

## Intercultural sensitivity: A comparative study among Business English Undergraduate Learners in two Countries of Iran and China

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**Abstract:** One of the major aspects of intercultural communication competence is intercultural sensitivity which is gaining increasing attention in different disciplines. Intercultural sensitivity is important because it reduces cultural barriers between people interacting from different cultures. This paper focuses on the importance of intercultural sensitivity and shares the results of a comparative study on the intercultural sensitivity among two countries of Iran and China. For this purpose, 40 Iranian and 40 Chinese male and female undergraduate Business English students completed the intercultural sensitivity questionnaire comprising five factors with 24 items developed by Chen and Starosta (2000). The results showed that in all five dimensions of the intercultural sensitivity including “Interaction Engagement”, “Respect for Cultural Differences”, “Interaction Confidence”, “Interaction Enjoyment”, and “Interaction Attentiveness”, Iranian participants had greater scores compared to Chinese participants. For both countries by increasing the age, the scores of all five dimensions of intercultural sensitivity increased too. Also, the results indicated that both Iranian and Chinese male participants had greater level of intercultural sensitivity in dimensions of “Interaction Engagement”, “Respect for Cultural Differences”, and “Interaction Confidence” compared to female ones. However, gender did not have any impact on two intercultural sensitivity dimensions of “Interaction Enjoyment” and “Interaction Attentiveness”.

**Keywords:** China, Intercultural dimensions, Intercultural sensitivity, Iran, Undergraduate Business English students.

### Introduction

Common features of all definitions of culture include the group of persons with shared system of meanings, behaviors, values, and beliefs which are passed from one generation to another generation. Culture is different from nationality or race. Therefore, “culture is relative, learned, collective, changeable, and includes complex responsive processes”. (Matsumoto, 1996). Culture is “all those things that people have learned to do, believe, value, and enjoy in their history . . . the ideals, beliefs, skills, tools, customs, and institutions into which each member of society is born” (Sue, 1981, p. 37).

“Culture may be understood as a consortium of communication (or a bundle of messages) that a given people have in common: their shared experiences, shared perceptions, and values, shared consciousness” (Macdonald, 1991). These values, experiences, and communications are “guidelines about what things mean, what is important, and what should be done” (Schmidt, Conaway, Easton, & Wardrope, 2007). Culture guides the actions of individuals and groups are guided through their cultures. Consequently, we should understand the similarities and differences between cultures to create good relationships between cultures. Individuals can be enculturated in the setting they are born and their enculturation level would be developed during the stages of their life. During enculturation process, individuals view other cultures from their own point of view. As pointed out by Stafford, Bowman, Ewing, Hanna, and Wardrope (1997), cultural sensitivity means being aware that cultural differences and similarities exist and they have strong effect on values, learning, and behavior. Cultural sensitivity starts with the awareness that there are differences between cultures and these variations are apparent in the ways that different groups communicate to one another. Recognizing differences among cultures is important, but we should also be conscious that variations also exist within cultures. It is not true to believe that all the members of the society with the same race, language, and religion share a common culture. We must understand our personal cultural values. Any prejudices that prevent us from communicating effectively with people from different cultures should be identified. “We should not overlook that, whether we like it or not, we most probably maintain some stereotypes about race, culture, food, customs, religion, body language, dress code, gender, etc”.(Barnlund, 1998; Holliday, Hyde, & Kullman, 2004).

Lacking acceptance of cultural variation and intolerance for outgroups is called ethnocentrism. (Berry & Kalin, 1995). When cultural diversity is not accepted, individuals tend to have negative stance, bias and negative

behaviors toward other cultural or ethnic groups (Billiet, Eisinga, & Scheepers, 1996). There are three closely related but separate concepts in this regard. The cognitive process a person goes through in his or her own and others' culture is known as intercultural awareness. Intercultural effectiveness deals with the ability to attain communication goals in intercultural interactions. And finally, intercultural sensitivity represents both the ability of an individual to distinguish between the different behaviors, perceptions, and feelings of a culturally different counterpart and the ability to appreciate and respect them as well (Chen & Starosta, 1997; Woofter, 2019).

Cultural sensitivity training is necessary to go ahead through cultural sensitivity stages and to create better relations between culturally different individuals. The aim of training is to become cognitively aware of and have an understanding of differences between cultures. "Cognitive awareness and understanding of cultural values and norms is a key to meeting the challenges of intercultural interactions." For this reason it is necessary to go beyond the simple basic elements of an individual culture in cultural sensitivity training; "...one must be able to assimilate the knowledge of one culture with another (or several others) in order to determine the most effective way to interact and communicate" (Rudd & Lawson, 2007).

