Examining the Predictive Power of Cultural Intelligence on Iranian EFL Learners’ Performance on IELTS Speaking and Writing Modules

Behzad Ghonsooly
Seyyed Ehsan Golparvar
Ferdowsi University of Mashhad

Abstract

This research effort examines the relationship between Iranian EFL learners’ cultural intelligence (CQ) and their performance on the IELTS Speaking and Writing Modules. Further, this research explores the predictive power of the four subscales of CQ on EFL learners’ speaking and writing abilities. To this end, eighty three EFL learners, both male and female, participated in this project. Cultural Intelligence Scale and IELTS Speaking and Writing Tests were used in this study. The IELTS Writing Module and the Cultural Intelligence Scale were administered to those test takers who were willing to take part in this study. After that, IELTS speaking interviews were conducted. The results revealed that Iranian EFL learners have an average level of CQ. Moreover, it was found that there exists a significant relationship between EFL learners’ CQ and their speaking and writing abilities. Finally, among the subscales of CQ, motivational CQ was found to be the best predictor of speaking ability, and cognitive CQ was found to be the best predictor of writing. The results are discussed and pedagogical implications are provided.

Keywords: Cultural intelligence, Writing ability, Speaking ability

1. Introduction

It is clear that a person who embarks on learning a foreign language and aims at mastering it needs to appreciate and accommodate to the culture of the people whose language s/he is trying to learn. Cultural awareness is a term related to this discussion. Cheng (2007) pointed out that cultural awareness refers to becoming aware of the members of another cultural group, such as their values, perspectives, expectations, and behavior. Cheng (2007) introduced four levels of cultural awareness. At the first level, there are individuals who are cognizant of their way of doing things; however, they are ignorant of cultural differences. Individuals, at the second level, become familiar with others’ ways of doing things, but they think their way is the best. The third level of cultural awareness is characterized by becoming conversant about other cultural norms and choosing the best norm based on the circumstances. At the fourth level, people are ready to construct shared meanings with the members of other cultures.

Cultural intelligence (CQ), the ability to have effective interactions with people from different cultures, requires cultural awareness. To put it differently, successful interactions with the members of a given culture calls for being aware of their values, perspectives, and patterns of behavior. In a similar vein, Cheng (2007) has argued that proper awareness of cross-cultural communication patterns is the first step to have harmonious and successful communication. There are many research projects conducted on the role of CQ in successful communication.
(Imai & Gelfand, 2010; Gregory, Priifling & Beck, 2008), and successful leadership (Alon & Higgins, 2005; Elenkov & Manev, 2009; Groves & Feyerherm, 2011; Moon, 2010; Triandis, 2006; Khani, Etebarian, & Abzari, 2011). All in all, these studies suggest that CQ plays an important role in effective communication and successful management and leadership.

There are few studies carried out to investigate the role of CQ in educational achievement. Similarly, the contribution of CQ to learning a foreign (or a second) language is rather unexplored. To the best of the present researcher’s knowledge, the relationship between CQ and EFL learners’ speaking ability has not been researched. Hence, the present study aims at examining the association between Iranian EFL learners’ CQ and their performance on the IELTS Speaking Module. Among the four language skills, speaking is selected because it is more culturally loaded.

2. Theoretical Background

Cultural intelligence (CQ) has been defined as the ability to have effective interactions with people from different cultures. Thomas and Inkson (2004) have proposed that CQ is a multidimensional competence that is composed of knowledge of other cultures, mindfulness, and a set and of behavioral skills. Thomas (2006) held that CQ enables people to comprehend different cultural norms and function appropriately in cross-cultural contexts. Ng and Earley (2006) suggested that CQ is a culture-independent construct that is applicable to particular cultural settings. They also mentioned that CQ helps individuals adjust themselves to different cultural contexts. CQ refers to the ability “to engage in a set of behaviors that uses skills (i.e., language or interpersonal skills) and qualities (e.g., tolerance for ambiguity or flexibility) that are tuned appropriately to the culture-based values and attitudes of the people with whom one interacts” (Peterson, 2004, p. 89).

