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## Intercultural education in times of restricted travel: Lessons from the Gaza Strip



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### Abstract

This article draws upon a research project on intercultural language education conducted online between 2014 and 2017 with people living in the Gaza Strip (Palestine). Because the Gaza Strip has been under blockade since 2007, people cannot travel in and out freely. This context thus prompts educators and scholars to reflect on intercultural competence from a context of protracted crisis and of forced immobility. This study considers pre-service and in-service English teachers' understandings of intercultural competence and how these educators encourage intercultural communicative competence (ICC) in their classrooms in the Gaza Strip, where neither teachers, nor students, may have travelled abroad or experienced a face-to-face intercultural encounter. Based on this analysis, this article argues that frameworks for intercultural education and ICC need to capture non-movement and the lack of face-to-face intercultural encounters as *agentic* in definitions of interculturality. In other words, ICC should be conceptualised in terms of the actual freedoms and opportunities that individuals have to develop and nurture it. In order to propose such a model, this article connects ICC with the capabilities approach (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1999), the capability of mobility (de Haas, 2010), and with the capacity to aspire (Appadurai, 2004).

**Keywords:** intercultural communicative competence (ICC), mobility, aspirations, protracted crisis, digital

### Introduction

Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) has been abundantly discussed and theorized in the last decades. Most models and frameworks of ICC have been developed in Western contexts of free mobility and peace time and assume abundant resources. Mobility is at the heart of intercultural

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language education, being at the same time one of its goals and also a prerequisite of Western frameworks (e.g., Council of Europe, 2001). Thus, mobility and its counterpart immobility as a concept in itself has not been foregrounded in the field of intercultural communication, despite its assumed status as a condition for the internationalization of education. At the time of writing, the COVID-19 pandemic has illuminated the need to reconceptualize intercultural education in consideration of situations of prolonged self-isolation, immobility, and physical distancing.

As part of rethinking intercultural education, it is useful to look at contexts of forced immobility and protracted crisis, where movements are constrained, and different theoretical approaches, and ways of working are already in place. The aim is not to make a comparison between ways of living, difficulties, and challenges, but rather to discuss those perspectives in order to acknowledge a more complex picture of ICC. For instance, as mobility is taken for granted as a prerequisite and as an objective of ICC, what happens to our frameworks when mobility is taken away?

The current health emergency has also highlighted the prominence and importance of the digital as a tool and as a space where learning, teaching, and relationship-building can occur in times of travel restrictions. Previous studies have already analysed telecollaboration and online education in terms of the development of students' ICC, and overall there is agreement that a digital medium opens new possibilities for intercultural encounters (e.g., Avgousti, 2018; Helm, 2013). However, much of this body of work focuses on the tools and on the instrumentality of the digital without offering much consideration about the ethical, ontological, and epistemological dimensions of ICC.

The ethical dimensions of ICC become foregrounded, however, when the context is English language teaching in the Gaza Strip (Palestine). The Gaza Strip has been under blockade since 2007, and this impedes the flow of people into and out of the Strip, as well as the flow of resources, infrastructure, and basic goods. Roy (1978) defined the Gaza Strip as a context of “de-development,” and the same definition was reiterated by the UN in 2017, to indicate how human potential and the right to flourish have been suppressed in that context (Feldman, 2016; Roy, 1978; Tawil-Souri & Matar, 2014; UN, 2017; Winter, 2015). Since 2008, three military operations, the last of which was in 2014, have severely hindered everyday life, worsening the mental and physical wellbeing of individuals and the development of their society (UN, 2017). These conditions of “de-development” and forced immobility have not impeded the need and willingness of people in Gaza to embark in international and collaborative research projects (Fassetta *et al.*, 2020). It is evident that, in this precise context of restricted travel, mobility—both as an aspiration and as the impossibility to migrate—is at the heart of ICC. In Gaza, ICC is rarely experienced in immanent encounters; even though technology enables connectivity with the world outside the Strip, no digital medium can transcend forced immobility. As the data presented in this article show, the participants felt that they were interculturally *incompetent* and were concerned about their abilities to foster their students' ICC. Yet, they kept and continue to keep trying to promote ICC in their English classes, even though their knowledge, attitudes and skills were determined largely by textbook content.

In the next section, I discuss relevant scholarly literature, presenting the most prominent Western models of ICC and then discussing current research on ICC in online environments. I then discuss the theoretical framework I adopted in the study, namely, the Capabilities Approach (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1999). I then briefly discuss the study, which consisted of a series of participatory workshops on appropriate methodologies for ELT in the Gaza Strip. Finally, I present and analyse some of the findings of the study that focus on making sense of intercultural communicative competence in forced immobility.