The importance of self-awareness would not be investigated enough. Intercultural sensitivity education should encompass self-awareness building, because cultural understanding of similarities and differences are related to a person's home culture (Halpern, 2017; Hanberg & Odterdahl, 2009; Shalehi et al., 2018). There are many questions one must ask himself when improving self-awareness, such as "What are my cultural values, beliefs and attitudes?" "How are these elements of my culture reflected in my behavior?" and "How adaptable and tolerant am I?" (Walker, Walker, & Schmitz, 2003). Through asking these questions, an individual will become more self-aware and therefore more culturally sensitive towards persons from different cultures. Through the study and comparison of cultures one can attain cognitive awareness and understanding of cultures can be achieved.

Global citizenship refers to an understanding of how people from different cultures in different countries think, behave, believe and respect each other. Knowledge of culture is one of the main elements that allow nations to get a deep understanding of one another's political, economic and social aspects. Iranian thinks very highly of Chinese people because of cultural, historical and civilization similarities that they share with each other. Thus the current study aimed at investigating intercultural sensitivity dimensions more deeply among Iranian and Chinese Business English undergraduate learners both descriptively and comparatively to raise intercultural awareness, develop a positive attitude towards cross-cultural communication, and improve confidence in cross-cultural communication.

## Review of Literature

Intercultural sensitivity can be defined as "an individual's ability to develop emotion towards understanding and appreciating cultural differences that promotes appropriate and effective behavior in intercultural communication" (Chen & Starosta, 1997, p. 5). The concept was treated as one of the dimensions of intercultural communication competence. Intercultural communication competence comprises three aspects: cognitive, affective, and behavioral abilities; the cognitive ability is represented by intercultural awareness, the affective ability by intercultural sensitivity, and the behavioral ability by intercultural effectiveness or adroitness (Chen, 2009; Chen & Starosta, 1996, 2003, 2005; Hammer, 1989).

The importance of intercultural sensitivity has been emphasized by scholars from a variety of disciplines including Communication Studies, Education, and Psychology. Most have concluded that intercultural sensitivity is required for successful and productive communication between people from different cultural backgrounds (Chen & Starosta, 1997; Graf, 2004; Moran, Harris, & Moran, 2007; Olson & Kroeger, 2001; Rosen, Digh, Singer, & Phillips, 2000). Academics from different disciplines have tried to conceptualize intercultural awareness and intercultural sensitivity and develop instruments for measuring these two concepts (e.g. Bennett 1986; Chen & Starosta 1998; Hanvey, 1987; Turner 1968).

Bennett (1986) argued that intercultural sensitivity was related to interactants' ability to transform themselves not only affectively but also cognitively and behaviorally from denial stage to integration stage in the development process of intercultural communication in order to have empathic ability to accept and adapt cultural differences as pointed out by Chen and Starosta (2000).

From the above statement it can be inferred that intercultural sensitivity is a developmental process. To support this notion, for example, Bennett (1993) suggested that intercultural sensitivity is composed of six developmental stages: denial, defense, minimizing, acceptance, adaptation and integration of cultural difference. On the other hand, Hammer, Bennett, and Wiseman (2003) stated that one's potential competence in intercultural relations increases as one's experience of cultural difference becomes more complex and sophisticated.

Similarly, researchers such as Bhawuk and Brislin (1992) perceived intercultural sensitivity from the perspective of individualism and collectivism and proposed a measure by arguing that intercultural sensitivity consists of three elements, including the understanding of cultural behaviors, open-mindedness towards cultural differences, and behavioral flexibility in host culture. They suggest that intercultural sensitivity is an individual's reaction to people from other cultures, which can predetermine that individual's ability to work successfully with those people. They stated that "to be effective in other cultures, people must be interested in other cultures, be

sensitive enough to notice cultural differences and also be willing to modify their behavior as an indication of respect for people of other cultures. A reasonable term that summarizes these qualities of people is intercultural sensitivity” (p. 416).

Chen and Starosta (1998) defined intercultural sensitivity as the subjects’ “active desire to motivate themselves to understand, appreciate, and accept differences among cultures” (p.231). According to Chen and Starosta (2000) intercultural communication sensitivity is a prerequisite for intercultural communication competence. And it is thought that people with higher intercultural sensitivity will become more confident global citizens as their understanding of cultural difference become more complex. As Bhawuk and Brislin (1992) suggest those with high sensitivity are those who interest in, engage, and tend to learn other cultures.

Among studies in this line of research, Chen and Starosta's (1996) model of intercultural communication competence draws much special interest. The model is comprised of three conceptual dimensions of intercultural communication competence, including intercultural awareness, intercultural sensitivity, and intercultural adroitness. Based on this model, Chen and Starosta (2000) further explained the nature and constituents of intercultural sensitivity and developed an instrument to measure the concept. They developed a new intercultural sensitivity measurement scale to “integrate features of both cross-cultural attitude and behavioral skills models” (Fritz, Mollenberg, & Chen, 2001, p. 54). This scale is a 24-item questionnaire aimed at measuring intercultural sensitivity. The scale has five factors on which its items are based: (1) interaction engagement, (2) respect for cultural differences, (3) interaction confidence, (4) interaction enjoyment, and (5) interaction attentiveness (Chen & Starosta, 2000, p. 98).

