



Intercultural Communicative Competence, Emotional Intelligence, and English Proficiency Among Iraqi Preservice EFL Teachers: An Exploratory Moderation Analysis

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Abstract

Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is widely held to underpin effective English language teaching, yet little is known about whether its association with preservice EFL teachers' own English proficiency depends on their emotional intelligence (EI). This exploratory study examined whether EI, treated both as a composite construct and through its five competency-based components, moderates this association among Iraqi preservice EFL teachers. A convenience sample of 163 student teachers at the University of Baghdad completed self-report ICC and a teacher-focused EI scale assessing self-awareness, managing emotions, motivating oneself, empathy, and social skills, alongside a free 25-item Cambridge English online general English test. Six simple moderation models were estimated using PROCESS Model 1, with inferences based on heteroscedasticity-consistent (HC3) standard errors and Holm adjustment across the six interaction tests. Participants reported moderate ICC and EI, and ICC was positively associated with proficiency in all models. Composite EI was associated with proficiency additively but did not moderate the ICC–proficiency association. Among the components, only empathy showed a robust interaction, with a stronger ICC–proficiency association among participants reporting higher empathy. A negative interaction for managing emotions did not survive the multiplicity adjustment, the negative interaction for social skills was not significant under robust estimation, and self-awareness and motivating oneself showed no moderating effect. The findings suggest that composite EI scores may mask differences among components and that the role of empathy merits confirmatory, longitudinal research using proctored proficiency measures.

Keywords: intercultural communicative competence, emotional intelligence, English proficiency, preservice EFL teachers, teacher education

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Introduction

The increasingly dominant place of English as a global means of communication has progressively enlarged the scope of competencies expected of language teachers. Effective intercultural communication requires not only linguistic proficiency but also the ability to recognize cultural differences and respond appropriately in cross-cultural encounters (Sercu, 2005). This ability, commonly referred to as intercultural communicative competence (ICC), can no longer be overlooked in contemporary language classrooms (Fantini, 2021). Nevertheless, many educational systems, particularly those outside Western contexts, continue to prioritize linguistic knowledge over the development of intercultural competence. This disparity is particularly consequential in preservice teacher education, where future teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) are still developing the proficiency on which their later teaching will depend.

The Iraqi EFL context exemplifies this problem. EFL classrooms in this context offer minimal authentic intercultural contact, with textbooks as the principal avenue to other cultures (Obaid et al., 2019), and instruction has long been form-driven (Borg & Capstick, 2024). Insufficient ICC has been reported among Iraqi preservice EFL teachers (Hassoon, 2019) and postgraduate EFL students (Abdullah, 2024; Ilyas, 2021), and Iraqi teachers, like their counterparts in other EFL contexts, tend to endorse intercultural teaching more readily than they practice it (Abdulhasan, 2024; Gün, 2023; Loo et al., 2018; Safa & Tofighi, 2022; Young & Sachdev, 2011). The present study, however, does not examine classroom practice. Its concern is an earlier link: whether the intercultural resources that preservice teachers bring to their training are associated with their own English proficiency, the foundation of their future professional competence.

The present research starts from the premise that the association between preservice teachers' intercultural competence and their English proficiency may depend on their emotional intelligence (EI). Multidimensional theories of ICC (Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017; Byram, 1997) and EI (Goleman, 1995, 1998; Mayer & Salovey, 1997) both integrate cognitive, motivational and affective elements. Byram's (1997) ICC model provides the core conceptual lens for the present research, and EI is conceptualized following Goleman's (1995, 1998) competency-based mixed model. The two constructs are assumed to play different roles: ICC supplies the knowledge, attitudes and skills needed for intercultural interaction, whereas EI competencies bear on how readily these resources are mobilized in actual interpersonal and linguistic encounters (Mercer & Gkonou, 2017). If EI governs the use of intercultural resources rather than simply adding to them, the strength of the ICC–proficiency association should vary with EI, which makes EI a candidate moderator rather than a parallel predictor. How components of the two constructs combine in relation to communicative ability remains underexplored (Klímová et al., 2025).

Non-native EFL teachers commonly face the twin challenge of developing second/foreign language (L2) communicative skills for professional success and of forming an identity that reflects new intercultural competence (Fantini, 2020, 2021).

Research on teachers who shift from teaching one language to another points to the relevance of intercultural and psycho-emotional competence to that identity (Rostami et al., 2021). Associations have been documented between EI and L2 achievement (Al-Obaydi et al., 2022; Deepika & Jennifer, 2026; Wang & Liu, 2026) and between ICC and L2 proficiency (Wang et al., 2025). We have not, however, identified studies that examine whether composite EI or its components condition the association between ICC and prospective EFL teachers' L2 proficiency.

The study is intended to contribute in two ways. Conceptually, it tests an interactive model in which EI and its components serve as moderators rather than merely parallel predictors. Pedagogically, the results may suggest, though not establish, how intercultural and emotional competencies might be combined in Iraqi teacher education. Because prior research did not support directional predictions for the individual EI components, the study is exploratory, and its findings are offered as a basis for confirmatory research.

Literature Review

Preservice EFL teachers live through a transitional state that identifies them simultaneously as language learners and as future language educators. Their English proficiency functions concurrently as an academic outcome, a professional resource, and a prerequisite for effective classroom communication. During teacher education, they are expected to develop not only an adequate level of L2 proficiency but also the psychological and intercultural competence required for teaching English in a foreign-language context.

An important question in such a learning milieu is whether L2 proficiency develops in conjunction with closely related competencies such as intercultural competence and psycho-emotional capacity. Preservice EFL teachers are not merely future instructors of linguistic or communicative competence; they are also prospective models of how language can be used to communicate across cultural boundaries. Effective intercultural communication in foreign-language education has been argued to depend on psycho-emotional characteristics as well as linguistic competence (Mercer & Gkonou, 2017), and Klímová et al. (2025) identified EI and related characteristics as relevant to intercultural competence and effective foreign-language communication.

