DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE IN CHINESE ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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Abstract:

The post-pandemic emphasis on global and intercultural education has introduced new challenges for English language teaching in China. Following the guidelines of China Education Modernization 2035, China Medium- and Long-term National Education Reform Modernization, and the College English Curriculum Requirements of China, the College Foreign Language Teaching Steering Committee of China has prioritized the integration of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) into the curriculum. This initiative aims to enhance learners' understanding of diverse communities and improve their intercultural interaction skills, ultimately preparing them to be global citizens. Despite extensive theoretical discussions, empirical evidence on the practical integration of ICC into English Language Teaching courses is limited. This study aims to bridge this gap by examining the language learning experiences of Chinese students and the perceptions of English teachers regarding ICC development at a newly established international institute in China. This paper highlights the current state of ICC instruction in China, emphasizing the need to integrate ICC-focused modules into the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) curriculum. The goal is to improve the ICC skills of Chinese students. Due to the complex nature and increasing importance of ICC, incorporating and exploring ICC-centred English modules is both beneficial and crucial for developing ICC among Chinese English language learners. This underscores the importance of designing and implementing ICC-oriented components within the EFL courses of Chinese international institutions.

Keywords:

College English Curriculum Requirements of China, Intercultural Communicative Competence, English Language Teaching, English as a Foreign Language

Introduction

Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) is the capability to interact effectively and appropriately with people from different cultural backgrounds. It encompasses linguistic skills as well as the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and awareness needed to understand and convey meaning across cultures (Deardorff, 2006). ICC allows individuals to recognize cultural differences, interpret behaviours within their cultural contexts, and adjust their communication strategies to foster mutual understanding and respect. It focuses on cultivating empathy, openness, curiosity, and flexibility in intercultural exchanges, aiming to bridge cultural gaps and encourage meaningful dialogue in diverse environments.

In a globalized world where interactions across cultural boundaries are routine, ICC is increasingly seen as crucial. It involves the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people from different cultural backgrounds, extending beyond mere language proficiency to include cultural knowledge, skills, attitudes, and awareness (Byram, 2021). The growing interconnectedness of societies, with businesses, educational institutions, and governments operating on an international scale, drives the need for ICC. Without it, cultural differences can lead to misunderstandings, miscommunications, and conflicts, impeding cooperation and progress. Cultivating ICC enables individuals to navigate diverse cultural contexts with sensitivity and competence, promoting mutual respect, collaboration, and effective communication across borders.

The current state of ICC in China shows both progress and challenges. Progress is evident through increased emphasis on intercultural education modules, growing international exchanges, and corporate recognition of ICC skills in the workplace. However, challenges remain, such as limited exposure to diverse cultures, language barriers, and the need to address stereotypes (Li & Song, 2019). Government initiatives, technology, and efforts to balance globalization with cultural preservation are shaping the evolving ICC landscape in China, reflecting a dynamic interplay between advancements and ongoing hurdles (Mai, 2018). The government and educational institutions have recognized the importance of ICC and have started integrating it into language education (Gu, 2017). Nonetheless, there is an urgent need to address the deficiencies in ICC development among students, stemming from limitations in current English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching methods and a lack of focus on intercultural knowledge, awareness, attitudes, and communicative skills (Zhang & Zhou, 2019). Therefore, implementing ICC teaching modules in English language classes in China is crucial. While initial steps have been taken, the pressing need to improve ICC development among students underscores the importance of integrating comprehensive intercultural communication skills into the EFL curriculum (Sun, 2016). Overcoming challenges like limited exposure to diverse cultures and language barriers requires a deliberate focus on cultural awareness, fostering a more inclusive and globally proficient student body. Incorporating targeted ICC modules in English language classes will be instrumental in preparing Chinese students for effective communication in today's interconnected and diverse world (Zembylas, 2023).

Literature Review

ICC has gained significant importance in the globalized world, especially within the context of English language teaching. As China emerges as a major global player, it has become crucial for Chinese college students to develop ICC. This literature review will explore the key issues related to fostering ICC in college English programs for Chinese students.

Definition of ICC

ICC refers to the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people from different cultures, while understanding and respecting their cultural backgrounds. In English language teaching, ICC is crucial for successful communication in a globalized world. As English serves as a lingua franca across cultures, students without ICC skills may encounter communication challenges in international settings. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2020) identifies ICC as a fundamental aspect of language proficiency, highlighting the importance of learners acquiring knowledge of other cultures, fostering attitudes of openness and curiosity, and developing the ability to communicate effectively in intercultural contexts. This framework is widely used in language education, and numerous studies have examined its effectiveness in enhancing ICC among English learners.

