Forced-Migrant Women's Intercultural Communicative Competency Development in German as a Second Language

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Abstract: The development of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) has become a central component of successful second language (L2) use and social participation for all L2 learners. This is especially relevant for minoritized groups and forced migrants (i.e., refugees), as the social spaces they navigate produce challenges that traditional L2 learners may not face, and the stakes for their ability to effectively communicate are extremely high, including accessing food, medical care, and housing, and understanding their rights and responsibilities in a brand new environment. For these learners, appropriate communication is an existential feature of life. This study investigates how the development of ICC among forced migrant women living in Germany influenced the success of their interactions with German speakers. Data were collected within the framework of the InQua – Integrative Qualifikation für Frauen als Multiplikatorinnen project through surveys that examined participants' ability to navigate everyday communicative tasks and to reflect on the impact of their growing cultural knowledge of German society. The findings indicate that increased cultural awareness and its integration into communicative strategies improved interactional outcomes, enabling participants to achieve their communicative goals. The results underscore the importance of ICC development as a critical resource for migrants' language learning, integration, and social participation.

Keywords: German, forced migration, refugees, Ukrainian, intercultural communicative competence, German as a second language

1. Introduction

In the face of increasing societal diversity, and in conjunction with the clear relevance of linguistic-cultural integration, the development of Intercultural Communicative Competency (ICC) among second language learners, particularly those with (forced) migratory backgrounds, should be viewed as a central component for increasing learners' successful communication and a necessity for social participation. ICC has been viewed in the scientific literature as the communicative process between partners from different intercultural communities with diverse linguistic practices. Within this interpersonal communicative process, differing conceptual views of words, styles of life, national and ethnic characteristics, as well as relational patterns and norms expressed through linguistic and non-linguistic communication come together. Through this process, mutual understanding results—or does not—through coordination of individual perspectives with one's communicative partner(s) (Nikolaieva, Bihych, Borysko, & Boretska, 2013). Through analyzing the content, structure, and other communicative factors that support intercultural communication, researchers focus on two central concepts: Culture and communication. A single, all-encompassing definition of culture does not exist, although many scientific disciplines, such as semiotics, sociology, history, anthropology, linguistics, ethnology, and cultural studies, have developed their own definitions.

In the case of language education in intercultural learning contexts, the anthropological definition of culture is particularly relevant, which understands culture as the culmination of outcomes of human activity in all areas of life that permeate and define the lifestyles within a nation, an ethnic collective, a social group, or even the individual in a defined historical period. This is because, from the anthropological perspective, language plays an important role in the reproduction of culture through not only its communicative function of conveying cultural values, beliefs, and practices between individuals and groups, but also in the historical development of language itself by embodying culture through its linguistic encoding of culturally relevant information. In this way, linguistic competence, as a key component of ICC, becomes a dominant factor in the process of second/foreign/additional language learning. As such, learners come to realize the interdependence between the language and culture of their respective communities (Svyrydyuk, 2024). Language is viewed in this relationship as a result of human cultural development, as a component of the culture of its speakers, as a starting point for their continued development, and, at the same time, as a medium of cultural knowledge (Nikolaieva et al., 2013).

Therefore, for effective and successful communication in a second language (L2), it is necessary that learners develop an understanding of the importance of differences between cultures and individuals, and the role these differences play in shaping how one communicates. From this viewpoint, the growth of sociolinguistic and sociocultural understanding, in the form

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of ICC, is necessary for L2 learners to communicate effectively across a wide variety of contexts and with a diverse array of interlocutors. The development of ICC in L2 learners not only enables linguistically correct interactions but also teaches them to attend to cultural contexts, norms, and values during communicative exchanges that can make their communication efforts successful by providing them with the means not just to be understood, but to get what they need and want from their interlocutors. Therefore, ICC is an especially useful skill for forced migrants who must navigate new sociocultural environments. Developing their ICC can serve as a central resource for a forced migrant's capacity for integration, self-efficacy, and social participation. However, there is limited literature, empirical or theoretical, on the impact of these types of ICC programs for forced migrants specifically, and on whether the needs of ICC programming can enhance the distinct experiences that forced migrants face compared to other types of language learners.

The purpose of this study was to understand how the development of ICC for forced migrant women living in Germany affected the success of their interactions with German speakers. Forced migrants face particularly high stakes when it comes to communication and to being able to use their linguistic knowledge and skills to secure what they need to survive, be it housing, education, or food assistance. As part of the project InQua – Integrative Qualifikation für Frauen als Multiplikatorinnen (InQua – Integrative Qualification for Women as Disseminators), forced migrant women from Ukraine were taught in small groups about communication models and techniques to enhance their ability to assess and reflect on their interactions in their new cultural surroundings. The study aims to answer the research question: What effect can ICC programming, such as that structured within the InQua project, have on forced-migrant women's ability to communicate successfully in the new linguistic and cultural landscape of their host country? To answer this question, participants were ask to respond to surveys related to their ability to navigate communicative tasks in their daily lives and reflect on the role that their growing cultural knowledge of German society, particularly located in and around Hamburg, changed their interactions and whether these changes led to significantly improved outcomes, i.e., their ability to get what they needed or wanted. The results indicate that growing cultural knowledge and its application to linguistic communicative strategies, in other words, ICC, provided these language learners with the tools needed to maneuver through a new way of life in a new country and culture. We argue that it was not simply the development of their L2 abilities to a point where the participants could relay the same information in the same way as they would in their first language (L1) that improved their communicative outcomes and helped them achieve their communicative goals, but rather learning how to use their new L2 linguistic knowledge in ways that were appropriate for the context of their host country and local host community. These results highlight the importance of cultural learning and the development of ICC as necessary to successful language learning and use, particularly for those with (forced) migratory histories.

