

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF THE EIGHTH LIFELONG LEARNING COMPETENCE: CULTURAL AWARENESS AND EXPRESSION

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Abstract

This study explored university students' Cultural Awareness and Expression (CA&E), a core lifelong learning competence, within the context of an experiential learning-based course. A mixed-methods, one-group pretest–posttest design was implemented with 92 undergraduates, combining quantitative testing with structured reflective writing data. The course incorporated experiential activities and guided reflective tasks intended to encourage engagement, reflection, and the application of cultural knowledge. CA&E was assessed using the Cultural Awareness and Expression Competence Scale (CAECS) and a structured reflective writing task capturing self-assessment and critical engagement with intercultural experiences. Quantitative results revealed statistically significant pre-post score differences in knowledge ($\Delta = 3.5$, $t = 5.8615$, $p = 0.0006$), attitude ($\Delta = 3.2$, $t = 4.3317$, $p = 0.0034$), and skills ($\Delta = 5.0$, $t = 11.0931$, $p = 0.001$), indicating measurable changes across all CAECS domains during the course period. Reflective writing data were analyzed within an

explanatory sequential mixed-methods framework, using a subsample of students with complete quantitative and qualitative datasets. Findings highlighted the coursebook, cross-cultural advertisement task, and term project as important components in students' accounts of their learning experiences, particularly in relation to the application and expression of cultural knowledge. Skills-related dimensions were especially prominent in both CAECS and students' reflective accounts. Overall, the findings provide an exploratory indication of CA&E-related changes within this instructional context. Although the study does not permit causal inference due to the absence of a control group, it offers insights into how CA&E can be engaged through experiential and reflective pedagogical practices. This approach may inform curriculum design in higher education as well as in teacher education and K–12 contexts.

Keywords: cultural awareness, cultural expression, experiential learning, intercultural communication, eighth key lifelong competence.

VÝZKUMNÁ STUDIE OSMÉ KOMPETENCE CELOŽIVOTNÍHO UČENÍ: KULTURNÍ POVĚDOMÍ A VYJÁDŘENÍ

Abstrakt

Tato studie zkoumala kulturní povědomí a vyjádření (KPV), jakožto jednu z hlavních kompetencí pro celoživotní učení, u vysokoškolských studentů, a to v kontextu kurzu založeného na zážitkovém učení. Uplatněn byl smíšený výzkumný design s jednou skupinou v režimu pretest–posttest, kterého se zúčastnilo 92 studentů bakalářského studia. Výzkum kombinoval kvantitativní testování s daty ze strukturovaného reflexivního psaní. Do kurzu byly začleněny zážitkové aktivity a řízené reflexivní úkoly, jejichž cílem bylo podpořit zapojení studentů, reflexi a aplikaci kulturních znalostí. Kompetence KPV byla hodnocena pomocí Škály kompetence kulturního povědomí a vyjádření (ŠKKPV) a strukturovaného reflexivního psaní, které zachycovalo sebehodnocení a kritickou reflexi interkulturních zkušeností. Kvantitativní výsledky odhalily statisticky významné rozdíly

mezi výsledky pretestu a posttestu v oblastech znalostí ($\Delta = 3,5$; $t = 5,8615$; $p = 0,0006$), postojů ($\Delta = 3,2$; $t = 4,3317$; $p = 0,0034$) i dovedností ($\Delta = 5,0$; $t = 11,0931$; $p = 0,001$). To naznačuje měřitelné změny ve všech doménách škály ŠKKPV v průběhu konání kurzu. Data z reflexivního psaní byla analyzována v rámci navazujícího vysvětlujícího sekvenčního smíšeného designu u podskupiny studentů s kompletními kvantitativními i kvalitativními daty. Poznatky ukázaly, že práce s učebnicí, úkol zaměřený na křížovou (mezikulturní) reklamu a semestrální projekt byly klíčovými prvky v popisech studijních zkušeností studentů, a to zejména ve vztahu k aplikaci a vyjádření kulturních znalostí. Oblasti spojené s dovednostmi byly obzvláště výrazné jak v dotazníku ŠKKPV, tak v reflexivních zprávách studentů. Celkově tyto výsledky poskytují průzkumný indikátor změn souvisejících s kompetencí KPV v tomto výukovém kontextu. Ačkoli studie kvůli absenci kontrolní skupiny neumožňuje vyvozovat kauzální závěry, nabízí pohled na to, jak lze kompetenci KVP rozvíjet prostřednictvím zážitkových a reflexivních pedagogických postupů. Tento přístup může být inspirací pro tvorbu kurikula ve vysokoškolském vzdělávání, stejně jako v přípravě budoucích učitelů a v primárním i sekundárním vzdělávání (K-12).

Klíčová slova: kulturní povědomí, kulturní vyjádření, zážitkové učení, interkulturní komunikace, osmá klíčová kompetence pro celoživotní učení.

1 INTRODUCTION

Lifelong learning (LLL), typically a self-directed process through which individuals acquire knowledge and skills by engaging with real-life experiences (Kolb, 2014), has increasingly attracted attention in higher education, reflecting institutions' recognition of their responsibility to support learners' holistic development. Jarvis (2009, p. 11) defines LLL as "the process of transforming experience into knowledge and skills, etc., resulting in a changed person - one who has grown and developed as a result of the learning." Central to this definition is the transformative potential of experience, through which individuals expand their *knowledge*, refine their *skills*, and shape their *attitudes*, ultimately developing both personally and

socially. Educational institutions must provide learning environments that promote meaningful engagement, foster hands-on, experiential activities, encourage reflection, and support the development of learners' perspectives and personal characteristics (Kolb, 2014).

