

## Integrating Intercultural Communicative Competence into English Language Teaching in Nepalese Community Schools

Bishow Raj Joshi

Ramesh Adhikari

### Abstract

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Corresponding Author:

Bishow Raj Joshi

Email: [bishowjosshi5@gmail.com](mailto:bishowjosshi5@gmail.com)

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*This study explores the integration of intercultural aspects into English language teaching at the Basic Level in Nepal. Focusing on teachers' perceptions, practices, challenges, and needs, it aims to identify strategies to enhance Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) in classrooms defined by linguistic and cultural diversity. A qualitative research approach was employed, applying semi-structured interviews guided by a set of interview guidelines. Participants included English teachers from community schools in Chitwan, with about a decade of teaching experience at the Basic Level (Grade 6-8). The findings reveal that classrooms in Nepal are highly multicultural, with students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Teachers adopt strategies such as storytelling, role-playing, and ICT-based tools to facilitate intercultural learning. However, challenges such as insufficient resources, lack of training, curriculum rigidity, and time constraints hinder effective integration of intercultural content. Despite these barriers, teachers emphasize the importance of intercultural communicative competence in preparing students for global engagement and fostering respect for cultural diversity. This study highlights the need for curriculum reforms to incorporate more context-sensitive intercultural content and improve flexibility. It also*

*highlights the significance of formal training for teachers, with an emphasis on intercultural pedagogy and collaboration with native speakers. These findings invite interculturally friendly policy and curriculum design. Future research should investigate students' perspectives on intercultural learning and evaluate the impact of tailored interventions on their intercultural communicative competence.*

**Keywords:** Intercultural communicative competence, cultural diversity, curriculum design, classroom strategies

### Introduction

The growing interconnectedness of the modern world has made intercultural communicative competence (ICC) an essential component of education. In multilingual and multicultural societies like Nepal, where classrooms are microcosms of diverse cultures and linguistic backgrounds, the integration of ICC into English language teaching is particularly relevant. ICC, as conceptualized by Byram (1997) and further developed by Hua (2019), encompasses the knowledge, attitudes, and skills required to navigate and communicate effectively in intercultural contexts. It emphasizes not only

linguistic proficiency but also cultural awareness, empathy, and adaptability, making it a critical competency for students preparing to engage in an increasingly globalized world.

In Nepalese community schools, English is taught as a second or third language (National Statistics Office, 2023), often in classrooms where students come from varied ethnic and cultural backgrounds. While this diversity offers opportunities for cultural exchange and mutual learning, it also presents significant challenges for teachers. These include linguistic barriers, limited resources, insufficient training, and a rigid curriculum that inadequately addresses intercultural dimensions. Relating to the Basic Level English textbooks, Timsina (2025) claims that they include different cultural aspects, including native and foreign cultures; however, they lack equal treatment of some ethnic cultures. Teachers are often left to navigate these complexities with minimal systemic support, despite the recognized importance of ICC in fostering mutual respect, global readiness, and effective communication among students.

To address the pedagogical gap, this article explores the integration of ICC in English language teaching at the basic level in Nepalese community schools. It examines teachers' perceptions of ICC, their strategies for fostering intercultural understanding, and the systemic challenges they face. Using qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews with experienced teachers, the study seeks to identify actionable strategies for enhancing ICC integration. The findings provide valuable insights into the current state of intercultural education in Nepal and propose practical recommendations for curriculum reform, teacher training, and policy interventions. Thus, this study contributes to the broader discourse on intercultural education, emphasizing the need for inclusive and context-sensitive approaches. It underscores the transformative potential of ICC in creating classrooms that not only teach language but also foster cultural sensitivity, empathy, and global citizenship.

### **Literature Review**

The integration of ICC into English language teaching has been extensively studied as a critical approach to fostering cultural awareness and effective communication in multilingual and multicultural contexts. This review explores theoretical frameworks, empirical studies, and practical implications of ICC in education, focusing on its relevance to Nepalese classrooms.

#### **Theoretical Frameworks on ICC**

This study employs a synthesized theoretical framework to investigate ICC. Rather than applying multiple disparate theories, this research develops a single, focused framework by utilizing core constructs from foundational scholarship. The primary structure is adapted from Byram's influential model of ICC, which has been developed and refined over several decades (Byram, 1997, 2021). This model, which posits that ICC is a composite of interconnected attitudes, knowledge, and skills, has profoundly shaped language education and policy (Byram et al., 2013). This foundational structure is further sharpened by constructs that emphasize the fluid and emergent nature of intercultural encounters. Specifically, the framework incorporates Fantini's (2009) concept of the relativity of meaning and insights from scholars like Hua (2019), who stresses that communication is a dynamic and situated practice. This integration allows for a more detailed analysis that accounts for both the components of competence and the subjective nature of meaning-making.