2. Literature Review

Research on ICC has expanded drastically in the last 20 years. In a search of Linguistics and Language Behavior Abstracts (LLBA), only 10 articles included the term "Intercultural Communicative Competency" between 1990 and 1999, and between 2000 and 2009, the term was used in only 138 articles. In stark contrast, ICC can be found in 620 articles between 2010 and 2019, and from 2020 to 2025, just a 5-year time span, it can already be found in 605 articles. The reason for this rapid expansion in research related to ICC likely has to do with the field of Second Language Acquisition's response to increased interest in sociocultural issues related to language acquisition and a push-back against the field's prior long-standing affect towards cognitive aspects of language learning (see Block, 2007) and a "native speaker-based notion of communicative competence" (Alptekin, 2002, p. 57).

2.1. Models and Theories of ICC

To this point, there have been many conceptualizations of ICC. One of the earliest models for understanding ICC was adopted from Ruben (1976) and was based on a behavioral understanding of an individual sojourner. However, this model was strongly criticized as overly narrow, with a need to incorporate not only the individual's motivation, knowledge, and skills but also their relationships with other speakers (see Imahori & Lanigan, 1989). Similarly, Spitzberg's (2000) model also emphasized the relational aspects of ICC and expanded upon Imahori and Lanigan's (1989) model to represent both actor and co-actor's motivation, knowledge functions, and skills relevant to positive relational outcomes. Byram's (1997) model for ICC is also very relevant, as the context of our study is within the European Union, and Byram himself played a significant role in the development of the Common European Framework of Reference used to assess language proficiency levels by EU member states. His model includes five ICC factors that influence an individual's communicative success: attitudes, knowledge, interpreting and related abilities, discovery and interaction skills, and critical cultural awareness.

Some additional theoretical considerations should also be made about the myriad factors that go into a conceptualization of ICC. This includes a basic understanding of Communicative Competence itself. Volfovska (2001) views communicative competence as the level of development of the experiences, abilities, and skills of interpersonal interaction necessary for a person's successful functioning in society, taking into account their own abilities and social status. Thus, a person's communicative competence is a complex phenomenon characterized by different concepts and based on certain abilities of an individual: First is the ability to make a socio-psychological prediction of the situation in which communication will take place, i.e., the ability of a person to foresee certain events; second is the ability to socially and psychologically map-out the communication process, based on the specifics of the communicative situation; third is the ability to adapt to the socio-psychological atmosphere of the communicative situation, i.e., to correctly assess its positive and negative aspects; and fourth is the ability to carry out the social and psychological management of communication processes in a communicative situation (organization of the attention of communication partners, stimulation of their communicative activity, management of the communication process) (Mamchur, 2006).

Following Mamchur (2006), communicative competence generally represents an individual's communicative potential, characterizing their communicative abilities and determining the quality and success of their communication across various areas of life. Communicative competence is a practical aspect of the problem of mutual understanding, reflects the level of an individual's cultural development in society, and is one of the factors in promoting tolerance and mutual understanding. These are reflected by Bulhakova (2005), who emphasizes the subject's awareness in the field of communication. Similarly, Moritz (n.d.) argues that communicative competence is the ability to communicate constructively, effectively, and consciously. This

includes knowledge of important communication concepts and models, as well as mastery of specific communication techniques. The communication concept forms the organizational framework for defining the tools for targeted communication. According to von Thun's (1999) communication square (see also "four-ears") model, a message is conveyed on four levels: 1) Factual content (What is it about?), 2) appeal (What does the person want to achieve with their statement?), 3) relationship (What is the relationship with the conversation partner?), and 4) self-disclosure (What does the person reveal about themselves?) (Fischer-Epe, 2017). Every piece of information can therefore be intended in four different ways by the sender and interpreted in four different ways by the receiver.

The factual level contains the pure facts of the information. These are often numbers and/or data that leave no room for interpretation. The recipient evaluates the information relative to its truth, relevance, and sufficiency. If both conversational partners communicate on this factual level and the messages are formulated precisely, the risk of misunderstandings is reduced. At the appeal level, a sender wants to move the recipient to action, for example, by issuing commands, offering advice, or expressing wishes. On the relationship level, the sender can convey their message through wording, tone of voice, and facial expressions, thereby expressing the relationship with the recipient. The message can be received by the recipient in different ways: with respect, esteem, criticism, or contempt. And the self-disclosure level focuses on information about the speaker. The sender reveals something about themselves, for example, a wish, feelings, or values. This self-disclosure can occur through direct statements, but also implicitly or unintentionally. The recipient listens carefully to the sender's information on this level and gets to know the sender better. Von Thun's (1999) square of communication is ideally suited to more easily identify and react to the causes of misunderstandings and is therefore helpful in developing ICC.

Another model that provides insight into the importance of ICC development is the Functional Model of Transactional Analysis (Berne, 1976; 1977). In this model, individuals possess three ego states: Parent, Adult, and Child, with various subclassifications (e.g., Critical Parent Ego State: "Will you sit down properly!" versus Nurturing Parent Ego State: "Well, are you sitting comfortably?") (Berne, 1976; Stewart & Joines, 2012). The model posits that humans need these ego states to interact well and appropriately with our environment. The functional model allows us to observe the state of an individual and those around them. In so doing, individuals can analyze themselves, which gives them the opportunity to behave differently in previously unsatisfactory situations, and, by analyzing the ego states of others, they can better understand one another's perspectives. In relation to the ICC, these ego states can help (forced) migrants, in particular, understand how their own (linguistic) behaviors, in both their L1 and L2, as well as those of their interlocutors, can affect communicative outcomes.