Aspin (2000, p. 75) notes, "Creative and expressive activities across the Arts have a particularly powerful part to play in adapting to, and even leading the way, in embracing the challenges and changes inherent in the imperative for learning to be an activity engaged in throughout people's lives." In line with this perspective, the European Commission (EC, 2007) identifies Cultural Awareness and Expression (CA&E) as the eighth key competence for LLL. CA&E involves awareness of one's own and others' cultural frameworks, as well as the ability to interpret, create, and communicate ideas, experiences, and emotions through a range of creative and expressive forms. It comprises an integrated combination of *knowledge* (e.g. understanding cultural heritage and diversity), *attitudes* (e.g. openness and respect toward diverse cultural expression), and *skills* (e.g. interpreting and expressing ideas creatively). Structured experiential learning tasks, combined with guided reflection, can support it (Beard and Wilson, 2013). This competence can be enacted through learners' engagement with diverse perspectives, requiring them to interpret, evaluate, and respond to cultural meanings in context. As higher education becomes increasingly internationalized, CA&E is particularly relevant in multicultural educational contexts.

Although extensive research has examined intercultural competence (e.g. Dervin, 2016; Deardorff, 2006; Sercu *et al.*, 2005), few studies have explicitly operationalized and empirically investigated the development of CA&E as a distinct LLL competence. Intercultural competence studies often address broader frameworks or emphasize general communication skills, whereas CA&E highlights the integration of *knowledge*, *attitudes*, and *the creative and expressive dimensions* of cultural engagement, including interpreting and producing ideas, experiences, and emotions through various media. Research examining the development of CA&E through intentionally designed, experiential curricular interventions that incorporate reflection is particularly scarce. By operationalizing CA&E across its domains (*knowledge*, *attitudes*, and *skills*) and embedding it in experiential and reflective course activities, this study examines how university instruction may be associated with changes in students' CA&E trajectories within a structured course context.

The importance of CA&E is particularly evident in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), a highly multicultural country where expatriates from diverse cultural backgrounds constitute approximately 90% of the population, which is estimated at around 11 million (World Bank, 2024). In such settings, developing intercultural *awareness*, inclusive *attitudes*, and *the capacity for creative expression* is considered important for meaningful engagement with diverse cultural perspectives.

Addressing these limitations, this study adopts an exploratory mixed-methods design to examine students' CA&E trajectories within an Intercultural Communication course at a UAE-based university. The study combines pre- and post-test measurements using the CA&E Competence Scale (CAECS), which operationalizes CA&E through the subdomains of *knowledge*, *skills*, and *attitude*, with students' self-reported reflections on their engagement in course activities. The course intentionally integrates experiential learning assignments and a structured reflective task, drawing on Kolb's experiential cycle (2014) and Dewey's (1983) principles of learning from experience. This design ensures that students engage with content and reflect on both their own and others' cultural perspectives. By integrating quantitative evidence of pre-post differences with students' reported associations between course components and their learning experiences, the study seeks to provide contextualized insights into how CA&E may be supported within the eighth key LLL competence.

While this study is situated in a UAE-based university, the findings have broader implications for higher education globally. Institutions in multicultural and internationalized contexts may draw on these insights to better support CA&E engagement. By linking course activities to observed pre-post differences and students' reflective experiences, the study offers a model for fostering CA&E competence through experiential and reflective learning. The principles underlying these interventions may also inform curriculum design and pedagogical practices across educational levels, including collaborations among educators, researchers, and K-12 practitioners.

Against this backdrop, the following research questions are addressed:

- 1) Are there statistically significant pre-post differences in students' CAECS scores?
- 2) To what extent do students perceive changes in their CA&E during participation in the Intercultural Communication course?

- 3) Which aspects of the course do students identify as contributing to their perceived CA&E-related experiences?

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. Experiential Learning

Educational theory has moved away from viewing teachers as transmitters of knowledge and students as passive recipients; contemporary cognitive, humanistic, social, and constructivist perspectives now emphasize learners' active role in meaning-making and the value of prior experience in shaping future learning (Lewis and Williams, 1994). Within this broader shift, experiential learning emerged as a pedagogical framework that foregrounds learning through direct engagement and reflection (Kolb, 2014). In order to translate this framework into classroom practice, educators increasingly adopted active learning exercises as a means of operationalizing experiential principles. Such exercises require students to move beyond passive listening and participate in purposeful tasks while reflecting on their actions (Lewis and Williams, 1994). Through these structured engagements, learning becomes a sustained and cyclical process in which theory and practice are repeatedly reframed, each cycle contributing to a deeper and more sophisticated understanding (Kolb and Kolb, 2005).

Experiential learning supports LLL, for which there is empirical evidence. Jiusto and DiBiasio (2006) found that experiential, project-based learning environments can enhance students' self-directed learning capacities, critical thinking, and reflective skills closely associated with LLL. Their findings suggest that competencies cultivated through experiential pedagogies are not confined to a single course but may extend into broader academic and professional contexts, strengthening students' readiness to assume responsibility for their continued intellectual growth beyond formal education. Similarly, Upadhyay and Patra (2025) found that experiential learning is associated with critical reflection, adaptability, self-direction, and continuous skills development, which are core dispositions associated with LLL. The authors further demonstrate that an LLL orientation enhances individuals' capacity to derive meaning from experience, sustain motivation for upskilling and reskilling, and integrate new knowledge across contexts.

2.2. The eighth LLL competence

The term ‘competence’ is defined by the EC (2007, p. 3) as “a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes appropriate to the context.” CA&E, the eighth competence, is defined as “an appreciation of the importance of the creative expression of ideas, experiences and emotions in a range of media, including music, performing arts, literature, and the visual arts” (EC, 2007, p. 12). A specific set of *knowledge*, *skills*, and *attitudes* underpins the eighth competence.