### **Summary of comparison of three theoretical instruments**

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<b>Developmental Model for Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) (Bennett, 1986)</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. To explain the reactions of people to cultural differences in both academic and corporate settings.</li><li>2. To compare pre, during and post departure to other cultures. It is therefore, more appropriate to be used with longitudinal participants.</li><li>3. To be used with cross-cultural Adaptability Inventory (CCAI) and compare the intercultural communication skills of subjects before and after studying intercultural programs</li></ol>
<b>Intercultural Sensitivity Inventory (ICSI) (Bhawuk and Brislin, 1992)</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. To measure people in different cultural settings who have stayed for three or more years.</li><li>2. To measure an individual’s ability to modify behavior culturally appropriate ways when moving between different cultures.</li><li>3. To be used in comparing behaviors in five dimensions of culture by Hofstede such as individualistic vs. collectivistic or masculinity vs. femininity.</li></ol>
<b>Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS) (Chen and Starosta, 2000)</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. To measure people’s understanding and appreciation of cultural differences in order to construct “global citizenship”.</li><li>2. To measure intercultural sensitivity with five main factors: “interaction engagement”, “respect for cultural differences”, “interaction confidence”, “interaction enjoyment”, and “interaction attentiveness”.</li><li>3. To report from a study that Turkish students who had previous international experience were more open-minded and understood people who were culturally different and Chinese learners could use their previous educational background to serve as a bridge between different cultures.</li></ol>

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Based on the objectives and scope of this study the researcher found that the intercultural sensitivity of Bhawuk and Brislin (1992) and Bennett’s DMIS model do not fit this study because the ICSI model of Bhawuk and Brislin required the duration of stay of the participants from three or more years of cross-cultural experience in international business environments. Also, Bennett’s DMIS model is developed to examine the students in international programs and it should be used in combination with Cross-Cultural Adaptability Inventory (CCAI) and compare the intercultural communication skills of students before, during and after studying international programs. Thus, it is more appropriate to use with longitudinal participants. Therefore, the current study uses the Chen and Starosta’s (2000) Intercultural Sensitivity Scale to measure intercultural sensitivity with Iranian and Chinese students because it fits the aims and scope of this study. Several studies have been done to scrutinize the validity and reliability of the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS). All these studies indicated positive results. Chen and Starosta (2000) conducted a study to validate and test their Intercultural Sensitivity Scale and they came to

this conclusion that the “ISS has demonstrated strong reliability and appropriate concurrent and predictive validity. While further research is needed to replicate the properties of the ISS, the scale shows promise for use as a measure of intercultural sensitivity.”

In the recent years, more surveys have been conducted to test the intercultural sensitivity level of college students in China. The results turn out to be similar, that is, the intercultural level of the subjects is generally medium, although the mean of the five factors varies from one survey to another. Liu (2014) took 317 non-English major students as subjects and tested their intercultural sensitivity level by utilizing Chen and Starosta's ISS. The results show that the subjects' intercultural sensitivity level is a bit higher than the intermediate. And among the five factors, the subjects' Respect of Cultural Differences is the highest, followed by Interaction Engagement, Interaction Attentiveness, Interaction Enjoyment and Interaction Confidence. Li (2015) conducted a survey on the intercultural sensitivity level of college students in Beijing by using Chen and Starosta's ISS and the findings show that the overall situation of 757 students' intercultural sensitivity is at a medium level, Zhang, Zhao, and Liu (2015) adopted Chen and Starosta' ISS to measure the intercultural sensitivity level of 605 medical undergraduate students. They found that the subjects' intercultural sensitivity is at medium level, and the mean of Respect for Cultural Differences is highest while the mean of Interaction confidence remains the lowest, with Interaction Engagement, Interaction Enjoyment and Interaction Attentiveness in the middle. Huang (2016) did a survey on the intercultural sensitivity level of 85 non- English major postgraduates at Southwest Minzu University. The results show that the subjects' intercultural sensitivity level is intermediate, and the correlation coefficient analysis reveals that the five constructs of ISS are correlated.

## Research Questions and Hypotheses

The research questions addressed in this study are as follows:

RQ1. Is there any significant difference between intercultural sensitivity dimensions among Iranian and Chinese Business English undergraduate students?

RQ2. Is there any significant difference between male and female Iranian and Chinese Business English undergraduate students in terms of intercultural sensitivity dimensions?

RQ3. Is there any significant relationship between the age of Iranian and Chinese Business English undergraduate students and intercultural sensitivity dimensions?

The following hypotheses are developed in order to test the research questions:

H0 1: There is no significant difference between intercultural sensitivity dimensions among Iranian and Chinese Business English undergraduate students.

H0 2: There is no significant difference between male and female Iranian and Chinese Business English undergraduate students in terms of intercultural sensitivity dimensions.