In this expanded, multi-relational view of ICC, studies have explored several aspects relevant to this article, including cross-cultural adaptation, skills, motivations and attitudes, and sources of knowledge. However, few studies have examined the unique relational aspects inherent to forced migrant populations and how ICC affects their ability to navigate their host country. Important differences in motivation and preparedness to interact with locals set forced migrants apart from other types of migrants and sojourners, and it is necessary, for a complete model of ICC, to understand how these distinct relational aspects drive the development of ICC by this population.

2.2.   ICC Development and Training for Forced Migrants

Overall, research has shown that ICC, along with sufficient L2 proficiency, can lead to easier integration of workers into the foreign labor market (e.g., see Djatmika, Mohamad, Santosa, & Wibowo, 2024; Madziva, McGrath, & Thondhlana, 2016). However, the focus of these papers on migrants or guest laborers obscures the generalizations we can make about other migrant subpopulations. As a group, many migrants and guest laborers know in advance that they will leave their home country and travel to a new one. They might also have time to take courses that prepare them for both linguistic and cultural differences between their home and host countries. Forced migrants, on the other hand, often have little choice over the timing, preparation, and final destination of their travel, as they are responding to a crisis in their home country that necessitates an expeditious departure. If they end up entirely displaced from their home country, they are likely to arrive ill-prepared for the linguistic and cultural differences that await them.

Despite ample areas for inquiry, few studies have investigated ICC preparedness and training among forced migrants, and there are significantly fewer than those aimed at more traditional language learners. Of the 1,155 scholarly articles in LLBA between 2010 and 2025 that use the term ICC, only 56 include either the term "refugee," "forced migrant", or "forced migration,", and of those studies, most of them did not address the topic directly (the LLBA matches came from cited references rather than any discussion of the relationship between ICC and forced migrants in the actual articles). We review here the few studies directly related to forced migration and the ICC, and summarize their findings on the relationship between the ICC and integration into host countries' cultures.

In one article, Isotalus (2025) investigated the interaction between asylum seekers' ICC and the asylum reception process in an asylum center in Finland, as well as related facilities where asylum seekers used various institutional services, such as a legal aid office. The researcher applied an ethnographic approach, using on-site field notes from 2017 to 2020 and incorporating various documents into a policy discourse analysis, which the author defines as Institutional Ethnography. She focused on the expression and interpretations of (perceived) threats between refugees and institutional representatives in the asylum-seeking process, which is a very high-stakes setting for forced migrants. While much of the argument of the paper revolves around the need to adopt a Critical ICC approach that is localized and contextualized, it does show that both sides, the asylum seekers and the institutional representatives, depend on ICC skills to better understand one another and mediate situations in which one side perceives a threat. This is quite different from most studies, because rather than seeing ICC development as only the responsibility of the forced migrant, we see a need, or even a responsibility for ICC development among host-country inhabitants as well, especially those that work closely with forced migrants through host-country institutions.

Two other studies are of particular relevance to our study because the application of ICC is not limited to everyday communication but also extends to professional settings, as the InQua participants were all employed and interested in learning how to communicate more effectively with German colleagues in the workplace. First, Ganassin and Young (2020) explored the impact of a program called Critical Skills for Life and Work, which aimed to help refugees in Austria, the Netherlands, and the UK reintegrate professionally. This study took place in the UK and used one-on-one interviews with five participants to examine their experiences traveling to the UK, prior work experience, learning and adjustment upon arrival, education and

training in their home country, and in the UK. They also asked which key factors supported or hindered their professional integration into the UK workforce, and what advice they would pass on to others in a similar situation. Their findings indicate support for their theoretical model based on Byram (1997), but they also showed that resilience was another key factor beyond the five factors, and suggested: "inter-relationships between ICC and psychological resilience after displacement" (Ganassin & Young, 2020, p. 11).

Within the same Critical Skills for Life and Work program framework, a second study by Schukking and Kircher (2022) investigated Professional ICC development in the Netherlands among highly educated, mostly Syrian refugees. In their study, they examined advanced and early integrators, i.e., refugees who had been in the Netherlands longer and had successfully transitioned into the workforce, and those who were still enrolled in language classes and in the process of transitioning into the workforce, respectively. The researchers conducted focus groups and interviews with the refugees about their professional lives, experiences in/looking for work in the Netherlands, as well as their educational, training, and language learning experiences. Using thematic analysis, the researchers uncovered major differences between the two groups. First, advanced integrators were open to culturally different ways of doing things and actively reflected on this. They also mentioned they gave advice on this to other refugees. Early integrators showed some evidence of positive attitudes towards culturally different ways of doing things, but less than the advanced integrator group. The advanced integrators also showed greater knowledge of culturally different social groups and identities, a greater ability to interpret culturally relevant meanings and norms, and to relate to Dutch speakers; greater interest in and understanding of Dutch culture; and the ability to reflect on it as it differed from or conformed to their own culture. The only area in which the early integrators had higher ICC was critical cultural awareness. Based on these findings, the authors argue that developing (P)ICC should benefit highly educated refugees' ability to integrate into the labor market of their host country. Despite these positive findings, this study examined only correlational data on the relationship between ICC development and employment among advanced and early integrators. It is therefore unclear whether the advanced integrators had greater ICC upon arrival in their host country, or if the development of their ICC drove their success. It is also unclear what impact ICC training might have on forced migrants' ultimate success in the workplace.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