In terms of *knowledge*, individuals must be aware of cultural heritage at local, national, and global levels, gain basic knowledge of major cultural works, and understand global cultural and linguistic diversity. Regarding *skills*, they are expected to appreciate artistic works and performances and express themselves through media appropriate to their capacities, including the ability to “relate their own creative and expressive points of view to the opinions of others and identify and realize social and economic opportunities in cultural activity” (EC, 2007, p. 12). As for *attitude*, this entails openness to and respect for diverse cultural expression, as well as “creativity and willingness to cultivate aesthetic capacity through artistic self-expression and participation in cultural life” (EC, 2007, p. 12).

Scholars have also noted the multidimensional and process-oriented nature of intercultural competence. For instance, Deardorff (2006, pp.247–248) defines intercultural communication as “the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one’s intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes.” She views competence development as a process in which *attitudes* (e.g. respect, openness, curiosity, and discovery) form the foundation, supporting the growth of cultural *knowledge* (e.g. self-awareness, deep cultural understanding, and sociolinguistic awareness) and intercultural *skills* (e.g. listening, observing, interpreting, and relating). This process leads to internal outcomes (e.g. adaptability, empathy, ethnorelative perspectives) and, ultimately, external outcomes reflecting effective and appropriate intercultural behavior.

Similarly, Dervin (2016) considers interculturality to be a dynamic and context-dependent process, proposing that intercultural competence emerges through interaction rather than existing as a fixed individual trait. She emphasizes the importance of situated and relational perspectives, where competence is shaped by social, cultural, and institutional contexts, and cautions

against reductionist approaches that rely on static national or cultural stereotypes. According to her, the development of intercultural competence is process-oriented; learners must engage in continuous reflection, adaptation, and negotiation in intercultural encounters. Critical reflexivity is essential, as students need to recognize their own cultural assumptions, biases, and communicative habits to engage meaningfully with others.

There is empirical evidence that intercultural competence, conceptualized in terms of the *knowledge*, *skills*, and *attitudes* underpinning CA&E, is associated with a deeper understanding of cultural diversity (Moreno-Guerrero *et al.*, 2022), may support inclusive communication practices (Pareja de Vicente *et al.*, 2019), and may contribute to environments characterized by belonging and inclusion (Moncloa *et al.*, 2019).

2.3. Development of LLL competences

Sustained commitment to learning throughout life lies at the core of LLL. As Titmus (1979, p. 29) notes, “Life itself is a continuous learning process, but each person needs specific opportunities for continuing, purposive and sequential learning to keep abreast of technical and social change.” This requires explicit attention to developing LLL competences during formal education. However, the metacognition underpinning these competences does not develop incidentally (Bjork *et al.* 2013); deliberately designed instructional interventions can prepare students to engage in LLL through metacognitive processes (Wijnen-Meijer, 2020). Such processes support the acquisition of disciplinary knowledge, the refinement of transferable skills, and the shaping of constructive learning attitudes. Similarly, Farrington *et al.* (2012) caution against teaching non-cognitive skills in isolation, emphasizing the importance of embedding competence development within meaningful curricular contexts, where *knowledge*, *skills*, and *attitudes* are developed holistically rather than separately.

Numerous studies have examined students’ development of various LLL competences (e.g. Dunlap, 2005; Hauer *et al.*, 2018; Iveljić and Iličić, 2021), and there is also a body of research investigating the development of learners’ intercultural competence (e.g. Chui and Mohammed, 2024; Huang *et al.*, 2023; Naranjo-Toro *et al.*, 2026). However, comparatively little attention has been paid to CA&E as a distinct LLL competence. This limited focus may stem from curricular pressures to prioritize predetermined content, leaving less room

for creative and expressive dimensions of learning. Moreover, traits associated with creativity, such as independence, risk-taking, and nonconformity, may be perceived as disruptive in structured educational environments (Runco *et al.*, 2017), potentially discouraging sustained engagement with CA&E-related development. Yet creativity and cultural expression are closely linked to both academic and social performance. Beyond raising test scores, they support a central educational aim: cultivating students' curiosity, engagement, and sustained interest in their external surroundings and inner growth (Zhang *et al.*, 2024). Effective intercultural communication likewise requires integrating intercultural and creativity competences (Braslauskas, 2021). In the EC (2007) framework, creativity is not treated as a separate construct but is embedded within the *skills* and *attitude* domains of CA&E, particularly in relation to expressive ability and openness to cultural participation.

The European Union (2016) underscores the role of teachers and curricula in fostering this competence:

Within compulsory education, whether a learner is inspired to learn (and use) cultural knowledge, skills and attitudes mainly depends on the teacher ... the competence of [CA&E] is related to artistic as well as non-artistic subjects. It transcends the various artistic disciplines, and it also transcends 'the arts' as an area of learning in such a way that all teachers - specialised or not - should feel a responsibility to transmit this key competence to their students. (p. 43)

Research demonstrates that purposefully designed instructional activities may support students' cultural competence by enhancing intercultural sensitivity (Deveci *et al.*, 2022), cross-cultural knowledge and skills (Kazemian *et al.*, 2021), the ability to adapt communication styles to interlocutors' cultural backgrounds (Dimitrov *et al.*, 2014), and, consequently, overall intercultural communication competence (AlTaher, 2019). Such findings inform curriculum design, support the integration of relevant activities into regular practice, and highlight tools for assessing students' cultural competence (Moreno-Guerrero *et al.*, 2022). In support of this, Sercu *et al.* (2005) argue that classroom tasks should be experiential, reflective, and context-sensitive, enabling learners to engage meaningfully with diverse cultural perspectives. Empirical evidence also supports this view. Allen (2025) found that experiential tasks, particularly a linguistic landscape project involving fieldwork, reflective reports, and video presentations, were associated with

enhanced students' intercultural competence by deepening cultural knowledge, fostering openness, and strengthening analytical and interpretive skills. This approach aligns with frameworks such as the EC's CA&E, emphasizing that structured pedagogical interventions may contribute to the development of culturally aware and expressive lifelong learners.