## Literature Review

### Models of intercultural communicative competence and the place of mobility

Spitzberg and Changnon (2009) classified 300 theoretically distinct constructs related to ICC, acknowledging that despite the complexity of the reality these models try to synthesize, it seems implausible to think that all these constructs are necessary, especially since many of them present extensive commonalities. The large majority of these models were developed in Western contexts, in contexts of free mobility and peace times, and presuppose some sort of mobility and migration, as those relate to foreign language education and to the internationalisation of education.

Byram (2014) analysed the development of the intercultural field over the past 25 years. His analysis points out that although considerable advancement has been achieved in recognising the value of the cultural and intercultural dimension in language teaching, and although policy documents reinforce its value, there are still some grey areas that require attention. One of these is teachers' understanding of the significance of intercultural competence, which, in Byram's words, lies in its educational and "political import" (Byram, 2014, p. 211; see also 1988).

The educational and political focus of ICC, at that time, was a protest against instrumental understandings of language learning and teaching (Byram, 2014). Byram's model eschewed the tourist-consumer view of language use, which was dominant in the 1980s. Within the European Union, people were increasingly starting to move between countries for educational and occupational purposes, and thus, language and intercultural education became increasingly important within those domains, in addition to tourism. This inspired the development of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001) which was then widely used beyond the European context (e.g., Byram & Parmenter, 2012). The political in Byram's model found its place in the concept of "*savoir s'engager*," i.e., critical cultural awareness defined as 'the ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries' (Byram, 1997, p. 53). Byram then developed the notion of "intercultural citizenship" (Byram, 2008), which was later operationalised in EU programs (e.g., European Union, 2007).

Deardorff (2009) contends that most Western definitions and models [of ICC] tend to view this construct "in a vacuum devoid of context" (Deardorff, 2009, p. 267). I believe that the models that Byram (1988, 1997) developed, and the ones that were inspired by his work, were deeply embedded in the context of the European Union, and took "context" into account. However, structural imbalances within the European context of free mobility do not affect people in the same way that these can *constrain* freedoms and wellbeing as in contexts of conflict, and therefore, these were not highlighted in Byram's models and in many subsequent ones, with the result that these seem disconnected from relationality, and seem to be constructed in a vacuum.

A focus on the *relational* and on *context* is highlighted in conceptualisations of intercultural competence that have emerged *outside* of European and Anglophone contexts as seen in Medina-Lopez-Portillo and Sinnigen (2009) in Latin America, Zaharna (2009) in the Arab world, and Nwosu (2009) on the African continent. A point of critique towards these works may be the potentially problematic generalisation of *Latin America*, *Arab world*, and *African continent* respectively, even though this may also be a strategic way of expanding the scope beyond European and Anglo-Saxon contexts. However, the significance of these studies lies in the fact that they all raise issues of power—particularly in relation to colonialism and postcolonialism. These works all suggest that intercultural education should take such political issues into account, and that the "political" should

not be limited to the idea of global citizenship for those who are privileged enough to aim for that.

A recent work by Barrett (2018), which has influenced the development of the Council of Europe *Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture* (Barrett *et al.*, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c), presents a more relational approach to intercultural competence, which also includes considerations of power. In his work, Barrett differentiates between an “intercultural situation” and an “interpersonal situation”:

When an interpersonal situation becomes an intercultural situation, because cultural differences have been perceived and made salient either by the situation or by the individual’s own psychological orientation or cultural positioning, these are the conditions under which intercultural competence becomes relevant.

(Barrett, 2018, pp. 94–95)

Barrett’s definition importantly implies that intercultural situations are not *all* situations in which two or more people from different backgrounds interact. Rather, Barrett argues, when individuals are in situations in which their cultural affiliations are devalued and discriminated against, the individuals’ framework shifts from the interpersonal to the intercultural (Barrett, 2018). His work therefore attends to relationality and to the political in a more nuanced way compared to Byram’s model.

Similarly, other scholars have critiqued the neutrality of those models which do not foreground problematic issues of power and present an instrumental view of ICC: for instance, Phipps and Gonzalez (2004) focused on the *intercultural being* instead of the *intercultural speaker*; Crosbie (2014) argued for considering individuals’ well-being and development as part of intercultural education; Frimberger (2016) discussed a well-being focused language pedagogy for unaccompanied minors; Zembylas & Papamichael (2017) talks about a “pedagogy of discomfort” to illustrate how teachers might need to inhabit discomfort when dealing with power and structural imbalances that affect marginalized groups. I have argued for a more holistic approach to language and intercultural education that may be enabled by grounding ICC within the Capabilities Approach (Imperiale, 2017, 2018). All these authors pose ethics, relationships, contextualised knowledges, and ways of interacting at the center of language and intercultural education. However, the frameworks that these authors use are still not popular yet, even though there is increasing interest even among agencies such as the British Council, which had been critiqued for ‘educational imperialism’ (Phillipson, 1992, 2016) in the past, to move beyond an instrumental approach to language and intercultural communication (see Imperiale, in press a)

