



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF
EDUCATION, PSYCHOLOGY
AND COUNSELLING
(IJEPC)
www.ijepec.com



**BRIDGING THE GAP: POLICY AND THEORETICAL
PERSPECTIVES ON INTEGRATING INTERCULTURAL
COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE INTO CHINESE
VOCATIONAL ENGLISH CURRICULA**

Liang Yinyin¹, Abdul Said Ambotang^{2*}

¹ Faculty of Education and Sports Studies, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Malaysia
Email: 22254230@qq.com

² Faculty of Education and Sports Studies, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Malaysia
Email: said@ums.edu.my

* Corresponding Author

Article Info:

Article history:

Received date: 24.04.2025

Revised date: 05.05.2025

Accepted date: 21.05.2025

Published date: 30.06.2025

To cite this document:

Liang, Y., & Ambotang, A. S. (2025). Bridging The Gap: Policy And Theoretical Perspectives On Integrating Intercultural Communication Competence Into Chinese Vocational English Curricula. *International Journal of Education, Psychology and Counseling*, 10 (58), 1025-1032.

DOI: 10.35631/IJEPC.1058065.

This work is licensed under [CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)



Abstract:

As China increases its participation in global economic and cultural exchanges, vocational education institutions are increasingly faced with the challenge of aligning English language teaching with the objective of cultivating students' Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC). Policy documents such as China's Education Modernization 2035 and the English Curriculum Standards for Higher Vocational Education Institutions (2021) reflect this ambition and highlight the importance of integrating ICC into language programs. However, significant gaps remain between these strategic objectives and the reality of program implementation. This article critically analyzes policy directives and theoretical perspectives on the integration of ICC into Vocational English language teaching. By examining national policy texts from the perspective of curriculum internationalization theory and the Integrated Model of Intercultural Communication Competence (IMICC), this study identifies key conceptual gaps and low attention to practical measures such as teacher development, teaching strategies, and curriculum coherence. It advocates for more sophisticated theoretical support and clearer educational pathways to support sustainable ICC integration. The discussion provides ideas for educators and policymakers who wish to rethink Vocational English language teaching based on global competence.

Keywords:

Intercultural Communication Competence, Vocational English Education, Curriculum Internationalization, Educational Policy, Policy-Practice Gap

Introduction

In an era of rapid globalization, vocational education systems are increasingly required to provide students not only with professional skills but also with the intercultural competences required for international integration. Intercultural communication competence (ICC), defined as the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people from diverse cultural backgrounds, has become an essential skill for employability (Deardorff, 2006). In this context, English is the primary lingua franca of international interaction and the integration of ICC into professional English language programs is becoming increasingly popular, especially in programs that prepare students for cross-border work and intercultural cooperation (Arasaratnam, 2009).

China has responded to these global demands with a series of national education policies aimed at internationalizing its vocational education system. The “Education Modernization 2035” strategy document sets out a vision to develop talents who can adapt to a multicultural environment and contribute to the global knowledge economy (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 2019). As part of this broader modernization agenda, vocational education is moving beyond the delivery of technical knowledge to foster global perspectives and intercultural skills (Zong, 2024). The 2021 edition of English Curriculum Standards for Higher Vocational Education Institutions further institutionalizes this direction by mandating the integration of international content, cultural knowledge, and communication skills into English teaching (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 2021).

However, there remains a significant gap between national policy goals and their implementation in the classroom. While curriculum standards support comprehensive and globally oriented English teaching, many institutions continue to rely on imported textbooks and superficial references to world cultures without engaging in substantive pedagogical reform (Su & Pan, 2022). ICC is often treated as a secondary subject, addressed through symbolic activities rather than integrated learning objectives. This problem is particularly acute in rural or underfunded vocational schools, where institutional support for pedagogical innovation is limited and teachers often lack the training needed to teach ICC effectively (Hu & Lei, 2014; Li, 2024).

Moreover, national policy discourses on ICC, while ambitious, often lack conceptual precision. The mainstream literature tends to reiterate the importance of internationalization without proposing operational definitions or contextually appropriate implementation strategies (Aguilar, 2018). As a result, institutions interpret and apply these guidelines inconsistently, contributing to fragmentation in program design and educational delivery in the vocational education sector.

Given these challenges, there is an urgent need to examine how ICC is conceptualized in national policy frameworks and how this concept fits into established theoretical models. This paper draws on two interrelated theoretical perspectives - Curriculum Internationalization and the Integrated Model of Intercultural Communication Competence (IMICC) - to provide a critical analysis of the integration of ICC into Chinese professional English curricula. The internationalization of curriculum perspective provides insight into how global dimensions can be systematically integrated into instructional design (Knight, 2004; Leask, 2015), while the IMICC framework provides a structured understanding of ICC across cognitive, affective and behavioral domains (Arasaratnam, 2009).