3. METHOD

3.1. Design

This study employed a mixed-methods, one-group quasi-experimental pretest-posttest design within an Intercultural Communication course at a UAE-based university. The course was designed to engage students in the *knowledge*, *attitudes*, and *skills* components of CA&E, the eighth key competence for LLL. Course activities engaged students in both in-class and out-of-class experiential and reflective learning aligned with the three components. The curriculum emphasized the relationships among communication, language, and culture, providing structured opportunities to develop these domains.

While a one-group design lacks a separate control group, it was carefully selected because the study focused on tracking the changes in students' CA&E-related outcomes throughout the course; all students participated in the same experiential and reflective activities, making random assignment or control groups infeasible. To mitigate the limitations inherent in one-group designs and strengthen internal validity, several strategies were implemented:

- a) Pre- and post-testing with the CAECS to measure individual pre-post differences in scores over time (directly addressing RQ1).
- b) Triangulation with a structured reflective writing task to provide qualitative insights complementing quantitative findings (addressing RQ2 and RQ3).
- c) Alignment of assignments with theoretical frameworks (Kolb, 2014; Dewey, 1983; Deardorff, 2006; Dervin, 2016) to ensure that the intervention specifically targeted the CA&E domains.
- d) Exclusion of students with incomplete participation, ensuring that only data from students fully exposed to the intervention were analyzed.

This design allowed a context-sensitive examination of CA&E patterns over time, capturing pre-post differences in CAECS scores alongside structured qualitative insights into students' experiences.

3.2. Participants

Using convenience sampling from students already enrolled in the course, 115 students (75 females, 40 males) participated in the study over two academic terms. After applying the inclusion criteria (regular class attendance and completion of all course assignments), 92 students remained in the final analysis. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 21 ($M = 20$), and the majority were Emirati nationals (approximately 90%).

3.3. Data collection tools

3.3.1. Cultural awareness and expression competence scale (CAECS)

The quantitative instrument consisted of two parts: Part A included demographic questions, while Part B comprised the CAECS, developed specifically for this study. Consistent with the EC (2007) framework, the CAECS assesses three dimensions of cultural awareness and expression: cognitive (*knowledge*), affective (*attitude*), and behavioral (*skills*), allowing analysis of both overall competence and domain-specific scores.

Content domains were derived from established literature on LLL and intercultural competence, including the EC (2007) key competence framework, Deardorff's (2006) intercultural competence model, and empirical studies on experiential and reflective pedagogy (e.g. Aspin, 2020; Dervin, 2016). Item content was reviewed by two instructors and a professor of LLL, providing initial content validity evidence.

The CAECS was developed as a context-specific instrument due to the absence of an existing scale aligned with the EC (2007) CA&E framework. Item generation was theory-driven and informed by these frameworks to ensure construct alignment with the study's conceptualization of CA&E.

The initial 30-item scale was administered to 115 students who completed the pre-test. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) using principal axis factoring with oblimin rotation indicated sampling adequacy ($KMO = 0.85$; Bartlett's $\chi^2(435) = 1320.45$, $p < 0.001$) and supported a three-factor structure corresponding to knowledge, attitude, and skills. Six items with low or cross-loadings were removed, resulting in a 24-item scale explaining 62% of total variance.

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted on the same sample as a preliminary model-testing procedure. The model demonstrated acceptable

fit ($\chi^2/df = 1.95$, CFI = 0.94, TLI = 0.92, RMSEA = 0.056, SRMR = 0.045), with standardized loadings exceeding 0.60. However, these analyses do not constitute validation of the CAECS. Given the absence of an independent validation sample, both EFA and CFA results should be interpreted strictly as initial, exploratory evidence of internal structure, and further validation using independent and cross-institutional samples is required.

Internal consistency was high across subscales (*Knowledge* $\alpha = 0.87$, *Attitude* $\alpha = 0.89$, *Skills* $\alpha = 0.85$; total scale $\alpha = 0.91$). These results provide preliminary evidence of internal consistency within the current sample. The finalized 24-item CAECS was used in pre- and post-test administration. Responses were collected on a five-point Likert scale; negatively worded items were reverse-scored. Higher scores indicate higher competence. No cut-off values were applied; quartile ranges were used for interpretive reference (See Table I).

Table I: CAECS score ranges

	N	Min	Max	Quartiles		
				First (Lower)	Second (Median)	Third (Upper)
Knowledge	8	8	40	10	20	30
Attitude	8	8	40	10	20	30
Skills	8	8	40	10	20	30
Scale as a whole	24	24	120	30	60	90

3.3.2. Reflective writing task

A structured reflective writing task, which was not graded for formative assessment, was administered at the end of the course to complement the CAECS data with qualitative insights into students' experiences and perceptions of CA&E trajectories. It functioned as both a pedagogical and research tool by prompting students to integrate and articulate their learning experiences, thereby supporting metacognitive reflection across the course.

To support a shared understanding of the construct, the task included a working definition of CA&E, as defined above based on the EU framework, and consisted of two prompts: (a) the extent to which students perceived any

changes in their CA&E over the duration of the course, which elicited brief evaluative responses expressed through linguistic features such as adjectives and adverbs, and (b) which course components they perceived as contributing to these changes, eliciting more elaborated descriptions of learning experiences and associated CA&E development. The prompts were intentionally framed in an open and non-evaluative manner to allow for both perceived change and non-change responses. To support recall and focus, the second prompt was accompanied by a guiding list of course components (see Table II).