Central to this framework are the five specific dimensions, or *savoirs*, first articulated by Byram (1997), which provide the analytical tools for this study. These are: attitudes (*savoir-être*), defined by curiosity and openness; knowledge (*savoirs*) of social groups and their practices; skills of interpreting and relating (*savoir-comprendre*); skills of discovery and interaction (*savoir-faire*); and

critical cultural awareness (*savoir s'engager*). This final dimension, the ability to critically evaluate cultural practices and act as a mediator, is increasingly highlighted as essential for fostering meaningful intercultural dialogue and social action (Byram & Wagner, 2018). By operationalizing these integrated constructs, the framework offers a comprehensive methodology for examining how the teachers integrate ICC into ELT in Nepalese Community Schools. This approach allows for a detailed analysis of the interplay between cultural understanding, communicative action, and critical reflection within the context of this research.

### **Empirical Evidence on ICC Integration**

Empirical studies strongly advocate for the integration of ICC into language teaching practices. Research emphasizes that culturally responsive curricula and teaching strategies significantly enhance student engagement and intercultural understanding (Chen, 1990; Dugulan et al., 2010). Chen's (1990) findings, particularly, highlight the value of storytelling, role-playing, and reflective practices, strategies that align with those reported by teachers in this study. Similarly, Dugulan et al. (2010) underscore the importance of experiential learning in cultivating intercultural awareness, advocating for collaborative activities and cultural exchange programs that foster empathy and mutual respect. Emphasizing social, cultural and historical artifacts in learning a second or foreign language, Neupane (2022) suggests that integrating learning experiences relevant to learners' socio-cultural context plays a significant role in learners' cognitive development.

Recent literature further supports these insights. Hoff (2020) critiques the traditional ICC models and calls for innovative pedagogical practices that bridge theoretical and practical dimensions of intercultural education. Likewise, implementing an Intercultural Communicative Language Teaching (ICLT) model not only improves linguistic competence but also significantly enhances learners' intercultural abilities in EFL settings (Tran & Duong, 2018). Furthermore, Heggernes (2021) and Haerazi and Nunez (2022) argue that authentic texts and multilingual resources are crucial for fostering intercultural competence in the language classroom. As Pasand and Ghasemi (2018) emphasize, ICC development must transcend linguistic proficiency to encompass cultural adaptability, critical thinking, and the ability to negotiate meaning across diverse cultural contexts.

### **Challenges in ICC Integration**

The challenges associated with ICC integration are well-documented in global and local literature. Chen (1990) highlights time constraints and the absence of institutional support as key impediments that participants in this study echoed. Moreover, recent research reinforces these concerns. Iswandari and Ardi (2022) found that while EFL teachers recognize the value of ICC, they often struggle to integrate it effectively due to a lack of training and clear assessment frameworks. Nindya et al. (2022) also reported that pre-service teachers in EFL contexts exhibit limited implementation of ICC practices despite possessing positive theoretical understandings, largely due to systemic constraints such as curriculum design and student proficiency variations. Safa and Tofighi (2021) revealed a notable gap between teachers' stated ICC beliefs and their actual classroom practices, further underscoring the difficulty of translating theory into practice.

### **Practical Implications of ICC**

The practical benefits of ICC integration extend far beyond linguistic competence, preparing students for meaningful engagement in a globalized world. Dugulan et al. (2010) and Chen (1990) emphasize ICC's transformative potential in nurturing global citizenship, where empathy, cultural sensitivity, adaptability, and effective communication are central. In this context, fostering positive

intercultural attitudes enhances learners' global readiness and cross-cultural negotiation skills (Baroudi, 2017).