ICC, which emerged partly in response to limitations in traditional conceptualizations of communicative competence, extends well beyond grammatical and sociolinguistic knowledge to include cultural knowledge, attitudes, and adaptable skills (Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017; Byram, 1997, 2021). Byram's ability-based framework defines ICC through five interconnected *savoirs*: intercultural attitudes (*savoir être*), knowledge (*savoirs*), skills of interpreting and relating (*savoir comprendre*), skills of discovery and interaction (*savoir apprendre* and *savoir faire*), and critical cultural awareness (*savoir s'engager*). Deardorff's (2006) process model moves from attitudes to internal and external outcomes, and Fantini's (2012) framework treats language as constitutive of ICC: intercultural competence and language proficiency cannot be pulled apart without distorting both, since the capacity to decenter from one's own worldview is realized through the linguistic resources available for doing so. His model therefore positions target-language

proficiency as a further constitutive dimension rather than a precondition or by-product (Fantini, 2019, 2020, 2021).

The relationship between ICC and language proficiency is theoretically complex because the two constructs are both distinct and mutually supportive. ICC requires linguistic resources for intercultural interaction, while language proficiency can provide access to cultural meanings, pragmatic conventions, discourse practices, and interpersonal relationships. Byram's (1997, 2021) placement of linguistic, sociolinguistic and discourse competence inside the ICC construct provides the strongest theoretical warrant for expecting the two to covary, and Fantini (2020, 2021) frames the relationship as a spiral in which each construct opens further scope for the other. Much applied linguistics research treats proficiency as the foundation for ICC; among 223 preservice teachers in an EFL context, for example, foreign-language proficiency predicted ICC more strongly than national-language proficiency did (Wang et al., 2025). The opposite path is also plausible, since intercultural engagement supplies exposure, motivation and pragmatic feedback that can support language learning, and ICC has been linked to L2-learning motivation (Mirzaei & Forouzandeh, 2013). Here, ICC is designated as the focal predictor because the research questions concern the conditions under which intercultural resources are associated with linguistic attainment; the designation is analytic rather than causal, as cross-sectional data cannot separate the two directions.

A psycho-emotional capacity that may condition the relationship between ICC and L2 proficiency is EI. Of the ability-based and the broader mixed or competency models of EI, the present study adopts the competency-based conceptualization associated with Goleman (1995, 1998), whose framework identifies five interrelated dimensions: self-awareness, managing emotions, motivating oneself, empathy, and social skills. EI is thus treated as a constellation of emotional and interpersonal competencies that may influence how individuals perceive themselves, regulate their emotional responses, maintain motivation, understand others, and manage social interactions (Liu & Liu, 2025). Sun et al. (2025) supported a five-factor, 37-item version of the Leadership Toolkit EI scale (U.S. Coast Guard, 2021) among 450 university teachers in China, providing a differentiated measure of teacher EI.

There are theoretical grounds for expecting the components to relate differently to the ICC–proficiency association, although the literature does not support directional predictions for each. Goleman's (1995, 1998) dimensions can be grouped into intrapersonal (self-awareness, managing emotions, motivating oneself) and interpersonal (empathy, social skills) competencies. Empathy overlaps conceptually with the attitudinal and interpretive *savoirs* of ICC (Byram, 1997) and is listed among the internal outcomes of intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006), so it may bear on how intercultural understanding is used in interaction. Managing emotions and social skills concern the conduct of interaction itself and could either support the use of intercultural resources or offer an alternative route to communicative success, whereas self-awareness and motivating oneself are more general learning resources. Because these considerations point in different directions, a composite score could mask component-level differences, and the component-level questions were posed as non-directional and exploratory.

The relevance of EI to language education is increasingly supported by empirical research (Al-Obaydi et al., 2022; Deepika & Jennifer, 2026; Peng & Shuhong, 2025; Wang & Liu, 2026). In a meta-analysis of 39 studies, Wang and Liu (2026) found positive, negative and non-significant associations between EI and second/foreign language achievement, with a moderate pooled effect ($r = .43$, 95% CI [.32, .53]) when the outcome was actual L2 performance. The relationship was stronger for female participants and for those from collectivist cultural contexts, but it did not vary across language skills, education level or major.

In another meta-analysis of 47 studies, Peng and Shuhong (2025) reported a small correlation ($r = .24$) when L2 achievement was measured subjectively and a moderate one ($r = .41$) when it was measured objectively; unlike Wang and Liu (2026), they found that the relationship varied with education level and language skill. A systematic review of 121 articles from 16 national settings likewise found mostly significant links between EI and L2 learning variables (Deepika & Jennifer, 2026). In a sample of 319 Iranian EFL learners, EI was the strongest of several affective predictors of L2 proficiency (Taherkhani & Sharafi, 2026), and EI has also been associated with cognitive variables such as executive functioning (Alavi et al., 2019).

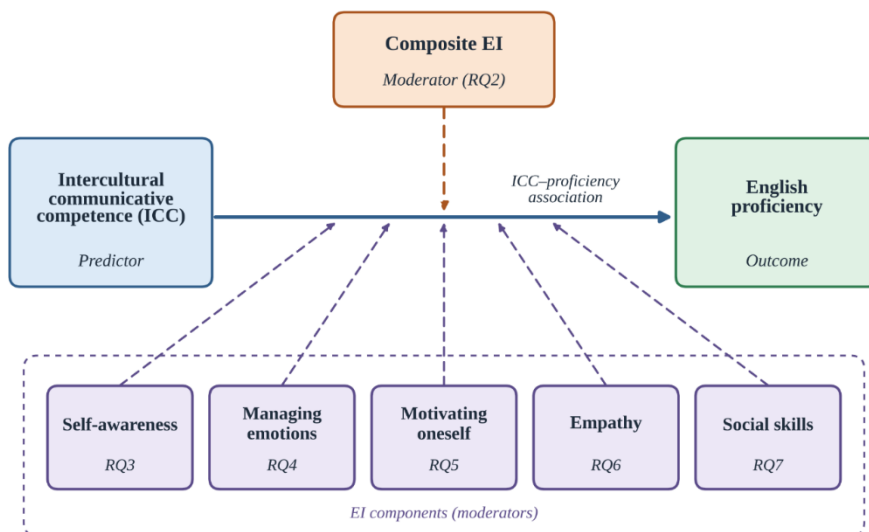
Research has also begun to connect EI with intercultural competence among teachers and teacher candidates. Mercer and Gkonou (2017) argue that the intercultural and interpersonal character of language teaching makes emotional and social competence intertwined capacities of language teachers. Although such research in EFL remains scarce, studies in mainstream education point to a close affinity between teachers' EI and intercultural competence (Gómez Yepes et al., 2026; Varis et al., 2025; Zheng, 2023). EI predicted intercultural sensitivity among 150 teachers of Turkish as a foreign language (Yılmaz & Eyüp, 2025) and correlated positively with all assessed dimensions of intercultural sensitivity among 629 prospective secondary teachers (Gómez Yepes et al., 2026). It has also been treated as an individual characteristic associated with the ways prospective teachers understand cultural difference (Varis et al., 2025).