Important to note is the fact that the reflective task was designed as a structured qualitative content task rather than a fully interpretive thematic inquiry, due to the guided and constrained nature of the prompts and the predefined experiential framework.

3.4. Procedures

Given the study's aim to explore students' CA&E in relation to pedagogical practices, specific experiential assignments were intentionally aligned with CA&E. These assignments were designed to provide structured frameworks for critical reflection on how culture operates across contexts. Their intended purpose was to support students' awareness of their own communicative practices and cultural assumptions, while fostering openness to alternative perspectives, expressive skills, and the development of all three CA&E domains. *Knowledge* was cultivated through research and analysis; *attitudes* through guided reflection, openness, and critical engagement with cultural frameworks; and *skills* through expressive and interpretive tasks such as presentations, adverts, and art interpretation.

Prior readings and class discussions provided students with conceptual tools to understand, interpret, and critically analyze their experiences. This structured alignment was intended to support the examination of RQ1 (pre- and post-test competence gains) and RQ2 (students' perceptions of development and contributing course elements), which could be addressed. The approach combined quantitative measures of pre-post differences with qualitative reflective learning, consistent with Deardorff's (2006; 2016) emphasis on assessing both process and outcomes, Sercu *et al.*'s (2005) recommendation for experiential, reflective, and context-sensitive classroom activities,

Table II: Tasks targeting CA&E development and theoretical pedagogical principles

Task	Description	Correspondence to CA&E Domains	Reflection of Deardorff, Dervin, Sercu et al.
Regulators of Identity	Analyze how identity markers (e.g. gender, age, ethnicity) affect their communication	Knowledge, Attitude	Deardorff: reflective task + skill practice; Dervin: critical self-reflection; Sercu et al.: experiential, context-sensitive
Countries	Research and present a foreign culture, including high/low context, being/doing, non-verbal cues	Knowledge, Skills	Deardorff: applying knowledge in practice; Dervin: engaging with diverse perspectives; Sercu et al.: experiential and reflective
Cultural Expression through Art	Select an artwork from another culture, interpret cultural aspects, reflect on own perceptions	Skills, Attitude	Deardorff: interpretive skill + reflective outcome; Dervin: situated engagement; Sercu et al.: experiential learning
Cross-cultural Advert	Create an advert for cultural item, explain design choices, anticipate global audience reaction	Skills, Attitude	Deardorff: creative application + reflection; Dervin: adaptation and perspective-taking; Sercu et al.: context-sensitive, experiential
Arts & Intercultural Communication (Term Project)	Analyze sub-categories in two cultures, compare to own culture, discuss role in intercultural communication	Knowledge, Skills, Attitude	Deardorff: integration of all domains; Dervin: critical engagement; Sercu et al.: reflective, experiential
End-of-Course Reflective Writing	Reflect on how CA&E competence developed through the course, citing specific assignments and experiences	Knowledge, Skills, Attitude	Deardorff: process and outcome assessment; Dervin: critical reflection and adaptation; Sercu et al.: experiential reflection, context-sensitive

and Dervin's (2016) focus on critical reflection and engagement with diverse cultural perspectives.

Table II. presents the main assignments, illustrating how each task operationalizes the three CA&E domains while embodying the pedagogical principles described above. The tasks fostered a reflective understanding of culture as dynamic and contextual. Frameworks such as Hall (1976) and Hofstede (2001) provided analytical tools, but students were encouraged to critique and move beyond nation-based classifications, developing a contextualized awareness of intercultural communication.

3.5. Analytic strategy

To answer RQ1, students' pre- and post-test CAECS scores were compared using paired-sample *t*-tests, with significance set at $p < 0.05$. To complement significance testing, mean differences (Δ) and Cohen's *d* were calculated to quantify the magnitude of observed changes for the overall scale and each subdomain.

To address RQ2 and RQ3, reflective writings were analyzed in relation to the quantitative CAECS results to examine how students' learning experiences were represented in their accounts. This qualitative strand was situated within an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (QUAN → QUAL), in which qualitative analysis was used to elaborate and contextualize quantitative findings rather than to achieve statistical representation. Accordingly, a purposive, case-oriented sample of 52 students was included from those who completed both pre- and post-tests and submitted full reflective writings. The selection was based on data completeness (matched quantitative scores and full reflective texts), ensuring alignment between quantitative and qualitative datasets for integrated analysis. No students were selected or excluded based on the magnitude or direction of their CAECS score changes. The qualitative component, therefore, does not aim to represent the full distribution of developmental trajectories, but to provide an in-depth examination of how students articulate CA&E-related learning experiences within an experiential learning context.

The analysis of the first reflective prompt generated brief evaluative responses regarding the perceived extent of change, which were analyzed descriptively as linguistic indicators of intensity. Given the low-inference nature of this analysis, responses were categorized based on explicit lexical markers.

The second reflective prompt focused on students' explanations of perceived contributing course components (see Table 2). A structured qualitative content analysis was used to code and categorize references to learning experiences into recurring course components and CA&E domains. These categories were then quantified using frequency counts as a descriptive mapping device to illustrate distribution patterns across categories, rather than as indicators of developmental strength, and were supported with representative excerpts in relation to RQ3.

As the coding scheme was based on a predefined set of course components and involved low-inference categorization, inter-coder reliability was not calculated. To enhance the credibility and consistency of the analysis, coding procedures were applied systematically and reviewed iteratively across the dataset, and an independent researcher reviewed the alignment between student responses, assigned categories, and selected illustrative excerpts. Any discrepancies were discussed and resolved through agreement.

3.6. Ethical considerations

This study complied with all relevant ethical standards. IRB approval was obtained from Khalifa University (Protocol Number H19-015) prior to data collection. All participants provided informed consent, and anonymity was ensured by replacing student names with alphanumeric codes. Only fully completed datasets were analyzed, and all procedures conformed to the ethical guidelines of the University and the Declaration of Helsinki.