By synthesizing these theoretical perspectives, this study proposes a conceptual framework for assessing the fit between policy goals and educational practice. This paper contributes to the current debate on vocational education reform by emphasizing the need for clearer policy clarity, stronger institutional support mechanisms, and more coherent curriculum design strategies. Finally, this analysis aims to inform future efforts to effectively integrate ICC into professional English language teaching and support the production of culturally competent students who are prepared to enter the international workforce (Teng, 2024).

Literature Review

This chapter provides a critical review of existing literature relevant to the integration of Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) into vocational English education in China. The review is organized into four sections: (1) conceptualizing ICC in vocational education; (2) policy context and curriculum reform; (3) theoretical perspectives guiding the study; and (4) research gaps and the contributions of the current study.

Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) in Vocational Education

The integration of ICC into English language teaching has received increasing attention in recent years, especially in professional contexts where students are required to operate in global and multicultural environments. ICC is widely considered to be a multidimensional construct consisting of cognitive, affective, and behavioral components (Deardorff, 2006; Arasaratnam, 2009). These dimensions represent cultural knowledge and awareness, openness and empathy, and the ability to adapt one's communication to intercultural situations.

Arasaratnam (2009) developed the Integrated Model of Intercultural Communication Competence (IMICC), which identifies the three dimensions as interrelated and dynamically interacting in educational settings. The model has been applied in various educational contexts to assess learners' readiness for intercultural engagement and to support curriculum development aimed at improving communication skills in global contexts. Pan (2022) argues that in vocational education, ICC should be embedded in both instructional design and assessment in order to foster intercultural adaptation and empathy. Hu and Lei (2014) emphasize that reducing ICC to cultural trivia or one-off lessons fails to provide students with the critical tools needed for meaningful global communication.

Policy Context: ICC and Curriculum Reform in China

China has clearly emphasized the importance of international competence and intercultural awareness in its education reform strategy. Policies such as the Education Modernization 2035 and the 2021 English Curriculum Standards for Higher Vocational Education Institutions promote the integration of international perspectives and intercultural elements into the English curriculum (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2019, 2021). This framework aims to produce students who are able to function effectively in multicultural work environments.

However, researchers have observed a gap between political aspirations and their concrete implementation. Huang and Fang (2023) note that many initiatives, such as importing foreign textbooks or organizing short-term exchange programs, often lead to superficial internationalization. Su and Pan (2022) argue that meaningful curriculum reform requires structural changes in teaching practices, including teacher training in intercultural pedagogy,

provision of appropriate resources, and organizational support. Without this support, the policy risks remaining merely an aspiration and not translating into educational reality.

Zhang (2025) points out that implementation efforts often prioritize form over substance, focusing on visible changes such as labeling bilingual courses or superficial international collaborations, without integrating intercultural competence into pedagogical content and assessment. Peng, Wu, and Fan (2015) also point out that many teachers lack the training and materials needed to effectively implement ICC.

Theoretical Perspectives guiding the study

This study draws on two complementary theoretical frameworks: Curriculum internationalization theory and the Integrated Model of Intercultural Communication Competence (IMICC). Together, these frameworks provide a conceptual basis for understanding the policy and pedagogical practice requirements related to ICC in professional English language programs.

Curriculum Internationalization refers to the systematic integration of international, intercultural, and global dimensions into the content, delivery, and assessment of educational programs (Leask, 2015). Originally developed in Western higher education contexts, this approach is increasingly being adopted in non-Western contexts such as China, where it supports the broader goals of educational modernization and international cooperation (Knight, 2004; Zong, 2024).

However, true internationalization is not limited to the use of imported textbooks or participation in exchange programs. It requires pedagogical innovation to foster intercultural sensitivity, openness to the world, and critical thinking among students. Su and Pan (2022) point out that in Chinese vocational education institutions, this reform is often hindered by systemic factors such as rigid curricula, limited teacher training, and performance-oriented organizational cultures.

At the same time, the IMICC framework provides an analytical structure for evaluating the concept and implementation of ICC, in policy and practice. He emphasizes that intercultural competence is not static but context-sensitive and evolving, requiring organizational commitment and pedagogical consistency (Arasaratnam, 2009; Li, 2024).

Research Gap and Contribution

Despite the growing scholarly interest in ICC and Curriculum Internationalization, three major gaps remain in the literature. First, there is still no consensus on how to implement ICC in vocational English programs. While models such as IMICC provide a solid conceptual foundation, their application to program planning and policy analysis is still underdeveloped in the Chinese context (Arasaratnam, 2009; Leask, 2015).