The literature reviewed above documents associations between ICC and L2 proficiency, between EI and L2 proficiency, and between ICC and EI, but how EI bears on the link between intercultural competence and L2 proficiency remains open to investigation (Dombi, 2021; Figueroa & Hofhuis, 2024; Klímová et al., 2025). Kang (2025) found that the relationship between Korean language teachers' intercultural sensitivity and teaching performance was significantly moderated by EI, although not in the conventionally expected positive direction: the effect of intercultural sensitivity on teacher performance was stronger among teachers with lower EI ($B = -.097$, $p < .001$). EI may thus act as a moderator that either enables or limits the use of intercultural resources. A moderation model suits this reasoning better than a mediation model, because EI is conceptualized here as a relatively general set of competencies that conditions how intercultural resources are used rather than as an outcome of ICC, and because mediation would require a temporal ordering that cross-sectional data cannot support. To our knowledge, this moderation has not been tested among preservice EFL teachers, particularly in the Iraqi context.

The literature review thus points to two gaps. We found no study quantifying the relationship between ICC and L2 proficiency among Iraqi preservice EFL teachers, and none testing whether EI, as a composite construct or through its five components, moderates this relationship. The present study addresses both. Because conceptualizing EI solely as a monolithic construct may conceal important differences among its dimensions, the five competencies are also examined as individual moderators. The conceptual model of the study is displayed in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Conceptual Model of EI and Its Components as Moderators of the Association Between ICC and Iraqi Preservice EFL Teachers' English Proficiency



Based on this conceptualization, the present research addressed the following questions, of which RQ2–RQ7 were non-directional and exploratory:

RQ1. What levels of ICC and EI do the participating Iraqi preservice EFL teachers report?

RQ2. Does composite EI moderate the relationship between ICC and English proficiency among Iraqi preservice EFL teachers?

RQ3. Does Self-Awareness (SA) moderate this relationship?

RQ4. Does Managing Emotions (ME) moderate this relationship?

RQ5. Does Motivating Oneself (MO) moderate this relationship?

RQ6. Does Empathy (EM) moderate this relationship?

RQ7. Do Social Skills (SS) moderate this relationship?

Method

This study adopted a cross-sectional correlational design to investigate the interplay between ICC, L2 proficiency and EI among Iraqi preservice EFL teachers. EI and its componential features were treated as the moderating variables, meaning the study asked whether the strength or direction of the ICC–L2 proficiency association varies with EI; the design does not permit causal inference.

Participants

The target population for this study was Iraqi preservice EFL teachers, who are preparing to become the next generation of English language educators in a context where intercultural communication skills are increasingly vital yet remain largely underexplored in teacher training. In accordance with a convenience sampling procedure, 163 student teachers enrolled in the English Department at the University of Baghdad participated. Inclusion criteria were enrollment in the undergraduate EFL teacher education program and prior exposure to English learning in academic settings. Participants were 71 women and 92 men aged 20–28 years ($M = 23.8$, $SD = 2.14$), in years 3–4 of the program; they had completed the teaching practicum, and all were native speakers of Arabic. Because all participants came from a single department, the sample cannot be considered representative of Iraqi preservice EFL teachers.

Because the sample size was determined by access rather than by an *a priori* calculation, a sensitivity power analysis was conducted (Lakens, 2022). For a single interaction term in a three-predictor model with $N = 163$ and $\alpha = .05$, the study had 80% power to detect effects of $f^2 \geq .049$, or about 3% of additional variance when the full model explains 35% (Cohen, 2013); at the strictest step of the Holm correction described below ($\alpha = .0083$), the threshold was $f^2 = .076$. Since moderator effects in field research typically account for 1%–3% of the variance (McClelland & Judd, 1993), the study was underpowered for small interactions, and non-significant interactions do not show that moderation is absent.

Instruments

Participants' self-perceived ICC was assessed with the scale developed by Mirzaei and Forouzandeh (2013) for Iranian EFL learners on the basis of the models of Deardorff (2006) and Byram (1997). Its 22 items, rated on a 5-point scale, measure knowledge, skills, attitudes, and awareness; only the total score was analyzed. Internal consistency in the present sample was acceptable (Cronbach's $\alpha = .76$; McDonald's $\omega = .79$). The scale has not been validated with Iraqi or preservice-teacher samples, however, and its factor structure was not examined in this study, so its construct validity for the present population is assumed rather than established.

EI was measured with the Emotional Intelligence Scale of a leadership self-assessment toolkit (U.S. Coast Guard, 2021), originally 50 items based on Goleman's (1995, 1998) model, in the 37-item, five-factor version validated by Sun et al. (2025) among university teachers in China. It assesses self-awareness (7 items), managing emotions (8), motivating oneself (6), empathy (7), and social skills (9) on a 5-point scale. Internal consistency was $\alpha = .81$ for the total scale and $\alpha = .79, .76, .81, .74$, and $.78$ for the five subscales, respectively. Here too the validity evidence comes from a different population, and the weak and occasionally negative correlations among subscales (see Results) suggest that the five-factor structure may not hold in the same form in this sample.

English proficiency was measured with the free Cambridge English online general English test (<https://www.cambridgeenglish.org/test-your-english/general-english/>), a self-assessment tool based on the criteria outlined by the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). The test includes 25 multiple-choice items arranged in five sets of five-item sections, and the score is the number of correct answers (0–25), which participants reported from the results screen (test accessed in November 2024). The test is designed to give learners a quick indication of their level rather than to serve as a research instrument. The scores are, therefore, treated as a brief, unsupervised indicator of general proficiency rather than as an objective or comprehensive assessment.