Product-oriented models that focus on mastering skills and assume mobility and migration, are often imported, adopted, and highly welcomed by educators and scholars in the Global South, posing issues of “educational transfer” (Fassetta *et al.*, 2017; Tabulawa, 2003). This problematic, uncritical, transfer of resources (including the transfer of concepts) presents ethical, but also pragmatic challenges, and it poses questions such as, how could post-conflict contexts of forced immobility endorse ICC concepts that are based on the presupposition of mobility? Ethical, since adopting models developed in the “Center” does not foster a two-way flow of knowledge, and as a result, structural and power imbalances are not challenged but rather replicated, reinforcing the asymmetrical relationship between norm-providing and norm-dependent countries. Pragmatic, since local communities in the “Outer circles” (Kachru, 1986) in order to adopt certain concepts, will need to embark on a process of intercultural translation (Santos, 2018) which still requires a significant effort, and it is not a process that can be rushed. That is, I believe that in order to make use of these models, people in the outer circles do adapt them; however, this process may be overlooked and not explicitly spelled out—making models produced in the Center even more popular at the expense of

local knowledges.

### **Intercultural communicative competence and the telecollaboration**

The ubiquity of computer-mediated communication (CMC) has transformed the possibilities of teaching and learning. In the fields of language and intercultural education, the kinds of telecollaboration afforded by computer mediated communication have received particular attention. In the context of education, telecollaboration is defined as “the practice of engaging classes of geographically dispersed learners in online intercultural exchange through Internet communication tools for the development of language and/or intercultural competence” (Helm, 2015, p. 197).

Telecollaboration has been welcomed by teachers and learners. Helm’s (2013) survey of 231 university language teachers showed that 93% of educators perceived telecollaboration as a positive tool for teachers and for their students, and 77% of the 137 surveyed students in 23 European countries felt that online exchanges should be compulsory for students of foreign languages. Avgousti (2018) conducted a systematic review of empirical studies on the development of ICC for foreign language learners through online intercultural exchanges. In her review of 54 articles, she comprehensively illustrated: a) how ICC is displayed, b) how learners’ attitudes towards technology and multimodality affect their experiences of ICC, and c) how multiple identities emerge during online encounters. In the studies she analysed, learning occurred both in synchronous and asynchronous modalities, even though researchers often highlighted the importance of synchronous exchanges, as these allow for instant clarification, feedback, questioning, and topic expansion (Angelanova & Zhao, 2014; Jauregi & Bañados, 2008; Tanghe & Park, 2016).

Despite the general enthusiasm about telecollaboration, many studies discussed the challenges related to online intercultural exchanges, ranging from students’ linguistic proficiency (Lee, 2011); technological problems (Helm, 2015; Wang & Chang, 2011), issues related to time, as in attention to different semesters’ organization and time difference (Helm, 2015), and, more deeply, the lack of challenging participants’ respective views and the overall lack of critical reasoning (Basharina, 2007; Boehm *et al*, 2010; Lee, 2011). These studies, however, overall, praised the possibilities that telecollaboration allows, as having a positive impact on students’ and even on teachers’ ICC. In the majority of these studies, telecollaboration is considered as a tool, and research focuses on how to make best use of it (O’Dowd, 2016). This has the effect of tacitly validating rather than problematising existing frameworks of ICC.

There is some work that begins to consider ethics and ontology within telecollaboration. For example, Ware *et al.* (2012) highlighted that traditional goals of language learning (e.g. accuracy and fluency) need to be expanded to include “global agency”—that is, the power to make meaningful choices that have a certain impact locally and globally. Helm and Guth (2010) understand the skills related to “telecollaboration 2.0” as both instrumental know-how to manage digital tools and new ways of attending to pedagogy, participation, and agency in online communities. Similarly, Hauck (2019) stresses how virtual exchanges enable the development of critical digital literacy, which should be among the skills that teachers need to master. Telecollaboration therefore shapes teachers’ agency and their philosophy in creative ways.

However, there is still a dearth of research that looks at the ethics and at the epistemological and ontological dimensions of telecollaboration for people living in fragile settings, such as contexts of forced immobility, protracted crisis, and post-conflict. In my previous work on language education in the Gaza Strip, I have discussed alternative frameworks for language education which explore how the digital shapes relations and learning (see Imperiale, 2018). In another article, starting from

relationships developed and nurtured online with partners in the Gaza Strip, I conceptualized “virtual academic hospitality,” describing how the Derridean hospitality changes but can still be performed in online interactions (Imperiale *et al.*, in press).

