

Enhancing Intercultural Communicative Competence in EFL Education for Sustainable Development and Globalization Challenges

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Abstract

In response to the ongoing challenges posed by globalization, this research investigates the critical need for enhancing Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) among EFL learners within Saudi universities. Employing qualitative research methods, including in-depth interviews with twenty-eight stakeholders in seven Saudi universities, this study emphasizes the urgency of bolstering ICC within EFL curricula. The findings underscore the profound significance of integrating authentic intercultural experiences and creating pragmatic avenues for skill refinement. While acknowledging the consensus regarding the importance of enhancing ICC in EFL education, this research also sheds light on various obstacles that may impede the effective integration of ICC. These obstacles encompass limited resources, resistance to change, constraints arising from cultural diversity, language barriers, cultural stereotypes, biases, and time constraints, thus underscoring the need for meticulous planning, resource allocation, and the provision of professional development opportunities. This research strongly advocates for an unwavering commitment to continued research in this field, with the primary goal of advancing ICC among EFL learners. The study offers a range of strategic proposals, including the integration of ICC into the curriculum, the facilitation of cultural immersion opportunities, the promotion of cross-cultural collaboration and communication, the integration of technology for intercultural learning, the provision of intercultural training for EFL educators, and the cultivation of partnerships with international businesses and organizations. The implications of this study are significant for educators, policymakers, and researchers dedicated to fostering intercultural understanding and sustainable development through EFL education. Further research in these areas can deepen our understanding of how to effectively enhance ICC in EFL education, address the challenges identified, and ultimately contribute to the promotion of intercultural understanding and sustainable development in our increasingly interconnected world.

Keywords: EFL education; global engagement; intercultural communicative competence, Saudi universities, sustainable development

1. Introduction

Globalization has heightened the need for nations to adapt to rapidly evolving economic landscapes. Vision 2030's emphasis on economic diversification aligns with this imperative. By moving away from sole reliance on oil revenues and embracing diverse industries such as technology, tourism, and renewable energy, Saudi Arabia positions itself to thrive in an interconnected global economy. This strategy not only enhances economic resilience but also fosters innovation and competitiveness on the global stage. Amidst globalization's impacts, societal and political shifts within Saudi Arabia play a pivotal role in driving sustainable development. Initiatives promoting inclusivity, gender equality, and the empowerment of youth resonate with global goals for sustainable and equitable societies. These internal reforms not only benefit the nation but also contribute to the broader global discourse on social progress and justice sustainability (AlArjani, et al 2021).

The National Transformation Program (NTP) 2020 serves as the backbone of Saudi Arabia's efforts, strategically outlining objectives across economic, social, and environmental spheres. In the context of globalization, this program is crucial as it positions the nation to adapt and thrive within the evolving global landscape while staying committed to sustainable development (Nurunnabi, 2017).

Addressing sustainability challenges necessitates a comprehensive approach. Saudi Arabia's investments in renewable energy, conservation of natural resources, and efforts to mitigate climate change align with global sustainability agendas. By actively engaging in sustainable practices, the nation demonstrates its commitment to environmental stewardship and serves as a beacon for others facing similar challenges. Furthermore, as a global contributor, Saudi Arabia's commitment to nurturing a sustainable future extends beyond its borders. Collaborations, investments, and participation in international initiatives underscore the nation's dedication to being an active player in global sustainability efforts.

Yet, Saudi Arabia, like many nations, confronts multifaceted sustainability challenges that transcend borders and are deeply influenced by cultural intricacies. Cultural perspectives significantly shape how these challenges are perceived and addressed. Consequently, effective solutions hinge on collaborative efforts among individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, all united by a shared aspiration for sustainable development. Within this context, the study of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) assumes paramount importance.

Research in ICC offers insights into how cultural disparities influence the perception and response to sustainability issues. This understanding, in turn, informs more effective communication strategies and outreach initiatives. Moreover, ICC, coupled with an appreciation for cultural diversity, serves as the linchpin for fostering relationships and trust among individuals from varied cultures—an indispensable element in advancing cooperation and collaboration towards overarching sustainability objectives.

Recognizing the intrinsic interplay between ICC and EFL learning, it becomes evident that proficient EFL learners are well-positioned to play a central role in advancing sustainability efforts on a global scale. Proficiency in English is increasingly vital in our interconnected world, where cross-border communication and collaboration underpin economic progress. English has emerged as the lingua franca for international discourse and commerce (Crystal, 2012). Proficiency in English equips individuals with the language skills essential for engaging in the global economy and working within multinational corporations (Mansilla, et al, 2022).

In a globalized world, where interactions across borders and cultures are frequent, ICC becomes crucial for fostering understanding, cooperation, and ultimately, sustainable development. The integration of ICC into English language programs holds significance due to the widespread use of English as a global lingua franca. By incorporating ICC components into language learning, individuals can not only improve their language skills but also develop a deeper understanding of cultural differences, communication styles, and perspectives. This approach aligns with the notion that effective communication across cultures is a fundamental aspect of sustainable development in a globalized world. Tailoring these strategies specifically for Saudi Arabia involves understanding the nation's unique cultural context, societal norms, and values. This contextualization is crucial for designing ICC-focused English language programs that resonate with Saudi learners, considering their specific needs and challenges in navigating a globalized environment while preserving cultural identity.

In a job market that demands effective communication with colleagues and clients from diverse cultural backgrounds, EFL learning is instrumental (Nghia, et al, 2023). Proficient EFL learners can further bolster sustainability by harnessing their ICC. They can develop adept communication strategies, navigate cultural nuances, and bridge divides between different cultures to craft sustainable solutions that respect cultural sensitivities and distinctions. By enhancing the ICC of EFL learners, individuals gain profound insights into other cultures and their values, fostering empathy and mutual understanding. This, in turn, promotes cross-cultural comprehension—an indispensable element for the sustainable development of economies.

