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INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION: A REVIEW OF CONCEPTS, FRAMEWORKS, AND TRAINING APPROACHES IN THE CHINESE CONTEXT

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Abstract:

Intercultural competence has emerged as a crucial element of foreign language education as teachers work within classrooms that are increasingly diverse and globally interconnected. This review compiles and analyses important conceptual, theoretical, and empirical work on intercultural competence, focusing specifically on its implications for foreign language teaching in China. Drawing on key frameworks such as Byram's Intercultural Communicative Competence model and Deardorff's process-based approach, this review describes intercultural competence as a multidimensional construct that encompasses cultural knowledge, interpretive skills, communicative adaptability, reflective awareness, and open-minded attitudes. Research shows that training programmes that combine practical activities, reflective processes, and long-term engagement lead to significant gains in teachers' intercultural sensitivity and self-efficacy. However, studies continue to highlight enduring challenges in China, where exam-driven classroom cultures, scarce intercultural contact, and uneven institutional backing hinder teachers from effectively using intercultural teaching approaches, particularly in regions like Jilin. The review suggests that improving intercultural competence in China calls for professional development that is both coherent and responsive to local contexts, bridging the gap between policy aims and everyday teaching realities. Long-term experiential training, strong institutional support, and chances for genuine intercultural engagement are crucial for helping teachers apply conceptual knowledge in their classroom practice. The findings provide

a foundation for designing more sustainable, locally relevant intercultural training initiatives for foreign language teachers.

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Keyword:

Chinese Education Context, Cross-Cultural Training, Foreign Language Education, Intercultural Competence, Jilin Province, Teacher Professional Development



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Introduction

Intercultural competence has become a central component of foreign language education as teachers worldwide confront increasingly diverse and globalised classrooms. Modern foreign language teachers are expected to do more than help students master grammar and vocabulary. They contribute to easing cultural challenges, strengthening mutual understanding, and mentoring learners as they navigate diverse intercultural contexts. This change highlights the idea that real communication involves empathy, cultural awareness, and the skill to make sense of perspectives that differ from one's own. In this setting, intercultural competence is widely understood as an essential professional capability, not merely an optional pedagogical enhancement.

Against this broader educational backdrop, foundational research offers long-standing frameworks for understanding intercultural competence. Byram's (1997) framework of Intercultural Communicative Competence underscores the need for open attitudes, awareness of cultures, interpretive competence, and critical sensitivity to cultural circumstances. In a similar manner, Deardorff's (2006) Process Model describes intercultural development as a continuous cycle shaped by attitudes, knowledge, internal qualities like empathy and adaptability, and outward behaviours that support effective cross-cultural interaction. Fantini (2009) further observes that the development of intercultural competence depends on a reflective and progressive learning process. When considered together, these prominent models indicate that intercultural competence consists of cognitive, emotional, and behavioural dimensions that educators need to nurture in order to prepare learners for global communication.

When these theoretical models are considered in specific national contexts, China has shown a growing emphasis on advancing intercultural competence in response to the country's increasing global presence and education policies that encourage international awareness, cross-cultural insight, and wider global involvement. However, many foreign language teachers, particularly those working in provinces such as Jilin, still struggle to incorporate intercultural pedagogy into their teaching because of exam-oriented curricula, limited institutional backing, and minimal opportunities for genuine intercultural exposure. These teachers commonly report difficulties in managing cultural misunderstandings and incorporating intercultural components into their lessons. These challenges reveal deeper structural weaknesses in initial teacher preparation as well as ongoing professional development.