Another exception, which relates directly to the study at hand, is a recently published volume, *Multilingual Online Academic Collaborations as Resistance* (Fassetta *et al.*, 2020). The authors of the chapters in the book present a multiplicity of international projects developed between universities in the Gaza Strip and other universities in the Global North. For example, Guariento (2020) illustrates the telecollaboration projects he and his team developed bringing together international students from the University of Glasgow and students in the Gaza Strip. The fourth iteration of the project involved some actual mobility as some students from the Gaza Strip were able to go to Glasgow for a semester. Guariento reflects that the project members in Glasgow assumed that students in the Gaza Strip would benefit from online collaborations and would be incentivised to participate in the online exchanges, not only because of the intrinsic value of education for Palestinians but because of “structural imbalances.” In that “they have few alternative modes of interaction with the world beyond the Strip?” (Guariento, 2020, p. 26).

I similarly wondered whether the *dream* and aspiration of travelling outside the Strip have had an impact on students’ involvement in digital projects. Might students associate these projects with the imaginary to move and to travel, which is well beyond what CMC alone could offer? And in relation to ICC models, might models of ICC developed in European and Anglophone contexts be associated with aspirations of free mobility, and hence be accepted and adopted in other contexts? These reflections on structural imbalances and consequent manifestations of symbolic power related to mobility, online and actual, and their relation with the aspirational, require careful consideration and further analysis.

These reflections pushed me to seek models that do not look at competence in an individual sense but offer alternatives that capture the ethical and ontological realities of forced immobility, enforced monoculturalism, and the potential of the digital (Imperiale *et al.*, 2017; Imperiale, in press b; Imperiale *et al.*, in press). In the next section I introduce the capabilities approach which offered me a lens to work through these complexities.

### **The capabilities approach: (im)mobility and the capacity to aspire**

Within welfare economics and philosophy, Amartya Sen (1999) and Martha Nussbaum (2011) proposed a normative approach to frame and assess the well-being of individuals with the ultimate aim of pursuing human development and the flourishing of humanity (Nussbaum, 2011). *Wellbeing*, in the capabilities approach, concerns the freedoms that individuals have to live the life that they value and that they have reason to value (Sen, 1999). In order to achieve wellbeing, individuals need to have the real opportunities (*freedoms*) to convert what they are capable of being and doing (*capabilities*) into achieved outcomes, including valued beings and doings (*functionings*) (Sen, 1999). The capability approach focuses also on tackling socio-economic, cultural, and discursive constraints on individuals, which may impair the realization of their wellbeing. Although the capabilities approach has been applied in education, this model has received scant attention in intercultural and language education, with the exception of the work developed by Crosbie (2014), who looked at TESOL classrooms in the UK and in Ireland. I also have elsewhere argued that a capability approach can be used as a theoretical lens to consider the role of intercultural education in nurturing individuals’ well-being (Imperiale, 2017; Imperiale, 2018; Imperiale *et al.*, 2017).

Of related interest for this paper, is work in the field of anthropology by de Haas (2010) on *mobility*

in migration studies, and the work by Appadurai (2004) and Hart (2016) on *aspiration*. De Haas (2010, 2014) conceptualized human mobility as a capability, valuing the potential of migration both for utilitarian purposes, and, more importantly, for human development. According to de Haas, “human mobility is the capability to decide where to live and human movement (i.e., migration) is the associated functioning” (de Haas & Rodriguez, 2010, p. 178). De Haas differentiates between being able to choose where to stay and move, and the act of movement itself. He argues that both mobility and migration are the results of complex factors of human development: that is, wealthier countries tend to have better options in terms of choices and of freedom to move. However, when considering macro-structural constraints and freedoms, de Haas also stresses the importance of accounting for the role of aspirations in understandings of the agency behind choices of mobility *and* immobility (de Haas, 2014; de Haas & Rodriguez, 2010). In other words, if constraints do not enable individuals to move neither to decide where to live, still aspirations may be a driving force that determines individuals’ agency even if this may not lead to achieved outcomes.

Appadurai (2004) defines aspiration as a “cultural” capacity: aspirations, outcomes, preferences, and choices in relation to the future are culturally and relationally grounded, and do not need to be necessarily market-driven. Hart (2016) explored the role of aspirations in relations to the capability approach and argued that the capability to aspire includes both revealed and concealed aspirations. These concepts are important for this work, as they do not focus on outcomes, but rather on processes: in situations where unfreedoms (Sen, 1999) limit possibilities, aspirations and capabilities still have an agentic role and determine contextualised individuals’ actions.