Recent studies confirm that ICC training promotes not only effective communication but also critical reflection on identity and culture (Heggernes, 2021; Hoff, 2020; Tran, 2018). This shows that, in the Nepalese context, where classrooms mirror the country's rich cultural diversity, ICC integration may substantially improve mutual respect and intercultural understanding among students. By embedding ICC into English language education, teachers can help students transcend linguistic boundaries and engage as intercultural mediators. Pasand and Ghasemi (2018) argue that a detailed, culturally informed pedagogy enhances learners' ability to interact successfully across cultures, an increasingly essential skill in today's interconnected societies. Aligning educational practices with these insights, as suggested by Tran (2018), Heggernes (2021), and Haerazi and Nunez (2022), can foster more inclusive, culturally responsive classrooms that prepare students not merely as proficient English speakers, but as empathetic, reflective, and globally competent individuals.

The reviewed literature conclusively highlights the critical importance of integrating ICC into English language teaching. Theoretical frameworks proposed by Byram (1997) and Fantini (2009) provide a strong foundation for understanding intercultural competence, while empirical studies conducted by Chen (1990), Dugulan et al. (2010), Hoff (2020), and others validate its practical relevance and challenges in diverse educational contexts. In Nepal, addressing barriers such as curriculum rigidity, insufficient teacher preparation, and limited resources is vital for effective ICC integration.

The literature provides a theoretical foundation for ICC, primarily through the seminal work of Byram (1997, 2021) and others, and offers substantial empirical evidence of its benefits and challenges in various global EFL contexts (Chen, 1990; Hoff, 2020; Tran & Duong, 2018). The existing research conclusively establishes why ICC is critical and identifies universal barriers to its implementation, such as insufficient teacher training, curriculum constraints, and a gap between teachers' beliefs and practices (Iswandari & Ardi, 2022; Safa & Tofghi, 2021).

However, a significant gap emerges when considering the specific, highly localized context of Nepalese community schools. While the global literature outlines general principles and challenges, there is a scarcity of research that explores how these manifest and are navigated within Nepal's unique socio-educational landscape, characterized by profound linguistic and ethnic diversity and specific systemic constraints. The one local study cited, Timsina (2025) focuses on the content of textbooks, pointing to an imbalance in cultural representation. This highlights a problem at the resource level but does not investigate the crucial next step: how teachers perceive and mediate this material in their actual classroom practices.

Therefore, the central research gap lies in the lack of an in-depth, qualitative understanding of teachers' lived experiences with ICC integration at the grassroots level in Nepalese community schools. We know what the textbooks contain, but we do not understand how teachers interpret their role as intercultural mediators, what practical, context-specific strategies they develop to foster ICC amidst resource limitations, and how they perceive the interplay between the national curriculum and the diverse cultural realities of their students. This study aims to fill this void by moving beyond broad theoretical models and generalized challenges to explore the detailed perceptions, tailored strategies, and firsthand accounts of Nepalese teachers on the front lines of intercultural education.

### **Methodology**

We employed a generic qualitative research design (Merriam & Grenier, 2019) to explore the integration of ICC into English language teaching in Nepalese community schools. We have

purposefully selected (Flick, 2017) four Basic Level English language teachers having at least three years of teaching experience in multicultural and multilingual classrooms of community schools of Chitwan district of Nepal. We employed semi-structured interview guidelines that comprise questions about teachers' perceptions of ICC, strategies for integrating intercultural content, challenges encountered, and recommendations for improvement. The interviews, followed by telephone conversations, were conducted in a conversational format to encourage participants to share detailed accounts of their experiences. The collected audio data were transcribed and translated into English. Then, they were coded, grouped, categorized, and thematized. Finally, we thematically analyzed and presented our data. To ensure the trustworthiness and plausibility of this research study and its findings, we followed a range of verification procedures prescribed by Creswell and Poth (2018).

Following Morse (2000), participants were determined. In this regard, four English language teachers were purposefully selected based on their teaching experience, locations and cultural diversity in their classrooms. Two participants were from schools in Bharatpur Metropolitan City, one from Siraha, and one from Ichchhyakamana Rural Municipality, Chitwan. The schools where these teachers were working had students from various ethnic groups, including Tharu, Newar, Magar, Gurung, Madhesi, and Chepang.