McNab and Worthley (2011) examined the relationship between CQ and individual characteristics (i.e., general self-efficacy, international travel experience, management, and work experience). Three hundred and seventy managers and management students representing over 30 nationalities participated in their study. They found that there is a positive relationship between general self-efficacy and CQ (r=.15). Their findings also revealed that three subscales of CQ, i.e., meta-cognitive (r=.18), motivation (r=.16), and behavior (r=.18), are associated with general self-efficacy. McNab and Worthly (2011) concluded that general self-efficacy is a salient feature in CQ education and development efforts.

Petrovic (2011) explored teachers’ level of cultural intelligence and the variables that can be perceived as the predictors of CQ. This research project involved 107 elementary teachers (86.9% female and 13.1% male) coming from four towns in Serbia. It should be noted that most of these teachers (68.2%) taught in culturally heterogeneous classes. Petrovic chose 8 variables for potential CQ predictors, namely contacts with other cultures, communication in a foreign language, reading of foreign literature, watching TV travel shows, the importance of knowing other cultures, experiencing multicultural classes as a challenge, enjoyment of intercultural communication, and openness to cultural learning. It was found that teachers show a high level of CQ (mean= 67.79, SD= 9.21). The majority of the teachers demonstrated a high (66.4%) or very high (22.4%) level of CQ. In addition, significant predictors of teachers’ CQ were enjoyment of intercultural communication (β=.262), experiencing the multicultural composition of the class as a challenge (β=.240), and openness to intercultural learning (β=.185).
Almost all the studies reviewed here investigate the role of cultural intelligence in business and management particularly in crosscultural contexts. There seems to be a gap in the literature on CQ regarding the role of CQ in learning the verbal aspects of another culture. Moreover, the contribution of CQ to observing the verbal expectations of those with whom we interact -not necessarily from another culture - appears to be unexplored. Speaking is an important facet of the verbal behavior in a culture that is the focus of this study.

3. Research Questions

This study is aimed at answering the following questions:

1. Is there a significant relationship between Iranian EFL learners’ cultural intelligence and their performance on the IELTS Speaking test?

2. Is there a significant association between their cultural intelligence and their performance on the IELTS Writing test?

3. Among the subscales of cultural intelligence, which one is the best predictor of performance in the IELTS Speaking test?

4. Among the subscales of cultural intelligence, which one is the best predictor of performance in the IELTS Writing test?

4. Method

4.1. Participants and setting

This study was carried out in Pardis Toos Scientific Centre, Mashhad, Iran. Eighty three EFL learners, 41 males (47.7%) and 42 females (48.8%), participated in this project. All of them were university students studying at different universities in Mashhad, Iran. Fifty one learners (61.4%) were students of Ferdowsi University of Mashhad. Twenty three learners (27.7%) studied at Khayam University and nine learners (10.8%) were students of Islamic Azad University. They were mostly advanced EFL learners attending IELTS preparation courses. The participants age ranged from 18 to 27 (mean= 22.55, SD= 2.39). The sample, which was an available sample to the researcher, seemed to be representative of Iranian EFL students with the same age average, yet having different academic backgrounds.

4.2. Instruments

4.1.1. Cultural Intelligence Scale

In order to assess EFL learners’ cultural intelligence, the researcher utilized the Cultural Intelligence Scale (CQS) developed and validated by Ang et al., (2007). This 20-item self-report questionnaire is composed of four factors. The first factor is Metacognitive CQ consisting of 4 items (item 1, 2, 3, and 4). This factor is related to the accuracy of individuals’ cultural knowledge as they interact with people from different cultures. The second factor of this questionnaire is Cognitive CQ including 6 items (items 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10). This factor measures individuals’ knowledge to express verbal and non-verbal behaviour in different cultures. The third factor of this scale is Motivational CQ dealing with enjoying interaction with
people from other cultures. This factor is composed of 5 items (items 11, 12, 13, 14, and 15). Behavioural CQ is the fourth factor of this instrument. It deals with changing one’s non-verbal behavior in a cross-cultural context. It has 5 items (items 16, 17, 18, 19, and 20). The items of this questionnaire are on the basis of a five-point Likert scale, i.e., strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5).