Twenty-two female forced migrants from Ukraine participated in the study. Participants ranged in age from 24 to 54 years old. Of the 22 participants, 18 reported having been in Germany for approximately 2 years, and 4 reported having been in Germany for 5 or more years. The participants came from a diverse array of professions, including teachers, accountants, media personalities, project coordinators, graphic designers, pediatricians, physicians, other medical personnel, manicurists, lawyers, sales managers, and linguists. All participants indicated speaking German typically once per day, likely in their professional setting, but the time spent speaking German varied by participant. The majority (11) said they spoke German for three or more hours a day, while six indicated two hours per day on average, and five indicated one hour per day. None of the participants said they spoke for less than one hour a day on average.

Participation in the InQua program was not part of the study recruitment. This was a voluntary program that participants opted into. The survey of InQua outcomes among participants was conducted post hoc and did not require ethics board review, as it was considered a non-interventional study. However, approval for data collection by the first author was granted by the director of the company hosting the training (BIN GmBH), the InQua project director, and the InQua module instructors. Participants were invited to take part in the survey voluntarily via an email with a description of the research questions, an outline of the survey they would take, and affirmations about data privacy and security, anonymity of participation, and their rights to stop the survey at any time or request that their data not be used in any publication.

3.2. Projekt InQua Overview

The InQua project is a training and qualification program for women who aspire to group leadership or social counseling assistant roles within their own cultural community. The project was funded by the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) program for social cohesion, strengthening the participation of people with a migration background, and promoting intercultural openness in the host society. The federal program "Social Cohesion – Local. Networked. Connected." contributed to the efficient implementation of the funded project. On behalf of the Federal Ministry of the Interior, Building and Community (BMI), the "Social Cohesion" federal program supports local projects that sustainably and positively transform coexistence in municipalities and cities. The target group of the InQua project was women with a migration background. The project aimed to empower women and encourage them to actively shape their lives by improving their communication skills and strengthening their self-efficacy. The project combined the acquisition of language skills with the reduction of language barriers and promoted social integration through continuous exchange with other women in the project. The project had four main foci:

1. Support for integration into the host society to facilitate the transition into the new social environment and promote active participation.

2. Maintaining and expanding language skills acquired in integration courses through everyday interaction, especially with German speakers.

3. Strengthening language skills by boosting self-confidence, leading to more confident use of the German language in everyday life, and enabling sustainable integration.

4. Developing counseling skills and strengthening voluntary engagement.

The training within the InQua project focused on communication models to help participants better understand the complex process of interpersonal communication and make various processes and relationships visible at different levels. One of the units within the InQua project discussed communication techniques, including active listening, a fundamental practice that builds trust with others. This technique is therefore well-suited for building and deepening a relationship as well as for

difficult communication situations. In active listening, one conversation partner reflects back to the other what he or she has understood from what was said and how it has affected him or her.

The InQua project also incorporated client-centered communication, which is used not only in therapy but also in education (e.g., schools), medicine (e.g., to clarify diagnoses), police work, and companies and the private sector. As all of the women involved in the InQua project were already working in Germany, client-centered communication gave them skills they could readily apply in their work life.

Participants also learned about questioning techniques to help to structure a conversation and elicit specific information. The categories of questions included guidance on using open-ended and closed-ended questions to structure and elicit various types of responses. In coaching, open-ended questions are primarily used because they allow for deeper conversation, self-reflection, broader perspectives, and the opportunity to view a situation from multiple angles. In addition, participants learned about circular questions. This questioning technique involves putting oneself in another person's shoes to initiate a change of perspective, to answer from a different position during interaction with another person, and to see things from a bird's-eye view (meta-level). Participants were also taught how to provide feedback. In feedback, the feedback giver shares how they perceived the feedback recipient's behavior and how it affected them. There are cultural norms for giving and receiving feedback that shape this process, and it is important to make learners from other cultural backgrounds aware of how these norms operate in the host country to manage conversations and achieve the desired outcome.

Through the communication techniques taught to participants, they learned the processes, rules, and methods for structuring communication, as well as how to use them to support communication among two or more people by structuring information exchange. They also learned how communication is formalized and ritualized within particular cultural contexts, providing participants with a sense of security, especially in difficult communication situations such as conflict resolution. The instruction on communication techniques was intended to offer participants insight into how cultural norms can affect communication outcomes. For example, the quality of communication improves because participants can focus on information exchange, and disruptions are avoided thanks to established, familiar rules and forms. The norms make it easier to conduct the communication process respectfully in unfamiliar and difficult situations, and they reduce stress and conflicts caused by misunderstandings in communication (Bohinc, 2022). However, formalized techniques alone are not sufficient for successful communication in diverse intercultural situations. It was emphasized to the participants that, crucially, the ability to combine communication models and techniques with socio-cultural knowledge is essential.

The qualification served not only to impart knowledge but also to provide practical training for aspiring counselors. It also significantly strengthened the participants' self-esteem, self-awareness, self-efficacy, reflective skills, and resilience. Upon completion of the course, participants should be able to conduct counseling sessions independently, resourcefully, and effectively. Furthermore, participants should be able to exchange ideas and network with other participants in the InQua project. The core of the project consisted of qualification modules that trained and prepared course participants for future roles in counseling through knowledge transfer, self-reflection, and practical experience. The focus was on the "Counseling Expertise" course, which BIN (Berufliche Integration) gGmbH designed and implemented, with twice as many teaching units as other supplementary courses within the project. The content of this course aligns with a systemic coaching training program featuring practical scenarios.