In response to these contextual challenges, cross-cultural training has emerged as a central professional development approach for overcoming these difficulties. Evidence from global scholarship shows that experiential strategies, reflective tasks, intercultural simulations, and digital exchange initiatives can substantially boost teachers' intercultural sensitivity, adaptability, and teaching flexibility (Cushner & Mahon, 2009; O'Dowd, 2020). Recent studies further demonstrate that AI-enhanced and cloud-based digital learning environments extend these benefits by enabling sustained intercultural interaction, personalised feedback, and reflective engagement across global contexts (Papadakis et al., 2024a, 2024b; Samala et al., 2025). Nevertheless, the quality and depth of such training differ across countries. In China, many training initiatives continue to be theoretical, sporadic, or limited to single sessions, which restricts the ongoing engagement needed for sustained professional change (Wang & Coleman, 2009). As a consequence, teachers often develop conceptual knowledge about intercultural competence but lack the skills or institutional structures required to implement intercultural pedagogy in practice.

Despite the wide range of international theoretical and empirical work on intercultural competence, there is still a clear lack of synthesis focused on the Chinese foreign language education context. Much of the existing research is scattered across conceptual discussions, policy analyses, and classroom-based investigations, with relatively little attention to how intercultural competence models are enacted in China's varied educational settings. Studies on less urbanized areas, including Jilin Province, are particularly scarce even though these regions have unique sociocultural and institutional characteristics. Taken together, these shortcomings underscore the need for a review that is firmly grounded in context and that connects international frameworks, national policy priorities, and what teachers encounter in their everyday practice.

This review extends its analytical scope by engaging with a wide body of international and Chinese literature published between 2010 and 2024, encompassing theoretical perspectives, empirical research, and policy-focused studies. Moving past foundational approaches, it incorporates recent research on digital intercultural exchange, AI-supported intercultural learning, and teacher professional development to reflect current developments in the field.

Additionally, this review aims to integrate foundational theories, well-established models of intercultural competence, cross-cultural training approaches, and empirical evidence to present a comprehensive understanding of intercultural competence in foreign language education, with specific focus on the Chinese context. Through a critical synthesis of global literature, Chinese studies, and teachers' reported difficulties, the review uncovers continuing gaps,

contextual barriers, and opportunities for enhancing intercultural teacher development. It ultimately calls for long-term, reflective, and context-aware training approaches that can help teachers cultivate deep and practically relevant intercultural competence.

Guiding Focus Questions

The review was guided by the following focus questions:

1. How is intercultural competence conceptualized in the literature?
2. What frameworks and training models have been developed globally and in China?
3. What challenges affect Chinese language teachers, particularly in provinces such as Jilin?
4. What implications emerge for teachers, institutions, and policymaking?

Literature Review

Concept of Intercultural Competence

Intercultural competence is widely recognized as a foundational requirement in contemporary foreign language education, particularly as classrooms become increasingly shaped by globalisation and cross-cultural contact. It is generally defined as an individual's ability to interact effectively, appropriately, and ethically with people from culturally diverse backgrounds (Byram, 1997). Many scholars describe intercultural competence as a complex set of abilities that brings together attitudes, cultural understanding, interpretive skills, flexible communication, and an awareness of cultural differences at a deeper level.

In foreign language teaching, intercultural competence is crucial because language meaning cannot be separated from its cultural background. Teachers act as cultural mediators who help learners make sense of the cultural perspectives embedded in communication in the target language (Sercu, 2005). Fantini (2006) notes that educators with strong intercultural competence are better able to create inclusive classrooms and handle misunderstandings that emerge from cultural differences.

Within China, the importance of intercultural competence has intensified as education systems seek to align with global standards and promote international communication. However, many teachers still struggle to interpret and address cultural diversity because they have not received adequate training and lack meaningful exposure to multicultural settings (Zhang & Zhao, 2022). This situation highlights the importance of viewing intercultural competence as both a key learning goal and a crucial professional skill for foreign language teachers.