In light of these considerations, this study seeks to address two fundamental research questions:

1. How does ICC influence sustainability initiatives and address globalization challenges, particularly in the context of Saudi Arabia?
2. How can English language programs within Saudi Arabian universities actively promote ICC as an integral component of sustainable development and in response to globalization challenges?

To put it into context, this research aims to explore the dynamic impact of ICC on sustainability efforts and offer strategies for seamlessly integrating ICC into English language programs, especially within the unique context of Saudi Arabia.

2. Research Problem

The research problem at hand revolves around the intersection of globalization challenges and the role of EFL in addressing sustainability concerns in Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia's commitment to sustainable development, exemplified by Vision 2030, demonstrates its dedication to fostering economic diversification and sustainable growth. However, like many countries, Saudi Arabia faces various sustainability challenges across different domains, which are further complicated by the intricate web of globalization. These challenges, though inherently global, are deeply influenced by cultural differences, which shape how individuals perceive and respond to them. Effectively tackling these sustainability and globalization challenges necessitates collaboration among individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, united by the common goal of sustainable development.

In this context, research in ICC can shed light on the cultural variations in how people conceptualize and engage with sustainability issues within the framework of globalization. This research can provide valuable insights for crafting more effective communication strategies and outreach initiatives. Moreover, ICC, when combined with an appreciation for cultural diversity, emerges as a crucial asset of relationships and trust among individuals from different cultures. This is an indispensable element in advancing cooperation and collaboration towards sustainable development goals. Recognizing the inherent connection between ICC and EFL learning, we argue that proficient EFL learners have a unique role to play in addressing the challenges posed by sustainability and globalization in Saudi Arabia. These learners can contribute by discerning effective communication strategies, understanding cultural nuances, and catalyzing sustainability projects that align with the demands of an interconnected global landscape. This assertion is grounded in the understanding that EFL learning is essential in our globally connected world, and the ability to navigate globalization challenges is intricately tied to sustainability efforts.

In light of this argument, this research aims to explore the dynamic influence of ICC on sustainability efforts within the context of globalization challenges in Saudi Arabia. Crucially, we seek to propose strategies for the seamless integration of ICC into English language programs, particularly tailored to the unique circumstances of Saudi Arabia. By doing so, we aim to make a meaningful contribution to the ongoing discourse on harnessing EFL learning and ICC to advance sustainability objectives while addressing the multifaceted challenges posed by globalization in an ever-evolving global landscape.

The ultimate goal of this research is to propose actionable strategies for seamlessly integrating ICC into English language education in Saudi Arabia. By doing so, it aims to contribute to the broader discourse on leveraging English as a tool for intercultural understanding and

sustainable development in the face of globalization challenges. This research intends to offer practical insights that not only benefit Saudi Arabia but also potentially serve as a model for other nations navigating similar dynamics in an ever-evolving global landscape.

3. Literature Review

ICC represents a significant advancement in the realm of language teaching, extending beyond the conventional concept of Communicative Competence (CC) that has long served as a cornerstone in language education (Byram, 2020). While CC traditionally centered on linguistic elements, ICC emphasizes the integration of sociocultural aspects of language use, transcending the boundaries of mere vocabulary and grammar (Jackson, 2020). Nevertheless, as English gains prominence as a global lingua franca, the pursuit of native-like CC proficiency has become increasingly unrealistic. This recognition has led to calls for a reevaluation of language competence to better align with English's dynamic role as an international language (Fantini, 2018).

ICC is the capacity to comprehend, value, and proficiently navigate both the distinctions and similarities in cultures across various situations. It encompasses a comprehension of diverse cultural norms, values, and beliefs, as well as the skill to adapt one's behavior and communication style accordingly (Dombi, 2021). ICC specifically centers on the ability to communicate effectively with individuals from different cultural backgrounds (Jackson, 2023). This not only involves language proficiency but also an awareness of cultural variations in communication styles, nonverbal cues, and patterns of discourse (Winke & Brunfaut, 2020). ICC also encompasses the capability to interpret and respond appropriately to cultural disparities in communication and to utilize communication as a means to establish connections and foster mutual understanding between cultures (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). As thus, ICC serves as a comprehensive concept that encompasses intercultural communicative competence as one of its essential elements.

Given that English stands as the most widely spoken language globally, it has the potential to function as a powerful tool for intercultural communication. This includes enhancing learners' awareness of various cultures, as well as how English functions across diverse contexts. Achieving this goal necessitates educators' development of inclusive English-language lessons that transcend language and cultural barriers, with the groundwork for this starting early on, during teacher training programs. In this regard, it can be claimed that ICC has its place in the EFL studies.

According to Hinkel (2005), ICC is undeniably crucial in the context of EFL education, and it goes beyond mere language proficiency. Romanowski (2017) explains that language is more than just words; it includes cultural nuances, context, and nonverbal cues. ICC teaches students how to interpret and use these aspects effectively. The premise is that learning a language is not just about vocabulary and grammar; it's also about understanding the cultural context in which the language operates. ICC encourages students to engage with authentic materials like movies, literature, and news from English-speaking countries. This not only improves their language skills but also deepens their understanding of the culture associated with the language (Gonzalez, 2023). This is crucial because miscommunication can lead to misunderstandings, conflicts, and even business or diplomatic failures. ICC fosters cultural awareness and encourages students to explore and appreciate the customs, traditions, and values of different cultures. This leads to greater empathy and respect for cultural diversity, which is essential in our interconnected world (Iswandari & Ardi, 2022).