Importance of ICC in English Language Teaching

Over the past decade, the new policy of internationalization in higher education has become closely tied to English Language Teaching (ELT) classes, fostering increasingly bilingual and bicultural environments in international institutions. The bilingual and bicultural nature of ELT programs (Baker, 2016; Jenkins, 2014) suggests that students in these institutions must consider both linguistic and cultural aspects in their communications, whether in class or other situations. Knight (2008) describes internationalization as the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the goals, functions, or delivery of higher education at both institutional and national levels. There is a pressing need for international institutions to develop curricula and syllabi that support the internationalization of higher education programs, as highlighted in educational theory and teaching practices and applied linguistics (Ladegaard, 2022). In the post-pandemic era, COVID-19 has heightened the emphasis on incorporating intercultural competence into course curricula and enhancing students' experiences through English language classes, because many Chinese students now opt to study at international institutions in their home country rather than going abroad, aiming to improve their ICC and ultimately become interculturally competent global citizens in an increasingly competitive global job market (Dervin & Tian, 2023).

ICC aims to equip students for the challenges of a globalized world by encouraging them to think beyond international boundaries, recognize the global scope of social connections, appreciate diversity, and engage responsibly in both local and global communities (Byram, 2008, 2018). ICC can be aligned with Bloom's taxonomy of learning outcomes in three aspects: cognitive, psychomotor, and affective. The cognitive aspect involves knowledge, where intercultural learning experiences in class enable students to collaborate with peers, understand, and convey messages effectively in both their native and target languages. The psychomotor aspect involves competence, requiring students to develop creative skills, such as thinking innovatively and expressing themselves in new ways. The affective aspect pertains to attitudes and actions, where students should develop questioning skills, including analytical reasoning and the ability to ask critical questions of themselves and the world (Kulich et al., 2021).

Situating ICC Teaching in China

China has a vast number of English language learners, who can enhance their linguistic and communicative competence by studying at international institutes within the country or going abroad. According to Qiao (2017), the number of English learners in China has exceeded 400 million. English is taught from preschool through secondary school and is a required course in

colleges and universities. Chun and Evans (2016) emphasize the need to integrate ICC and English language teaching on a global scale into the national curriculum and syllabus for higher education. Studies by Fang et al. (2016, 2018) indicate that while Chinese university students have a positive view of ICC, their understanding is often superficial. However, practical methods to integrate ICC into English language classes are scarce, and there is little empirical research on designing ICC-based teaching modules or assessing their impact on the ICC development of Chinese learners.

Additionally, *College English Curriculum Requirements (CECR)* lack clear objectives for teaching ICC, and teachers face several challenges in integrating culture and ICC into their lessons. These challenges include teachers' perceptions, inadequate instructional knowledge, skills, and awareness, difficulties in assessing students' ICC levels, and a general need for effective teaching modules to address these issues (Ou & Gu, 2020). Despite attempts to overcome these obstacles, there are still few effective ICC teaching modules in English language instruction (Dervin, 2022). Therefore, conducting critical research on the implementation of ICC teaching modules could provide valuable insights into effective strategies for fostering ICC in EFL teaching.

Methodology

Research Questions and Research Objectives
This research aims to evaluate and report on the impact of an ICC teaching module on the development of Chinese students' ICC, as well as to assess both students' and teachers' perceptions of ICC development. The study will be guided by the following research questions:

1. How does integrating an ICC teaching module into an English language class affect students' development in terms of ICC skills, knowledge, awareness, and attitudes?
2. How do students view the effect of implementing an ICC teaching module in their English language class on their ICC development?
3. How does the teacher view the impact of the ICC teaching module implementation on students' ICC development?

The research objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To assess the impact of incorporating an ICC teaching module into an English language class on students' development of ICC in terms of awareness, skills, knowledge, and attitudes.
2. To explore how students perceive the implementation of the ICC teaching module in their English language class and its effect on their ICC development.
3. To investigate how the teacher views the implementation of the ICC teaching module in an English language class and its impact on students' ICC development.

These objectives aim to address the gap in practical classroom application regarding the integration of ICC skills into English language instruction.