H0 3: There is no significant relationship between the age of Iranian and Chinese Business English undergraduate students and intercultural sensitivity dimensions.

## Method

### Participants

The participants of this study were 40 Business English undergraduate students from Attar Institute of Higher Education, Mashhad, Iran and 40 undergraduate Business English language students from Amy College, Nanchang, China. They were selected based on availability sampling and completed Intercultural Sensitivity questionnaire comprising five factors with 24 items developed by Chen and Starosta (2000) for measuring intercultural sensitivity dimensions. Out of these 80 participants, 62 were female and 18 were male and the age ranged from 18 to 22.

### Instrument

The 24-items questionnaire was based on 5-likert scale and the choices were: 5=strongly agree, 4=agree, 3=uncertain, 2=disagree, and 1=strongly disagree. The 24 item model consists of five dimensions: (1) interaction engagement, (2) respect for cultural differences (3) interaction confidence, (4) interaction enjoyment, and (5) interaction attentiveness. The validity and reliability of the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS) had been investigated in research on intercultural sensitivity measurement conducted by Nieto (2008). Moreover, the confirmatory of the validity of the model had been evaluated on other research related to intercultural sensitivity measurement (Chen & Starosta, 2000; Fritz et al., 2001). The alpha reliability coefficient of the scale is 0.88.

Among the intercultural sensitivity dimensions, Interaction Engagement, included seven items which are related to participants' feeling of participation in intercultural communication; Respect for Cultural Differences, included six items which are about how participants acquaint to or tolerate their counterparts' culture and ideas; Interaction Confidence, had five items, which are concerned with how confident participants act in the intercultural setting; Interaction Enjoyment, included three items, which deal with participants' positive or negative feedback

towards communicating with people from different cultures; and Interaction Attentiveness had three items, which are concerned with respondent's attempt to understand what happens during intercultural interaction. It should be noted that items 2, 4, 7, 9, 23, 25, 28, 30, and 22 should be reverse-coded before summing the 24 items. The respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement on intercultural sensitivity with the five-point Likert scale.

## Result

To investigate whether the variables of the study have a normal distribution, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test is utilized.

**Table 1.**  
*Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test*

		age	Interaction Engagement	Respects for cultural Differences	Interaction Confidence	Interaction Enjoyment	Interaction Attentiveness	Total
N		80	80	80	80	80	80	80
Normal Parameters	Mean	21.2	3.49	3.97	3.10	3.57	3.49	3.54
	Std	3.31	0.45	0.55	0.54	0.71	0.66	0.42
Most Extreme Differences	Absolute	.29	0.14	0.15	0.14	0.16	0.16	0.11
	Positive	.29	0.08	0.08	0.14	0.10	0.16	0.08
	Negative	-.16	-0.14	-0.15	-0.09	-0.16	-0.14	-0.11
Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z		2.60	1.28	1.37	1.23	1.46	1.39	0.97
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)		.00	0.08	0.051	0.10	0.03	0.04	0.30

Table one indicates that the significance level for each category of the questionnaire is greater than 0.05 except for the categories of "Interaction Engagement" and "Interaction Attentiveness" which their significance levels are less than 0.05. This shows that these two categories are not normal.

Table 2 presents the findings of the intercultural sensitivity scale that measures individuals' feelings about interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds. In order to obtain a clearer picture of the overall findings regarding Iranian and Chinese students' intercultural sensitivity, the summary of the scores of the five intercultural sensitivity dimensions is displayed in Table 2.

**Table 2.**  
*Summary of the Scores of Intercultural Sensitivity Dimensions for the Two Countries*

Factor	country	mean	Level of IS
Interaction Engagement	Iran	3.72	High
	China	3.26	Moderate
Respect for cultural Differences	Iran	4.22	High
	China	3.71	High
Interaction Confidence	Iran	3.34	Moderate
	China	2.86	Moderate
Interaction Enjoyment	Iran	3.76	High
	China	3.37	Moderate
Interaction Attentiveness	Iran	3.85	High
	China	3.11	Moderate
Total	Iran	3.79	High
	China	3.28	Moderate

The values of the measures were interpreted according to the standard rating scale of intercultural competence research of Paige, Jacobs-Cassuto, Yershova, and De Jaeghere (2003). 1 – 1.5= very low, 1.51 – 2.50= low, 2.51 – 3.50= moderate, 3.51 – 4.50= high, and 4.51 – 5.0= very high According to table 2, the averages of all the intercultural sensitivity dimensions including "Interaction Engagement", "Interaction Confidence", "Interaction Enjoyment", "Interaction Attentiveness", and "Respect for Cultural Differences" are greater for the country of Iran than the country of China. For the intercultural factors of "Interaction Engagement", "Interaction Enjoyment" and "Interaction Attentiveness", Iranian participants represented high level of intercultural sensitivity and Chinese participants displayed moderate level. Iranian participants gave priorities to intercultural sensitivity factors of "Respect for Cultural Differences", "Cultural Attentiveness", "Interaction Enjoyment", "Interaction Engagement", and "Interaction Confidence" respectively. Chinese participants reported that they were more sensitive to these

