studying English than any other language; consequently, there are more expected graduates from this department compared to any other language department.

A *binary response format* questionnaire (Agree/Disagree and Yes/No) was designed then distributed personally and randomly to the targeted participants. The employed questionnaire format was chosen because it is

more practical for administration and data collection within the constraints of the distribution time (final exams week of the spring term 2025). The questionnaire consisted of three perspectives informed by Mezirow's (1997) transformative learning framework: personal (learner's existing frame of reference), reflective (critical reflection) and practical (readiness for action); and Arabic translation was included to guarantee accurate comprehension and feedback since a reasonable proportion of the participants were not English majors. The personal perspective indicates why the participants chose their degree program and where do they aspire to work; whereas the reflective perspective tells more about what the participants think about what they had learnt (practical and academic knowledge) during their years of study within their respective departments. As for the practical perspective, this gives a more in-depth assessment of the skills the participants feel they had developed during their years of study or still need to develop (see Appendix 1 for student questionnaire sample). A series of Chi-square tests were performed on the data in order to find out whether there were any statistically significant associations across the differences in skills developed and skills needing improvement across the examined departments.

Since the student questionnaire consisted of dichotomous (Yes/No and Agree/Disagree) response format, the *Kuder-Richardson Formula 20 (KR-20)* was employed as a reliability measure to assess the internal consistency of the questionnaire's binary option items (Kuder & Richardson, 1937) not the *Cronbach's Alpha*, which is employed for continuous or polytomous scale data. The analysis was conducted separately for each subscale: the Reflective Perspective (4 items) and the two Practical Perspective subscales — Skills Developed (5 items) and Skills Needing Improvement (5 items) — rather than across the instrument as a whole, given that the three subscales measure conceptually distinct constructs.

Analysis

Prior to the analysis of the collected data and as highlighted in the methodology section regarding KR-20, Table 1 below shows that the KR-20 coefficient for the *Skills Developed* subscale was **0.55**, and for the *Skills Needing Improvement* subscale was **0.52**. The *Reflective Perspective* items yielded a negative KR-20 coefficient of **-0.28**, which indicates that those

four items do not function as a unified scale, as they capture conceptually opposing beliefs (e.g., 'what I studied will benefit my employment' versus 'what I studied is not enough'), and should therefore be interpreted independently as descriptive indicators rather than as a reliability-tested scale.

Table 1: KR-20 Internal Consistency Coefficients by Subscale

Subscale	*K*	KR-20	Interpretation
Reflective Perspective	4	–.28	Not a unified scale
Skills Developed	5	.55	Poor / Limited
Skills Needing Improvement	5	.52	Poor / Limited

Note. KR-20 ≥ 0.70 is considered acceptable for research instruments. The low values obtained are attributable to the binary response format, which inherently limits item variance.

Since the questionnaire was designed as an *exploratory instrument* rather than a validated psychometric scale, the limited reliability coefficients obtained are consistent and expected with the known psychometric constraints of binary-response instruments (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). Therefore, the findings indicated below are interpreted as exploratory and descriptive indicators of students' self-perceived experiences and competencies, and no causal or inferential claims are made on the basis of the instrument scores alone. Despite all, the findings still provide meaningful insights into the gap between students' academic preparation and their work aspirations, which remains the central focus of this study.

Starting with the *personal perspective*, this seems to go in line with the literature as it shows that 49% of the participants chose to study their degree programs - English, French, Italian and Spanish - out of *passion* followed by almost 40% who made the same decision for *good employment prospects*. On this regard, and from the employment options given in the questionnaire, more than half of the participants (60%) indicated that they seek to work in *diplomacy* or *international organizations* whereas 47% specified that they would want to work in education or business. This proves what was discussed in the literature that most students who choose to study languages would most likely, one way or another, work in a culturally diverse environment where direct and

indirect personal interaction with people who have different cultural backgrounds - hence expectations - is expected. Therefore, and as explained in the literature, if students were not equipped with CQ and EQ - thus were not cross-culturally competent - they would most likely struggle with achieving effective communication, work relations and, consequently, they would not thrive in their careers.

Table 2: Personal Perspective (Motivations & Goals)

Category	Data Point	Percentage
Motivation for Study	Passion	49%
	Good employment prospects	40%
Career Aspirations	Diplomacy or International Organizations	60%
	Education or Business	47%*

Note: Percentages exceed 100% because participants could select multiple options.