Research Design
The current study employs a mixed methods approach to address the research questions. This approach combines both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, which are utilized in data collection, analysis, and interpretation of results (Creswell, 2014). By using at least one

quantitative and one qualitative instrument, this approach allows researchers to gather comprehensive data and mitigate the limitations of relying solely on either method. In addition to providing diverse data sources, the mixed methods approach enhances the reliability of quantitative findings by offering a deeper understanding through qualitative insights. Choy (2014) supports this approach, noting that combining quantitative and qualitative methods yields more robust results compared to using either method in isolation.

Quantitative data will be collected through questionnaires, while qualitative data will be gathered from semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Participants will be selected using convenience sampling, comprising Chinese EFL students and users of English at a newly established international institute. The study will involve 300 participants, including 10 English language teachers who teach both General English and Academic English. Additionally, 5 focus group participants will be included. This setup ensures coverage of diverse academic experiences among teachers and students while remaining manageable for both quantitative and qualitative analysis. To provide a longitudinal and developmental view of intercultural communicative competence, data will be collected from students and teachers before, during, and after their teaching and learning experiences.

Findings and Discussion

ICC Teaching Modules

To address the research questions, this study implements an experimental investigation of ICC teaching modules. The intervention utilizes the textbook *An Integrated Course (Third Edition)* published by Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press. Teaching activities will be designed around the theme of each unit, reflecting the principles of intercultural language and foreign language teaching methods with the goal of enhancing intercultural communication competence. The teaching process is structured into four segments:

1. ICC Knowledge: Students will read content related to the unit's theme, with the teacher explaining cultural knowledge and students contributing their own cultural materials.
2. ICC Skills: The focus will be on cultural and communicative case studies related to the theme, where students will analyse and summarize the ICC skills required, such as applying social norms, values, and thinking styles in real-life situations.
3. ICC Attitudes: Students will participate in real cross-cultural communication tasks to experience authentic communication activities and develop appropriate and effective attitudes toward various tasks and activities.
4. ICC Awareness: Groups will discuss each unit's theme, report on their learning experiences, and engage in cultural critique and reflection to enhance their ICC awareness in both their native and target languages.

The four teaching segments are intricately linked, progressing sequentially and seamlessly to create a comprehensive and systematic approach to developing intercultural communication competence. The teaching process emphasizes student participation and interaction, with teachers delivering rich intercultural content aligned with each unit's theme. For instance, using the second volume of the textbook as a reference, intercultural content from eight units is organized into eight core intercultural packages, covering topics such as educational concepts, views on happiness, intergenerational communication, innovative thinking, coping with adversity, cross-gender communication, language learning perspectives, and environmental

awareness. Additionally, expanded ICC content is structured into eight supplementary cultural packages, addressing lifestyle customs, history, politics and economics, social norms, thinking styles, religious beliefs, values, and non-verbal communication. Teachers will choose reading materials, cultural case studies, and design practice activities and critical reflections based on these ICC packages.

Results of the ICC Questionnaires and Interviews

To meet the objectives of this study, an intercultural competence questionnaire is administered to collect data before and after the implementation of the ICC-based English module. A preliminary questionnaire is given to participants to gather information about their background, intercultural experiences and awareness, perceptions of EFL teaching and learning, and intercultural communicative competence. This questionnaire is adapted based on themes identified by previous research (Fang & Baker, 2018). It includes items designed to assess students' perceptions prior to the introduction of the ICC-based module provided by English language teachers involved in this study. In addition to using triangulation, the researcher believes that ensuring anonymity will lead to more honest responses compared to face-to-face data collection methods.

The questionnaire for this study is organized into five sections. Section 1 collects demographic information such as gender, age, English learning experience, education level, and training. Respondents will answer these questions with specific details or select yes or no options. This section aims to gather comprehensive background information on students' English learning experiences. Section 2 includes questions about intercultural experiences. The current study has adapted the questionnaire by consolidating similar questions and eliminating redundant ones, as well as adding new questions relevant to authentic classroom practices in international institutes in China. Section 3 features five-point Likert scale items that focus on intercultural awareness and global citizenship. The data from this section will help address the research questions of the study. This tool was chosen for its alignment with the study's objectives and its accuracy, with a Cronbach Alpha coefficient above 0.70 for the adapted constructs. Section 4 investigates English language use and learning through 10 questions. The final section examines the implementation of ICC in English programs, with results that will also contribute to answering the research questions.