factors respectively: "Respect for Cultural Differences", "Interaction Enjoyment", "Interaction Engagement", "Interaction Attentiveness", and "Interaction Confidence". The results suggest that the preferred intercultural communication factor for both Chinese and Iranian students is "Respect for Cultural Differences". Both Iranian and Chinese participants reported they would like to interact with people from different cultures and they are not biased against foreigners and accept their opinions. They respect the values and the ways people from different cultures behave and they don't think their cultures are better than the other cultures. The next high agreement level for the country of Iran is related to "Interaction Attentiveness". This is an evidence indicating that Iranian participants would like to be more observant and gain as information as necessary while interacting with people from different cultures and they are also more sensitive about subtle meanings through interaction. For the country of China, the next higher level of agreement is relevant to "Interaction Enjoyment". Most of Chinese participants reported that they don't get upset or discouraged while interacting with people from different cultures. The level of "Interaction Confidence" is moderate in both countries. The findings indicated that both groups of participants are not pretty sure of themselves and they don't know what to say when they are interacting with people from other cultures. Also, the results reported that Iranian respondents are more sociable and more confident than the Chinese respondents. In terms of "Interaction Engagement", Iranian respondents reported they tend more to wait before forming impression about their culturally - distinct counterpart compared to Chinese ones. They utilize more verbal and non-verbal cues to show their understanding. On the other hand, Chinese respondents reported that they are likely more to avoid those situations where they have to interact with people from other cultures. They reported that they tend to give more positive responses to their culturally-distinct counterparts. According to findings, differences between cultures are more enjoyable for Iranian participants than Chinese ones. On the whole, as the results indicate the total level of intercultural sensitivity is greater for the country of Iran (3.79=high) compared to the country of China (3.28=moderate).

**Table 3.**

*The Results of T-Test for Investigating the Difference Between Intercultural Dimensions Among Iran and China*

		F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Lower	Upper
Interaction Engagement	Equal variances assumed	.00	1	5.4	78	.00	.297	.64
	Equal variances not assumed			5.4	77.8	.00	.297	.64
Respect for cultural Differences	Equal variances assumed	.14	.71	4.6	78	.00	.29	.73
	Equal variances not assumed			4.6	77.9	.00	.29	.73
Interaction Confidence	Equal variances assumed	6.38	.01	4.3	78	.00	.26	.69
	Equal variances not assumed			4.3	65.8	.00	.26	.69
Total	Equal variances assumed	.04	.84	6.8	78	.00	.36	.65
	Equal variances not assumed			6.8	77.7	.00	.36	.65

The significance level for the equality of variances of the first dimension "Interaction Engagement" and the second dimension "Respect for Cultural Differences" in two countries are 0.997 and 0.706 respectively which are more than  $p\text{-value}=0.05$ . Thus, the variances of these two intercultural dimensions among two countries are the same. The significance level for the equality of the averages of two groups is 0.000. Since this value is less than 0.05, it can be concluded that "Interaction Engagement" and "Respect for Cultural Differences" are different among the countries of Iran and China. The averages of these variables are greater for the country of Iran.

The significance level for the dimensions of "Interaction confidence" is reported as 0.014. This indicates that the variance of interaction confidence is not the same for two countries. The significance level for the equality of the averages of two groups is 0.000 which is less than 0.05 and this shows that the "Interaction Confidence" is different among two countries and it is greater for the country of Iran.

The significance level for the equality of the variances of all the items of the questionnaire is 0.844 and greater than 0.05. The significance level for the equality of the averages of all the items among two countries is 0.000 and less than 0.05. This indicates that there is a significant difference between responses to all the items of the questionnaire. The average of all the items is reported a greater value for the country of Iran.

**Table 4.**

*The Results of Mann-Whitney U Test for Investigating the Difference Between Categories Of Interaction Enjoyment and Interaction Attentiveness in Two Countries*

	Interaction Enjoyment	Interaction Attentiveness
Mann-Whitney U	578.500	273.000
Wilcoxon W	1398.500	1093.000
Z	-2.162	-5.176
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.031	.000

Note. Grouping Variable: Country

The significance levels for the categories of "Interaction Enjoyment" and "Interaction Attentiveness" are reported as 0.031 and 0.000 which are less than 0.05. So, it can be concluded that the averages of items of "Interaction Enjoyment" and "Interaction Attentiveness" are greater for the country of Iran than the country of China.