One of the researchers travelled to the respective schools to collect data. The most challenging visit was to the Chepang village in Ichchhyakamana Rural Municipality, which required walking uphill for more than three hours. Upon arrival, the school was found closed due to a local tragedy: a suicide near the school. The researcher had to stay an additional night to meet the teacher the next day. Prior to conducting the interviews, rapport was built with the teachers to establish trust. Verbal consent was obtained from each participant to conduct and record the interviews. Teachers were assured that their identities would remain confidential. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to allow flexibility in responses while maintaining a structured set of core questions. The interviews focused on their experiences teaching students from different cultural backgrounds, strategies they employ to promote ICC, and the challenges they face while teaching in a multicultural setting. The participants were informed about the purpose of the study and how their responses would contribute to improving ELT practices. Their confidentiality and anonymity were ensured. The researcher maintained neutrality and avoided influencing participants' responses. The collected data were transcribed and thematically analyzed. The responses from different teachers were categorized to identify common themes and unique insights regarding ICC integration in English language classrooms. The analysis focused on teaching strategies, intercultural challenges, and teachers' perceptions of ICC's role in ELT.

## **Results and Discussion**

This exploratory qualitative research revealed the instances of a multicultural classroom context, teachers' perceptions on ICC, strategies for intercultural learning, challenges in integrating ICC, curriculum flexibility and reform needs, training and professional development, and policy implications and recommendations. This section introduces the theme, presents the findings and discusses the results with the literature.

### **Multicultural Classroom Context**

The theme- multicultural classroom context- signifies the linguistic and cultural diversity that defines Nepalese classrooms. Teachers interact daily with students from varied ethnic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds, creating dynamic, rich, and complex learning environments. However, this diversity simultaneously challenges pedagogical practices, as teachers must navigate differences in language use, cultural behaviours, and educational expectations. Drawing on ICC frameworks

articulated by Byram (2021) and Fantini (2009), understanding learners' socio-cultural contexts is fundamental for fostering meaningful communication, ensuring equitable learning, and promoting inclusivity. Additionally, the target cultural knowledge is another aspect to be addressed in classroom pedagogy.

In Nepalese classrooms, cultural and linguistic heterogeneity is a hallmark. Teachers consistently emphasized the influence of this diversity on their teaching approaches and classroom management. They should balance the cultural knowledge of the students and native speakers of English. In this regard, Shital stated:

There is a great difference in the cultural language of my student. They cannot explore their idea and views in the English language. As it is the second language or sometimes third language, bringing the English cultural instances in the classroom pedagogy is very difficult. Our students have to understand not only English culture but also the multiple cultures of their friends to communicate effectively.

Similarly, Rachana reflected that "I have a multicultural classroom. That means diversity in every class. There are so many students from different cultures, and they bring their culture into classrooms also." Supporting the Rachana, Laxmi remarked:

There is diversity in the classrooms. Not all of these students are using the same language. We have to handle such a complex situation. We don't have training for handling intercultural issues in the class. We have to manage it on our own.

Likewise, Nirmal commented:

We have students from Gurung, Magar, and a few Dalit communities, as well as some Chepang students. While dealing with them, in addition to English, we have addressed their culture too... it [handling such a situation] is a very difficult task. If we focus on the ICC, we can't complete the course on time, as a result, our students cannot score high in the board examination. Though the curriculum has components like project work, we should focus on results rather than cultural aspects.

These reflections vividly illustrate how classrooms have evolved into microcosms of Nepalese society, requiring teachers to adopt inclusive practices that recognize and respect cultural plurality together with native culture, i.e., English culture.

These findings are consistent with foundational ICC scholarship, confirming Byram's (2021) emphasis on engaging with students' complex social identities and illustrating Fantini's (2009) concept of the "relativity of meaning" within Nepal's diverse classrooms. The teachers' struggles also validate Hoff's (2020) critique of static ICC models, highlighting the need for dynamic, text-mediated approaches suitable for such complex realities. This context emphasizes the relevance of pedagogical strategies that foster inclusivity and responsiveness, as advocated by Chen (1990) and Pasand and Ghasemi (2018), and aligns with calls to use experiential learning to transform diversity from a challenge into an educational resource (Dugulan et al., 2010). Central to this transformation is the thoughtful use of materials; teachers can leverage multilingual content and authentic texts to mediate cultural knowledge and foster critical reflection, as suggested by Haerazi and Nunez (2022) and Heggernes (2021). However, as the teachers' testimonies reveal, significant systemic barriers impede the implementation of these practices, a finding that mirrors the documented gap between teachers' positive beliefs and actual classroom integration due to a lack of training and support (Iswandari & Ardi, 2022; Nindya et al., 2022; Safa & Tofighi, 2022). To bridge this gap, pedagogical solutions like Huang's (2014) participatory "cultural experience model" and Tran's (2018) structured intercultural language teaching prove essential. Ultimately, enhancing teachers' own intercultural sensitivity is a

critical prerequisite for success (Mostafaei Alaei & Nosrati, 2018), and only through systemic reforms can educators transform these culturally diverse classrooms into sites of intercultural learning, empathy, and global citizenship (Byram & Wagner, 2018; Hua, 2014). Thus, in Nepalese classrooms, teachers have to manage multicultural students and facilitate them to enhance ICC.