Data Collection Procedure

Prior to any data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants after a detailed explanation of the study's purpose, procedures, confidentiality measures, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. The ICC scale and the EI questionnaire were administered online using the Google Forms platform in their original English versions. Participants completed the proficiency test on the Cambridge English website at their convenience and then sent a screenshot of their results to the researcher. Responses were matched to test scores through a personal code, and participants were instructed to take the test once, without assistance or reference materials. Because the test was unsupervised, testing conditions such as time spent, external help, or repeated attempts could not be controlled or verified.

Data Analysis Procedure

The analyses proceeded in three stages. The data were first screened for missing values, distributional problems, outliers, and violations of the assumptions underlying regression. RQ1 was then addressed with descriptive statistics and one-sample *t* tests comparing each mean with the midpoint of the 5-point response scale (3.00), which served as the main basis for interpreting levels. As a descriptive aid only, scores were also grouped into three equal-width bands, each $(5 - 1)/3 = 1.33$ points wide: low (1.00–2.33), moderate (2.34–3.67), and high (3.68–5.00). These

bands are interpretive labels rather than established norms or diagnostic levels, and they were not used in any inferential analysis.

RQ2–RQ7 were tested as six simple moderation models, each corresponding to Model 1 in the PROCESS framework (Hayes, 2022). In each model, English proficiency was regressed on ICC, the moderator (composite EI or one of its five dimensions), and the product of the two. ICC and the moderators were mean-centered before the product terms were formed, so that each lower-order coefficient represents the effect of one predictor at the sample mean of the other. Separate models were used because composite EI, as a linear combination of its components, cannot be entered alongside them, and because a single model with the five components and their five product terms (11 predictors, $N = 163$) would have had even less power to detect any one interaction, with the product terms sharing much of the variance that the components share (r s up to .57). The separate models therefore show whether each component, considered on its own, moderates the ICC–proficiency association, not whether its effect is independent of the others. Significant interactions were probed by estimating the conditional effect of ICC at low (-1 SD), average, and high ($+1$ SD) values of the moderator (Aiken & West, 1991) and with Johnson–Neyman analyses.

Inferences about the interactions were based on HC3 heteroscedasticity-consistent standard errors, which are recommended for routine use in ordinary least squares (OLS) regression (Hayes & Cai, 2007) and were warranted here by evidence of heteroscedasticity in three of the six models (see Results); OLS results are reported alongside. To control the familywise error rate across the six interaction tests, the HC3 p values were adjusted with the Holm (1979) procedure, which is less conservative than the Bonferroni correction. Interactions that remained significant after adjustment were regarded as robust, and those significant only before adjustment as tentative. All primary analyses used the full sample ($N = 163$); models re-estimated without influential cases served only as sensitivity checks.

Results

Data Screening and Preliminary Analyses

Table 1 reports the descriptive statistics. Skewness ranged from -0.23 to 0.19 ($SE = 0.19$) and kurtosis from -0.60 to 0.19 ($SE = 0.38$); dividing each value by its standard error gave no ratio above 1.96 in absolute terms, which indicates approximately normal distributions. No standardized score exceeded the $|3.29|$ criterion for univariate outliers (largest $|z| = 3.14$; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019). English proficiency scores ranged from 6 to 23 out of a possible 25 ($M = 14.95$, $SD = 3.98$), with no floor or ceiling effects.

Table 1*Descriptive Statistics for the Study Variables*

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	95% CI	Skew.	Kurt.	<i>t</i> (162)	<i>d</i>	Band
ICC	2.99	0.48	[2.91, 3.06]	0.11	−0.37	−0.32	−0.02	Moderate
EI (composite)	3.01	0.39	[2.95, 3.07]	0.17	−0.50	0.36	0.03	Moderate
Self-Awareness	3.36	0.76	[3.25, 3.48]	−0.23	−0.44	6.13***	0.48	Moderate
Managing Emotions	2.65	0.71	[2.54, 2.76]	0.18	−0.60	−6.38***	−0.50	Moderate
Motivating Oneself	3.03	0.64	[2.93, 3.13]	0.13	−0.59	0.66	0.05	Moderate
Empathy	2.98	0.59	[2.89, 3.07]	0.19	−0.45	−0.47	−0.04	Moderate
Social Skills	3.06	0.54	[2.98, 3.15]	−0.20	0.19	1.51	0.12	Moderate
English proficiency	14.95	3.98	[14.34, 15.57]	−0.01	−0.57	—	—	—

The *t* tests compare each mean with the scale midpoint (3.00), and *d* expresses that difference in standard deviation units. Bands are descriptive equal-interval ranges (low = 1.00–2.33, moderate = 2.34–3.67, high = 3.68–5.00), not normative levels. Standard errors are 0.19 for skewness and 0.38 for kurtosis. English proficiency is reported in raw test scores (0–25).

****p* < .001.

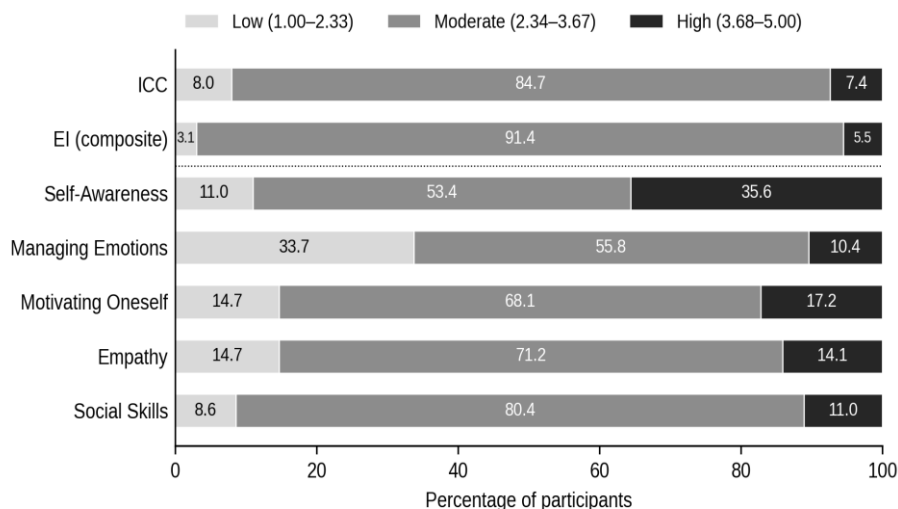
Across the six moderation models, variance inflation factors did not exceed 1.34, and the largest Cook's distance was .73, below the conventional cut-off of 1. Residuals were nearly symmetric (skewness ≤ 0.21) but somewhat flat (kurtosis between −1.38 and 0.01); with a sample of 163, this light-tailed departure was not considered a threat to inference. Breusch–Pagan tests, however, indicated heteroscedasticity in the composite EI, SA, and SS models (*ps* ≤ .031), which supports the use of HC3 standard errors as the primary basis for inference.