Theoretical Foundations of Intercultural Competence

A range of theoretical perspectives helps explain how intercultural competence develops and offers direction on how foreign language teachers can continue to build this skill. Interpreting these theories through a Chinese lens demonstrates that the development of intercultural competence is shaped not only by teachers' individual characteristics, but also by wider systemic and institutional influences. Byram (1997) and Deardorff (2006) illuminate the essential knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours required of teachers, while Bandura (1986), Engeström (1987), and Fullan (2007) clarify how self-efficacy, organisational structures, and

policy alignment determine whether intercultural approaches can be meaningfully employed in day-to-day classrooms, especially in exam-centred contexts.

Synthesis of Models and Their Relevance to China

These models share several common assumptions, including the need for sustained exposure, reflective engagement, and supportive institutional ecosystems. Across China, the implementation of these models is variable, constrained by fixed curriculum requirements and scarce opportunities for intercultural exchange. This review contends that the models need to be reshaped to suit local circumstances, including exam-driven schooling and variations in teacher training across regions.

Byram's Intercultural Communicative Competence Framework

Byram's (1997) framework retains strong influence in intercultural education. It specifies five major elements which include attitudes, knowledge, skills for interpreting and relating, skills for discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness. The framework presents teachers as facilitators who assist learners in understanding and critically examining cultural perspectives. The review highlights that this model is especially useful for foreign language educators since it combines both linguistic and cultural dimensions with critical reflection.

Deardorff's Process Model of Intercultural Competence

According to Deardorff (2009), intercultural competence develops through an ongoing process shaped by attitudes including openness and curiosity, cultural knowledge, internal qualities such as empathy, and outward expressions of competent intercultural behaviour. This process-oriented view mirrors how teachers develop professionally, with competence strengthening through repeated experiences, reflective thinking, and sustained practice.

Social Cognitive Theory

Social Cognitive Theory, proposed by Bandura (1986) explains that teachers acquire intercultural behaviours through observational learning, modelling, and the development of self-efficacy. Teachers who feel confident in their ability to manage culturally diverse exchanges show greater willingness to embed intercultural aspects into their lessons (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001). The review highlights that cross-cultural training enhances teachers' confidence by providing practical mastery experiences along with opportunities for thoughtful reflection.

Activity Theory

Engeström's (1987) Activity Theory explains teacher learning by conceptualising it as a process embedded within an activity system comprising tools, community, rules, and the division of labour. The review highlights that cross-cultural training operates as a mediational tool that reshapes instructional practices and encourages more culturally responsive pedagogy.

Fullan's Change Theory

Fullan (2007) emphasises that meaningful educational change is achieved through a shared moral purpose, ongoing development of capacity, and coherence throughout the education system. In relation to intercultural teacher development, this points to the importance of locating training initiatives within institutions that foster collaboration, uphold leadership support, and enable sustained professional learning. The review highlights that when coherence is lacking, the long-term impact of training is difficult to maintain.

These theories, when viewed collectively, indicate that intercultural competence is influenced by cognitive, social, emotional, and institutional dimensions, reinforcing the need for professional development that addresses several layers of teacher growth.

Cross-Cultural Training in Language Education

Cross-cultural training has gained prominence as a major strategy for developing teachers' intercultural competence. It works to enhance cultural awareness, communication flexibility, and reflective openness to cultural variation (Fantini, 2006). The review highlights that multiple components are frequently emphasized:

Forms of Cross-Cultural Training

Cross-cultural training encompasses a wide spectrum of pedagogical approaches designed to enhance teachers' cultural awareness, sensitivity, and communicative adaptability. Scholars generally classify these types of training as pre-service education, professional development undertaken during teaching service, experiential forms of learning, reflective modes of practice, and digitally facilitated intercultural engagement. Together, these forms of training establish complementary means for building teachers' intercultural awareness, professional attitudes, and pedagogical competencies.

Pre-service preparation usually introduces key theories related to culture, communication, and diversity, allowing prospective teachers to develop early awareness of cultural differences and their significance in language teaching. This form of preparation enables learners to foster openness and curiosity, which are commonly identified as key attributes of intercultural competence (Byram, 1997; Dearnorff, 2006).