### **Teachers' Perceptions of ICC**

The theme- teachers' perceptions of ICC- denotes how teachers conceptualize and value ICC within their classrooms. According to Byram (1997), ICC encompasses the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to navigate cultural diversity effectively. This competence is especially critical for fostering meaningful communication and understanding in Nepal's culturally and linguistically diverse educational settings.

Teachers widely recognized ICC as an essential aspect of English language teaching. Shital highlighted the challenges of introducing ICC to younger students stated that "intercultural communication is very hard for small children from class 6 to 8, also because they are having a hard time with an international language." Despite these difficulties, Shital's remark reflects an awareness of ICC's role in bridging linguistic and cultural gaps. Similarly, Rachana expanded on the scope of ICC by noted that "intercultural competence means knowing different cultures, different languages." Laxmi provided a succinct yet profound definition of IC as "intercultural competence means to know the culture of difference." Nirmal, offering a more values-based interpretation, remarked, "It's important not to neglect or demean others' cultures. Just as we value our culture, others value theirs. This teaches them to respect and preserve their culture while respecting others' as well." These perspectives collectively reveal a shared understanding among teachers regarding the importance of ICC for preparing students for intercultural communication and global citizenship.

The teachers' perceptions of ICC as a blend of cultural knowledge, respect, and communication skills resonate strongly with the foundational components of Byram's (1997, 2021) model, which emphasizes the interplay of knowledge, attitudes, and critical awareness. This understanding is further enriched by Fantini's (2009) focus on the cultural nuances beyond mere linguistic proficiency and aligns with Chen's (1990) early calls for culturally responsive teaching. However, despite this strong theoretical alignment, the findings also reveal a significant gap between belief and practice, as teachers voiced challenges in operationalizing ICC, particularly with younger students. These practical difficulties mirror the systemic barriers identified in broader research, where even teachers who value ICC are hindered by inadequate training, resource scarcity, and rigid curricula (Safa & Tofighi, 2021; Nindya et al., 2022). Consequently, successful implementation depends heavily on systemic support through professional development and intercultural rich materials (Iswandari & Ardi, 2022), as well as structured pedagogical frameworks like the ICLT model to scaffold learning for both teachers and students (Tran, 2018). Ultimately, this reinforces the argument that ICC must be embedded as an integral part of daily instruction (Hoff, 2020; Heggernes, 2021), as doing so is essential for developing learners' ability to interact across cultures and fostering the global competencies necessary for an interconnected world (Ghasemi & Gholami Pasand, 2018). To sum up, though the teachers are aware of multicultural and intercultural issues to be addressed in the class, the systemic lacunae have obstructed them from implementing their knowledge on it.

### **Strategies for Intercultural Learning**

The theme- strategies for intercultural learning- examines the methods teachers employ to introduce and teach intercultural topics in their classrooms. These strategies reflect how teachers foster empathy and mutual respect among students in an interactive way. The practices by the teachers are

closely aligned with Fantini's (2009) emphasis on experiential learning in the development of Intercultural Communicative Competence.

Teachers mostly used storytelling, role-playing, and translation methods to facilitate intercultural learning. Shital highlighted the use of translation and visual aids and said, "I use a translating method in their language and I use some visual aids of their and our language." This method helps students connect new concepts to familiar contexts, which makes intercultural learning easier. As she states, Rachana integrates reflective practices. In this regard, she explains that "sometimes I make a speech inside the class, and I promote writing essays about their culture and how they celebrate their festivals." Her approach encourages students to reflect on their cultural identities and interact with their peers. Likewise, Laxmi encourages collaboration, stating that "I include activities like role-playing, storytelling, and group discussions. They feel happy because they get an opportunity to communicate with each other." Nirmal highlighted the mutual strategy stating that "since I don't know how they speak in their native languages, I ask the students themselves. I gather information from them and use that as a resource." These strategies help to foster intercultural understanding and enhance students' communication skills.