4 RESULTS

The first aim of this research was to compare students' pre-test and post-test scores on CAECS. The results are summarized in Table III.

Students' mean pre-test score for the scale as a whole was 90.1, indicating a fairly high degree of initial CA&E competence. The mean post-test score was higher at 102.8, representing a statistically significant pre-post difference in overall CA&E competence ($\Delta = 12.7$, $t = -10.18$, $p = 0.001$, $d = 1.2$), indicating a substantial difference between the two measurement points.

When considering the subdomains, students scored highest post-test in *knowledge* (36.1), followed by *attitude* (34.6), and *skills* (31). All subdomains showed important pre-post differences: *knowledge* ($\Delta = 3.5$, $t = 5.8615$,

Table III: *Students' pre- and post-test results*

		Domains			Scale as a whole
		Knowledge	Attitude	Skills	
Pre-test	Min	24	21	18	76
	Max	37	38	33	106
		32.6	31.4	26	90.1
Post-test	Min	31	27	18	83
	Max	40	40	38	118
		36.1	34.6	31	102.8
Δ		3.5	3.2	5.0	12.7
t		5.8615	4.3317	11.0931	-10.18
p		.0006	.0034	.0000	.001
Cohen's <i>d</i>		1.0	0.8	1.3	1.2

$p = 0.0006$, $d = 1.0$), *attitude* ($\Delta = 3.2$, $t = 4.3317$, $p = 0.0034$, $d = 0.8$), and *skills* ($\Delta = 5.0$, $t = 11.0931$, $p = 0.0000$, $d = 1.3$). Notably, the *skills* subdomain exhibited a relatively larger pre–post score difference compared to other domains.

The second aim of the study was to identify students' perceived extent of change in CA&E. To that end, reflective writings from 52 students who provided complete quantitative (pre-post CAECS) and qualitative (reflective writing) data, revealing a range of adverbs and adjectives denoting perceived change (see Table IV). Because some students used more than one adjective or adverb to describe perceived change, the total frequency represents the number of occurrences rather than the number of students.

As shown in Table IV, students used a range of linguistic expressions to indicate the perceived magnitude of change in their CA&E over the duration of the course. The most frequently used expressions were “a lot” and “significant(ly)” ($f = 20$ each), followed by “drastic(ally)” and “to a large extent” ($f = 8$ each). Other expressions such as “considerably”, “extensively”, “greatly”, “huge”, and “much” were used less frequently ($f = 4$ each), while “quite a lot”, “immeasurably”, and “very well” appeared only occasionally.

Table IV: Linguistic expressions used by students to indicate the perceived magnitude of CA&E change

Expressions	f
a lot	20
significant(ly)	20
drastic(ally)	8
to a large extent	8
a great amount	4
considerably	4
extensively	4
greatly	4
huge	4
much	4
quite a lot	2
immeasurably	1
very well	1
Total	84

The third aim was to explore the aspects of the course that students perceived as relevant to their CA&E experiences. For this purpose, the same students' reflective writings were analyzed. Results are presented in Table V. Because students often referred to more than one course element in their reflections, the frequencies represent the number of mentions rather than the number of students.

The coursebook (f = 53) was the most frequently cited component in students' reflective writings. References to this component were associated primarily with *knowledge*- and *attitude*-related aspects of CA&E, particularly cultural knowledge, reflection on cultural differences, and awareness of alternative perspectives. For example, S5 stated, "The chapters have contributed to my understanding by reading into the textbook and researching about different identities and cultures with similar and non-similar qualities," while S13

Table V: *Factors influencing CA&E learning experiences*

Aspects	f
Course-book	53
Cross-cultural advert	44
Term project	32
Seminars	28
The countries	24
Cultural expression through art	20
Regulators of identity	16
Total	217

noted, “The chapter on culture shock has affected my perspective of things and what I can expect when travelling to different places.”

The Cross-cultural Advert task ($f = 44$) also appeared frequently in student accounts and was linked mainly to *skills*- and *attitude*-related aspects. Students’ responses referred to applying cultural knowledge in communicative contexts and engaging with intercultural perspectives. For instance, S7 stated, “I was able to bridge the gap between different cultures... I learned how to extract certain pieces of information to use as an advantage when expressing my culture.”

The term project ($f = 32$) was referenced in relation to all three CA&E domains (*knowledge*, *attitude*, and *skills*). Students’ accounts included cultural knowledge, engagement with diverse forms of cultural expression, and interpretive or comparative perspectives. Illustrative examples include S6’s comment, “I was able to learn a lot about how different countries had different belief systems and how closely art and culture are related,” and S7’s remark, “This assignment expanded my knowledge... I learned that cultural expression can come from anywhere or anything.”

Seminars ($f = 28$) were most often associated with *skills*- and *attitude*-related aspects. Student responses highlighted sharing insights, peer discussion, and engagement with diverse perspectives. For example, S44 stated, “I realized how much I learned by not only the textbook’s chapter but by doing external research for resources to provide during the [seminar],” while S51

noted, “The seminars helped me see different opinions of the various topics that the book introduced. They also encouraged me to search on my own and discover new things about diverse cultures, which made me excited to share with my classmates.”

The Countries Assignment ($f = 24$) was mainly linked to *knowledge*- and *skills*-related aspects of CA&E. Students frequently referred to cross-cultural frameworks and their application to real-world contexts. As S33 stated, “My investigation about Germany made me want to visit it... I would feel more comfortable interacting with Germans despite my inability to speak the German language.”