4.1.2. IELTS Writing Module (Academic Version)

The second instrument of the study is the IELTS Academic Writing Module. It is composed of two tasks. In Academic Writing Task 1, the candidates are given a task on the basis of some graphic or pictorial information. The candidates are expected to write a summary of the information provided. The summary should not be less than 150 words. Test takers are advised to spend around 20 minutes on this task. Academic Writing Task 2 is assumed to be more challenging. Test takers should produce a written argument on a given topic. They are supposed to organize their writing and provide examples to support their arguments. This task should be at least 250 words. The candidates are recommended to spend around 40 minutes on this task. The second task is longer than the first task and worth more scores. The writing examiners mark candidates work on a scale of 1-9 in four areas, namely vocabulary, grammar, content, and organization (Jakeman & McDowell, 2008).

4.1.3. IELTS Speaking Module

The third instrument of the study is the IELTS Speaking Module. It is in the form of a one-to-one interview. This test includes three parts. They give candidates the opportunity to display their spoken English skills through several tasks. The design of the tasks requires test takers to use a variety of language structures on different topics. The IELTS Speaking Test takes between 11 and 14 minutes. In the first part, which takes 4-5 minutes, the examiner asks a number of questions concerning the candidates’ personal lives and familiar topics that are not difficult to answer. This part allows candidates to overcome their anxiety and display their basic fluency. The second part, which is a short talk, takes 3-4 minutes. The examiner chooses a topic and candidates should talk about this topic for 1 or 2 minutes. The topics are on the basis of candidates’ personal experiences and feelings. In the third part, taking 4-5 minutes, the candidates are asked a number of questions that are more abstract in comparison with those asked in the first part of the interview. These questions are basically related to the topic put forward in Part 2. In Part 3, the candidates are supposed to provide longer answers than those they give to the questions asked in Part 1. The examiners rate the candidates’ language on a scale of 1-9 in four areas, namely fluency, pronunciation, grammar and accuracy, and vocabulary (Jakeman & McDowell, 2008).

4.3. Data collection and data analysis

Those who were eager to participate in the second phase of the study were asked to enter a separate room in order to fill out the Cultural Intelligence Scale after their IELTS Speaking Test was finished. The researcher provided the participants with a brief explanation of the purpose of the study. The English directions related to the Cultural Intelligence Scale accompanied the questionnaire. Nevertheless, the researcher was present in the meeting where the questionnaires were administered and repeated the directions in Persian (the participants’ native language) once again so that the participants could gain a clear understanding of what they were supposed to do.
Meanwhile, they were served with cookies and juice to help them fully concentrate on the questionnaire items. The researcher was present in both phases of the study that were under standard conditions.

IELTS candidates’ writing and speaking skills was scored by two ratters, one of whom was the researcher. In addition, the researcher prepared the scores related to the Cultural Intelligence Scale. The data obtained via the IELTS tests and the Cultural Intelligence Scale were given to the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 16 to answer the research questions.

5. Results

The first research question was concerned with the association between CQ and Iranian EFL learners’ performance in IELTS Speaking Module. Table 1 shows this relationship.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavioral CQ</th>
<th>Cognitive CQ</th>
<th>Metacognitive CQ</th>
<th>Motivational CQ</th>
<th>Total CQ</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Speaking</td>
<td>.42**</td>
<td>.39**</td>
<td>.31</td>
<td>.44**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .05, ** p < .01

As Table 1, indicates, there exists a significant association between Iranian EFL learners’ performance in IELTS Speaking Module and their total CQ (r = .48, p < .01). In other words, the higher the level of CQ in Iranian EFL learners, the better their performance is in IELTS Speaking Test.