In recent years, numerous studies have come to focus on the role of ICC in sustainable development. Rieckmann (2017) argues that effective intercultural communication is increasingly recognized as a pivotal factor in promoting sustainability, both on a national and global scale. Sustainability necessitates collaboration among diverse stakeholders, from different cultural backgrounds, to address global challenges. Effective communication is the linchpin that enables this collaboration to succeed. Dearthoff (2009) adds that effective communication channels serve as crucial conduits for the exchange of ideas, information, and knowledge among stakeholders, a fundamental requirement for achieving consensus, formulating effective policies, and executing sustainable development initiatives. Moreover, these communication channels are instrumental in fostering collaboration and cooperation among stakeholders, which are integral elements in advancing sustainability objectives.

Patel, et al (2011) add that effective communication channels also play a pivotal role in raising awareness and mobilizing public support for sustainable development. By disseminating information about the benefits of sustainable development and the potential consequences of unsustainable practices, these channels generate momentum and cultivate a broad-based movement for change.

Despite the substantial literature concerning the role of effective cultural communication in promoting sustainability, the role of ICC in this context remains inadequately addressed. Many language teaching programs primarily emphasize linguistic proficiency and accuracy, sidelining the cultural and social dimensions of communication. This oversight is significant since culture and language are inseparable and are fundamental to effective communication, especially in the realm of sustainability. Additionally, sustainability challenges often have cultural roots, making effective communication across cultures indispensable for devising sustainable solutions. For instance, cultural values and beliefs can influence perspectives on conservation, economic development, and the environment. Without a profound understanding of cultural differences and the ability to communicate effectively across these divides, it becomes challenging to develop sustainable solutions that are culturally relevant and effective.

In EFL contexts, students are frequently taught a standardized form of the language, disregarding the cultural and regional variations that are crucial for effective communication (Banaruee, et al, 2023). This approach can leave students ill-prepared to navigate cultural differences and communicate effectively in real-world situations, including those related to sustainability. Closing the literature gap regarding the relationship between ICC and sustainability studies offers a promising avenue for research. This not only advances theoretical understanding but also has practical implications for language education and sustainable development practices on a global scale. An

in-depth exploration of this topic would involve assessing the impact of ICC on sustainability initiatives, particularly in diverse cultural settings like Saudi Arabia. Such an exploration will unveil the intricate dynamics between intercultural competence and sustainable development, highlighting the significance of ICC as a driving force behind effective cross-cultural communication, collaboration, and awareness-building for sustainability.

Furthermore, the existing body of literature rarely explores how ICC can be systematically integrated into language teaching programs, particularly in the EFL context, to foster sustainable development. This is a critical area that deserves scholarly attention. By focusing on this unaddressed facet, we can develop strategies to seamlessly embed ICC into EFL programs, thus equipping students with the essential skills to bridge cultural divides, communicate effectively, and actively contribute to sustainability efforts. In other words, addressing the literature gap concerning the relationship between ICC and sustainability studies not only advances theoretical understanding but also has practical implications for language education and sustainable development practices on a global scale.

4. Data Collection

The research methodology for this study employs interviews as the primary data collection method. Interviews have been selected for several compelling reasons. First, interviews allow for in-depth exploration of participants' viewpoints, experiences, and perceptions regarding sustainability and EFL education in Saudi universities. (Basit, 2010). This qualitative approach enables a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. Second, interviews provide a platform for participants to share context-specific insights and experiences related to sustainability and EFL education King & Horrocks (2010). This contextual information is crucial for a study situated in the Saudi Arabian higher education landscape. Third, interviews facilitate dynamic, interactive discussions that allow for the exploration of complex topics. Researchers can probe further, seek clarifications, and encourage participants to articulate their perspectives fully (Olson, 2016). Finally, the study involves a range of stakeholders, including faculty members, department heads, program designers, and other influential figures in Saudi universities. Interviews allow for a diverse set of perspectives to be captured.

Structured interviews were conducted with twenty-eight participants representing various role categories in seven Saudi universities: Prince Sattam Bin Abdulaziz University, Princess Nourah Bint Abdul Rahman University, Prince Sultan University, Taibah University, Northern Borders University, Qassim University, and King Khaled University.

4.1 Interview Protocol

The interview protocol was designed to gather comprehensive data on participants' perceptions and experiences related to sustainability and EFL education in Saudi universities. It included a series of open-ended questions and prompts that encourage participants to reflect on the following key areas:

1. **Perceptions of sustainability:** Participants were asked to define sustainability in the context of higher education and describe its importance within the Saudi Arabian university system.
2. **Role of EFL education:** Participants were prompted to discuss the role of EFL education in fostering sustainability awareness and practices among students.
3. **Challenges and Opportunities:** Participants were invited to share their insights on the challenges and opportunities associated with integrating sustainability into EFL programs.
4. **Curriculum and pedagogy:** Questions tended to explore how sustainability is currently integrated into EFL curricula, teaching methodologies, and assessment strategies.
5. **Recommendations:** Participants were encouraged to provide recommendations for enhancing the integration of sustainability principles into EFL education within Saudi universities.
6. **Globalization challenges:** Participants were asked to discuss the impact of globalization on sustainability initiatives in Saudi Arabia and how EFL education can address globalization challenges in the context of sustainability.

4.2 Code of Ethics

This study adhered to a rigorous code of ethics to ensure the protection of participants' rights, confidentiality, and the overall integrity of the research:

1. **Informed consent:** Participants were fully informed about the study's objectives, their role, and the voluntary nature of participation. Informed consent will be obtained from all participants.
2. **Confidentiality:** All data collected, including interview transcripts, were anonymized and kept confidential. Participants' identities will not be disclosed in any publications or reports resulting from the study.
3. **Respect for autonomy:** Participants have the right to withdraw from the study at any point without facing consequences or pressure to continue.
4. **Privacy:** Interviews were conducted in private settings to ensure the privacy of participants. Any recorded data will be stored securely and accessible only to the research team.
5. **Non-discrimination:** The study did not discriminate against participants based on gender, age, ethnicity, or any other personal characteristics. All viewpoints and experiences were valued equally.