The practical strategies reported by the teachers, such as storytelling, role-playing, and translation, directly align with Fantini's (2009) assertion that experiential learning is fundamental to developing ICC. In this regard, these methods provide tangible opportunities for learners to practise empathy and build cultural awareness through active engagement. In the same vein, the use of reflective practices, such as writing essays about cultural festivals, supports the development of critical reflection and engagement with cultural practices, a cornerstone of Byram's (1997) ICC framework. Similarly, the value of these interactive approaches is strongly supported by empirical research; Chen (1990), for instance, highlighted the power of storytelling and collaborative discussions in promoting cultural understanding. Likewise, Dugulan et al. (2010) reinforce this point by demonstrating how collaborative learning activities enhance both student engagement and intercultural competence. However, while these strategies signify effective pedagogy, their implementation is often constrained by systemic barriers such as limited time, resource scarcity, and the need for greater teacher proficiency in addressing diverse cultures. Therefore, empowering teachers with targeted professional development and curriculum support is crucial to help them overcome these obstacles and more effectively leverage these powerful strategies in their classrooms.

### **Challenges in Integrating ICC**

The theme- challenges in integrating ICC- denotes the barriers teachers face when implementing intercultural content into their classrooms. These challenges include linguistic diversity, insufficient training, lack of resources, and time constraints. They underline the complexities of fostering intercultural competence in a multicultural and multilingual context. Systematic support is required to overcome these challenges and to enable teachers to handle cultural diversity effectively.

Teachers reported the challenges they encountered in integrating ICC. Shital expressed "the challenges of inadequate training and limited time." She added:

Other challenges are a lack of training and time. There are not enough trained teachers. Time is also lacking because there are more students in one class. We haven't learned how to practically handle intercultural competence in our TPD sessions.

This underlines the stress caused by large class sizes and the absence of professional development opportunities for managing ICC. Rachana emphasized the linguistic barriers faced by students learning English as a second or third language. She accepted that "it is very difficult to teach because English is a second or third language for them." Similarly, Laxmi pointed out the compounded



difficulties of linguistic and cultural diversity. She explained that “I face linguistic and cultural challenges because they don’t know each other’s cultures and languages. At the same time, teaching a third language and its culture is a real challenge.” Nirmal highlighted the issue of time constraint and the unavailability of materials. He stated that “time is a major issue. It’s challenging to include everything within the available time. The lack of teaching materials also limits what I can teach.” These quotes illustrate the multifaceted nature of the challenges from the individual to the system.

The multifaceted challenges, such as spanning linguistic diversity, insufficient training, and resource scarcity, find strong validation in established literature. In this regard, the linguistic barriers and lack of materials directly echo Fantini’s (2009) identification of these as significant obstacles to developing ICC, while also underscoring a critical gap where teachers lack the specific knowledge and skills required by Byram’s (1997) framework to navigate cultural complexities. In the same line, these issues are not unique to Nepal; they confirm Chen’s (1990) long-standing findings that time constraints and inadequate training are universal impediments in intercultural education. Likewise, the teachers’ difficulty in adapting their methods validates the research by Dugulan et al. (2010), which highlights that without adequate, practical training, educators struggle to meet the needs of diverse learners. Consequently, these findings collectively point to the need for systemic support, where customized professional development, improved access to teaching resources, and practical pedagogical strategies are essential to empower teachers to overcome these hurdles and effectively foster ICC in their classrooms.

### **Curriculum Flexibility and Reform Needs**

The theme- curriculum flexibility and reform needs- addresses the limitations of the current English curriculum in Nepal, particularly the integration of intercultural content and adapting to the diverse needs of multicultural classrooms. In spite of the room for integrating ICC in the curriculum, participants expressed concerns that the existing curriculum is insufficiently inclusive and lacks the flexibility necessary for addressing the linguistic and cultural diversity of Nepalese students.

Shital emphasized the need for curriculum reform that reflects local realities, stating that “the curriculum should be made according to the geographical features of the country.” However, the existing curriculum has room for that. Rachana elaborated on the shortcomings of the current curriculum as “it is not enough because speaking and listening are not emphasized there, and there are not enough lessons to promote native culture.” Her critique highlights the gaps in both linguistic skill development and the promotion of cultural awareness.

Similarly, Laxmi pointed out the rigidity of the curriculum as:

The curriculum includes little intercultural content. It is not flexible. Instead of focusing primarily on local culture, our students should enhance their knowledge and skills to acquire ICC. They should be able to understand themselves [their cultures] and target [English] culture. But curricular components seem to be inadequate in this aspect.