The results of the ICC questionnaire shown in Table 1 indicate that the questionnaire is reliable for data gathering purposes. The Cronbach alpha value for questionnaire is $\alpha=0.80$ which suggests that the statements in the questionnaire are internally consistent, and the questionnaire is reliable. Furthermore, a reliability test will also be run on the data obtained from perception as well. The Cronbach alpha value for perception is $\alpha=0.76$ which indicates that the questionnaire is reliable and internally consistent to gather data regarding students' perception on ICC.

Table 1: Cronbach Alpha Value of the Questionnaire

Sections	Items	Cronbach Alpha Value
Background information	14	0.81
Intercultural experience	12	0.70
Intercultural awareness	10	0.79
English language use and learning	11	0.76
English language use and learning	15	0.71

Examples of Items of Intercultural Awareness

A1. To effectively communicate with individuals in another language, it's essential to comprehend their culture.

A2. Understanding culture is integral to learning another language.

A3. Understanding one's own culture is crucial when learning another language.

A4. Acquiring a new language entail acquiring new behaviours, beliefs, and values.

A5. Culture and language are linked.

A6. Specific languages, cultures, and countries are inherently connected (e.g., the English language, English culture, and England).

A7. Languages can be associated with various cultures (e.g., the English language can be employed to represent the cultures and nations in which it is utilized, such as China).

A8. Different groups and individuals may define and comprehend cultures in varying ways.

A9. Individuals belong to various ethnic groups, including their national cultural group.

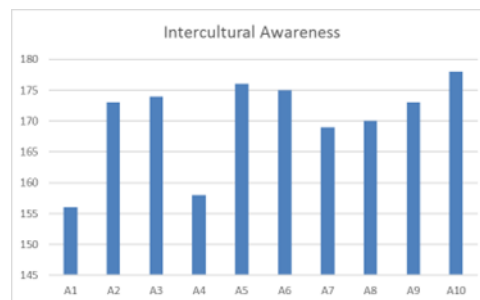A10. It is essential to avoid evaluating individuals from other cultures based on the norms of my own culture.

Figure 1: Students' Perception on Intercultural Awareness before the Intervention
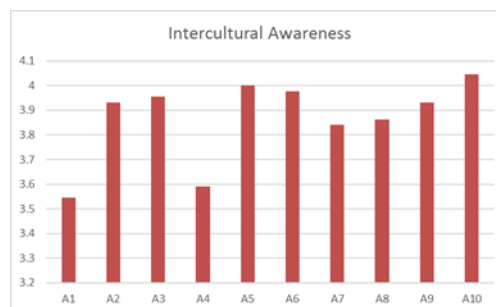

Figure 2: Students' Perception on Intercultural Awareness after the Intervention

The questionnaire responses present a varied view of respondents' understanding of the terms, with only a small percentage being familiar with them before the intervention. However, when asked about the factors important for ICC, there is broad agreement, with an average response of about 3.6. Most participants concur that experiencing intercultural interactions, whether in their home country or abroad, is essential for becoming interculturally competent. Regarding the respondents' English learning experiences, it is not surprising that the majority viewed English primarily as a tool for passing exams, due to the long-standing emphasis on exam-oriented teaching methods. However, factors related to careers, culture, travel, and intercultural communication are considered important by a significant portion of participants after the intervention. The data from the interviews and focus groups reveals that while the respondents

believed their previous English learning experience aids in studying ELT courses at university, more and more students recognize the importance of developing ICC, understanding the connection between ELT and ICC, and becoming interculturally competent citizens in the globalized world.

Conclusion

The concept of ICC has gained prominence in international higher education, but most research focuses on international students studying abroad. Few studies examine Chinese English language learners' taking ELT courses at international institutes within China, a post-pandemic trend that has grown as more students opt to stay in their home country while seeking higher education. Language teachers urgently need to equip these students with ICC, enabling them to interact effectively in diverse intercultural settings, since students do not inherently acquire ICC through ELT courses. A structured ICC teaching module is needed to create opportunities for students to engage, to develop their ICC without studying abroad. Teachers could integrate ICC teaching modules into the curriculum framework and provide concrete classroom experiences to foster students' ICC. Equipping with the linguistic and ICC skills, EFL learners could participate both competently and professionally in future global contexts.

Acknowledgement

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