**Table 5.**

*Descriptive Statistics for the Intercultural Sensitivity Dimensions Based on Gender Differences*

	gender	N	Mean	SD	Level of IS
Interaction Engagement	Female	62	3.44	.460	Moderate
	Male	18	3.68	.358	High
Respect for Cultural Differences	Female	62	3.93	.587	High
	Male	18	4.08	.409	High
Interaction Confidence	Female	62	3.01	.520	Moderate
	Male	18	3.41	.524	Moderate
Interactions Enjoyment	Female	62	3.61	.751	High
	Male	18	3.42	.557	Moderate
Interaction Attentiveness	Female	62	3.50	.726	Moderate
	Male	18	3.44	.379	Moderate
Total	Female	62	3.50	.443	Moderate
	Male	18	3.66	.282	High

According to the statistics reported in Table 5, the level of intercultural sensitivity for the dimensions of "Interaction Engagement", "Respect for Cultural Differences", and "Interaction Confidence" is higher for male participants and the level of intercultural sensitivity for the "Interaction Enjoyment" and "Interaction Attentiveness" is higher for the female ones. On the whole, the results showed that the male participants are more interculturally sensitive than the female respondents.

The significance levels for the equality of the variances of "Interaction Engagement", "Respect for Cultural Differences", and "Interaction Confidence" are 0.117, 0.101, and 0.861 respectively. All these values are greater than 0.05. Also, the significance levels for the averages of two groups are 0.043, 0.322, and 0.0006 respectively which are less than 0.05. Thus, it can be concluded that the averages of the intercultural dimensions "interaction engagement", "respect for cultural differences", and "interaction confidence" are greater for the male participants than the female ones.

The significance level for the equality of the variances of all the items of the questionnaire for both male and female were recorded as (0.092 > 0.05). So, it is inferred that the total variance is the same for both genders. Since the significance level for the equality of the averages of two groups is (0.152 > 0.05) it can be concluded that total variance is not different among two genders.

**Table 6.**

*The Results of Mann-Whitney Test to Investigate the Difference Between Interaction Enjoyment And Interaction Attentiveness Regarding Participants' Genders*

	Interaction Enjoyment	Interaction Attentiveness
Mann-Whitney U	430.000	498.000
Wilcoxon W	601.000	669.000
Z	-1.496	-.706
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.135	.480

Note. Grouping Variable: Gender

The significance level for comparing two groups for the categories of “interaction enjoyment” and “interaction attentiveness” is reported as 0.135 and 0.480. These values are more than 0.05 and it is evident that there is no significant difference between male and female responses to these two intercultural dimensions.

Since the age variable is not normal, Spearman Correlation Coefficient is used to consider the correlation between the intercultural sensitivity factors and the age to answer the third question of the study.

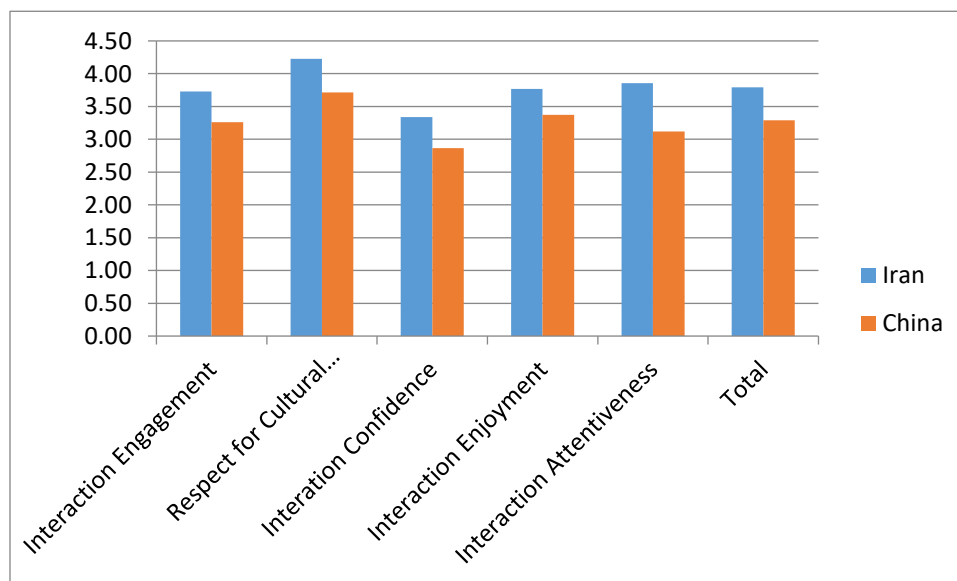
**Table 7.**

*Spearman Correlation Coefficient Between Age and Intercultural Sensitivity Variables*

	age	Correlation Coefficient	Respect for					Total
			Interaction Engagement	Cultural Differences	Interaction Confidence	Interactions Enjoyment	Interaction Attentiveness	
Spearman's rho			.436**	.317**	.221*	.248*	.347**	.433**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.004	.049	.026	.002	.000
		N	80	80	80	80	80	80

The significance level with regard to the correlation between “interaction engagement” and the age is 0.000 and less than 0.05. Thus, there is a correlation between this variable and the age. The correlation coefficient is considered as 0.436 which is a positive value and indicates that there is a directional relationship between age and interaction engagement. By increasing the age, interaction engagement increases two.