Research Question 1: Levels of ICC and EI

As Table 1 shows, the preservice teachers' mean ICC score was 2.99 (*SD* = 0.48), 95% CI [2.91, 3.06], and their mean composite EI score was 3.01 (*SD* = 0.39), 95% CI [2.95, 3.07]. Neither mean differed from the scale midpoint, *t*(162) = −0.32, *p* = .753, *d* = −0.02 for ICC, and *t*(162) = 0.36, *p* = .721, *d* = 0.03 for EI, and both fell in the moderate band. The distribution of individual scores points the same way (Figure 2): 84.7% of participants fell in the moderate band for ICC, with small and almost equal shares in the low (8.0%) and high (7.4%) bands, and 91.4% fell in the moderate band for composite EI. This clustering restricted the range over which moderation could be observed and reduced the power to detect it (McClelland & Judd, 1993).

Figure 2

Distribution of Participants Across Low, Moderate, and High Bands of ICC and EI



The five EI dimensions were less uniform. Their means were all in the moderate band, but Self-Awareness was the only dimension rated significantly above the midpoint, $t(162) = 6.13$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.48$, and Managing Emotions was the only one rated significantly below it, $t(162) = -6.38$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.50$. More than a third of the participants (35.6%) reported high self-awareness, while a similar proportion (33.7%) fell into the low band for managing emotions. Motivating Oneself, Empathy, and Social Skills did not differ from the midpoint ($ps \geq .134$).

Correlations Among the Study Variables

Zero-order correlations are presented in Table 2. ICC was positively correlated with English proficiency, $r = .52$, $p < .001$, a large association by Cohen's (2013) conventions. Composite EI was related to proficiency to a similar degree ($r = .49$), as were Social Skills ($r = .50$) and Self-Awareness ($r = .48$). The correlations for Managing Emotions ($r = .30$) and Motivating Oneself ($r = .23$) were more modest, and Empathy was unrelated to proficiency ($r = .08$, $p = .296$). ICC and composite EI shared a moderate positive correlation ($r = .45$). Correlations among the EI components were uneven: Self-Awareness and Social Skills were moderately related ($r = .57$), whereas Empathy was unrelated to Self-Awareness ($r = .00$) and Social Skills ($r = -.02$) and weakly negatively related to Managing Emotions ($r = -.18$). This departs from the expectation, in Goleman's (1995, 1998) model, that the competencies are positively interrelated.

Table 2*Pearson Correlations Among the Study Variables*

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. ICC	—							
2. English proficiency	.52***	—						
3. EI (composite)	.45***	.49***	—					
4. Self-Awareness	.25**	.48***	.68***	—				
5. Managing Emotions	.13	.30***	.38***	.22**	—			
6. Motivating Oneself	.38***	.23**	.66***	.17*	.02	—		
7. Empathy	.32***	.08	.31***	.00	-.18*	.35***	—	
8. Social Skills	.22**	.50***	.63***	.57***	.25**	.25**	-.02	—

N = 163. **p* < .05. ***p* < .01. ****p* < .001**Moderating Role of Emotional Intelligence (RQs 2–7)**

The zero-order correlations establish that ICC, EI, and proficiency are associated, but they cannot indicate whether the strength of the ICC–proficiency association varies across levels of EI. Table 3 compares the interaction tests under OLS and HC3 estimation, with Holm-adjusted *p* values. ICC was a significant positive predictor of English proficiency in all six models, with effects at the mean of the moderator ranging from $b = 3.30$ to $b = 4.35$ (all *ps* < .001), and the predictors together explained between 27% and 46% of the variance in proficiency. The six moderation models are summarized in Table 4.

Table 3*Tests of the ICC × Moderator Interactions Under OLS and HC3 Estimation*

Moderator	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i> (OLS)	<i>p</i> (HC3)	<i>p</i> (Holm)	Evidence
Composite EI	−1.29	1.35	.341	.471	.942	Not supported
Self-Awareness	−1.33	0.73	.068	.082	.246	Not supported
Managing Emotions	−1.70	0.74	.023	.018	.090	Tentative
Motivating Oneself	−0.07	0.76	.923	.927	.942	Not supported
Empathy	2.22	0.84	.009	.001	.006	Robust
Social Skills	−2.82	0.91	.002	.056	.224	Inconclusive

b and *SE* are OLS estimates of the interaction coefficient. *p* (Holm) = HC3 *p* values adjusted for six tests (Holm, 1979). Robust = significant after adjustment; tentative = significant only before adjustment; inconclusive = significant under OLS only and sensitive to one influential case.

Table 4

Moderation Models Predicting English Proficiency From ICC, Emotional Intelligence, and Their Interaction (OLS Estimates)