Cultural Expression through Art ($f = 20$) was associated with *skills*- and *attitude*-related aspects, particularly in relation to interpreting artworks and reflecting on differing aesthetic values. For instance, S6 noted, “This task helped me better understand and see the links between a piece of art and the culture of its origin,” and S37 stated, “Not only did I learn about a different cultural expression but I also understood the logic, emotions, and meanings of that expression, which creates even greater respect for the culture of the artist.”

Finally, Regulators of Identity ($f = 16$) appeared in student responses in relation to *attitude*- and *knowledge*-related aspects of CA&E. These references focused on identity markers (e.g. gender, class, and religion) and awareness of cultural differences in communicative behavior. For instance, S29 stated, “Now I see more clearly how being a Muslim defines who I am,” while S31 noted, “Learning about regulators of identity made me think more about how I as a girl behave and express myself.”

Collectively, these results suggest that the structured assignments in the course were associated in students’ reflections with learning experiences across all three CAECS subdomains: *knowledge*, *attitude*, and *skills*.

5 DISCUSSION

The aim of this research was to explore the eighth LLL competence (CA&E) among students in an Intercultural Communication course and to examine their perceptions of CA&E-related experiences during the course, as well as the course components they associated with these experiences.

The CAECS data indicated that students’ overall post-test score ($\bar{x} = 102.8$) differed from their pre-test score ($\bar{x} = 90.1$). Similar statistically significant pre–post differences were observed across the three subdomains (*knowledge*,

attitude, and *skills*). The magnitude of these differences suggests relatively large variation across measurement points, particularly in the *skills* dimension. Reflective writing data similarly indicated that students reported perceived shifts across CAECS subdomains.

Comparable findings have been reported in studies on students' intercultural competence development (AlTaher, 2019; Deveci *et al.*, 2022; Kazemian *et al.*, 2021). These studies align with the view that metacognitive development requires purposefully designed instructional contexts (Bjork *et al.*, 2013; Wijnen-Meijer, 2020) and caution against teaching non-cognitive skills in isolation (Farrington *et al.*, 2012). In the present study, the incorporation of CA&E-related content, activities, and tasks under instructor guidance within the course illustrates how experiential pedagogy can be structured to engage students with all three CA&E domains.

Farrington *et al.* (2012) report limited evidence for the malleability of non-cognitive skills in isolation. In the present study, the observed pre-post differences in CAECS scores may suggest that experiential and reflective pedagogical approaches are associated with variation in non-cognitive skill-related outcomes, including creative expression and intercultural understanding. Prior research has also reported similar patterns under specific contextual conditions, such as pandemic-related educational disruptions (Deveci, 2022). Taken together, these findings, while not permitting causal inference, point to the potential relevance of adaptable and context-sensitive pedagogical designs.

Although students' post-test scores in the *skills* subdomain remained lower than those in *knowledge* and *attitude*, this domain showed the largest pre-post difference, indicating greater variation over time. The *skills* subdomain relates to students' ability to express and interpret cultural knowledge, which was in the course addressed through experiential assignments. For example, the cross-cultural advert task required students to design advertisements for a global audience, supporting engagement with multiple perspectives and creative expression. Similarly, the cultural expression through art task involved the interpretation of artworks from different cultures, supporting reflective analysis alongside engagement with expressive tasks.

knowledge-related content was addressed through tasks such as the countries assignment and term project, while *attitude*-related engagement emerged through guided reflection, openness to alternative perspectives, and critical engagement with cultural frameworks (e.g. regulators of identity and reflective writing tasks). The alignment between course tasks and CAECS

subdomains is consistent with observed pre-post differences and students' reported reflections, suggesting coherence between instructional design and learners' reported experiences across domains of CA&E. In this structure, attitudes are positioned as foundational, while knowledge and skills are operationalized through reflection and contextual engagement (Deardorff, 2006; Dervin, 2016).

The analysis of students' reflective writings also identified several course components that students associated with their CA&E-related experiences. The most frequently mentioned component was the coursebook. Students reported that it introduced a range of intercultural concepts and perspectives, which they associated with increased awareness of cultural diversity and theoretical understanding. Çalman (2017) emphasizes the importance of carefully selected coursebooks in intercultural communication courses, as they can support engagement with cultural comparison and perspective-taking. Similar findings have been reported in prior studies where course materials were frequently cited as contributing elements in students' intercultural learning accounts (Deveci *et al.*, 2022).

Other frequently mentioned components included the cross-cultural advert task (*skills, attitude*), term project (*knowledge, attitude, skills*), seminars (*attitude*), countries assignment (*knowledge*), and cultural expression through art task (*skills, attitude*). These components represent experiential learning activities that provide opportunities for engagement with cultural content, creative expression, and reflection. While these associations do not establish causal relationships, they indicate that students linked specific instructional components with their reported learning experiences.

Although the end-of-course reflective writing task was not explicitly identified as a contributing course component, students' responses indicated engagement in metacognitive processes such as describing experiences, evaluating learning, and integrating insights across tasks. These processes are conceptually consistent with deeper engagement with *knowledge, attitude*, and *skills* dimensions of CA&E and align with prior literature on reflective learning (Bennett, 1993) and LLL frameworks emphasizing self-regulation and perspective-taking (Farrington *et al.*, 2012; Zimmerman, 2002).

The importance of experiential learning for intercultural education is widely recognized. The Council of Europe (2010) emphasizes that authentic cultural engagement creates opportunities for learning through experience, supporting higher-order thinking such as comparison and analysis (Boss and

Krauss, 2014). Similarly, Brooks (1986) highlights the role of applied tasks in providing opportunities for practicing intercultural skills. Within the present study, these perspectives provide a conceptual basis for interpreting how students described their learning experiences in relation to course activities.