In-service professional development, however, offers practising teachers more applied opportunities to integrate intercultural principles into real classroom contexts. Such programmes often include workshops, case-based examinations, classroom observation tasks, and guided discussions that work to enhance teachers' interpretive skills, professional confidence, and ability to manage culturally diverse learning environments (Sercu, 2005). Evidence indicates that these professional learning efforts are most successful when they remain ongoing, are responsive to local conditions, and are strengthened by a positive institutional climate (Cushner & Mahon, 2009).

Experiential learning continues to be regarded as one of the most important approaches to cross-cultural training. Rooted in experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984), this model incorporates the following components:

- Intercultural simulations
- Role-plays of culturally situated scenarios
- Cultural immersion programs

These experiences enable teachers to confront cultural ambiguities, negotiate meanings, and develop adaptive communication strategies, skills that cannot be acquired through theoretical instruction alone (Byram et al., 2002; Fantini, 2006).

Reflective practice represents another essential element of cross-cultural training. Activities such as systematic reflection, reflective journaling, collaborative discussions, and critical incident analysis help teachers question taken for granted assumptions and recognise how their personal beliefs shape intercultural encounters. Fantini (2006) and Chen (2019) highlight that these reflective practices foster greater cultural self-awareness, which is essential for the development of intercultural competence.

More recently, digital intercultural exchanges have become increasingly prominent, particularly with the expansion of global online learning communities. Virtual exchange initiatives, including telecollaboration and online intercultural dialogue, enable teachers to engage with international peers, observe varied communication styles, and join global professional communities (Park, 2018; Byram & Wagner, 2018). These digital opportunities help address geographical constraints, making them particularly valuable for teachers working in less urbanised areas such as Jilin. Recent research highlights the growing role of AI-enhanced and digitally mediated learning environments in supporting intercultural competence development. Studies examining cloud-based and AI-enabled educational technologies demonstrate their capacity to foster personalised, ongoing, and adaptable learning environments, while international analyses of mobile learning underscore their expanding role in promoting cross-border interaction and learner-centred practices in higher education. Collectively, this body of research suggests that AI-supported technologies extend traditional virtual exchange models by enabling more context-responsive and scalable forms of intercultural learning (Papadakis et al., 2024a, 2024b; Samala et al., 2025).

Taken together, these approaches to cross-cultural training highlight that the development of intercultural competence relies on the integration of conceptual insight and practical experience. With consistent implementation and robust institutional backing, these training strategies can contribute to stronger cultural empathy, communicative flexibility, and intercultural pedagogical competence among teachers.

Benefits for Teacher Development

Teachers who engage in cross-cultural training show increased cultural empathy, stronger adaptability, and more responsive pedagogical practices (Sercu, 2005). Such training further enables teachers to interpret students' actions within cultural contexts and to develop instructional resources that reflect cultural inclusivity (Chen, 2019).

Challenges in the Chinese Context

The value of cross-cultural training is well understood and its implementation across China continues to vary widely. Many initiatives rely heavily on theoretical instruction, providing limited scope for experiential participation (Jin & Cortazzi, 2018). Teachers in Jilin Province,

in particular, note insufficient institutional support and scarce opportunities to interact with culturally diverse communities (Wang & Chen, 2020). These conditions reduce the long-term impact of training and highlight the need for professional development that is continuous and sensitive to local contexts. Situated within the national landscape, Jilin Province represents an analytically relevant case given its comparatively limited involvement in international exchange programmes, fewer foreign language training opportunities, and lower levels of exposure to multicultural environments than China's coastal metropolitan regions. Provincial education documentation and recent empirical research suggest that teachers in Jilin experience distinct structural constraints, rendering the region particularly suitable for examining the mediating role of systemic factors in intercultural competence development.