6. **Transparency:** The research process was transparent, and participants had the opportunity to review and verify their statements during the data analysis phase.

4.3 The Interview Questions

In the pursuit of a deeper understanding of the intricate relationship between ICC and sustainable development within the context of EFL education and research, this study engaged with a diverse group of participants closely associated with the field. Through a series of structured interviews, participants were invited to share their insights, experiences, and perspectives on the intersections of ICC and sustainability in EFL education and research. The interview questions, carefully designed to probe into various dimensions of this multifaceted relationship, provided a platform for participants to elucidate their roles, conceptualizations, contributions, challenges, and visions concerning Enhancing ICC in EFL education for sustainable development. These questions are shown as follows.

1. Can you describe your role and involvement in EFL education and research? How long have you been working in this field?
2. From your perspective, what is the relationship between ICC and sustainable development in EFL education and research? How do these concepts intersect or complement each other?
3. In what ways do you believe EFL education and research can contribute to sustainable development, while also fostering intercultural communicative competence? Can you provide specific examples or experiences?
4. Have you noticed any recent trends or innovative approaches in EFL education and research that emphasize the integration of ICC and sustainable development principles? If so, could you share some examples or insights?
5. What challenges or obstacles do EFL educators, researchers, and institutions face when attempting to incorporate both ICC and sustainability aspects into their work? How can these challenges be addressed effectively?
6. Are there any noteworthy initiatives or projects related to EFL education and research that focus on ICC and sustainable development which you have been involved in or are aware of? Please describe them.
7. How do you perceive the role of technology and digital resources in promoting both ICC and sustainability within EFL education and research practices? Are there any specific tools or platforms that you find particularly effective?
8. From your experience, what strategies or methods can EFL educators and researchers employ to enhance intercultural understanding and collaboration, while also advancing sustainable development goals in their teaching and research?
9. Could you share any successful case studies or best practices in EFL education and research where ICC and sustainability initiatives have been integrated successfully? What lessons can be learned from these examples?
10. In your opinion, what role should policymakers, educational institutions, and professional organizations play in supporting and promoting the integration of ICC and sustainability into EFL education and research at both local and global levels?

5. Analysis Procedures

Thematic content analysis was used to analyze qualitative data in this study. It involved identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within the data. The following procedures, shown in Figure 1, outline how the thematic content analysis was carried out.

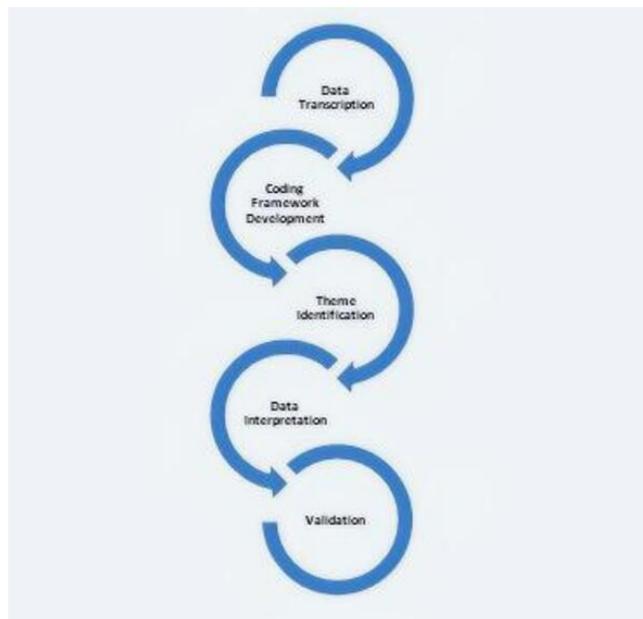


Figure 1. Outline of the analysis procedures

1. **Data Transcription:** After conducting interviews with the participants, the audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. These transcripts served as the primary data source for analysis.
2. **Coding Framework Development:**
 - a. **Open Coding:** Researchers performed open coding, which involved identifying initial codes or labels for segments of text that represented meaningful content. This phase was exploratory and allowed for the emergence of themes from the data.
 - b. **Creating a Codebook:** The research team collaboratively developed a codebook that included a list of codes, code definitions, and examples from the data. This codebook served as a reference during the coding process.
 - c. **Initial Coding:** Researchers independently applied the codes from the codebook to segments of text within the transcripts. Each segment of text received one or more codes that captured the content's essence.
 - d. **Comparative Coding:** The research team met to discuss and refine the coding process. This involved comparing codes, resolving discrepancies, and ensuring consistency in coding across the data.
3. **Theme Identification:**
 - a. **Collating Codes:** Codes that shared commonalities or related to similar concepts were grouped together to form preliminary themes. This step involved organizing and collating coded segments.
 - b. **Review and Refinement:** The research team reviewed and refined the preliminary themes, ensuring that they accurately captured the participants' viewpoints and experiences.
 - c. **Defining and Naming Themes:** Each theme was defined and given a clear, descriptive name that reflected its content. These themes served as the primary outcomes of the analysis.
 - d. **Data Retrieval:** Relevant segments of text (quotes) associated with each theme were retrieved from the transcripts to support and illustrate the themes.
4. **Data Interpretation:** The research team interpreted the themes in the context of the research questions and objectives, considering how they contributed to understanding sustainability and EFL education in Saudi universities.
5. **Validation:** To enhance the validity of the analysis, member checking was performed, where participants were given the opportunity to review the identified themes and provide feedback to confirm their accuracy.