The correlation coefficient between variables of “respect for cultural differences”, “interaction confidence”, “interaction enjoyment” and “interaction attentiveness” are positive values of 0.317, 0.221, 0.248, and 0.347 respectively. This shows that by increasing the age, all these variables are increasing too. Also, the correlation coefficient between the age and total items of the questionnaire was estimated 0.433. This indicates that there is relationship between the age variable and total responses to the items of the questionnaire. Thus, the third hypothesis of the study can be rejected.



**Figure 1.** The bar graph of comparing intercultural sensitivity dimensions between Iran and China



As is evident from Figure 1, the score of Iranian Business undergraduate learners in all five dimensions of intercultural sensitivity is greater than the scores of Chinese Business undergraduate learners.

## Discussion and Conclusion

In general, intercultural sensitivity refers to the affective dimension of intercultural communication competence. This dimension focuses on the feelings and emotions created by specific situations, persons, and environment that are not the same as one's own culture. The ability to interact and communicate effectively is a necessary skill. Intercultural sensitivity describes a person's response to cultural differences and the perspectives of people from other cultures (Bhawuk & Brislin, 1992). Awareness about cultural elements and norms of the target community is not just enough to the international interaction with native and non-native speakers of English. Rather, having positive view regarding the target culture and its people is also important and should be given more attention.

The existence of affinities between two countries of Iran and China convince people of both countries to have cultural relationship with each other. Iran is eager to deepen its cooperation with China and frequently holds exhibitions in China in order to promote art, literature, and culture. This is true for China too and these two countries have many agreements in the context of cultural exchanges and tourism. So, much attention should be paid to affective dimensions of intercultural communication competence.

This study aimed to investigate the affective dimensions of intercultural communication among two countries of Iran and China. To achieve this aim, the present study assessed the difference between intercultural sensitivity dimensions including "Interaction Engagement," "Respect for Cultural Differences", "Interaction Confidence", "Interaction Enjoyment", and "Interaction Attentiveness" among Iranian and Chinese Business English undergraduate students. The study revealed that nationality had significant effect on all five intercultural dimensions. This finding is in line with the study conducted by Morales (2017) which indicated that there is a statistically significant difference in the level of intercultural sensitivity between Korean and non-Korean participants from 48 countries of the world.

The results of this study informed that the averages of all the intercultural sensitivity dimensions for the country of Iran (3.79) are greater than the country of China (3.28). This proves that Iranian learners have higher level of intercultural sensitivity and more positive attitude towards it, and Chinese learners showed a moderate level of cultural sensitivity.

The level of intercultural sensitivity towards "Interaction Engagement" indicated that Iranian participants are highly sensitive and Chinese ones are moderately sensitive towards this aspect of intercultural sensitivity. For this reason, Iranians are less likely to avoid the situation in which they have to interact with foreigners; they use verbal and non-verbal cues more than Chinese persons to show their understanding. Also, the results proved that Iranian participants were more open-minded to people from different cultures. Both Iranian and Chinese respondents reported that interacting with foreigners are enjoyable for them but Chinese participants believed that they use more positive responses while interacting compared to Iranian ones.

The findings showed that the intercultural sensitivity assessment for "Interaction Enjoyment" was at a moderate level for the country of China and at a high level for the country of Iran. Chinese participants reported that they get upset easily and feel useless more when interacting with people from different cultures. Both Iranian and Chinese participants revealed that they get discouraged while interact with culturally -distinct counterparts.

In terms of "Respect for Cultural Differences", both Iranian and Chinese participants had high level of agreement toward this dimension of intercultural sensitivity. They reported that they respect the values and the behavior of people from different cultures and accept their opinions. They don't regard their cultures superior to other cultures. Also, they reported they like to be with people from different cultures.

The level of intercultural sensitivity of the participants toward "Interaction Attentiveness" was reported high for Iranian and medium for Chinese participants. It means that Iranian participants were more observant, they tend more to get as much information they can during interaction, and they are more sensitive to subtle meanings while interacting to persons from other cultures.

Findings revealed that the intercultural sensitivity assessment on "Interaction Confidence" was at the level of medium for the participant of two countries. The results showed that both Iranian and Chinese respondents had moderate level of sensitivity in nearly all the items of this intercultural dimension. Furthermore, Iranian participants reported that they can be more sociable as they want to be when interacting with people from different cultures compared to Chinese participants.