Overall, this study highlights CA&E as a relevant competence in multicultural educational contexts such as the UAE, contributing to inclusive communication and cultural awareness (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006; Pareja de Vicente, 2019) and supporting learning environments characterized by inclusion and belonging (Moncloa *et al.*, 2019). The findings suggest that intercultural competence may be meaningfully engaged within structured, reflective, and context-sensitive experiential learning contexts in higher education, as reflected in both observed pre-post differences and students' reported experiences, in line with Deardorff (2006) and Dervin (2016).

6 IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION

Various LLL competences are essential for adapting to a rapidly changing, culturally diverse world, with CA&E being particularly important in highly multicultural contexts such as the UAE. From an experiential learning perspective, CA&E involves structured, reflective, and hands-on learning opportunities that integrate *knowledge*, *attitudes*, and *skills* to support adaptation to diverse cultural, social, and professional settings. Accordingly, educational institutions should create learning environments that foster students' intercultural communication skills and sense of belonging in multicultural contexts (Moncloa *et al.*, 2019). Overall, these considerations highlight the importance of CA&E in contemporary education and the need for pedagogical approaches that support its classroom integration.

From a practical standpoint, this paper offers pedagogical insights for addressing students' eighth LLL competence through educational activities and tasks targeting the three CAECS subdomains. The instructional design combined active engagement, creative expression, and guided reflection within an experiential learning framework. Within the limits of a one-group pretest-posttest design, the implementation of these activities was accompanied by observed pre-post differences in CAECS scores. Findings indicate that students reported increased awareness of both their own local cultural heritage and that of other cultures worldwide, alongside a greater appreciation of cultural and linguistic diversity. They also described becoming more open to

different forms of cultural expression and more engaged in self-expression through different media.

Although the students' post-test score for the *skills* subdomain remained lower than those of the *knowledge* and *attitude* subdomains, this domain showed the largest improvement from pre-test to post-test. This pattern suggests relatively greater variation over time, particularly in relation to tasks such as the cross-cultural advert, cultural expression through art, and term-project assignments. At the same time, the comparatively lower absolute scores suggest that expressive and interpretive cultural skills may require sustained practice and scaffolding beyond a single course. This highlights a key implication for experiential pedagogy: the need to provide structured guidance, reflection, and targeted support to further engage students with expressive and interpretive skills.

To that end, Işık (2018) offers a set of pedagogical strategies. First, teachers develop students' creativity skills (e.g. internal motivation, accessing information sources, effective reading) to support creative thinking. Second, they organize the learning environment to provide inspiration and ensure that students can express themselves freely. Third, teachers structure learning-teaching activities effectively, allowing students to make observations, ask questions, design and develop materials, access information resources, and use higher-order thinking skills. Embedding reflection at each stage of experiential tasks can reinforce metacognitive awareness and support engagement with skill development.

Drawing on Fox and Macpherson's (2015) notion of Inclusive Arts, educators can design collaborative activities where students with different levels of proficiency work together to develop the knowledge and skills essential for the *skills* component. This approach aligns with Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory and Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which emphasize learning through interaction and guided participation. By situating experiential learning within collaborative frameworks, educators may foster inclusive pedagogical environments that support competence-related practices. Collectively, these strategies are consistent with approaches that address the *skills* dimension in the CAECS framework.

It should be noted that the development of creative skills within the limits of a 16-week course is naturally constrained. Therefore, reinforcing these skills and introducing additional opportunities in other courses is important. Instructors may consider adopting a sequence of interconnected experiential

learning modules across multiple courses to deepen CA&E competence. Those teaching courses that support the eighth LLL competence could collaborate to engage students in ongoing CA&E-friendly activities. For instance, parallel syllabi may guide students in applying shared concepts, principles, generalizations, and skills, promoting the transfer of knowledge and understanding across disciplines, cultures, times, and places (Tomlinson *et al.*, 2009).

7 LIMITATIONS

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, the study relied primarily on self-report measures. These provided valuable insights into students' perceived changes in CA&E competence, but self-reported data may not fully reflect actual competence and may be influenced by social desirability or self-perception bias. In particular, the *skills* dimension, highlighted in this study as showing the largest pre-post difference, was assessed through self-report rather than through direct performance-based evaluation of students' expressive and interpretive abilities. In addition, reflective writing was collected only at the end of the course. Collecting reflections after each task and analyzing them separately could have provided more detailed insights into how students' experiences and perceptions evolved over time. Furthermore, the one-group pretest-posttest design without a control group limits the extent to which the observed pre-post differences can be attributed to the instructional context or interpreted causally. Accordingly, the findings should be interpreted as evidence of change observed during the course period rather than as confirmation of intervention effects. Also, the qualitative analysis primarily focused on a purposively selected subsample, which may not fully represent the range of student experiences within the cohort. Finally, although exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses were conducted to examine the construct validity of the CAECS, both analyses were performed on the same sample due to the absence of an independent validation dataset. Therefore, the reported factor structure should be considered preliminary.

8 FUTURE RESEARCH

To complement self-report measures, studies could incorporate performance-based assessments, observational tools, and reflective tasks administered after each learning activity to examine how specific experiential tasks are associated

with different CA&E subdomains. Employing control groups would allow for stronger causal claims regarding the effects of experiential learning interventions on CA&E. Future studies may also explore a wider range of student learning trajectories, including cases with minimal or no measurable change, to develop a more comprehensive understanding of variation in CA&E development. Such approaches may help distinguish between changes associated with instructional experiences and those resulting from external or developmental factors. Also, longitudinal studies integrating experiential learning modules across multiple courses could shed light on how CA&E competence evolves over time within a coordinated curriculum framework. To enhance methodological robustness, future studies could validate the CAECS using multi-sample approaches (e.g. split-sample, cross-institutional replication) to establish the stability and generalizability of the factor structure beyond the initial sample.

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