6. Results

Based on the interview questions provided, seven main themes were identified and defined as shown in Figure 2.

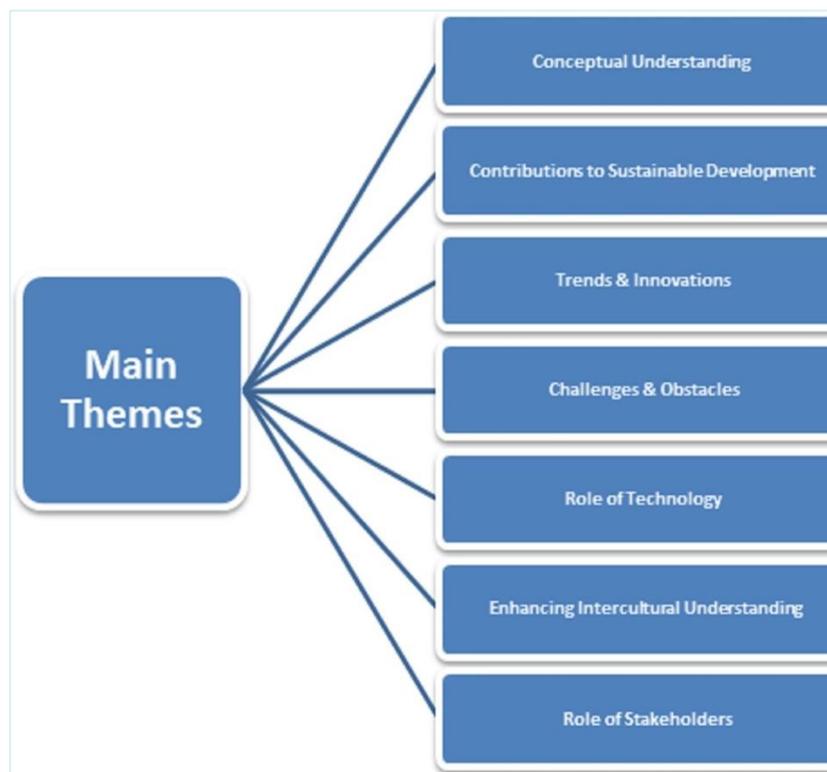


Figure 2. Summary of the main themes

These themes summarize what participants share their perspectives and experiences related to the intersection of ICC and sustainable development in the context of EFL education and research.

6.1 Conceptual Understanding

The participants emphasized the crucial role of effective communication channels in fostering collaboration and cooperation among a variety of stakeholders. These channels serve as platforms that facilitate dialogue and engagement, allowing for the establishment of trust and consensus among a broad spectrum of individuals and groups. This trust and consensus-building process is essential for advancing initiatives related to sustainable development. For instance, in the context of global initiatives to combat climate change, the presence of effective communication channels enables productive discussions and negotiations among different countries, ultimately leading to more impactful and ambitious actions to address climate issues.

Furthermore, these communication channels serve as powerful tools for raising awareness and mobilizing public support for sustainable development efforts. By disseminating information about the benefits of sustainable practices and the potential harms of unsustainable ones, these channels generate momentum and cultivate a widespread movement for positive change. This, in turn, creates the necessary political will and societal pressure needed to propel sustainable development initiatives forward and achieve meaningful progress.

In addition to the significance of communication channels, the participants also underscored the intrinsic value of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) in promoting effective communication and collaboration across diverse cultures. In today's increasingly globalized world, this competency has become even more essential. EFL learners who cultivate ICC are better equipped to navigate the complexities of cultural differences, gain a deeper appreciation for diverse perspectives on sustainability, and actively engage in collaborative endeavors aimed at attaining sustainable development goals.

Moreover, ICC fosters qualities such as open-mindedness, tolerance, and respect for cultural diversity. These attributes contribute significantly to social cohesion and harmony within diverse societies, further strengthening the foundations for successful sustainable development initiatives. In essence, ICC serves as a bridge that connects people from various cultural backgrounds, enabling them to work together harmoniously toward a shared vision of a sustainable future.

6.2 Contributions to Sustainable Development

The participants highlighted the increasing significance of effective intercultural communication in our contemporary globalized landscape. They pointed out that the rise of economic activities such as study exchange programs, urban development, immigration, international employment opportunities, and accessible international travel has resulted in frequent interactions among individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. In light of these developments, they underscored the crucial need to foster the right attitudes and communication skills required for successful multicultural interactions both in everyday life and within various organizations.

In today's interconnected world, where people from different cultural backgrounds regularly come into contact, the ability to communicate and collaborate effectively across these cultural divides has become a paramount concern. Whether it's in educational institutions, urban planning, workplaces, or during travel and immigration processes, the importance of understanding and respecting diverse cultures cannot be overstated. Therefore, the emphasis lies on equipping individuals with the tools and knowledge to navigate these interactions smoothly and harmoniously.

Developing these skills is not just a matter of personal growth; it has broader implications for sustainable development. When people can communicate and cooperate across cultures effectively, it fosters greater inclusivity, social cohesion, and harmonious coexistence. This, in turn, contributes to the sustainable development goals of building resilient communities, promoting economic growth, and ensuring equal access to opportunities for all.

The participants stressed that effective intercultural communication is no longer a mere skill but a vital element in today's globalized world, essential for enhancing personal interactions, fostering diversity and inclusion, and ultimately contributing to sustainable development on a global scale.

6.3 Trends and Innovations

The participants have drawn attention to emerging trends and innovative approaches that underscore the integration of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) and sustainability. One notable trend highlighted involves the increasing recognition of the value of incorporating literature and culture into EFL materials and curriculum.