This rigidity hampers teachers’ ability to adapt lessons to their students’ diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. In contrast, Nirmal offered a more optimistic view as “it’s flexible, sir. It’s better than before. The current curriculum is more practical. For instance, students have to develop their own stories and find information themselves. This encourages them to speak and participate more.” Nirmal’s perspective suggests that while improvements have been made, the curriculum’s flexibility remains perceived differently among teachers depending on their classroom experiences. This enforced us to triangulate this information with the curriculum, and we found out that the curriculum has addressed the intercultural aspect, but it does not detail the process of addressing it in the classroom.

The diverse perceptions of the curriculum, from rigid and inadequate to progressively more flexible, highlight a critical disconnect between policy and classroom reality. In this regard, the call for a curriculum that is more geographically and culturally responsive aligns perfectly with the foundational principles of Byram's (1997, 2021) ICC model, which necessitates embedding deep cultural understanding rather than treating it as an add-on. In the same vein, this need for reform is strongly corroborated by empirical research; for instance, Chen (1990) has long stressed the importance of culturally responsive curricula that prepare students for authentic interactions. Similarly, Tran (2018) demonstrates how structured Intercultural Communicative Language Teaching (ICLT) approaches can successfully bridge the gap that teachers identified between the curriculum's existence and its practical application. Furthermore, the critique of insufficient cultural content is directly addressed by scholars like Haerazi and Nunez (2022), who argue that systematically embedding diverse, multilingual content is key to fostering intercultural skills. Ultimately, this entire discussion validates Hoff's (2020) advocacy for moving beyond static documents toward dynamic pedagogical frameworks, which explains why a curriculum can simultaneously contain intercultural elements, as one teacher noted, yet fail to provide the clear, actionable guidance that other teachers require to implement them effectively.

### **Training and Professional Development**

The theme- training and professional development- refers to training and continuous professional development programs needed to equip teachers with the skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary to address linguistic and cultural diversity effectively in Nepalese classrooms. Given the multicultural composition of Nepalese society, teachers are increasingly encountering diverse linguistic backgrounds and cultural practices among students, thereby necessitating customized training programs to foster ICC.

Participants emphasized the significance of training for effective intercultural teaching practices. Shital articulated the necessity of supporting local teachers with tools to bridge language and cultural gaps. She recommended, "Local teachers should get training. Because if they get training, they can make their students easily understand languages." Similarly, Rachana elaborated on the type of training needed. In this regard, she suggested, "There should be special language training and intercultural training by native speakers. Every teacher should participate." Nirmal reflected on his own experience, noting that he had not had opportunities to participate in such training, indicating a gap that, if addressed, could significantly enhance teaching effectiveness. Laxmi reinforced the importance of cultural sensitivity in professional development, stated, "Training related to different ethnic groups and cultures would help to address intercultural aspects more effectively." These perspectives highlight teachers' recognition that specialized training is essential for navigating the complexities of multicultural classrooms and for fostering inclusive education.

The teachers' unanimous call for specialized training finds strong support in core ICC literature, which posits that teacher development is central to cultivating the knowledge and skills necessary for intercultural understanding (Byram, 2021; Hua, 2019). In this regard, Fantini's (2009) work reinforces this by arguing that without systematic, sustained professional development, the effective integration of cultural dimensions remains elusive. Similarly, this necessity is not a discovery; decades of research from scholars like Chen (1990) and Dugulan et al. (2010) have consistently highlighted that managing classroom diversity effectively requires training tailored to specific local contexts. Furthermore, the teachers' desire for practical, experience-based opportunities is echoed in recent studies; for instance, Tran (2018) validates the benefit of involving native speakers, while Haerazi and Nunez (2022) stress the importance of equipping teachers with multicultural training

frameworks. However, despite this overwhelming consensus, the findings reveal a critical disconnect, as teachers report a stark lack of access to such programs - a gap reflecting broader systemic failures in prioritizing ICC within teacher education, as documented by Iswandari and Ardi (2022) and Nindya et al. (2022), and which ultimately prevents educators from translating theoretical knowledge into the actionable intercultural pedagogies needed in their classrooms.

### **Actionable Policies and Systemic Support**

The theme- actionable policies and systemic support- highlights the role of educational policies in fostering ICC. Participants emphasized the necessity of systemic support through policies that integrate intercultural aspects into language teaching and provide resources for teachers. Effective policies can bridge existing gaps in curriculum design, professional development, and resource availability, needed for teachers to address the challenges of teaching in multicultural classrooms.