These anthropological concepts, therefore, differ from and complement predominant ICC models, as they enable a conceptualization of intercultural communication that goes beyond a competency dimension to include considerations of aspirations, dreams, and unfreedoms. These concepts highlight the importance of immanency and contextuality, rather than universal, standard understandings, so these can be integrated into our conceptualisation of ICC. As such, a model of intercultural communication education informed by capabilities may seem more ready to consider immobility not just as a problem to solve with the right digital tool, but as an effect of structural inequalities and power. It also puts wellbeing at the front and center, in contrast to more goal-oriented competency models. Finally, such a model pushes us to question whether intercultural communicative competence is a competence to be acquired or is rather a relational concept that is linked to the aspirations of real people in actual contexts.

## **The Study**

The large-scale study on which this article is based involved a cycle of critical participatory action research (CPAR) that was conducted online due to the inaccessibility of the Gaza Strip (the researcher was based in the UK). The CPAR consisted of the development, delivery, observation, analysis and evaluation of a series of 8 online workshops that were conducted over a period of three months with pre- and in-service English teachers. The participants were all women who were either enrolled in their last year of their MA in Education or in Applied Linguistics at the Islamic University of Gaza (IUG) or had obtained their degree in one of those programs within the last three years. A recruitment email with an application form was sent out to all the MA students through the local project partner, Professor Nazmi al-Masri, an Associate Professor in Applied Linguistics at IUG, and information was posted on the university’s website. The application collected initial data about potential participants’ motivations and their awareness of the use of multimodal creative methods (e.g. use of drama pedagogy, political cartoons, see also Frimberger, 2016) in English language teaching. Out of 29 applicants, 15 participants were selected according to whether they met the base criteria and their responses to the application form as a whole. Two students dropped out for

personal reasons before commencing the course, so the final number of participants reached 13, seven of which were studying and teaching at the same time.

During the workshops, the researcher and the participants collaboratively developed teaching materials and lesson plans for teaching English in secondary schools in the Gaza Strip. Participants were also involved in teaching practices and in peer-teaching during which they piloted and evaluated the materials they had developed. Data collected during the study included the recordings of the 8 workshops, fieldnotes, teaching materials, follow-up interviews with participants, participants' reflective journals, participants' posts on an online private Facebook group etc. Data were analysed thematically through the lenses of the capabilities approach.

### **Making Sense of Intercultural Communicative Competence in Forced Immobility**

In this section, I present findings on the theme of mobility and aspirations, and then I present participants' attempts to nurture ICC in their classroom despite the fact they felt interculturally incompetent by drawing on two vignettes. The theme of mobility and immobility, and of intercultural competence arose in the data, and the participants were not prompted by the researcher.

#### **Example 1: Getting to Palestine**

Neither mobility as the freedom to choose where to live, nor migration as its realised functioning (de Haas, 2014) were viable options for the participants in this study, however, dreams and *aspirations* for both mobility and migration clearly emerged in their talk about their teaching. Mobility in this context was interpreted as the capability to aspire (Appadurai, 2004) to be able to move, including both aspiring to reach home and the freedom to migrate.

To illustrate this, I draw on an activity that the participants and I co-constructed during the workshop series related to using political cartoons in English language teaching. During the workshop, participants analysed political cartoons that convey the Palestinian reality; focusing on the use of language and other symbols and potential uses in teaching. In groups, participants were invited to draw a cartoon for one of the units of the *English for Palestine* textbook (Grade 9), the textbook used in the Gazan schools, and to develop an activity around it. The aim was to stimulate creativity to develop new teaching materials that did not require additional resources and to enhance participants' understanding of the semiotics of political cartoons. From the 16 units in the textbook, three out of four groups chose to address the chapter entitled "Getting to Palestine."

In her reflective journal, one participant, F<sup>1</sup>, commented on the cartoons she drew with her group:

The second workshop was unprecedented one as we were too much interactive and enthusiastic. [...] we made our own cartoons (<3) for a unit from ninth grade English book. The name of the lesson we chose was 'Getting to Palestine'. Our group have drawn a picture of a happy foreign tourist, holding his baggage to get to Palestine, while on the other cartoon, we drew a picture of a Palestinian lady, carrying her luggage and crying because she can't break the siege and get into her country.

(F., journal)

The choice of the subjects of the drawings is interesting as it illustrates participants' understanding of mobility and also their "savoir s'engager" (Byram, 1997). Participants decided to contrast capabilities of mobility by contrasting a foreign tourist—a man who successfully manages to get to Palestine—with the aspirations of a Palestinian woman from Gaza who is prevented from travelling





Figure 1. "Getting to Palestine."

to her homeland. Their critical cultural awareness of their own condition of forced immobility is manifested in relation to others (non-Palestinians) who are able to travel more freely: the two cartoons are metaphorical representations of participants' ability to critically evaluate their own and others' product(s), practices, and perspectives which directly point to Byram's *savoir s'engager* (Byram, 1997). Participants, for instance, presented a Palestinian character in contrast to a foreigner.