Incorporating literature and cultural content into EFL education serves multiple purposes. It not only enhances language proficiency but also provides a gateway to understanding different cultural perspectives and values. This approach not only enriches language learning but also cultivates the ability to navigate intercultural interactions with sensitivity and effectiveness. The fusion of language and culture in EFL materials helps learners appreciate the broader context in which language operates, making it more meaningful and relevant to their lives. Furthermore, the participants pointed to recent policy shifts in Saudi Arabia that emphasize openness, diversity, and the acceptance of cultural differences. These policies signal a significant change in the national approach to cultural engagement and international relations.

Given these developments, the participants stressed the growing importance of enhancing intercultural communicative competence, particularly within the realm of EFL education. The changing landscape in Saudi Arabia necessitates a stronger emphasis on equipping learners with the skills and knowledge to engage effectively with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. This goes beyond language

proficiency; it encompasses the ability to appreciate and navigate the intricacies of cultural differences, fostering an atmosphere of inclusivity and global understanding. In essence, the trends and innovations discussed by the participants highlight a shift towards more holistic and culturally aware approaches in EFL education, driven by the recognition of the interconnectedness of language, culture, and sustainable development. These developments align with broader societal changes, emphasizing the importance of promoting intercultural communicative competence to thrive in a globalized and diverse world.

6.4 Challenges and Obstacles

Participants identified different challenges and obstacles confronting EFL educators, researchers, and institutions as they endeavor to integrate Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) and sustainability principles into their work. These included limited resources, resistance to change, cultural diversity constraints, language barriers, cultural stereotypes and biases, and time constraints.

The participants stressed that limited resources, both financial and material, pose a significant challenge. Developing comprehensive and culturally sensitive EFL materials, supporting research initiatives, and providing professional development opportunities often require substantial investments. They added that resistance to adopting new pedagogical approaches and incorporating ICC and sustainability aspects can hinder progress. Many educators and institutions may be entrenched in traditional teaching methods and may resist embracing innovative strategies. Furthermore, they pointed out that managing cultural diversity within educational settings can be complex. It requires careful navigation to ensure inclusivity and equal opportunities for all students while promoting intercultural understanding.

The participants also outlined that language barriers can impede effective ICC integration. Students' varying language proficiency levels can present challenges in creating an inclusive and communicative learning environment. They also agreed that overcoming cultural stereotypes and biases can be an uphill battle. These preconceived notions can perpetuate misunderstandings and hinder the development of genuine intercultural competence. Finally, the participants highlighted time constraints as one of the main challenges and obstacles that hinder the effective integration of ICC in EFL learning. They explained that the limitations of time within educational settings can be a constraint. Integrating ICC and sustainability may require additional instructional time, which can be challenging to allocate within an already tight curriculum.

To address these challenges and obstacles, the participants emphasized the need for meticulous planning and strategic resource allocation. Professional development opportunities for educators to enhance their knowledge and skills in ICC and sustainability integration are crucial. Moreover, fostering an open and receptive institutional culture that encourages innovation and embraces change is essential to overcoming resistance.

6.5 Role of Technology

The participants emphasized that the integration of technology and social media platforms into EFL education holds immense potential for enhancing intercultural communicative competence and promoting sustainability. These digital resources facilitate authentic communication, expose students to diverse perspectives, and offer innovative ways to engage with cultural differences and sustainability challenges. When leveraged effectively, technology becomes a powerful ally in preparing EFL learners to thrive in our interconnected, multicultural world while contributing to the goals of sustainable development. They explained that technology enables students to engage in authentic and meaningful communication with speakers of English from different cultural backgrounds. Unlike traditional classroom settings, where interactions may be limited to textbooks and language exercises, social media platforms provide opportunities for genuine, unfiltered communication. This authenticity promotes a deeper understanding of language as it is used in real-life contexts.

The participants outlined that the role of technology and digital resources in advancing ICC and sustainability in EFL education and research cannot be understated. They put forth innovative ideas, including the use and integration of social media platforms, such as Twitter (now referred to as X), Facebook, and other similar platforms, as powerful tools in EFL classrooms. These digital resources offer tremendous potential for improving intercultural understanding and fostering greater acceptance of cultural differences and diversity. They explained that social media platforms have transformed the way individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds connect and interact. These platforms facilitate global connectivity, allowing EFL learners to engage in real-time discussions and exchanges with people from around the world. This immediate and direct interaction exposes students to a wide array of cultural perspectives and viewpoints.

The participants suggested that EFL instructors can use technology to organize virtual cultural exchange programs, connecting their students with counterparts in other countries. Through video conferencing, collaborative online projects, and virtual pen-pal initiatives, students can gain firsthand insights into the culture, customs, and daily lives of people from diverse backgrounds. This experiential learning promotes intercultural competence. Additionally, social media platforms offer a treasure trove of diverse content, including news articles, videos, blogs, and discussions on a wide range of topics. Educators can guide students to explore and critically analyze these resources, encouraging them to consider different cultural viewpoints and perspectives on sustainability issues. This exposure broadens students' horizons and fosters a more comprehensive understanding of global challenges.

They indicated that digital resources can be used to provide cultural sensitivity training within EFL courses. Online modules, videos, and interactive quizzes can help students recognize cultural biases and stereotypes, and develop the skills needed to navigate intercultural interactions with sensitivity and respect. In this regard, they believed that technology offers numerous opportunities to raise awareness about sustainability. Students can access digital resources that provide information about environmental issues, sustainable practices, and global efforts to address sustainability challenges. Social media campaigns and online forums can mobilize support and engage students in

sustainability initiatives.