The course lasted over 7 hours per week for six months, comprising 220 teaching units. Participants had the opportunity to attend the course twice a week in a workshop format. At the end of the course, an examination was held to assess theoretical and practical knowledge. Before the exam, each participant had to have attended at least 80 percent of the classes. The course consisted of four modules: legal foundations and values, professional competence in counseling, communication and conversation skills, and IT skills. To achieve the project's objectives, modern approaches and various working methods were used to develop professionally oriented knowledge in system coaching. 30 women from different countries, cultures, age groups, family backgrounds, and levels of German proficiency participated in the project. The language level ranged from B1 to C1 (following the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages).

The course was conducted in German, and the teaching materials were based on scientific, authentic, and professionally oriented texts from modern sources. Working methods included group, partner, and individual work. Each participant had the opportunity to engage in discussions, express and justify their opinions on the module's topic, share information about their country's culture and traditions, and exchange ideas about women's rights across countries. An important aspect of the course was the practical component, which involved simulating various life situations in a coaching context. After the situation was simulated, an analysis was conducted to introduce systematic coaching from both the participants and the instructor. All participants willingly engaged in the discussions, as this contributed to the development of not only their linguistic and communicative competence but also their socio-cultural and professional competence. This approach helped the women integrate better into German-speaking society and created the conditions for their individual professional development. In summary, the conditions created for personal and professional development supported the project participants in:

- developing a positive attitude towards intercultural communication, intercultural awareness, and linguistic norms of behavior in a foreign language environment;

- learning about the legal framework in Germany – the Basic Law, the Integration Act, labor law aspects, and the school system in Hamburg;

- forming an understanding of the values on which society is based and critically questioning them;

- developing their personal potential in communication with one another;

- promoting the development of social and psychological perception, including identification, empathy, and social reflection;

- building self-confidence, self-efficacy, and adequate integration into a foreign-language, professionally oriented communicative situation with the help of communicative models and techniques;

- achieving significant satisfaction with communication and reducing neuropsychological stress in the process of foreign language communication;

- developing the ability to communicate in German in various status and role positions, and to independently establish and maintain necessary professional contacts;

- developing the ability to organize collaborative work and create a favorable social and psychological climate during communication to achieve high levels of activity and results;

- facilitating contact not only within a professional context but also in private and personal relationships and acting appropriately and respectfully while taking into account the other person's situation and abilities.

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis

The following research methods were used in the various phases of the scientific investigation: theoretical methods (analysis, synthesis, comparison, generalization) were employed for the systematic evaluation of scientific literature addressing the research questions within the categories of intercultural communicative competence, sociocultural competence, and social competence. The study design combined quantitative and qualitative survey feedback from participants to provide an exploratory analysis of the impact of an ICC-focused program on forced migrants' communicative development. This design differs from many others in the field that do not provide a specific ICC intervention.

Empirical methods included a survey developed by one of the researchers based on relevant factors in the literature that explored both demographic and intervention-specific factors related to ICC development. The introductory section included the survey objective, instructions for completion, and a statement on confidentiality. The main section of the questionnaire aimed to elicit respondents' opinions and evaluative judgments regarding the problem under investigation. The demographic section included questions about age and occupation. The questionnaire included open-ended questions, for which no answer options were provided, and closed-ended questions, which offered answer choices.

The questions were answered by the participants based solely on their personal integration experiences in Germany. The questionnaire comprised 23 items; participation was voluntary and anonymous. The survey was conducted using a bilingual (German-Ukrainian) Google Form to systematically collect participant feedback and subject the results of the InQua project activities to scientific analysis.

4. Results

This section reports on the findings of the survey conducted upon completion of the InQua project intervention. For the purpose of this paper and the language of the journal, all responses (in German and/or Ukrainian) have been translated by the authors.

The first part of the survey asked the participants about their general experience in the course. All 22 women in this study reported that it was important to make contact with other women within the InQua project space. When asked what they thought was most interesting about communication with other women as part of this project, the majority (18 of 22) indicated that they found discussion of the InQua project topics most interesting, while three found work-related and professional topics most interesting, and one mentioned personal and private topics.

The first InQua-content-related question asked participants whether they observed differences in communication between Ukraine and Germany. Of the 22 participants, 14 said they did notice differences. The 14 participants were asked, via a follow-up question, to explain what they noticed specifically. For our analysis, do not consider these statements to be broad, generalizable truths about all Ukrainians, but rather the perceived realities of these participants based on their own experiences. The 14 responses from the participants are provided here:

1. To me, the Germans seem friendlier and more open in their communication.
2. In Germany, there are many projects in which foreigners can participate to communicate and share their experiences.
3. Conversations with Germans are structured and pragmatic.
4. Differences in Mentality
5. The perception of gender roles in Ukrainian society has its own peculiarities: women are rarely employed in physically demanding jobs, and the topic of equal pay between genders is hardly discussed, as wages for men and women are practically the same. In Germany, on the other hand, there are intense discussions about equal pay for men and women, and women are still actively fighting for their rights.
6. In difficult situations, Germans tend to focus on positive aspects and look for constructive solutions. Personally, I find it difficult to remain positive in life situations, as my move to Germany was not of my own choosing but a forced decision caused by the war. My negative thinking probably also stems from my family, where the attitude is that it's better to think negatively so that if things turn out positively, it's a pleasant surprise. Conversely, if you think everything will be fine and the situation gets out of control, the disappointment is greater, and the emotions are harder to manage.
7. Ukrainians usually describe situations or problems emotionally and in detail, while representatives of German culture tend to express their thoughts concisely and clearly, focusing exclusively on the topic of conversation.
8. In private conversations, Ukrainians often bring up political topics, which have become particularly relevant under martial law. Germans, on the other hand, usually discuss neutral topics such as the weather or leisure activities.
9. In Ukrainian business and everyday communication, it is common to resolve problems verbally over the phone. In Germany, it is customary to arrange the date and time of the conversation in advance and to actively use email as the primary communication channel.
10. German conversation partners usually pay close attention during dialogue: they delve deeply into the subject matter and actively ask clarifying questions. At the same time, Ukrainians often avoid asking many questions for fear of being perceived as overly inquisitive.
11. Travel is often a topic of conversation during lunch breaks in Germany. Since a significant portion of Ukrainians

have limited financial resources for travel, such conversations can lead to discomfort or feelings of inferiority.

12. Maintaining eye contact during a conversation is a characteristic feature of German culture and is perceived as a sign of attentiveness and respect. In traditional Ukrainian culture, prolonged eye contact is sometimes interpreted as a sign of boldness or dominance.
13. A common topic of informal communication is discussing films and actors' private lives, which is typical of the German environment.
14. Most Ukrainians do not hold back their emotions and expressions when communicating. Most Germans adhere to certain boundaries (topics of conversation, a minimum of personal questions, or giving advice without being asked, etc.).

The responses to the open-ended question display a wide variety of communicatively related cultural and linguistic features that the forced migrants had noticed while communicating with Germans, including communicative norms for how discussions are structured, nonverbal cues, and what is (in)appropriate in workplace settings and peer relationships. The results of the survey also show strong support for the effect of the InQua program on forced migrant women's ability to use the ICC material presented and discussed with them in their own conversations with Germans, as well as others. All 22 participants said that participation in the program improved their communication skills. As a follow-up, participants were asked to rate, on a scale of 1 to 10 (10 being the highest), how much their knowledge of differences in communication improved as a result of taking part in this project. The answers ranged from 3 to 10, with a mean of 7.68 (N = 22, SD = 0.71).

The next question asked whether the participants believed the knowledge they gained from participating in this project would be useful for communicating in a foreign language. All 22 participants responded affirmatively to this question. When asked whether they deconstructed language barriers by using German in communication with other project participants, 14 responded "yes," 7 "somewhat," and 1 "no." In a subsequent question, participants were asked to reflect on their awareness of how they communicate. All participants indicated that they now had a better understanding of their own communication. They were also asked whether the skills they gained through this project helped them to set personal boundaries in communication. For this question, 20 of the 22 participants indicated that this was the case.

The following question asked participants to reflect on a specific content aspect of the InQua training: understanding the "ego-state" of their interlocutor. All but one indicated that it was important to understand the ego state of the person they were communicating with to decide on an appropriate communication strategy for the interaction. They were then asked whether they used the models and communication techniques presented in this project's framework in their daily work. Here, all but two indicated they used the models and techniques they learned for communication at work. The 22 participants who answered yes were asked to indicate which models and techniques they used. 12 indicated they used the questioning techniques taught in the project, 6 indicated they used the Parent-Adult-Child Model of Transactional Analysis, and 2 indicated they used Friedemann Schulz von Thun's Square of Communication Model (Von Thun, 2023). They were also asked specifically whether they used the nonverbal method introduced in the training. All but 4 of the participants indicated that they also used nonverbal methods in communication situations.

It was important for us to understand whether the methods taught in this project were having an impact beyond the participants themselves, as part of the goal was to encourage these women to disseminate their new knowledge to their migrant communities. For this reason, participants were asked whether they passed on what they learned from this project to other women to help them develop their own professional abilities. Of the 22 participants, 20 reported discussing these topics outside the project space. These 20 participants were then asked which situations they discussed in relation to the InQua project's themes. Seventeen said they discussed them with other women in personal/private settings, 9 said they discussed them with other women in work settings, 7 said they discussed them with other women in volunteer settings, and 5 said they discussed them on social media (note: more than one answer was possible, therefore sums for places where InQua topics were discussed sum to great than 22).

5. Discussion

The results of the survey showed positive effects of the InQua program on their ability to understand and develop their own ICC skills and helped answer our research question in a number of ways. First, overall, participants see ICC training for forced migrants as a positive factor in their own communicative abilities. The majority (63.6%) of respondents reported perceiving significant differences between German and Ukrainian cultures, and this perception directly affects their communicative behavior and adaptation strategies. Unlike other studies in this area previously reviewed, which examined correlational links between communicative and career success, this study demonstrated causal links between ICC training for forced migrants and their development of ICC as a skill they could employ to improve their communicative success in an L2. In a multicultural environment, it is indispensable for successful interpersonal and intercultural communication.

The survey analysis allows us to provide more detail on the specifics of our research question and to answer how ICC interventions impact forced migrant L2 learners, as we identified five key dimensions in which social competence is particularly relevant. First, communicative behavior and interaction style were strongly developed through the program. A striking difference lies in the structure of everyday and professional communication. German culture favors planned and formalized communication (e.g., scheduling appointments, using email), while Ukrainian culture tends to be more oral, spontaneous, and emotionally charged. For migrant women, this means practicing new linguistic scenarios and internalizing appropriate forms of communication.