Table 1 also demonstrates that there is a meaningful relationship between cognitive CQ and speaking ability (r = .39, p < .05). To put it differently, those Iranian EFL learners who are more knowledgeable about other people’s cultural preferences are more likely to be successful in their oral communication. In addition, there exists a significant association between behavioral CQ and Iranian EFL learners’ speaking ability (r = .42, p < .01). This means that those EFL learners who are able to perform appropriate verbal and nonverbal behavior in interacting with people with different cultural preferences tend to be better speakers of English as a foreign language. Furthermore, speaking ability is also significantly associated with motivational CQ (r = .44, p < .01). In other words, those EFL learners who are more inclined to devote attention and energy to learning about and functioning in situations which are characterized by cultural disparity tend to be more successful in speaking English. Finally, it should be noted that metacognitive CQ is moderately related to Iranian EFL learners’ performance in IELTS Speaking Module (r = .31, p < .05).

In order to perform further analysis of the relationship between CQ and speaking ability, the participants were divided into three groups with regard to their total CQ score. Those participants
whose score was below 50 were put in the Low Group, those whose score was between 50 and 70 were put in the Mid Group, and those whose score was above 70 were put in the High Group. One-way ANOVA was run to see whether the difference among groups is significant. Table 4.5. displays the results of ANOVA for the three groups.

Table 2.

Results of one-way ANOVA for cultural intelligence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sum of Squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sig.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>83.41</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>28.3024</td>
<td>1.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>56.64</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>29.3764</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>140.05</td>
<td>82</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Scheffe Post Hoc test revealed that the High group, the members of which had the highest level of CQ, had the highest level of speaking ability (mean= 6.44). The Mid-Group ranked second in speaking ability (mean= 5.59), and the Low-Group had the lowest ranking in speaking ability (mean= 4.68).

The second research question dealt with the relationship between Iranian EFL learners’ performance in IELTS Writing Module and their CQ. Table 4 demonstrates this relationship.

Table 4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavioral</th>
<th>Cognitive</th>
<th>Metacognitive</th>
<th>Motivational</th>
<th>Total CQ</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>.38**</td>
<td>.49**</td>
<td>.35*</td>
<td>.36**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .05, ** p < .01

According to Table 4, there is a significant relationship between Iranian EFL learners’ performance in IELTS Writing Module and their total CQ (r= .45, p<.05). It means that the higher the level of CQ in Iranian EFL learners is, the better their performance is in IELTS Writing Test.

Based on Table 4, there is a significant association between cognitive CQ and writing ability (r= .49, p<.01). To put it differently, those Iranian EFL learners who are more conversant about other people’s cultural preferences are more likely to be successful in their writing performance. Moreover, there is a meaningful relationship between behavioral CQ and Iranian EFL learners’ writing ability (r= .38, p<.01). In other words, those EFL learners who are able to perform appropriate verbal and nonverbal behavior in interacting with people with different cultural preferences tend to be better writers of English as a foreign language. In addition, writing ability is also significantly related to motivational CQ (r= .36, p<.01). This means that those EFL learners who are more inclined to devote attention and energy to learning about and functioning in situations which are characterized by cultural disparity tend to be more successful in speaking English. Finally, metacognitive CQ is also associated with Iranian EFL learners’ performance in IELTS Writing Module (r= .35, p<.05).

In order to perform further analysis of the association between CQ and writing ability, the participants were divided into three groups with regard to their total CQ score. One-way ANOVA was calculated to see whether the difference among groups is statistically significant. Table 5 displays the results of ANOVA for the three groups.
Table 5.

Results of one-way ANOVA for cultural intelligence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sum of Squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Between Groups</strong></td>
<td>85.73</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>25.5114</td>
<td>2.12</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Within Groups</strong></td>
<td>61.12</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>28.7598</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>146.85</td>
<td>82</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Table 5 indicates, the differences between the three groups in terms of IELTS Writing score band is statistically significant (F=2.12, p<.05). The analysis of variance showed just the difference among the three groups, but in order to locate the differences Scheffe Post Hoc test was run. Table 4.9. demonstrates the results of Post Hoc comparison.