Predictor	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI
<i>RQ2: Composite emotional intelligence (EI) as moderator</i>					
ICC	3.30	0.61	5.37	< .001	[2.09, 4.51]
EI	3.20	0.72	4.44	< .001	[1.78, 4.63]
ICC × EI	−1.29	1.35	−0.96	.341	[−3.96, 1.38]
$R^2 = .36$, $F(3, 159) = 29.46$, $p < .001$; $\Delta R^2 = .004$, $F(1, 159) = 0.91$, $p = .341$					
<i>RQ3: Self-Awareness (SA) as moderator</i>					
ICC	3.78	0.53	7.08	< .001	[2.73, 4.84]
SA	1.97	0.33	5.98	< .001	[1.32, 2.62]
ICC × SA	−1.33	0.73	−1.84	.068	[−2.77, 0.10]
$R^2 = .41$, $F(3, 159) = 37.37$, $p < .001$; $\Delta R^2 = .012$, $F(1, 159) = 3.37$, $p = .068$					
<i>RQ4: Managing Emotions (ME) as moderator</i>					
ICC	4.12	0.54	7.64	< .001	[3.05, 5.18]
ME	1.15	0.37	3.10	.002	[0.42, 1.88]
ICC × ME	−1.70	0.74	−2.30	.023	[−3.16, −0.24]
$R^2 = .35$, $F(3, 159) = 28.30$, $p < .001$; $\Delta R^2 = .022$, $F(1, 159) = 5.27$, $p = .023$					
<i>RQ5: Motivating Oneself (MO) as moderator</i>					
ICC	4.25	0.64	6.68	< .001	[3.00, 5.51]
MO	0.22	0.46	0.48	.635	[−0.69, 1.12]
ICC × MO	−0.07	0.76	−0.10	.923	[−1.58, 1.43]
$R^2 = .27$, $F(3, 159) = 19.92$, $p < .001$; $\Delta R^2 < .001$, $F(1, 159) = 0.01$, $p = .923$					
<i>RQ6: Empathy (EM) as moderator</i>					
ICC	4.35	0.59	7.41	< .001	[3.19, 5.51]
EM	−0.40	0.48	−0.85	.398	[−1.35, 0.54]
ICC × EM	2.22	0.84	2.65	.009	[0.57, 3.88]
$R^2 = .31$, $F(3, 159) = 23.83$, $p < .001$; $\Delta R^2 = .031$, $F(1, 159) = 7.04$, $p = .009$					
<i>RQ7: Social Skills (SS) as moderator</i>					
ICC	3.56	0.50	7.13	< .001	[2.57, 4.55]
SS	3.25	0.45	7.25	< .001	[2.37, 4.14]
ICC × SS	−2.82	0.91	−3.10	.002	[−4.61, −1.03]
$R^2 = .46$, $F(3, 159) = 45.05$, $p < .001$; $\Delta R^2 = .033$, $F(1, 159) = 9.64$, $p = .002$					

b = unstandardized coefficient; CI = confidence interval. Coefficient *t* tests have 159 degrees of freedom. ΔR^2 is the increase in explained variance due to the interaction term. HC3 tests of the interaction terms, which were used for inference, are reported in Table 4.

Composite Emotional Intelligence as a Moderator (RQ2)

Composite EI predicted proficiency in its own right ($b = 3.20, p < .001$), but the $ICC \times EI$ interaction was not significant, $b = -1.29, SE = 1.35, p = .341$, $HC3 p = .471$, and added less than half a percentage point of explained variance, $\Delta R^2 = .004$. Its contribution was additive rather than conditional, and RQ2 was not supported.

Self-Awareness as a Moderator (RQ3)

Self-Awareness was associated with proficiency independently of ICC ($b = 1.97, p < .001$). The interaction was negative but did not reach significance, $b = -1.33, SE = 0.73, p = .068$, $HC3 p = .082$. RQ3 was not supported.

Managing Emotions as a Moderator (RQ4)

The $ICC \times ME$ interaction was significant before adjustment, $b = -1.70, SE = 0.74, t(159) = -2.30, p = .023, 95\% CI [-3.16, -0.24]$, $HC3 p = .018, \Delta R^2 = .022, f^2 = .033$, but not after Holm adjustment ($p = .090$), so RQ4 received only tentative support. The negative coefficient indicates that the association between ICC and proficiency was weaker at higher levels of Managing Emotions. As Table 5 and Figure 3 show, the conditional effect of ICC was $b = 5.32$ among participants low in this dimension, $b = 4.12$ at the mean, and $b = 2.92$ among those high in it, remaining significant at all three points. The Johnson–Neyman boundary fell at $ME = 3.86$. Below this value, a range that included 94.5% of the sample, ICC was significantly associated with proficiency; the region above it contained only nine participants.

Table 5

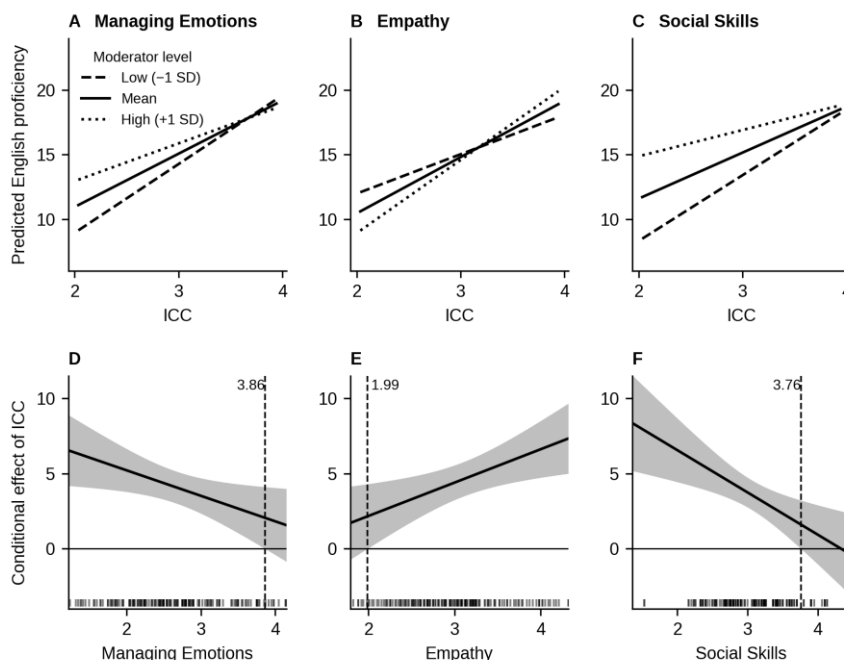
Conditional Effects of ICC on English Proficiency at Values of Managing Emotions, Empathy, and Social Skills

Moderator	Moderator value	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI
Managing Emotions	Low (1.94)	5.32	0.76	7.03	< .001	[3.82, 6.81]
	Mean (2.65)	4.12	0.54	7.64	< .001	[3.05, 5.18]
	High (3.35)	2.92	0.75	3.91	< .001	[1.44, 4.39]
Empathy	Low (2.39)	3.05	0.82	3.70	< .001	[1.42, 4.67]
	Mean (2.98)	4.35	0.59	7.41	< .001	[3.19, 5.51]
	High (3.57)	5.66	0.70	8.04	< .001	[4.27, 7.05]
Social Skills	Low (2.52)	5.09	0.69	7.36	< .001	[3.72, 6.45]
	Mean (3.06)	3.56	0.50	7.13	< .001	[2.57, 4.55]
	High (3.61)	2.03	0.71	2.85	.005	[0.63, 3.44]

Low and high values are 1 *SD* below and above the moderator mean. *b* = conditional (unstandardized) effect of ICC; CI = confidence interval; *t* tests have 159 degrees of freedom. Johnson–Neyman boundaries: the effect of ICC was significant for $ME < 3.86$ (94.5% of the sample), $EM > 1.99$ (95.7%), and $SS < 3.76$ (90.8%). Estimates are based on OLS standard errors.