6.6 Enhancing Intercultural Understanding

The participants indicated that enhancing intercultural understanding and collaboration in EFL education and research while advancing sustainable development goals requires a multifaceted approach. The strategies and methods discussed by the participants emphasize experiential learning, cultural immersion, technology integration, and critical thinking. These pedagogical approaches not only strengthen language proficiency but also equip students with the skills and mindset needed to thrive in a diverse, interconnected world while contributing to the achievement of sustainability objectives.

They proposed that EFL programs can collaborate with institutions in different countries to establish cultural exchange programs. These programs allow students to immerse themselves in the culture and language of the target country. Through living and studying abroad, students gain firsthand experiences, form cross-cultural friendships, and develop a deep appreciation for diverse perspectives.

They added that integrating dedicated intercultural communication courses into EFL curricula can be highly effective. These courses focus on enhancing students' cultural sensitivity, awareness, and communication skills. They encourage open discussions on cultural differences, biases, and stereotypes while promoting empathy and effective cross-cultural communication. Additionally, implementing project-based learning in EFL classrooms can foster intercultural understanding and collaboration. Students work on collaborative projects with peers from diverse backgrounds, addressing real-world issues related to sustainability. These projects require students to navigate cultural differences and find innovative solutions collectively.

They added that technology can be leveraged to create virtual learning communities that connect EFL students with peers from around the world. Online forums, discussion boards, and collaborative platforms enable students to engage in ongoing cross-cultural dialogue. This approach promotes intercultural understanding and the exchange of ideas on sustainability topics. Furthermore, utilizing authentic materials such as international news articles, films, documentaries, and literature exposes students to different cultures and global issues. Analyzing and discussing these materials in the classroom not only enhances language skills but also encourages critical thinking about cultural diversity and sustainability.

6.7 Role of Stakeholders

The participants indicated that the integration of Intercultural Communicative Competence and sustainability in EFL education and research is a multifaceted endeavor that requires collaboration and commitment from various stakeholders. Policymakers, educational institutions, and professional organizations all have unique and complementary roles to play in ensuring that EFL learners are equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to thrive in a globally interconnected and environmentally conscious world. Advocacy, policy development, resource allocation, curriculum integration, faculty training, assessment, knowledge sharing, and research support are all essential components of their contributions to this important cause.

The participants highlighted the role of stakeholders, including policymakers, educational institutions, and professional organizations in supporting and promoting the integration of ICC and sustainability in EFL education and research. They explained that policymakers play a pivotal role in advocating for the importance of ICC and sustainability in EFL education. They can use their influence to highlight the benefits of incorporating these elements into the curriculum, thereby encouraging educational institutions to prioritize them. Policymakers can enact legislation or create policies that mandate the inclusion of ICC and sustainability in EFL programs. These policies can set standards and guidelines for schools and universities to follow, ensuring that these essential components are integrated effectively. The premise is that policymakers can allocate funds and resources to support training programs for EFL teachers to enhance their proficiency in teaching ICC and sustainability. They can also provide grants and incentives for research in these areas, fostering innovation and improvement.

Furthermore, the participants suggested that educational institutions are responsible for designing and implementing curricula. They should ensure that ICC and sustainability are integrated into all levels of EFL education. This can involve creating dedicated courses, incorporating relevant content into existing courses, or promoting cross-disciplinary approaches. Institutions should invest in professional development programs for EFL teachers, helping them acquire the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively teach ICC and sustainability. This training could include cultural sensitivity training, sustainability education, and pedagogical techniques. Furthermore, institutions should develop assessment tools and methods that measure students' ICC and sustainability competencies accurately. These assessments can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of their programs and make necessary improvements.

Finally, they proposed that professional organizations in the field of EFL can serve as advocates for the integration of ICC and sustainability. They can use their influence to raise awareness and promote best practices among educators and institutions. These organizations can facilitate knowledge sharing by organizing conferences, workshops, and seminars where educators and researchers can exchange ideas and strategies for integrating ICC and sustainability effectively. They can fund and promote research in the field, encouraging scholars to explore innovative approaches and best practices. They can also publish journals and books dedicated to ICC and sustainability in EFL education, making research findings accessible to a wider audience.

7. Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the pivotal role of ICC in fostering sustainable development within the EFL education and research, particularly in the unique context of Saudi Arabia. Through an exploration of diverse perspectives, experiences, and insights shared by

participants, a multifaceted picture has emerged—one that accentuates the interconnectedness of ICC and sustainability. Participants, ranging from educators and researchers to policymakers and administrators, collectively advocated for the integration of ICC and sustainability principles into EFL education and research. They highlighted how this integration enhances students' abilities to navigate complex global challenges, fosters cross-cultural understanding, and facilitates collaboration on sustainability initiatives. Additionally, the study unveiled several emerging trends and innovative approaches that signify a growing recognition of the importance of ICC and sustainability within EFL education and research. Examples of these trends include the use of technology, digital resources, and experiential learning opportunities to promote ICC and sustainability. However, participants also candidly discussed the challenges and obstacles encountered in this endeavor, such as the need for professional development, resource constraints, and the imperative to bridge cultural gaps effectively. These insights serve as valuable touchpoints for future efforts to enhance ICC and sustainability integration within the Saudi Arabian EFL context and beyond.

In essence, this research underscores the symbiotic relationship between effective communication channels, ICC development, and sustainable development promotion. It highlights the need for educational programs, particularly those focused on EFL learning, to incorporate ICC development as a core component. By equipping learners with ICC skills, we can foster a generation of individuals adept at bridging cultural divides, promoting sustainable practices, and actively contributing to the global pursuit of sustainability and resilient economies.