Table 6.

The results of Scheffe Post Hoc Test for speaking ability

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low-Group</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>5.15</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid-Group</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>6.11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High-Group</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>7.09</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig.</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Subset for alpha=.05
Scheffe Post Hoc test illustrated that the High group, the members of which had the highest level of CQ, had the highest level of writing ability (mean= 7.09). The Mid-Group ranked second in writing ability (mean= 6.11), and the Low-Group had the lowest ranking in writing ability (mean= 5.15).

The third research question dealt with the predictive power of CQ on Iranian EFL learners’ performance on the IELTS Speaking Module. To answer this question, multiple regression analysis was run using CQ and its subscales as the predictor of variance in speaking ability. Table 7 presents the results of EFL learners’ speaking ability being regressed on the variables of interest in this research (the subscales of CQ). The results reveal which variables are important in predicting higher score bands in IELTS Speaking Module. According to Table 7, among the subscales of the CQ, motivational CQ is the best predictor of Iranian EFL learners’ speaking ability. It accounts for 23% of the total variance in speaking ability ($R^2 = .23, p<.05$).

Table 7.

*Multiple regression analysis predicting speaking ability by CQ*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>R</th>
<th>$R^2$</th>
<th>Adjusted $R^2$</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>P</th>
<th>B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Motivational</td>
<td>.489</td>
<td>.233</td>
<td>.223</td>
<td>21.01</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.489</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The fourth research question was concerned with the predictive power of CQ on Iranian EFL learners’ performance on the IELTS Writing Module. In order to answer this research question, multiple regression analysis was run using CQ and its subscales as the predictor of variance in writing ability. Table 8 demonstrates the results of EFL learners’ writing ability being regressed on the variables of interest in this research (the subscales of CQ). The results indicate which variables are important in predicting higher score bands in IELTS Writing Module. Based on Table 4.12., among the subscales of the CQ, cognitive CQ is the best predictor of Iranian EFL learners’ writing ability. It accounts for 23% of the total variance in speaking ability ($R^2 = .23, p<.05$).

Table 8.

*Multiple regression analysis predicting writing ability by CQ*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>R</th>
<th>$R^2$</th>
<th>Adjusted $R^2$</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>P</th>
<th>B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive</td>
<td>.492</td>
<td>.242</td>
<td>.232</td>
<td>22.56</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.492</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6. Discussion

The findings of this study showed that there is a significant relationship between Iranian EFL learners’ CQ and their speaking ability measured by IELTS Speaking Module. It means that those EFL learners who have higher CQ are more successful in the IELTS Speaking Test and vice versa. This association can be explained in light of the four components of CQ. First those EFL learners who showed high CQ are able to acquire and understand cultural knowledge, i.e., they have metacognitive CQ. They are capable of adjusting their mental models to their interlocutors’ thoughts, values, feelings, and expectations. Therefore, they are more likely to talk about what is favorable and avoid what is unfavorable for those with whom they are interacting (Brislin, Worthley & Macnab 2006; Triandis, 2006).

Second, culturally intelligent EFL learners tend to be aware of similarities and different between cultures. They can be also sensitive to the fact that people with whom they are communicating may have different feelings, and thoughts in comparison to themselves. Hence, they can adjust to these different feelings, values, and preferences. This enables them to have better interactional experiences with others (Brislin, Worthley & Macnab 2006).

The third reason for the significant relationship between Iranian EFL learners’ CQ and their speaking ability can be the fact that individuals with high CQ are more willing to spend time and energy on learning the norms and values of other cultural groups (Triandis, 2006). In addition, as it is supposed in this study, culturally intelligent people are likely to try to become familiar with emotions, beliefs, and preferences of other individuals within their own cultural group. It seems patent that dedicating one’s effort to understand other people’s thoughts and feelings help one have a more successful interaction with other people because this allows one to adjust one’s mental model and speech accordingly.