Gender also plays a role in the participants' representations. As explained by the participants during the workshop, the foreign tourist is a happy man who is going to Palestine for a business meeting (as indicated by the small suitcase he carries). He is travelling there in solidarity with Palestinians since, as a participant mentioned during the workshop, "He has a big heart with the Palestinian map, and he thinks 'wow... finally I'm getting to visit Palestine.'" Conversely, the Palestinian lady, who wishes to go to Al-Quds (Jerusalem), symbolised by the Al-Aqsa mosque drawn on her heart, cannot return to her homeland. Here it is important to note that Palestine in political cartoons is usually represented as female in the figure of an old mother; however, the choice of drawing a young girl living under siege might have also been a representation of the participants' own experiences as female graduates who can neither move abroad nor visit Jerusalem and the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

Mobility in the participants' representations intersects with a "capacity to aspire" that is oriented towards the future (Appadurai, 2004). This was also thematized during a workshop activity on using videos in English language teaching. Before showing the participants a YouTube video entitled "Palestinian dream," I asked them to speculate about the content of the video. Most of the participants welcomed the task, giving their opinions on the content of the video which might have dealt with issues related to dreams about mobility, peace, or better future opportunities. I was about to suggest watching the video, when A. stood up from her chair and stated:

About the Palestinian dream, I want to talk about *my* dream like a Palestinian. Ehh... I think that in one minute I will talk about the sufferings of the graduate students who want to complete their studies abroad and ehm... we cannot. [Long pause]. That's it.

(A., recorded workshop)

While the other participants discussed dreams in relation to the video, A. instead decided to present

her own personal dream and aspiration. She switched from using the first personal pronoun “I” to the plural “we,” as she felt that she was speaking on behalf of the group of “graduates.” Her aspiration was articulated as hope towards an enactment of the capability of mobility, but it also ends in the negation “we cannot,” in reference to the imminent possibility of transforming this capability into actual migration. A.’s voice was legitimised as endorsed by the other participants in the discussion; her aspiration thus became a collective aspiration and not only an individual manifestation of personal voice and agency.

In the data presented above, we could see how mobility – and forced immobility – are at the heart of participants’ aspirations and dreams to live a different life. The impossibility of mobility has a considerable impact on the development of ICC as the next set of data demonstrates.

### **Example 2: “Wedding Traditions around the World”**

Due to the siege imposed on the Strip, the cultivation of relationships with people abroad and with cultural others is difficult for Gazans. This was thematized during the practice teaching sessions, which participants developed in small groups. Before their practice teaching, I ran small-group tutorials in case participants had questions about their lessons and activities. One group chose to work on the lesson “Wedding Traditions around the World” taken from the *English for Palestine (Grade 9)* textbook. During the tutorial, the participants outlined the reasons for choosing this specific topic: they stated that it develops intercultural competence in a *not-intercultural* society as it is in the Gaza Strip:

A.: Each of us will present one custom and the students will come and see the different customs. Each girl will have a stall and the students are going to take a tour around the stalls, so they experience life abroad.

R.: Yes, to introduce to different customs for intercultural competence.

Grazia: So you will have different stalls for different countries and will do peer-teaching? Wow! Sounds great! [Participants look at each other and smile proudly].

F.: Can we?

Grazia: Of course you can, the lesson is yours! But what do you mean by intercultural competence?

A.: Yes, students are going to have a tour—yes, this is the aim of the lesson, to discuss different customs, to appreciate customs and traditions in other countries.

(recorded discussion during the tutorial)

The participants wanted to create the chance for their students to “experience life abroad” and to experience an intercultural encounter without leaving the classroom. Therefore, they tried to create an embodied “tour” amongst different stalls representing different wedding traditions. According to the participants, the tour would allow for a concrete, sensory experience of both mobility and of migration in order to nurture students’ intercultural competence. When I tried to explore what they meant by “intercultural competence,” they emphasized again the chance for students to “have a (metaphorical) tour,” which will allow them to acquire knowledge and to appreciate other cultures and countries. ICC was therefore connected with mobility and sojourning, even though the ‘travel’ was virtual and metaphorical rather than physical and geographical. The notion of touristic mobility

stood out among the participants' perceptions of intercultural competence; yet even as they endorsed this sojourner model, by creating the metaphorical tour, they demonstrated that students could develop intercultural competence without leaving Gaza. There is thus a tension between their preference for a model of interculturality, which is relatively de-contextualised and their creative way of realizing intercultural learning in their own situation of forced immobility.