Intercultural Competence in the Chinese Foreign Language Education Context

China's recent educational reforms place growing importance on global citizenship and intercultural communication, yet the extent to which these aims are realised in practice differs considerably across regions. The review highlights a range of contextual factors that limit implementation:

- An examination-centred system that leads teachers to focus on grammar, vocabulary, and test preparation rather than cultural understanding (Xu, 2019).
- In less urbanised or rural regions such as Jilin, teachers encounter limited opportunities to engage with culturally diverse groups (Li, 2020).
- Insufficient institutional support, reflected in limited resources, restricted training time, and the absence of follow-up programmes (Zhang and Zhao, 2022).
- Rigid curricular arrangements that leave minimal room for intercultural learning, despite teachers' interest in incorporating such elements.

Although teachers appreciate the importance of intercultural approaches in language education, their ability to implement such practices is often limited by policy expectations, institutional constraints, and broader systemic challenges. The resulting divergence between policy ambitions and classroom practice demonstrates the importance of intercultural training that is enduring, locally attuned, and comprehensive in scope.

Synthesis of Empirical Studies

The review synthesizes international and Chinese studies, highlighting substantial contrasts:

- ***Trends in International Research***

International research on intercultural competence reveals several consistent patterns in how teacher development is approached. Academic work frequently demonstrates that sustained intercultural immersion offers teachers rich firsthand familiarity with multiple cultural backgrounds. These efforts often pair experiential components with digital tools that facilitate real interactions across cultural boundaries. Programmes thrive when institutions prioritise teacher freedom and support innovative approaches. Globally, studies often employ mixed method approaches alongside longitudinal designs, enabling analysis of short-term learning results and the enduring impact of

intercultural training on classroom practice. Taken as a whole, these features embody a broad and developmental conception of intercultural competence in the preparation of teachers.

- ***Trends in Chinese Research***

Studies from the Chinese context frequently highlight conceptual comprehension rather than hands-on pedagogical practice. Many teachers indicate that they value intercultural competence, although they lack confidence in implementing intercultural approaches in their teaching (Yang, 2021). Research additionally reveals that irregular, short-duration training contributes to uneven intercultural competence development (Chen & Liu, 2020).

- ***Identified Gaps***

Despite these growing bodies of research, the review highlights several areas that merit additional study. One key gap is the lack of research on provincial regions like Jilin, where teachers face challenges that differ significantly from those in major urban centres. In addition, the relationship between teacher motivation, the quality of intercultural training they receive, and how these elements shape their classroom practices has not been examined in sufficient depth. An additional challenge is the lack of research linking cross-cultural and digital training frameworks, notwithstanding their expanding role in today's educational environment. Lastly, few empirical investigations track teachers over long periods to determine whether improvements in intercultural competence are sustained, leaving important questions about long-term impact unanswered.

These gaps indicate the need for focused, context aware research that recognises the heterogeneity of China's education system and its ongoing integration into global exchanges. Overall, these findings affirm that intercultural competence develops through the alignment of individual teacher learning, training design, and institutional and policy contexts. Rather than being reducible to isolated skills or short-term training interventions, the literature suggests that intercultural competence emerges from sustained interaction among theoretical perspectives, institutional structures, and professional learning processes. This synthesis emphasises the need to conceptualise intercultural competence as a dynamic and contextually situated capability within foreign language teacher education.

Methodology

A narrative review of the literature underpins this article. Studies published from 2010 to 2024 were accessed via ERIC, Scopus, Web of Science, and CNKI using targeted keywords, including "intercultural competence," "foreign language teachers," "cross-cultural training," and "China." Only materials relevant to teacher development and foreign language education in China were included. Inclusion criteria required studies to (a) focus on intercultural competence or cross-cultural training, (b) relate to foreign language education or teacher development, and (c) address either the Chinese context or internationally recognised models relevant to China. Exclusion criteria included opinion pieces without analytical grounding, studies unrelated to education, and publications lacking clear methodological or theoretical contribution.