Finally the meaningful association between speaking ability and CQ can be explained through the concept of behavioral CQ. According to Ang et al., (2007), behavioral CQ refers to an individual’s ability to exhibit appropriate verbal and nonverbal behavior when interacting with people from different cultures. Those with high behavioral CQ exhibit situationally appropriate behaviors based on their broad range of verbal and nonverbal capabilities, such as exhibiting culturally appropriate words, tone, gestures and facial expressions. Within the framework of this study, a person who has behavioral CQ is capable of showing appropriate verbal and nonverbal behavior in interaction with individuals having different values and preferences within his or her own cultural group. For instance, a person’s facial expressions or gestures which are salient concomitants of spoken interaction should be appropriate to the values of his or her interlocutors - either they are foreigners or not.

The significant relationship between Iranian EFL learners’ speaking ability and their CQ can also be interpreted in light of sociolinguistic competence. Bachman (1990) considered sociolinguistic competence as “the sensitivity to, or control of the conventions of language use that are determined by the features of the specific language use context; it enables us to perform language functions in ways that are appropriate to that context” (p. 94). Hence, a person who has high CQ is able to adjust his or her verbal and nonverbal behavior to the demands of a particular context. Based on James (1980), part of the concept of context is participants, i.e., the interlocutress’ values, feelings, beliefs, thoughts, and preferences are part of the context and shape the discourse. Consequently, a person’s verbal and nonverbal behavior should fit the values and preferences of people taking part in an interaction. Therefore, this person’s verbal and nonverbal behavior is contextually appropriate.
The theory of emotional intelligence may also cast light on the close association between CQ and efficiency in spoken interactions. Diggins (2004) proposed that emotional intelligence has the following components:

(a) self-wariness - recognizing and understanding one’s own thoughts and feelings as they occur, (b) self-regulation - managing one’s responses appropriately, (c) social awareness - recognizing the thoughts and feelings of others and having empathy, and (d) social skills - inducing effective and desirable responses in others. (p. 33)

Although the relationship between emotional intelligence and CQ might not have been empirically investigated, it goes without saying that these two are conceptually related. Social awareness, one of the components of emotional intelligence, seems to be conceptually close to CQ. Pishghadam (2009) found a significant relationship between EFL learners’ emotional intelligence and their speaking scores. This asserts the assumptions that understanding the feelings and thoughts of others and behave accordingly has a positive role in one’s spoken interaction.

Another finding revealed by this research was that there exists a significant relationship between Iranian EFL learners’ CQ and their writing ability measured by IELTS Writing Module in this study. In other words, those Iranian EFL learners who have higher CQ outperform those with lower CQ in writing tasks. To account for this finding, we may resort to the previously mentioned reasons related to the four components of CQ. Moreover, it may also be interpreted in light of what was said in light of sociolinguistic competence and emotional intelligence.

Another concept through which we can explain the association between CQ and writing ability is cognitive empathy. Zoll and Enz (2005) have defined cognitive empathy as the ability to take into account others’ perspectives. They asserted that in order to show cognitive empathy one should understand people’s expressive signals as well as the situational context. Therefore, a person who has high CQ can be assumed to possess cognitive empathy. To put it another way, culturally intelligent individuals are probably capable of putting themselves in the shoes of their audience. Consequently, they are able to write in a way suitable to their potential audience’s thoughts and feelings.

The meaningful relationship between Iranian EFL learners’ writing ability and their CQ may also be interpreted with regard to theory of mind. Theory of mind refers to the ability to develop an understanding of others’ mental states that are not directly observable (e.g. to recognize that people can express a certain emotion while feeling a different one) and to make inferences regarding others’ future reactions and behaviors (Premack and Woodruff, 1978). In other words, these individuals who are culturally intelligent have a theory of mind of others. They can predict their potential audience’s reactions to their written work. This makes them succeed in their writing tasks including in IELTS Writing Module.