Figure 3

Simple Slopes and Johnson–Neyman Plots for Managing Emotions, Empathy, and Social Skills



Panels A–C show predicted English proficiency at low ($-1\ SD$), mean, and high ($+1\ SD$) values of each moderator, plotted across ICC scores within $2\ SD$ of the mean. Panels D–F show the conditional effect of ICC (solid line) with its 95% confidence band across the observed range of the moderator. Dashed vertical lines mark the Johnson–Neyman boundaries, where the band crosses zero; tick marks along the horizontal axis show observed moderator scores.

Motivating Oneself as a Moderator (RQ5)

Motivating Oneself did not moderate the relationship, $b = -0.07$, $SE = 0.76$, $p = .923$, $HC3\ p = .927$, and showed no unique association with proficiency once ICC was taken into account ($b = 0.22$, $p = .635$). RQ5 was not supported.

Empathy as a Moderator (RQ6)

Empathy moderated the relationship between ICC and proficiency, $b = 2.22$, $SE = 0.84$, $t(159) = 2.65$, $p = .009$, 95% CI $[0.57, 3.88]$, $\Delta R^2 = .031$, $f^2 = .044$. The effect was clearer under HC3 estimation ($p = .001$) and was the only interaction to remain significant after Holm adjustment ($p = .006$); RQ6 was supported. In contrast to ME, the interaction was positive: the ICC–proficiency association was stronger at higher levels of empathy, with the conditional effect of ICC rising from $b = 3.05$ at low empathy to $b = 4.35$ at the mean and $b = 5.66$ at high empathy. The Johnson–Neyman boundary fell at $EM = 1.99$, so the effect of ICC was significant

for the 95.7% of participants scoring above that value. Empathy alone did not predict proficiency ($b = -0.40, p = .398$).

Social Skills as a Moderator (RQ7)

In the OLS model, the $ICC \times SS$ interaction was significant, $b = -2.82, SE = 0.91, t(159) = -3.10, p = .002, 95\% CI [-4.61, -1.03]$, and produced the largest increment of the six models, $\Delta R^2 = .033, F(1, 159) = 9.64, f^2 = .061$. The pattern resembled that for ME, with the ICC–proficiency association becoming weaker at higher levels of Social Skills: $b = 5.09$ at low, 3.56 at average, and 2.03 at high values. The Johnson–Neyman boundary was $SS = 3.76$, and 90.8% of participants fell in the region where ICC remained a significant predictor.

Under the primary HC3 criterion, however, the interaction was not significant ($SE = 1.47, p = .056$; Holm-adjusted $p = .224$). The influence statistics traced this discrepancy to a single case combining high leverage ($h = .33$), a large standardized residual (3.94), and a Cook's distance of .73. In a sensitivity analysis excluding this case, the interaction became larger and was significant under both OLS and HC3 estimation, $b = -4.05, SE = 0.91, p < .001, \Delta R^2 = .060$; removing the same case did not alter the conclusion for any other model. Because the primary analysis retained the full sample, RQ7 was not supported; the OLS and sensitivity results point to a possible negative interaction that requires confirmation in a larger sample.

Discussion

This exploratory study examined whether EI, as a composite and through its five components, conditions the relationship between ICC and English proficiency among Iraqi preservice EFL teachers. The participants reported moderate ICC and EI, and ICC was strongly associated with proficiency. Composite EI did not moderate this association, and among the components only Empathy showed a robust interaction; the negative interactions for Managing Emotions and Social Skills were weaker and less certain, and are best treated as leads for future research.

The moderate ICC profile, with 84.7% of participants in the middle band, presents a less discouraging image than reports of insufficient intercultural competence among Iraqi preservice and postgraduate students (Abdullah, 2024; Hassoon, 2019; Ilyas, 2021). It is broadly in accord with the medium-to-high intercultural sensitivity reported for Turkish teacher candidates (Hark Söylemez, 2025) and the high levels found among teachers of Turkish as a foreign language (Yılmaz & Eyüp, 2025), although comparisons across instruments are approximate. Within EI, the profile was uneven: participants rated self-awareness highest and managing emotions lowest. One reading is that they recognize their emotions more readily than they regulate them, an asymmetry resembling the gap between intercultural beliefs and practices reported among Iraqi teachers (Abdulhasan, 2024). The present data cannot establish such a parallel, however; the difference may equally reflect item content or response tendencies such as social desirability, and it

would need to be examined with behavioral or observational measures before conclusions about teacher education are drawn.

ICC was positively associated with proficiency in every model, consistent with frameworks that place linguistic competence within ICC (Byram, 1997, 2021) or treat language as constitutive of it (Fantini, 2012). Wang et al. (2025) examined the reverse path, with foreign-language proficiency predicting preservice teachers' ICC. Cross-sectional data cannot settle the direction, and Fantini's (2020, 2021) notion of a spiral, in which each competence widens the scope of the other, may capture the relationship better than either one-way account. Part of the association may also reflect unmeasured variables such as general academic engagement.

Composite EI was directly associated with proficiency ($r = .49$), somewhat more strongly than the pooled correlation that Peng and Shuhong (2025) reported for objectively measured achievement ($r = .41$), and in keeping with Taherkhani and Sharafi (2026), who identified EI as the strongest affective predictor of L2 proficiency, and with Fabumuyi's (2025) conclusion that EI and intercultural competence both matter for success in learning English. The collectivist cultural context of the sample, which Wang and Liu (2026) identified as strengthening the EI–achievement relationship, may partly explain the size of the association, although the brief, unsupervised proficiency measure calls for caution. Unlike in Kang's (2025) study of teaching performance, however, composite EI did not act as a moderator here.