Findings from Literature Review

This review found that teachers gain intercultural competence most effectively through long-term experiential and reflective learning rather than single-session training. Across a range of conceptual and theoretical viewpoints, scholars emphasise that intercultural competence encompasses attitudes of curiosity and openness, cultural knowledge, interpretive and relational competencies, and reflective capacities that support sensitive and purposeful engagement with cultural diversity (Byram, 1997; Dearsdorff, 2009). These competencies are not isolated attributes but interconnected processes that evolve through sustained exposure, reflective engagement, and meaningful intercultural interaction. This general view emphasises the necessity of ensuring that foreign language teacher education includes a strong intercultural focus.

The theoretical models reviewed point to shared principles in the development of intercultural competence. Byram's framework highlights how knowledge, skills, and critical cultural awareness work together, portraying teachers as mediators who help convey meaning across cultures. Dearsdorff's process focused model further supports the idea that intercultural development is cyclical rather than linear, influenced by both internal attitudes and outward behaviours. At the same time, Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory explains the psychological processes, including observational learning and self-efficacy, that shape teachers' willingness to use intercultural principles in their practice. Activity Theory adds that intercultural teaching occurs within institutional and social structures that influence and mediate teacher behaviour. According to Fullan's Change Theory, the continuation of intercultural teaching practices requires clear system-wide alignment, a culture of collaboration, and supportive organizational structures. Together, these theories converge on the general statement that teacher intercultural competence is contingent not only on individual ability but on the broader sociocultural and institutional contexts in which teachers work.

Research on cross-cultural training demonstrates parallel patterns. Studies repeatedly show that experiential learning, reflective processes, immersive cultural experiences, and digitally mediated intercultural exchanges effectively build teachers intercultural sensitivity and capacity to adapt (Fantini, 2006; Sercu, 2005). However, the review highlights a broad concern: although the value of these approaches is widely acknowledged, training in many settings, especially in China, tends to be fragmented, heavily theoretical, or short in duration. Teachers often complete training with enhanced conceptual understanding but limited practical competence due to the absence of long-term, iterative, and context-specific opportunities for continued development. This suggests the broader conclusion that cross-cultural training achieves its greatest impact when it is integrated into a long-term professional development framework backed by institutional support.

Placing the Chinese context alongside international perspectives reveals a set of statements that can be applied more broadly. Although policy frameworks highlight global citizenship and intercultural communication as priorities, intercultural pedagogy in China continues to be hindered by structural barriers. Key obstacles include examination-oriented teaching practices, limited opportunities for cultural engagement, insufficient curricular time for intercultural learning, and inconsistent institutional support (Jin and Cortazzi, 2018; Zhang and Zhao, 2022). In contexts like Jilin, these limitations are heightened since access to professional development and intercultural engagement is particularly restricted. Thus, the general principle that emerges

is that teachers' intercultural competence is shaped not only by individual readiness but by systemic affordances and constraints within their educational environment.

Empirical evidence from global and Chinese contexts points to a recurring gap between what educators understand conceptually and what they can implement in practice. International research often shows stronger use of experiential and intercultural training models, supported by institutional environments that encourage creative teaching. Conversely, Chinese studies frequently report that teachers appreciate the value of intercultural competence but lack the confidence and opportunities needed to put intercultural strategies into practice (Chen, 2019; Yang, 2021). This suggests that intercultural teaching is successful only when teachers' beliefs, the quality of their training, the support of their institutions, and their classroom practices are in harmony.

Synthesizing these strands, the overarching generalizations from the literature are as follows: Intercultural competence is a crucial component of foreign language education and involves the combined development of cognitive, emotional, and behavioural skills.

The growth of this competence progresses through an ongoing cycle shaped by individual traits, reflective engagement, and the sociocultural environment surrounding the learner.

Cross-cultural training works best when learners participate in hands-on tasks, reflective activities, and long-term learning, yet its effectiveness declines when offered as a one-off session or limited to theoretical content.