The results of this study showed that among the components of CQ, motivational CQ had the highest correlation coefficient with Iranian EFL learners’ speaking ability. In a similar vein, motivational CQ was shown to be the best predictor of speaking ability. As mentioned before, high motivational CQ indicates great tendency to devote time and energy on learning the values, beliefs, thoughts, preferences, and feelings of people in other cultural groups. It was also assumed that individuals who have high motivational CQ are willing to become aware of and sensitive to the values and preferences of other people within their own cultural group.

The fact that motivational CQ is the best predictor of success in speaking tasks may be interpreted in the light of the assumption that EFL learners with high motivational CQ are more
likely to garner information about verbal and nonverbal norms of spoken communication. To put it differently, they are more motivated to acquire the conventions of oral interactions as well as their interlocutors’ thoughts and feelings. Here the salient role of motivation in language learning comes into the scene. Numerous scientific inquiries have investigated the contribution of motivation to success in language learning, including success in speaking ability (e.g. Corno and Kanfer, 1993; Brown, 1994; Clement, Dornyei, and Noels, 1994; Cohen and Dornyei, 2002).

The findings of this study revealed that among the components of CQ, cognitive CQ had the highest correlation coefficient with Iranian EFL learners’ writing ability. In a similar vein, cognitive CQ was shown to be the best predictor of writing ability. Cognitive CQ refers to knowledge of norms, preferences, conventions, beliefs, thoughts, and feelings of the members of another cultural group. As mentioned earlier, in this study we have taken a broader look to CQ. In the framework of this research, cognitive CQ is regarded as knowledge of thoughts, beliefs, and preferences of other people in our own cultural group. Therefore, those individuals who have cognitive CQ are relatively aware of other people’s preferences and values. Hence, they are able to write according to their potential audience’s beliefs and values. This makes them more successful in writing. It should also be noted that cognitive CQ seems to be a perquisite to cognitive empathy and having a theory of others’ minds.

The results of this study also showed that there is no significant difference between male and female learners with regard to CQ. Therefore, the fourth hypothesis of this research is confirmed. This finding is in line with Khodadady and Ghahari (2011). Of course, future research is necessary to ensure the two genders’ similarity in CQ.

7. Implications

This research project explored the relationship between Iranian EFL learners’ CQ and their speaking and writing abilities in general and their performances in IELTS speaking and writing tests in particular. Cultural intelligence, in a general sense, is the capability of having successful interactions with people from different cultures. Hence, we may conclude that an individual having high cultural intelligence (CQ) can adjust his linguistic and non-linguistic behavior in interacting with a person from a different cultural group. Similarly, the present researcher holds the view that a person who is endowed with high CQ is able to adapt his or her verbal and non-verbal behavior in communication with different people from the same culture but with various thoughts, feelings, and preferences. It is also assumed that culturally intelligent people are able to accommodate their behaviors - both verbal and non-verbal - to different contexts. Therefore, the present researcher holds that CQ seems to be an important factor having a role in EFL learners’ sociolinguistic competence, the ability to use appropriate verbal and non-verbal patterns with different people and in different contexts. Consequently, the findings of this research can shed further light on factors involved in communicative competence in general and sociolinguistic competence in particular.

The results of this study can benefit EFL learners. If they allocate sufficient energy and time to learning the norms of other cultures - and other people’s thoughts, feelings, expectations, and needs by extension - they are more likely to succeed in their cross-cultural communication and even in their interactions with people from their own cultural background. A further notion that may be highlighted by this study is that making EFL learners familiar with norms, practices, and conventions of other cultures, especially the English culture, can be a serious responsibility on the shoulders of EFL teachers. This study also illustrated the importance of motivating EFL learners to learn and respect other people’s beliefs, feelings, needs, and expectations. Moreover,
the findings of this research may be of benefit to textbook writers and curriculum designers. By enriching textbooks and other materials used in EFL contexts, with contents that can encourage CQ in EFL learners, they can become more efficient in their interactions with other people - either from their own culture or from other cultures.

References