One possible reason is that the components did not behave uniformly. The ICC–proficiency association was stronger at higher levels of Empathy and, less certainly, weaker at higher levels of Managing Emotions and Social Skills, and interactions of opposite sign may offset each other once the dimensions are averaged. Because only the Empathy interaction survived the multiplicity adjustment, this offsetting account remains a possibility rather than a demonstrated explanation, but it is consistent with the study's premise that a monolithic view of EI can conceal differences among its components.

Self-Awareness and Motivating Oneself did not moderate the relationship. Self-Awareness was directly associated with proficiency, and its non-significant interaction carried the same negative sign as those of Managing Emotions and Social Skills. Motivating Oneself showed no unique association once ICC was controlled, possibly because its content overlaps with ICC itself: it correlated more closely with ICC than any other EI dimension did, and motivation is a component of integrated models of intercultural competence (Arasaratnam et al., 2010).

Empathy, the one component with a robust interaction, showed a purely conditional pattern: it was unrelated to proficiency at the zero-order level ($r = .08$, $p = .296$) and as a main effect ($b = -0.40$, $p = .398$), yet its interaction with ICC was positive and withstood both robust estimation and the multiplicity adjustment. This conditional role fits accounts in which empathy links intercultural understanding to communicative performance: Deardorff (2006) places empathy among the internal outcomes that precede effective and appropriate communication, empathy is a core component of the integrated model tested by Arasaratnam et al. (2010), and Fantini

(2012) ties decentering from one's own worldview to the linguistic resources through which it is realized. One possibility, which the present data cannot test, is that empathic preservice teachers are better able to draw on their intercultural competence in the attentive, perspective-taking interaction through which language develops. The finding extends evidence linking EI with intercultural sensitivity among teachers and teacher candidates (Gómez Yepes et al., 2026; Yılmaz & Eyüp, 2025) to language proficiency, although Empathy's weak correlations with the other components suggest that it may capture something distinct from EI as a whole.

The negative interactions for Managing Emotions and Social Skills call for more caution, since the first did not survive adjustment and the second was significant only under OLS and depended on one influential case. If confirmed, they would mirror Kang's (2025) finding that intercultural sensitivity was more strongly associated with the professional performance of teachers with lower EI. We therefore offer a compensatory hypothesis, to be tested in future research rather than treated as a conclusion of this study. Preservice teachers who regulate their emotions well and interact with ease may reach proficiency through other routes, such as more sustained use of English with others, so that their intercultural resources make less difference. For those with weaker emotional and social resources, ICC may carry more of the load. Testing this idea would require longitudinal data, measures of actual language use, and samples large enough to estimate small interactions reliably.

Taken together, the component-level results suggest that the five EI dimensions may relate to the ICC–proficiency association in different ways: Empathy as an amplifying condition, Managing Emotions and possibly Social Skills as attenuating conditions, and Self-Awareness and Motivating Oneself as additive correlates or not at all. These labels describe statistical patterns rather than mechanisms; a significant interaction shows that an association differs across levels of a third variable, not that one competence enables, replaces, or makes another unnecessary.

If this differentiation holds in confirmatory research, the practice of entering composite EI into models of language learning outcomes may obscure differences among components, and offsetting effects among components would offer one possible explanation for the inconsistent findings that both available meta-analyses have documented in this literature.

Conclusion

In this sample, Iraqi preservice EFL teachers reported moderate levels of ICC and EI, and ICC was closely associated with their English proficiency. Composite EI did not condition this association, but Empathy did: the ICC–proficiency association was stronger among participants reporting higher empathy, a result that held under robust estimation and adjustment for multiple tests. Weaker and less certain evidence pointed to the opposite pattern for Managing Emotions and Social Skills. Treating EI componentially therefore appears worthwhile in modelling

the ICC–proficiency relationship, although the component-level findings require confirmation.

For teacher education in Iraq, the findings suggest, without demonstrating, that intercultural and emotional competencies might be developed together rather than in isolation. Intercultural tasks could be paired with perspective-taking activities that cultivate empathy, and emotion regulation, the lowest-rated EI dimension in this sample, may deserve explicit attention in the curriculum. Because individuals differ in how much they gain from intercultural training (Figueroa & Hofhuis, 2024), such provision might also be tailored to trainees' profiles, as suggested by Taherkhani and Sharafi (2026). These proposals are best regarded as hypotheses for intervention research, since correlational, self-report data cannot show that changing one competence would change another.

Several limitations qualify these conclusions. The most important concerns the proficiency measure: a free, 25-item self-assessment test taken without supervision, with scores reported through screenshots. We could not verify whether participants worked alone, used reference materials, or made repeated attempts; a short multiple-choice test samples only part of general proficiency; and its reliability could not be estimated. These features add measurement error, reducing precision and power, and uncontrolled assistance could introduce systematic bias if it was more common among some participants than others. The findings should therefore be replicated with a proctored, standardized proficiency test. Second, ICC and EI were self-reported and measured with instruments validated in other populations, their factor structure was not examined here, and the weak correlations among some EI components suggest that the five-factor structure may not hold in the same form.

Third, the single-site convenience sample limits generalizability and provided adequate power only for interactions of $f^2 \geq .049$. The observed interactions were small, the clustering of ICC and EI scores restricted the range over which they could be detected, and the Johnson–Neyman regions at the extremes of the moderators rested on few cases. Because six models were tested, the component-level findings are exploratory, and separate models cannot show whether each component's interaction is independent of the others. Finally, the cross-sectional design precludes causal or directional conclusions; ICC and proficiency may influence each other, and both may depend on unmeasured variables. Future research could test the Empathy interaction and the compensatory hypothesis in larger, multi-site samples, using structural equation modeling with the components of both ICC and EI, longitudinal or intervention designs, and performance-based measures of ICC and proficiency. Qualitative inquiry could also clarify how empathy and emotion regulation shape the ways preservice teachers draw on their intercultural competence when using English.

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