Teachers' development of intercultural competence is strongly shaped by how institutions are organised, the priorities embedded in the curriculum, and the opportunities they have to engage in meaningful intercultural experiences.

In China, particularly in provinces like Jilin, systemic barriers hinder the practical implementation of intercultural pedagogy even though teachers generally hold positive attitudes toward it.

There exists a consistent gap between theoretical knowledge of intercultural competence and classroom application, indicating the need for more coherent and context-sensitive professional development.

Together, these statements establish the theoretical and research groundwork for the next section, which considers how these insights may shape the creation of improved intercultural training programs for China's foreign language educators.

This review found that teachers gain intercultural competence most effectively through long-term experiential and reflective learning rather than single-session training. Studies consistently show that limited institutional support, exam-driven teaching, and lack of exposure to multicultural environments reduce teachers' ability to apply intercultural pedagogy in practice, particularly in regions such as Jilin. Taken together, these findings indicate that intercultural competence in China is influenced not only by teacher knowledge and attitudes but also by contextual forces, confirming that sustained institutional support and meaningful intercultural engagement are essential for translating theory into classroom practice.

Discussion

Building on these synthesized findings, the literature shows that intercultural competence is a complex and continually developing construct that plays a vital role in successful foreign language teaching. By synthesising these viewpoints, the discussion draws attention to broader implications for teacher preparation, pedagogical approaches, and policy application within the Chinese context. Yet, despite access to a substantial body of global research, Chinese foreign language teachers continue to encounter deep-rooted structural and contextual constraints that impede meaningful instructional change.

A recurring theme in the literature is that intercultural competence takes shape through continuous engagement in experiential and reflective learning, rather than through isolated conceptual teaching. According to Byram's (1997) model and Deardorff's (2009) process approach, teachers build intercultural competence by participating in reflective analysis, authentic real-world interactions, and sustained cycles of learning. In many settings, including those in China, professional learning for teachers is commonly confined to brief or theory-focused training that fails to offer the depth and practical experience essential for long-term development. This situation highlights the need to redesign professional development so that ongoing, contextually relevant, and practice-oriented learning becomes the central focus.

The analysis shows that both internal psychological elements and systemic contexts affect teachers' capacity to implement intercultural pedagogy. Social Cognitive Theory positions teacher self-efficacy as central to the successful application of intercultural principles in classroom settings. Teachers who feel assured about their intercultural skills tend to incorporate cultural perspectives into their lessons more often (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001). The review reveals that teachers in China, and particularly those based in Jilin Province, often face reduced self-efficacy as a result of insufficient training opportunities, scarce intercultural engagement, and institutional pressures focused on test performance. Enhancing self-efficacy through training that promotes reflective thinking, hands-on practice, and collaborative learning can therefore improve the quality of intercultural instruction.

Teachers' ability to implement intercultural pedagogy is heavily shaped by the institutional conditions in which they work. Activity Theory explains that teacher actions are shaped by contextual elements such as the tools they use, the rules they follow, and the community norms surrounding them. Studies indicate that teachers have difficulty sustaining intercultural pedagogy when institutions fail to provide curriculum flexibility, administrative support, and sufficient resources (Jin & Cortazzi, 2018; Zhang & Zhao, 2022). Fullan's Change Theory emphasises that effective and enduring change depends on system coherence, strong leadership engagement, and a shared mission. Across China, even though global competence has gained prominence in national policy, limited coordination with school agendas commonly leads to fragmented or symbolic practices. Therefore, to embed intercultural competence meaningfully in foreign language teaching, schools and education bureaus must build institutional cultures that reinforce and value intercultural learning.