Second, current research often lacks a comprehensive framework that links policy goals at the macro level, institutional mediation at the meso level, and pedagogical practices at the micro level. Teng (2024) argues that this limitation prevents a full understanding of how policy goals are interpreted and implemented in local contexts, especially in TVET institutions with few elites or limited resources.

Third, most empirical literature treats ICC as a linguistic issue, ignoring broader intercultural competencies such as critical thinking, identity negotiation, and behavioral flexibility (Peng, Wu & Fan, 2015). Furthermore, few studies systematically address institutional factors—such as teacher development pathways, curriculum flexibility, and administrative leadership—that are prerequisites for successful implementation.

This study aims to fill this gap by providing a conceptual, theory-based, and policy-oriented analysis of the integration of ICC into Chinese vocational English teaching. It contributes to the literature in three ways: (1) by clarifying the conceptual foundations of ICC through the IMICC model; (2) by linking Curriculum Internationalization theory to implementation practice; and (3) identifying key gaps and suggesting directions for policy alignment and institutional reform.

Conclusion

As vocational education systems adapt to the urgent demands of globalization, the development of Intercultural communication Competence (ICC) has become an important educational priority. In China, national policy documents such as the Education Modernization 2035 and the 2021 English Curriculum Standards for Higher Vocational Education Institutions emphasize the importance of integrating ICC into vocational English curricula to enhance the international employability of graduates (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2021). These initiatives mark a gradual shift from traditional language teaching methods to a more comprehensive model for developing international communication skills.

However, as this article shows, there is still a significant gap between political discourse and the reality of educational practice. Especially in underfunded or marginalized vocational education institutions, the implementation of ICC often remains superficial, fragmented, or tokenistic (Zong, 2024; Huang and Fang, 2023). Structural barriers such as lack of teacher training, limited institutional support, rigid curriculum structures, and inadequate assessment tools continue to hinder meaningful integration (Peng, Wu, & Fan, 2015; Su & Pan, 2022).

Drawing on the theory of curriculum internationalization (Knight, 2004; Leask, 2015) and the Integrated Model of Intercultural Communication Competence (IMICC) (Arasaratnam, 2009), this article offers a conceptual perspective to analyze the fit between policy aspirations and pedagogical practice. By examining how ICC is constructed in national documents and exploring systemic constraints to its implementation, this study contributes to a better understanding of the gap between policy and practice in vocational English teaching in China.

Implications for Curriculum Reform

To bridge the gap between policy intentions and teaching practice, vocational English curriculum reform must be systematic and multidimensional. First, Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) must be explicitly integrated into program objectives, with measurable learning outcomes that reflect the cognitive, affective, and behavioral domains of the Integrated Model of Intercultural Communication Competence (Arasaratnam, 2009; Deardorff, 2006). These aspects guide not only the content taught but also how student progress is assessed.

Second, instructional strategies need to shift from traditional grammar-focused teaching methods to more interactive and experiential approaches. Task-based learning, situational simulations, project work, and intercultural dialogue exercises have been shown to promote deeper engagement with intercultural issues and facilitate behavioral adaptation (Holmes, Ganassin & Li, 2022; Pan, 2022).

Third, professional development for teachers should include structured training in intercultural pedagogy and opportunities for collaborative curriculum design across institutions or countries. Without institutional investment in teacher skills, even well-designed programs are unlikely to achieve desired outcomes (Su and Pan, 2022; Huang and Fang, 2023). Leadership plays a critical role in this. Administrators should align strategic planning, faculty evaluation, and resource allocation with ICC-related goals to create a supportive institutional environment (Zhang, 2025).

Finally, robust assessment mechanisms are essential. In addition to measuring language proficiency, assessment systems should assess students' intercultural sensitivity, empathy, and adaptive communication behaviors using both formative and summative tools (Arasaratnam, 2013; Deardorff, 2009). Institutional feedback loops, such as student surveys and peer observations, can contribute to the continuous improvement of ICC integration efforts.

Recommendations for Future Research

While this study provides a theoretical and policy-oriented examination of ICC integration in Chinese vocational English education, further empirical research is needed to strengthen the evidence base and inform sustainable reform. Future research should consider the following directions:

- i. Conduct comparative studies across regions or institutional types to explore how variations in context, resources, and leadership affect ICC implementation (Teng, 2024; Su & Pan, 2022);
- ii. Investigate classroom-level teaching practices through action research, case studies, or teaching experiments to identify effective ICC pedagogies (Holmes & Peña Dix, 2022);
- iii. Undertake longitudinal studies that track students' development of ICC, including shifts in attitudes, behaviors, and intercultural awareness over time (Arasaratnam, 2009; Deardorff, 2006);
- iv. Explore teachers' beliefs, knowledge frameworks, and perceived challenges regarding ICC instruction, especially in non-elite institutions (Zhang, 2025; Huang & Fang, 2023);
- v. Evaluate the fidelity of policy implementation at the institutional level, assessing the alignment between national standards and local curriculum adaptations (Peng, Wu, & Fan, 2015);
- vi. Incorporate interdisciplinary and cross-national comparisons to situate China's vocational English reform within broader global trends and transferable best practices (Leask, 2015; Knight, 2004).