The participants continued in their discussion during the same workshop, pointing out their concerns about possible negative attitudes among their students with regards to different cultural traditions and the preoccupation towards the risk of misunderstanding and of not being able to develop students' ICC:

F.: we expect students to reject some of these customs.[...]Yes, ehm... they will feel it is a bit strange.

R.: Yes, maybe they will not accept those customs.

A.: Here in Palestine, it is not ehm.. an *intercultural* society. So... ehm... about some different cultures... ehm we don't know.

R.: Maybe students will feel about religion or culture, or society that these are too different. [...]

A.: One of the customs, for example... it is different, like the bride friends wear the same colours for dresses against the spirits to avoid to take the bride<sup>2</sup>... it is so different... even for us is different to think, you know? So imagine for the students!

Grazia: [nodding] Yes, I understand... So [pause]... what would be a possible solution for this expected problem?

A.: We will try to... to... to tell the students that each country has its own traditions that differ from the other countries, and this is the way of life, their traditions...

R.: And tell that maybe for people in other countries it will be strange to hear about our customs too. They are strange for people outside Palestine maybe...

Y.: Yes, also each country, especially each Arab country has its wedding traditions.

A.: Yes, even within the same country; or in different cities... So it is good to respect all.

The participants were concerned about not being able to convey the traditions within different cultures as these differ from Palestinian ones. They were also concerned about the students' cognitive flexibility as they themselves as language teachers found it difficult to understand and appreciate other cultures' weddings traditions: they stated that they had never lived in a multicultural/intercultural society and they were aware that this had an impact on their appreciation of other cultures. In order to address these potential obstacles, participants displayed cultural humility and an appreciation of foreign cultures. In this way, they positioned themselves as having an awareness of intercultural competence, even while describing themselves as from a society that is not intercultural.

The participants' practice teaching about "Wedding Traditions around the World" was on the last day of the workshop series. By then, relationships were well established, and the atmosphere was very informal and friendly with lots of joking and laughter. As part of the practice teaching demonstration, the four teachers prepared a tour among the stalls of different countries and offered games, reading selections, role-plays and a listening activity. Towards the end of the practice teaching, all the participants gathered together in order to conclude the lesson with a wedding cake that one of the participants had baked. F. took the lead in cutting the slices of the cake while she continued to share the last pieces of information she wanted to give as part of her presentation of Scottish wedding traditions.

F.: Mashi, tayyb... [So, well...] Listen, listen... at the wedding both the bride and the groom cut the cake, then they eat it, right? But in Scotland, they eat only half of the cake.

A.: And they keep the other?

Peers: [laugh]

F.: What do you think they do with the other half? [...]

B.: I know... they keep it for the coming baby...

[noises]

S.: They keep it for the first baby then they eat it.

F., R., Y.: [applause] Yess!! Well done! [noises]

F.: They eat half of the cake at the wedding, then they save the other half until the first baby is born.

Peers: [laughing, surprised]. Ohhh [laughing] [noises]

F.: I know, I know... it may sound strange. But... what do you think of it?

A.: It's yuck! [laughing]

F. (turning to the camera): Grazia, is that true?! I've read it in the book! [giggling]

In this excerpt participants exaggerated, were surprised, joked, giggled, and laughed together at what they perceived as intercultural oddness. The teacher who was leading the activity was complicit in emphasizing and elaborating on Scottish traditions, justifying herself with the evidence that the piece of information was written in the textbook that students use at school. The textbook almost seems to validate the information while also rendering it something detached from actual relationships. I (living in Scotland but raised in Italy and with Italian nationality) became the expert on Scottish weddings and was the one who could validate or deny the information given in the textbook. Despite the stereotypical nature of the discussion, which caused deliberate comedic moments, participants concluded by agreeing to respect and value other individuals and what each person carries with him/herself, namely the cultural heritage and traditions that are re-constructed through the unfolding of relationships:

F.: The Scottish wedding is a bit strange with all these features... [giggling]

F.: I don't know... it is part of the book but it sounds weird... [giggling] Girls, girls, quiet, quiet. We know that not all the customs make sense... other customs in Palestine are strange but this is the heritage and for us are important... the heritage of the country and we are proud of it so it is important to respect others and their heritages of others too.

[Students applaud]

F.: So if we will ever be able to travel we will know... Maybe Grazia will invite us to her wedding in Scotland and we will see different traditions.

R.: We'll eat all your cake, Grazia [laughing].