The second dimension that the participants gained insight into was the effect of gender roles and societal expectations. Some participants emphasized that in Germany, topics such as equality, women's rights, and social participation are openly discussed, while in Ukraine, these are often less visible. This requires actively rethinking one's own role and a willingness to adapt to new societal norms. The third dimension that was developed was emotional expressiveness and nonverbal codes. The participants indicated that another difference is evident in the way emotions are handled between people from Ukraine and Germany. While Ukrainian women often express emotions openly and directly, in Germany, restraint and distance are considered signs of professionalism. These differences also extend to nonverbal codes such as eye contact, which is perceived positively in Germany but sometimes as dominant in Ukraine. As a fourth developmental dimension, the participants

constructed a thematic framework of everyday conversations. The survey results show that neutral topics of conversation dominate in Germany, while in Ukraine, personal or political topics are also considered acceptable. For migrant women—especially refugees—this discrepancy can lead to inner stress. It is therefore essential to develop thematic sensitivity. The fifth and final dimension evident in the data is emotional self-regulation. An interesting finding is that German conversation partners often think in a solution-oriented way, while some Ukrainian women report a culturally influenced "protective pessimism." This demonstrates that emotional resilience and self-reflection are also integral components of social competence.

The participants in this study achieved development along these five dimensions by adopting and practicing the techniques and models presented in the InQua framework. Both Von Thun's (1999) square of the Functional Model of Transactional Analysis (Berne, 1976; 1977) played important roles in participants' development. Transactional Analysis (TA), especially the model of ego states (Parent ego state, Adult ego state, Child ego state), was a particularly popular tool for these participants, as indicated by the survey results. Through TA, the participants learned how to promote migrant women's linguistic and sociocultural competence. Additionally, TA enabled linguistic adaptation to social contexts (sociolinguistic dimension), an understanding of roles and expectations in intercultural contact (sociocultural dimension), and the promotion of emotional stability and reflective responses (social dimension). By applying this model, women with migration experience can more consciously manage their communication, better assess conversation partners, and respond appropriately in different situations.

In this context, questioning techniques also played a central role. They are among the most important components of sociolinguistic competence, as they must not only be formulated correctly but also adapted to the social context, the conversational situation, and the cultural norms of the target country. The ability to ask targeted and situationally appropriate questions promotes effective communication and significantly contributes to intercultural understanding. An important component of sociocultural knowledge is not only its acquisition but also its conscious and responsible sharing with others. Within the InQua project, participants not only received new information and skills but also became active communicators of their acquired knowledge. By creating a safe space for communication, they were able to discuss the material they had received, exchange experiences, and reflect together on sociocultural practices. This enhanced the learning effect and fostered the development of a shared identity.

In addition to the development of the InQua participants themselves, knowledge was disseminated to other migrants through various channels: personal contacts with other women, social network activities, and involvement in civil society initiatives and volunteer projects. These activities not only facilitated the dissemination of information but also fostered the development of larger support networks, strengthened social cohesion, and created new opportunities for women's personal and professional development. Applying the acquired knowledge in their own lives was another crucial aspect, as it helped build self-confidence, expand skills, and strengthen their agency. Thus, within the InQua project, the transmission of sociocultural knowledge becomes not only a mechanism for information dissemination but also an instrument of social influence, a means of building solidarity networks, and a way to promote the sustainable development of women's communities. In conclusion, the combination of communication models and communication techniques is a central foundation for developing communicative competence. The conscious application of these models and techniques not only optimizes linguistic communication but also strengthens the ability to manage complex social interactions and minimize misunderstandings. This approach is particularly important for women with a migration background, as it enables them to systematically overcome language barriers and navigate foreign-language communication situations with greater confidence.

It is known that linguistic-socio-cultural competence is a complex, multidimensional skill that is of particular importance for women with migration experience. It enables effective communication in foreign-language and intercultural contexts—both in direct (e.g., personal) and indirect (e.g., written or media-based) forms—and promotes mutual understanding despite cultural and linguistic differences. Against this background, the development of ICC among women who change their country of residence is a key prerequisite for successful integration, as shown by Ganassin and Young (2020) and Schukking and Kircher (2022). It not only facilitates access to the labor market and the education system but also supports them in raising their children and building new social contacts. Sociolinguistic competence refers to the use of language while taking into account politeness rules and social norms that govern relationships between generations, genders, and social groups. It includes the ability to select and apply linguistic forms and means that are appropriate to the purpose and situation of communication (Skrypnyk, 2019).

Social skills are a key success factor in the workplace. They significantly influence the work environment, teamwork, and a company's productivity. Among the most important social skills are empathy, flexibility, and sensitivity. These contribute significantly to fostering a constructive and cooperative working relationship. The willingness to actively participate in work processes and to recognize and consider others' needs supports the achievement of common team goals. Furthermore, socially competent behavior can increase customer satisfaction by making interactions with external contacts more respectful and goal-oriented. All of these skills would be beneficial for forced migrants' readiness to enter the workforce in their host country, but the added intercultural element of ICC ensures that learning culturally appropriate and expected behaviors and norms is available as a resource for those transitioning to life in a new community and culture. A high level of social competence promotes team spirit and increases the willingness to cooperate within work groups. This, in turn, has a positive impact on efficiency and productivity. In professional communication, especially in conversations and meetings, self-reflection and the constructive handling of criticism are particularly important. The way these are dealt with is culturally specific and encoded in a community's linguistic norms. ICC development, combined with communication training, can enable forced migrants to actively participate in the ways they intend.