The evidence from international and Chinese contexts points to a significant variation in training methods as well as in the results observed. Many international systems favour cross-cultural training that is deeply experiential and immersive, with strong institutional support for intercultural dialogue. In China, teacher development programmes often focus heavily on theory, leaving limited room for practical or experiential learning. Teachers often view

intercultural competence positively, yet their classroom application of it is constrained by limited teaching time, fixed curricular structures, and few avenues for engaging with culturally diverse communities (Yang, 2021; Chen, 2019). This discrepancy reveals an underlying structural barrier, showing that motivated teachers cannot effectively implement intercultural principles unless broader systemic support is in place.

Finally, the discussion highlights a consistent divide in the literature between what teachers understand conceptually and what they are able to implement in the classroom. Although teachers generally acknowledge the value of intercultural competence, they often lack the necessary conditions to apply intercultural pedagogy effectively. The problem is more pronounced in regions such as Jilin, where teachers have limited exposure to authentic intercultural experiences and uneven access to training. Bridging this gap calls for coordinated action among policymakers, educators, and school administrators to develop long-term, context-sensitive professional development programmes that align with teachers' lived realities. Overall, the research indicates that strengthening intercultural competence among Chinese foreign language teachers demands broad transformation in institutional systems, teacher beliefs, and instructional practices. This means providing long-term experiential training, ensuring stable institutional support, and empowering teachers to incorporate intercultural perspectives into regular classroom practice.

Conclusion

This review integrates major theoretical, conceptual, and empirical findings related to intercultural competence in foreign language teaching, focusing especially on how these issues manifest in China. Research describes intercultural competence as a dynamic and layered construct that includes cultural knowledge, the ability to interpret cultural meanings, communicative flexibility, reflective awareness, and openness toward others (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2009). These abilities are vital for foreign language teachers because teaching a language inherently involves guiding learners to understand different cultural perspectives. Taken as a whole, these frameworks, including Byram's model, Deardorff's process model, Social Cognitive Theory, Activity Theory, and Fullan's Change Theory, reveal that the growth of intercultural competence relies on cognitive, emotional, behavioural, and institutional influences.

This review indicates that China's educational environment creates clear barriers to the effective adoption of intercultural pedagogy. Although national directives increasingly encourage global competence and intercultural communication, structural issues such as exam-focused teaching, restricted cultural exposure, and unreliable institutional support persist for teachers (Jin and Cortazzi, 2018; Zhang & Zhao, 2022). In many schools, particularly in regions such as Jilin, professional development is often fragmented or excessively theoretical, offering limited experiential or reflective opportunities to foster sustained intercultural growth. Consequently, although teachers tend to hold positive views about intercultural competence, gaps continue to appear between what they understand conceptually and what they practise in the classroom.

A consistent finding across empirical studies is that cross-cultural training is most effective when it is experiential, reflective, and sustained over time. Brief workshops or single lectures provide limited benefit for developing teachers' practical intercultural abilities. Effective professional development needs sustained experiential learning, structured reflection,

teamwork, and digital or in person intercultural interactions. These methods can increase teachers' assurance in their teaching abilities, expand their cultural insight, and enable the effective use of intercultural perspectives in their lessons (Sercu, 2005; Fantini, 2006).

Overall, the evidence reveals multiple considerations that must inform the training of foreign language teachers within the Chinese context. The central implication is that teacher education should emphasise intercultural competence, using established theories as guidance and ensuring alignment with broader institutional policy systems. Second, teacher development should occur in environments that encourage innovation, cultivate reflective thinking, and provide opportunities for cultural engagement. Third, training programmes must be aligned with local conditions. Finally, future research should address the long-term and context-bound outcomes of ongoing intercultural training, focusing on how factors such as teacher motivation, institutional environments, and digital tools shape intercultural instructional practices.

To conclude, developing intercultural competence in China's foreign language teachers calls for a sustained and holistic approach that unites theory, hands-on practice, and consistent backing from institutions. When these supports function cohesively, intercultural competence develops into more than an instructional goal and becomes a transformative method of teaching that prepares students for engagement in a highly interconnected world.

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