Acknowledgment

This study draws upon the initial theoretical and contextual work undertaken as part of my doctoral research. I would like to sincerely thank my academic supervisor, Dr. Abdul Said Ambotang, for his patient guidance, thoughtful insights, and continuous encouragement throughout this process. I am also grateful to Universiti Malaysia Sabah for its institutional support, as well as to the vocational colleges in Guangxi that generously facilitated the contextual exploration of this research. Their cooperation provided valuable insights into the educational settings discussed in this study. In addition, no potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

References

- Aguilar, M. (2018). Integrating intercultural competence in ESP and EMI: From theory to practice. *ESP Today*, 6(1), 25-43. <https://doi.org/10.18485/esptoday.2018.6.1.2>
- Arasaratnam, L. A. (2009). The development of a new instrument of intercultural communication competence. *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, (20). <https://www.immi.se/intercultural/nr20/arasaratnam.htm>
- Arasaratnam, L. A. (2013). *Intercultural competence: Key components and their relationships*. In J. Jackson (Ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Intercultural Communication* (pp. 90-102). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203805640.ch7>
- Deardorff, D. K. (2006). Identification and assessment of intercultural competence as a student outcome of internationalization. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 10(3), 241-266. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315306287002>
- Holmes, P., Ganassin, S., & Li, S. (2022). Reflections on the co-construction of an interpretive approach to interculturality for higher education in China. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 22(5), 503-518. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2022.2114491>
- Holmes, P., & Peña Dix, B. (2022). A research trajectory for difficult times: Decentring language and intercultural communication. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 22(3), 337-353. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2022.2068563>
- Hu, G., & Lei, J. (2014). English-medium instruction in Chinese higher education: A case study. *Higher Education*, 67(5), 551-567. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-013-9661-5>
- Huang, W., & Fang, F. (2023). Intercultural competence development in EMI programs in China. In F. Fang & P. K. Sah (Eds.), *English-Medium Instruction Pedagogies in Multilingual Universities in Asia* (pp. 90 - 110). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003173137-6>
- Knight, J. (2004). Internationalization remodeled: Definition, approaches, and rationales. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 8(1), 5 - 31. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315303260832>
- Leask, B. (2015). *Internationalizing the curriculum*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315716954>
- Li, X. (2024). *Intercultural communication competence training: A new orientation for higher vocational English teaching*. *Advances in Vocational and Technical Education*, 6(4), 15-21. <http://dx.doi.org/10.23977/avte.2024.060403>
- Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. (2021). *English curriculum standards for higher vocational education institutions* (2021 edition). Higher Education Press. <https://www.amazon.com/English-Curriculum-Standards-Vocational-Education/dp/7040559943>

- Pan, X. (2022). Developing students' intercultural communication competence (ICC) in English medium instruction (EMI) programmes in a transnational university in China. *The Educational Review, USA*, 6(9), 489 - 492. <http://dx.doi.org/10.26855/er.2022.09.007>
- Peng, R. Z., Wu, W. P., & Fan, W. W. (2015). A comprehensive evaluation of Chinese college students' intercultural competence. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 47, 143-157. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2015.04.003>
- Su, C., & Pan, K. (2022). The exploration of intercultural education of higher vocational English teaching under the background of "Belt and Road". *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 10(12), 81-87. <https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2022.1012006>
- Teng, Y. (2024). Influences of cultural capital and internationalization on global competence: Evidence from China's higher vocational education [Doctoral dissertation, Chapman University]. Chapman University Digital Commons. <https://doi.org/10.36837/chapman.000564>
- Zhang, Q. (2025). Some thoughts on promoting the construction of bilingual curriculum in higher vocational education under the "Double High Plan". *International Journal of Education and Social Development*, 2(2), 107-110. <https://doi.org/10.54097/ha6nnc31>
- Zhu, Y. (2019). New national initiatives of modernizing education in China. *ECNU Review of Education*, 2(3), 353-362. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2096531119868069>
- Zong, C. (2024). *The internationalization of China's vocational education: Value implications, practices and planning*. *Vocational and Technical Education*, 1(3). <https://doi.org/10.54844/vte.2024.0669>