These findings supported the results of studies done in China by Liu (2014), Li (2015), Zhang et al. (2015), and Huang (2016) which all reported China as a country with moderate level of intercultural sensitivity. The results also indicated that the level of intercultural sensitivity of the dimensions of "Interaction Engagement", "Respect for Cultural Differences", and "Interaction Confidence" is higher for the male participants than the female ones and gender did not prove any significant effect on the dimensions of "Interaction Enjoyment", and "Interaction Attentiveness". This finding is not similar to McMurray's (2007) and Margarethe, Hannes, and Weisinger's (2012) results that reported no significant difference in intercultural sensitivity between males and

females. McMurray (2007) and Margarethe et al. (2012) noted that the female participants tended to score slightly higher than males. Westrick (2004) also studied the relationship of gender on intercultural sensitivity and reported that females exhibited higher intercultural sensitivity than males. Many studies have reported that females appear to be more empathic to dimensions of the culture than males (e.g. Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998; Karniol, Gabay, & Ochion, 1998; Zhou et al., 2002).

Finally, the results revealed that by increasing the age of both male and female Iranian and Chinese undergraduate students, the level of intercultural sensitivity in all five dimensions of “Interaction Engagement”, “Respect for Cultural Differences”, “Interaction Confidence”, “Interaction Enjoyment”, and “Interaction Attentiveness” increased too.

Improving intercultural sensitivity will help intercultural communication more successfully and effectively. The results of this study revealed that the level of intercultural sensitivity is high for Iranian and moderate for Chinese participants. This proves that there is still some room available for improvement in terms of the general level of Iranian and Chinese learners’ intercultural sensitivity, but Chinese learners need to improve their level of intercultural sensitivity more than Iranian ones. Improving intercultural sensitivity will help intercultural communication more successfully and effectively. Learners with special educational background and professional skills can always serve as bridges between different cultures; and, developing intercultural sensitivity will better equip persons for their future intercultural obstacles to overcome.

As for teachers, on one hand, they must realize the significance of intercultural sensitivity to themselves and to their students, and constantly develop their own intercultural sensitivity and improve their intercultural communication abilities. On the other hand, teachers should pay attention to culture teaching alongside language teaching, and enable the students to acquire as much knowledge about the culture of the target language as possible and teach them to show respect for different cultures. In the meantime, in the classroom teachers can adopt such methods as video watching, role plays, and group discussions, etc. to cultivate the students’ intercultural sensitivity and enhance their intercultural interaction. (Xia, 2015).

As to students, it is too much important for them to raise intercultural awareness, develop a positive attitude towards cross-cultural communication, improve confidence in cross-cultural communication and actively take part in intercultural activities.

### **Limitations of the study**

This study highlighted differences of intercultural sensitivity dimensions between Iranian and Chinese participants among male and female undergraduate students via quantitative measures. The quantitative nature of the study did not allow for a deeper understanding of the intercultural differences. Therefore, a similar mixed methods research study would provide additional statistical information that could possibly help explain the differences in intercultural sensitivity dimensions more deeply.

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### **Biographical note**

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## Appendix

### Intercultural Sensitivity Scale

Below is a series of statements concerning intercultural communication. There is no right or wrong answer. Please work quickly and record your first impression by indicating the degree to which you agree or disagree with the statement.

Thank you for your cooperation.

5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = uncertain, 2 = disagree, 1 = strongly disagree

(Please put the number corresponding to your answer in the blank before the statement)

1. I enjoy interacting with people from different cultures.
2. I think people from other cultures are narrow-minded.
3. I am pretty sure of myself in interacting with people from different cultures.
4. I find it very hard to talk in front of people from different cultures.
5. I always know what to say when interacting with people from different cultures.
6. I can be as sociable as I want to be when interacting with people from different Cultures.
7. I don't like to be with people from different cultures.
8. I respect the values of people from different cultures.
9. I get upset easily when interacting with people from different cultures.
10. I feel confident when interacting with people from different cultures.
11. I tend to wait before forming an impression of culturally-distinct counterparts.
12. I often get discouraged when I am with people from different cultures.
13. I am open-minded to people from different cultures.
14. I am very observant when interacting with people from different cultures.
15. I often feel useless when interacting with people from different cultures.
16. I respect the ways people from different cultures behave.
17. I try to obtain as much information as I can when interacting with people from

different cultures.

18. I would not accept the opinions of people from different cultures.
19. I am sensitive to my culturally-distinct counterpart's subtle meanings during our interaction.
20. I think my culture is better than other cultures.
21. I often give positive responses to my culturally-different counterpart during our interaction.
22. I avoid those situations where I will have to deal with culturally-distinct persons.
23. I often show my culturally-distinct counterpart my understanding through verbal or nonverbal cues.
24. I have a feeling of enjoyment towards differences between my culturally-distinct counterpart and me.

(Items 2, 4, 7, 9, 12, 15, 18, 20, and 22 are reverse-coded before summing the 24 items. Interaction Engagement items are 1, 11, 13, 21, 22, 23, and 24, Respect for Cultural Differences items are 2, 7, 8, 16, 18, and 20, Interaction Confidence items are 3, 4, 5, 6, and 10, Interaction Enjoyment items are 9, 12, and 15, and Interaction Attentiveness items are 14, 17, and 19.)