Moving on to the *reflective perspective*, although a majority of the participants (70%) believe that what they had studied during their university years will benefit them when working in their aspired areas of employment, 40% believe that what they had studied is actually not enough. The former percentage can be linked to the 87% of participants who said they had acquired important academic knowledge during their years of study. These trends could imply that the majority of participants seem to believe that they can employ the academic knowledge they had acquired during their years of study, and that it would be sufficient in their future jobs which actually contradicts what the personal perspective had revealed about the participants' aspired areas of employment being it places which mostly require skills over academic knowledge. On the other hand, the percentage of participants who believe that what they had studied is not enough can be regarded more logical as it can be linked to the 37% of participants who indicated that they did not acquire important practical skills during their years of study; which is most likely the missing aspect that initially made most of the previously mentioned 40% believe that what they had studied during their years in university is not sufficient.

Table 3: Reflective Perspective (Academic vs. Practical)

Category	Statement / Belief	Percentage
Academic Value	Acquired important academic knowledge	87%
Utility	What was studied will benefit future employment	70%
Practical Gap	Did **not** acquire important practical skills	37%
Sufficiency	What was studied is **not** enough	40%

As for the *practical perspective*, although 4% of participants indicated that they required no further skill development - one noting "I don't feel like I need to work on any of these skills" (open-ended comment field response; included here for illustrative purposes only); the remaining 96% revealed more significant trends. Starting with the skill of *speaking*, which was outlined for the participants as being able to effectively speak and communicate in the language of study using adequate grammar, vocabulary and expressions, 76% of the participants indicated that they *still* need improvement (the highest percentage for skills to be further developed) compared to only 23% who consider their speaking skills to be well developed. As for the skill of *writing*, 43% claimed that they can write and respond to emails, reports, requests and recommendations professionally and effectively whereas 69% believe they are not good enough and that they *still* need to work on this skill (the third highest percentage for skills to be further developed). Also on this regard, from the list of skills provided, it is worth noting that some participants (7%) only chose speaking and writing as the skills to be further developed in order to become successful in their areas of employment. All the mentioned trends imply that most language specialization students seem to give significant importance and attention to perfecting language proficiency which can be attributed to a lack of awareness of the importance of personal interactive skills. In other words, it seems as if the participants reckon that maybe by only learning a new language (i.e., being able to speak and write in the language) one would naturally acquire CQ and EQ since the language would enable them to communicate with presumably culturally-different individuals. Consequently, to them, it would be more important to focus on developing language skills over interactive skills.

Table 4: Practical Perspective (Language & Professional Skills)

Skill Area	Status	Percentage
Speaking	Proficient	23%
	Needs improvement	76%
Writing	Proficient	43%
	Needs improvement	69%
Labor Readiness	Claim to be "fully equipped" (no skills need work)	4%
Focus	Chose *only* speaking and writing as skills to be developed	7%

For *interpersonal skills*, which was explained for the participants as being flexible, creative and collaborative when working as a team leader/ member, 44% believe they had developed this skill during their study years compared to 60% who believe they still need to develop it. From the %60, 58% studied English which can be attributed to several reasons: 1. the small number of participants from French, Italian and Spanish departments; 2. some of the courses taught to French, Italian and Spanish students do actually directly or indirectly help develop interpersonal skills - which needs further study; 3. the participants gave their feedback based on self-evaluation (i.e., skills they have developed outside of university) rather than evaluating what they had developed through their degree programs.

As for *emotional intelligence,* which was defined for the participants as being aware of the differences between self and the other, including self-control and self-regulation, in order to interact and communicate successfully and overcome conflict and misunderstandings, this skill is notably considered well-developed by almost half of the participants as 49% said so whereas 57% believe the skill needs further development. This aspect of the study needs further investigation since, according to Hofstede's (2001) framework, a targeted curriculum intervention aimed at developing EQ in professional contexts is needed in order for EQ to be well developed in cultural contexts similar to that of the Libyan culture (i.e. high power-distance-collectivistic) which is governed by implicit cultural norms rather than explicit. Therefore, as pointed out above, further investigation is needed in order to find out whether some courses across the examined departments – particularly the French, Italian and Spanish - do actually help directly with the development of EQ.

On the other hand, for *cultural competence,* and although similarly to emotional intelligence it was defined for the participants as being able to work effectively and navigate cultural differences with people who come from different cultural backgrounds; and despite the link between cultural competence and emotional intelligence (as explained in the literature), it was interesting to find that 73% feel they still need to develop it— a figure that is notably distant from what was found for emotional intelligence; yet very significant as it directly reflects the absence of intercultural communication knowledge in the current curriculum. The figure is also important as cultural competence was actually the second skill rated as needing further development by most participants immediately after speaking and not very far away from it (73% and 76% respectively) which implies that most students are actually aware of an aspect of language learning that they are lacking.