Finally, conflict resolution skills and goal orientation are also among the key social competencies in a professional context. They make it possible to appropriately integrate emotional aspects while simultaneously working towards achieving set goals. These competencies enable individuals to respond flexibly to change and continuously develop themselves. They thus make a significant contribution to individual professional success and long-term development within a company. Knowledge of discrepancies between one's own cultural ways of dealing with conflict and orienting others towards goals can help forced migrants better attain long-term employment and reduce potential areas of conflict with peers, managers, and clients. In relation to Ganassin and Young (2020) and Schukking and Kircher (2022), who examined late versus early adopters in a professional setting and found a difference in ICC development, we suggest that their correlational measures may, in fact, be causal but in the opposite direction to what they imply. The use of appropriate ICC interventions in conjunction with language training may

enable all learners to become "early adopters", rather than relying on individuals' idiosyncratic inherent or learned capacities that would enable them to develop ICC without direct, explicit instruction or formal training.

The findings of this study have important ramifications for the theoretical foundations and practical applications of ICC, as well as its position within language education. First, on the theoretical side, ICC has been shown to be important for successful L2 communication, but most studies involving ICC focus on traditional language learners (i.e., in classroom settings) or voluntary migrants. The forced-migrants in our study have a different relationship to their language learning experience in that they need to be successful communicators in order to meet their basic needs, while at the same time learning the language of their host country after they have already arrived, rather than any prior training in language or cultural that could smooth such transitions, and does, for other migrant groups or other traditional L2 learners. Our study underscores the importance of the ICC, especially in cases where L2 skills are essential for meeting basic needs, not just for improving one's financial stability or for short-term stays. On the practical side, we argue, along the lines of Isotalus (2025), that the development of ICC cannot and should not be left to the individual. ICC training should inform language programs, be they state or private, that provide services to forced migrants and L2 learners in general. Research shows that language instruction alone does not guarantee successful communication or integration, and ICC components that develop linguistic and cultural reflective practices should be integrated into curricular offerings intended to provide migrants and other language learners with the capacities they need to communicate successfully in new or diverse linguistic and cultural spaces.

6. Limitations and Future Research

Our study clearly showed that integrating ICC instruction into educational units can improve forced migrants' perceptions of their communicative skills and their ability to attain their communicative goals. Its strengths also included adding knowledge to ICC training specifically for forced migrants and a female-only population. In addition, the intervention design, rather than the observational approach used in other studies, provides evidence for the importance of explicit training in enhancing ICC development. However, this study does have limitations. First, it is unclear whether a minimum level of proficiency in the host country's language(s) might be necessary for some of these communicative strategies to be implemented by migrants. Further research is needed to test proficiency against ICC instructional gains and communicative goal attainment. It would also be important to test whether some of these communicative models and techniques are easier to incorporate at different proficiency levels. In addition, this study used a subjective measure based on participants' self-reflection on the growth of their communicative skills. Other studies might incorporate more behavioral research methods to empirically test how this type of instruction improves in a more controlled setting, such as discourse completion tasks or other methodologies that might provide clearer measures of gains in ICC.

Despite these limitations, this study shows a clear connection between ICC and communicative success for these forced migrant women living in Germany. It also emphasizes that it is not strictly L2 ability alone, in terms of grammatical knowledge and vocabulary, that enhances communicative outcomes, but rather an additional growing awareness of pragmatic norms of one's self and the host country that enables forced migrants to develop into effective communicators who can navigate their new host country and host community. The stakes for effective communication for forced migrants, as previously mentioned, are high, and programs like InQua, which support sociolinguistic development vis-à-vis ICC, are necessary for forced migrants to integrate and participate in their new surroundings.

7. Conclusions

The results of the study clearly demonstrate that the development of ICC is an interplay of linguistic abilities, social skills, and in-depth sociocultural knowledge. The latter proves to be a key factor, as it enhances the understanding of cultural values, norms, communication styles, and societal expectations. Sociocultural knowledge thus functions as a system of orientation, providing women with migration experience with a sense of security in new social environments and enabling them not only to perceive cultural differences but also to navigate them constructively.

The survey conducted shows that awareness of intercultural differences is widespread among the women interviewed. Nevertheless, their ability to integrate successfully, socially and culturally, depends significantly on the extent of their social skills and sociocultural knowledge. These two dimensions are complementary: While social competence forms the basis for respectful, empathetic, and cooperative communication, sociocultural knowledge provides the necessary background understanding for appropriate behavior in new contexts. Without this cultural orientation, even sufficient language skills can lead to misunderstandings or uncertainties. Against this backdrop, language integration programs should not focus solely on language acquisition, but should systematically integrate the teaching of social and, in particular, sociocultural knowledge. This includes, among other things, insights into culturally influenced communication styles, social norms, role models, institutional structures, and expectations placed on communicative behavior. Linking language, cultural knowledge, and social skills creates learning environments that not only promote the language development of women with a migration background but also empower them to actively participate in society.

In this way, women with migration experience can not only learn a new language but also develop a profound understanding of the social and cultural mechanisms of their new society. This enables them to communicate more confidently, assertively, and effectively in various areas of life—from professional situations and educational contexts to everyday interactions. This interplay makes it clear that intercultural communicative competence is a holistic concept whose sustainable development can only be ensured through the integration of linguistic, social, and sociocultural components.

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