In response to the obstacles mentioned by the participants, this study proposes several transformative strategies. Firstly, incorporating service learning projects into EFL courses enables students to apply language skills while addressing sustainability challenges, fostering responsibility and collaboration. University students can be motivated to take part in a wide array of cultural events hosted by the General Entertainment Authority in various cities throughout the Kingdom. Secondly, infusing elements of global citizenship education into the EFL curriculum promotes interconnectedness and shared responsibility for global issues, encouraging students to think beyond borders. Lastly, equipping EFL educators with cross-cultural competency training enhances their ability to guide students in navigating intercultural interactions and fostering inclusivity. In summary, this research highlights the potential of integrating ICC and sustainability into EFL education, advocating for a holistic approach that nurtures linguistic proficiency, intercultural competence, and sustainability awareness, resonating both within Saudi Arabia and across global contexts, urging stakeholders toward a more interconnected, inclusive, and sustainable future.

The findings of this study align with previous research, emphasizing the growing importance of integrating ICC into EFL education in today's globalized world, despite the fact that incorporating ICC into foreign language teaching has posed challenges, primarily due to potential gaps in teachers' understanding of the concept, emphasizing the need to bridge the gap between language and culture for effective intercultural communication in a globalized context (Block & Cameron, 2002; Brunner, 2022; Tsai, 2014).

Recent research underscores the pivotal role of effective communication channels in advancing sustainable development, particularly in the context of nurturing sustainable economies on both national and global scales (Phillipson, 2009). Effective communication channels are pivotal in propelling sustainable development, crucially in nurturing sustainable economies at national and global levels. They ensure alignment among diverse stakeholders, fostering a shared vision and purpose. By facilitating knowledge sharing, these channels disseminate successful strategies and encourage innovation. Moreover, they engage stakeholders meaningfully, incorporating diverse viewpoints and ensuring transparency and accountability in sustainability initiatives. These channels play a fundamental role in policymaking, aiding in the development and implementation of effective policies. Globally, they enable collaboration, resource sharing, and the coordination necessary to tackle cross-border sustainability challenges (Quan, 2016).

Effective communication channels, as elucidated by Sharifian (2009) serve as conduits for the exchange of ideas, information, and knowledge among various stakeholders. This exchange is instrumental in forging consensus, formulating sound policies, and executing sustainable development initiatives. For instance, within the sphere of building sustainable economies, these channels play a crucial role in disseminating knowledge about sustainable business practices, renewable energy technologies, and environmentally friendly agricultural techniques. This dissemination, in turn, empowers businesses and other stakeholders to adopt more sustainable practices, ultimately contributing to the creation of resilient and sustainable economies in the long term (Erling & Seargeant, 2013).

In light of the above arguments, it can be claimed that the significance of aligning EFL education with the principles of sustainable development and the demands of globalization challenges cannot be overstated. As our world becomes increasingly interconnected, the ability to communicate effectively in English and navigate intercultural interactions is paramount. EFL education, when thoughtfully integrated with sustainability principles and a focus on intercultural competence, serves as a powerful catalyst for preparing learners to thrive in a diverse, globalized society. It equips them with not only linguistic proficiency but also the skills, knowledge, and awareness needed to address pressing global challenges collaboratively. By fostering sustainable practices and nurturing intercultural understanding, EFL education contributes to the creation of responsible global citizens who can actively engage in building a more inclusive, interconnected, and sustainable world. Thus, the continued alignment of EFL education with these vital principles remains central to our collective journey towards a brighter and more sustainable global future.

8. Conclusion

In response to the challenges posed by globalization, this research investigated the critical need for enhancing Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) among EFL learners within Saudi universities. Employing qualitative research methods, including in-depth interviews

with twenty-eight stakeholders in seven Saudi universities, this study emphasized the urgency of strengthening ICC within EFL curricula. The findings of this study enrich and align with the existing literature on intercultural communication, sustainability education, and EFL pedagogy. They provide insights into the practical challenges and opportunities of integrating ICC and sustainability in EFL education and research, contributing to the broader conversation about the role of intercultural competence and sustainability in contemporary education.

It can be concluded that there is a critical need to prioritize the enhancement of ICC within EFL education, particularly in response to the challenges posed by globalization. Policy makers are encouraged to consider the pivotal role of ICC in preparing students for a globalized world and the potential long-term benefits for sustainable development and global cooperation. Recommendations include allocating resources for teacher training, curriculum development, and the creation of cultural immersion opportunities, as well as fostering partnerships with international organizations and businesses. Furthermore, this study calls for continued research in several areas. Longitudinal studies tracking the development of ICC among EFL learners over time can provide a deeper understanding of its long-term impact. Comparative research across different cultural contexts can offer insights into tailored strategies for diverse regions. Research on the professional development of EFL educators in terms of intercultural training and pedagogy can lead to improved teacher preparation programs. Additionally, studies assessing the effectiveness of ICC assessment tools can enhance the measurement and evaluation of ICC initiatives. Finally, further studies can build upon these findings to further explore effective strategies for promoting intercultural understanding and sustainability in EFL contexts.

The study's implications pave the way for future research endeavors and offer vital recommendations in enhancing Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) within English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education amid sustainability challenges in a globalized context. These insights advocate for continued investigation into optimized strategies for seamlessly integrating ICC and sustainability themes into EFL curricula, further exploring the impact of experiential learning on ICC development in diverse cultural and sustainability contexts, and delving deeper into interdisciplinary collaboration between language studies and sustainability-focused disciplines. Additionally, future research should examine the effectiveness of technological tools in fostering cross-cultural communication and engagement and refine assessment methods that holistically evaluate both language proficiency and intercultural communicative competencies. These recommendations lay a foundation for expanded research initiatives, aiming to better prepare EFL learners for navigating global challenges while contributing substantially to sustainable development through enhanced intercultural understanding and communication skills.

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