Participants expressed the need for the practical involvement of educational authorities to support ICC integration. Shital stressed the importance of accountability among policymakers. She stated, "Educational authorities should play many roles... punctuality is important. Without punctuality, nothing is possible." Her comment highlights the need for consistency and dedication from authorities in implementing and monitoring educational policies. Rachana advocated for the inclusion of cultural programs and resources. She recommended, "There should be cultural programs, cultural exchange programs, and more materials provided to teachers." This reflects the need for policies that facilitate realistic learning and support teachers with resources to engage with diverse cultural contexts. Laxmi focused on embedding intercultural concepts into educational content. She suggested, "Policies should promote intercultural concepts in the curriculum and textbooks." Her recommendation highlights the importance of effective policy for curriculum reforms for ICC as an integral part of English language teaching. Nirmal added, "Funds are provided for materials, but creating the materials ourselves is quite challenging. They should provide the necessary teaching materials according to the curriculum." It also suggests the policy amendment to support teachers with teaching resources.

A clear throughline exists between the teachers' plea for actionable policies and the core principles established by foundational ICC frameworks. In this regard, their recommendations for curriculum reform and resource provision mirror Byram's (1997) emphasis on the systemic integration of cultural knowledge, while their plea for accountability resonates with Fantini's (2009) argument that policy must prioritize and resource intercultural initiatives to be effective. In the same vein, this need for top-down institutional commitment is strongly validated by empirical research; for instance, Chen's (2018) work underscores the necessity of institutional support to properly equip teachers. Similarly, the specific suggestions for cultural exchange programs and curriculum contents are precisely the types of policies that Dugulan et al. (2010) found essential for bridging cultural divides in the classroom. Furthermore, the distinction one teacher made between the allocation of funds and the lack of practical, ready-to-use materials reveals a critical disconnect between policy intent and on-the-ground reality. This illustrates that effective policy is not merely about budgeting but requires a comprehensive strategy for resource development and distribution. Ultimately, the teachers' collective voice serves as a powerful call to action for policymakers, urging them to move beyond passive frameworks towards creating an active, supportive ecosystem where the principles of ICC can be genuinely implemented in every Nepalese classroom.

### Conclusion and Implications

This study underlines the critical importance of integrating intercultural communicative competence (ICC) into English language teaching in Nepalese community schools. It reveals the complexities faced by teachers in multicultural classrooms, where linguistic and cultural diversity serves simultaneously as an asset and a challenge. From the perspective of teachers' perceptions and practices, fostering intercultural understanding is essential for preparing students to adapt to increasingly multicultural environments. Key findings demonstrate that while teachers recognize the value of ICC, they encounter significant barriers, including linguistic and cultural diversity, insufficient training, and a lack of resources. Although strategies such as storytelling, role-playing, and reflective practices are employed to introduce intercultural topics, various challenges continue to hinder their effectiveness. The study highlights the need for customized training programs and culturally responsive teaching resources aimed at equipping teachers with the skills necessary for intercultural pedagogy. In response to these findings, the study calls for targeted policy interventions, including the development of cultural exchange programs, improved resource allocation, and the systematic integration of intercultural concepts within the curriculum. Teachers stressed the necessity of systemic support from educational authorities to enable the effective incorporation of ICC into everyday teaching practices. Furthermore, future research should explore students' perspectives to better address their needs and enhance their intercultural competencies. In conclusion, fostering ICC in Nepalese community schools requires a comprehensive approach involving curriculum redesign, specialized teacher training, and supportive educational policies. By bridging the current gaps, educators and policymakers can cultivate inclusive classrooms that promote mutual respect, cultural awareness, and global readiness. The integration of ICC not only enriches the educational experience but also empowers teachers to navigate and embrace cultural diversity effectively.

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#### Authors' Bio

**Bishow Raj Joshi**, Ph.D. scholar and Assistant Professor at Tribhuvan University, Nepal, specializes in English for Tourism and Hospitality. As an educator, researcher, and textbook writer, he has extensive experience in teaching, training, translation, and curriculum development

**Ramesh Adhikari** is a vice principal and English Language Teacher at Arunodaya Secondary School, Nepal, with over two decades of teaching experience at secondary level. He is a TESOL graduate, teacher-trainer, and the author of English language reference books. He is actively involved in teaching and training.