Table 5: Interactive Skills (Interpersonal skills, EQ and CQ)

Skill Area	Perceived Status	Percentage
Interpersonal Skills	Developed during study	44%
	Needs further development	60%
Emotional Intelligence	Developed during study	49%
	Needs further development	57%

Cultural Competence	Developed during study	31%
	Needs further development	73%

The data revealed no significant associations between student's reflective perceptions, their motivation for choosing their program, or their work aspirations and any of the practical skill variables, which suggests that regardless of the student's background or goal, there is an experienced disconnect between academic preparation and practical readiness for labor market. On the other hand, there was a significant association between *department* (English, French, Italian and Spanish) and the development of *speaking skills* ($\chi^2(3)=10.558$, $p=0.014$), *writing skills* ($\chi^2(3)=12.947$, $p=0.005$), and *emotional intelligence* ($\chi^2(3)=9.262$, $p=0.026$) as well as with the perception that *writing skills still need improvement* ($\chi^2(3)=12.900$, $p=0.005$) with English majors reporting higher rates across the mentioned areas compared to French, Italian and Spanish majors. All this suggests that further study is required in order to assess whether the teaching materials, techniques and approaches employed across the examined departments differ in terms of: 1. The amount of speaking-focused courses aimed at providing support and practice in the targeted language to enhance students confidence in their oral communication skills; 2. The amount and variation of writing-focused courses and assignments in the targeted language; 3. The integration of interactive and discussion-based teaching techniques which support the development of interpersonal and emotional competencies.

Table 6: Chi-Square Tests of Association between Department and Skill Variables (N = 70)

Variable	χ^2	df	p
Skills Developed			
Speaking	10.558	3	.014*
Writing	12.947	3	.005**
Emotional intelligence	9.262	3	.026*
Skills Needing Improvement			
Writing	12.900	3	.005**

Note. Department categories: English (n = 36), French (n = 20), Italian (n = 9), Spanish (n = 5). All tests used Pearson chi-square with df = 3. Non-significant associations were found for interpersonal skills developed ($\chi^2(3) = 4.365$, $p = .225$), cultural competence developed ($\chi^2(3) = 6.069$, $p = .108$), speaking needing improvement ($\chi^2(3) = 6.854$, $p = .077$), interpersonal skills needing improvement ($\chi^2(3) = 1.782$, $p = .619$), cultural competence needing improvement ($\chi^2(3) = 0.694$, $p = .875$), and emotional intelligence needing improvement ($\chi^2(3) = 6.050$, $p = .109$). No significant associations were found between department and any reflective perspective variables (all ps > .30). * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Conclusion

This study has revealed that although expected graduates are satisfied with the academic knowledge they have been provided with during their years of study in their respective departments, a significant percentage acknowledges that they did not develop enough practical skills, particularly cultural competence, and that development is still needed after graduation. From the analysis of the data it also became evident that a great proportion of students were able to link the lack of practical skills development to interactive skills development during their years at university. The study also shows that although, as most of the participants indicated, academic knowledge and speaking and writing proficiently in the language are significantly important for employment prospects, the deficit of lacking practical skills which include CQ, IC and EQ emphasizes urgent integration of intercultural communication knowledge into language-related degree programs which aligns with the theoretical position of Mezirow's (1997) transformative learning theory. In fact, and since globalization has become the defining paradigm across every academic and professional field, providing an *intercultural communication course* (see Appendix 2 for suggested course syllabus) to all undergraduate students can be of a great advantage as it would enable them to become more confident and comfortable working with people from different cultural backgrounds since such course would help them understand, develop and enhance CCC. Through this one basic course, inspired by Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions theory and Okunishi & Tanaka's (2023) study framework, students can develop an awareness of the extent to which cultural dimensions such as individualism, uncertainty avoidance and power distance which include assertiveness

(expressiveness, sensitivity and indirectness of expressions) and sociability (physical contact in greetings, keeping distance during interaction and punctuality) shape communication norms across professional settings. All this can help any student develop CQ and EQ through which they can better adapt, modify and interpret cultural behaviors in order to: 1. achieve effective communication and healthy work relations; 2. overcome conflict and miscommunication.

Although the study provides insightful findings about expected graduates' self-perceived readiness for the labor market and offers meaningful foundation for curricular reform, further research is still required in order to reach more statistically reliable assessment and concrete conclusions regarding students' perceived skill development and competency gaps. This can be achieved through a bigger sample across the examined departments and a *five-point Likert* scale questionnaire format to eliminate response biasness, social desirability effects and variation in how individual students interpret and assess their own competencies. Further research based on external assessment of the current curriculum is also recommended in order to investigate how much what is being taught actually helps with developing EQ and cultural competence since these are complex concepts which cannot be self-rated. Future research should also incorporate lecturers' perspectives on the current curriculum in order to assess the institutional awareness of the identified gap and to validate and compliment the present findings.

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