F's "quiet, quiet" marks her return to the teacher mode and with it, she again takes up the position of interculturally competent as she shows her tolerant attitude and that she was open-minded. Then, aspiration comes back in "If we will ever be able to travel we will know": here aspiration is not de-contextualised and abstract like the textbook, but it is rather connected to face-to-face experiences. Because of the interpersonal relationships we had established, participants felt the desire to see my own world and to be part of my own traditions and feasts, being involved in the physical "intercultural situations" that Barrett (2018) has described. Finally, the relationships that we built allowed a deliberate flouting of intercultural competence as the inside joke "We'll eat all your cake" attests. In this example, the participants created a virtual tour, albeit one that did not use technology but rather relied on textbooks and the simulation of experiences they had read about. They longed for a face-to-face encounter, and even though they were aware of the fact that this was—at least—temporarily unlikely, the embodied experience of sharing the cake allowed them to create, to hope, and to laugh.

### Conclusions and Future Directions

In this article I have drawn from two vignettes from my workshops with Gaza teachers to problematize dominant models of ICC that do not foreground the relational and the contextual dimensions of ICC (Deardorff, 2009), and thus leave mobility—and immobility—under-conceptualised. In this set of data, it is clear that the contextual and the relational dimension of intercultural competence emerge in connection with participants' awareness of their own context of forced immobility. Participants, embarrassed about their intercultural *incompetence*, acknowledged the importance of meeting intercultural others in order to confirm or discard what they have learned through texts. They also clearly pointed out that, as a result of the imposed monocultural context in which they live, they may find it difficult to develop appropriate intercultural competence. Some of them had never met someone from outside of the Gaza Strip in their life, and for others, their "virtual" encounter with me was the first one they had with a foreigner. At the same time, as professional language teachers, as they acknowledged the difficulties of ICC, they often simultaneously demonstrated conceptual awareness of what it involves and an ability to adapt and adopt strategies for teaching ICC even in a context of forced immobility and isolation. Similar to Phipps (2013)'s argument that linguistic incompetence has its own value and should not be demonised as it allows for developing humility and for experimenting with other resources that are not necessarily verbal, *intercultural incompetence* was acknowledged and challenged through the teachers' attitudes of respect and curiosity.

Participants' understandings of mobility – and experiences of *immobility*, of intercultural competence—and of intercultural *incompetence*, open up a space to deepen and critique our own models of ICC. These participants require us to rethink ICC models so as to foreground the “context” and the relational, collective dimension of ICC, and to understand its potential for educational and political import (Byram, 2014).

In the participants' discussions and their teaching practices, ICC was intertwined with aspirations of mobility. Even though Palestinians in the Gaza Strip may not find themselves in physical “intercultural situations” (Barnett, 2018) they still consider ICC as important to them, even within the tension between mobility and immobility, and the tension between being curious about the world outside the Strip and the impossibility to experience it. The capability to aspire for mobility, although constrained by structural unfreedoms, is still a capability that can be nurtured as being able to dream about going abroad is valuable for teachers and for students in the Gaza Strip. Inspired by the examples from these teachers, I argue that intercultural communication education needs to be rethought, re-conceptualised, and evaluated in terms of the actual freedoms and opportunities that individuals have to develop and nurture it and the creative, sometimes virtual ways in which they manage to develop intercultural thinking and being in spite of those constraints. At the same time, the context of the English language teachers in Gaza can serve as a call for language practitioners, who cultivate the political and educational value of ICC, to also advocate for rather than to take for granted the possibility for all learners to experience in-person intercultural encounters. This article perhaps does not offer concrete solutions to the problem of impassable borders, but through the examples of how people in situations of forced immobility make sense of intercultural learning, it hopefully opens up questions about the dreams, aspirations, and the (at least temporary) impossibilities that shape the possibility for intercultural communication and the competences related to it.

What can the stories of those teaching and learning in the Gaza Strip teach educators, practitioners, academics, and students living in the Global North? Firstly, they can teach us to define ICC in context. Secondly, they push us to understand ICC not as a competence that individuals exercise and possess, but rather as a result of relations, of networks, and often of structural imbalances. Thirdly, and ultimately, what this article suggests is a revision of the concept of ICC in light of travel restrictions, and to be able to capture non-movement and the lack of real intercultural encounters as *agentic* in the definition of interculturality.

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<sup>1</sup> This decision not to use pseudonyms is informed by the importance that participants themselves gave to *naming*, both in terms of pedagogy, and at the ontological level of acknowledging the presence of the unique other, of the unique voice and agency that is behind that particular name/person (see Imperiale, 2018). Hence my decision to use the initials of participants' names rather than de-personalizing their identities by replacing them with a fictitious pseudonym.

<sup>2</sup> With this sentence, A. meant that in one of the traditions that she read about, the bridesmaids wear the same dress as the bride. This is believed to be a protection from evil spirits who would try to kidnap the bride during the wedding.