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**INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE-BASED  
ENGLISH PROGRAMMES IN DEVELOPING CHINESE EFL  
STUDENTS' INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE**

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**Abstract**

The hot trend of intercultural education has aroused heated discussion among the foreign language learners and teachers especially during the post epidemic era, which has been a new challenge for the government-funded international institutes in China. According to three guidance documents, China Education Modernization 2035, China National Modernization, and new policy of internationalization of the curriculum, the cultivation of the students' intercultural communicative competence has been put on agenda by College Foreign Language Teaching Steering Committee of China. In response to the College English Curriculum Requirement of China, the implementation of the new curriculum and syllabus should emphasize the integration of the intercultural education into the language education. The ultimate goal is to enhance learners' understanding of multiple local and global communities, to foster their skills of successful interaction in intercultural circumstances, and to cultivate their intercultural communicative competence (ICC). However, most discussions in this field remain at the theoretical level and there is insufficient pedagogical practice about how to integrate ICC into the lesson plan and curriculum of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) programs which can result in the development of ICC. The literature review addresses this gap and calls on the formal ICC-based curriculum and syllabus for the Chinese EFL students in the international institutes.

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## 1. Introduction

The report of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2023 clearly states, as multi-polarization, social informatization, economic globalization, and cultural diversity continue to develop, the world's instability and unpredictability are becoming more evident, and people worldwide are encountering numerous shared challenges. The Chinese government is urging the establishment of a shared future community for all human beings and the advancement of cultural and intercultural communication.

According to three guidance documents of education, China's Education Modernization 2035 (The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2019) emphasized from the macro-level, in the modern era, education should aim to construct a high-level cultural exchange mechanism at home and abroad, which involves broadening the scope of cultural exchange, promoting people-to-people interaction, and fostering cultural exchanges between China and other nations; National Medium- and Long-term Education Reform and Development Program (The Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China, 2010) proposed the cultivation of a significant number of internationally-minded talents who possess a thorough knowledge of international regulations and can effectively participate in global affairs and competition. The program also emphasized the need to enhance international understanding education, facilitate cross-cultural exchanges, and improves students' awareness and comprehension of different countries and cultures; College English Curriculum Requirements of China (College Foreign Language Teaching Steering Committee, 2020) indicate that intercultural communication courses should focus on providing intercultural education to students. The objective is to enable students to comprehend the variations between Chinese and foreign worldviews, values, and thought patterns, to foster their intercultural awareness, and to enhance their socio-linguistic and intercultural communicative competence (ICC).

Moreover, it proposes the construction of intercultural communication courses of foundation level, improvement level and development level. There is a consensus that the internationalization of the curriculum and the cultivation of the students' intercultural communicative competence have been put on agenda by College Foreign Language Teaching Steering Committee of China. In response to this new policy, the intercultural education has aroused heated discussion among the second language learners and teachers especially during the post epidemic era, which has been a new challenge for the government-funded international institutes in China.

## 2. Problem Statement

Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) has become increasingly important in the globalized world, particularly in the context of English language teaching (Li & Song, 2019). With China's rise as a major player on the world stage, the need for Chinese college students to develop ICC has become particularly pressing. This literature review will examine the key issues related to cultivating ICC in college English programs for Chinese college students.

## **2.1. Defining ICC and its importance in English language learning**

ICC is the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people from different cultures, while understanding and respecting their cultural backgrounds. In the context of English language teaching, ICC is essential for effective communication in a globalized world. With English being used as a lingua franca across cultures, students who lack ICC skills may face communication difficulties in international settings. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2020) defines ICC as a key component of language proficiency, emphasizing the need for learners to develop knowledge of other cultures, attitudes of openness and curiosity, and the ability to communicate effectively in intercultural situations. This framework has been widely adopted in language education, and many studies have investigated its effectiveness in developing ICC in learners of English.

## **2.2. Challenges facing Chinese college students in developing ICC**

Chinese college students face several challenges in developing ICC. First of all, the education system in China is often criticized for being exam-oriented, with little emphasis on developing students' communication and intercultural skills. This may result in students lacking the necessary background knowledge and experience to understand and appreciate different cultures (Cai & Yun, 2020). Secondly, Chinese culture has a strong emphasis on conformity and obedience, which may make it difficult for students to express themselves freely and creatively (Zhang & Zhou, 2019). This may hinder their ability to communicate effectively in intercultural situations. Thirdly, Chinese students may lack exposure to different cultures, particularly if they come from smaller cities or rural areas. This lack of exposure may make it difficult for students to appreciate the diversity of cultures and to communicate effectively with people from different backgrounds. According to Byram (2021), students who never have the opportunity to interact with individuals from other cultures or use English outside of their language classrooms can still gain valuable knowledge, awareness, and attitude about their own and other cultures within the context of globalizing local settings. Byram and Wagner (2018) emphasize the importance of the international aspect of intercultural competence acquisition and understanding of other countries and societies for students to indirectly interact with other cultures throughout their lifetime.

There is still a chance for millions of Chinese students who are unable to study abroad to develop intercultural competence within their EFL classrooms (Fang & Baker, 2017). Due to its thriving economy, China is establishing international connections and collaboration with the Western world, which has led to a growing need for intercultural communication. In the last decade, the number of international institutions in China has significantly increased, necessitating high-quality EFL education that includes integral instruction on intercultural competence.

## **2.3. Teaching ICC in China**

There have been several approaches suggested for cultivating ICC in college English programs for Chinese college students. First approach is to incorporate intercultural materials in English language teaching because intercultural materials can help to promote the development of ICC in learners of

English by providing exposure to different cultures and promoting intercultural education. For example, incorporating literature from different cultures, videos or podcasts about different cultural practices, or using case studies to highlight cultural differences can help students to appreciate the diversity of cultures and develop their ICC skills. Second way is incorporating intercultural communication skills in English language teaching. ELT programs can be designed to explicitly teach ICC skills, such as understanding different communication styles, dealing with cultural misunderstandings, and adapting to different cultural contexts. These skills can be developed through role-playing, group discussions, and other interactive activities that simulate intercultural communication situations. Last but not least, providing opportunities for Chinese college students to interact with people from different cultures can help them develop their ICC skills. This can be achieved through online language exchange programs, or hosting international students on campus. Such interactions can help students to develop a deeper understanding of different cultures and to apply their ICC skills in real-world situations.

Several studies have investigated the effectiveness of different approaches to cultivating ICC in college English courses for Chinese college students. For example, a study (Qiao, 2017) found that incorporating intercultural materials in English language teaching can help to promote the development of ICC in Chinese college students. Another study (Gu, 2017) found that explicitly teaching intercultural communication skills in English language courses can be effective in developing students' ICC. A study conducted by Sun (2016) investigated the effectiveness of providing opportunities for intercultural interaction in developing ICC in Chinese college students. The study found that students who participated in an ICC-based program showed significant improvement in their ICC, particularly in their understanding of cultural differences and ability to adapt to new cultural environments.

However, while these approaches have shown promise in developing ICC in Chinese college students, there are still challenges to be addressed. For example, incorporating intercultural materials in English language teaching may be challenging for teachers who lack the necessary background knowledge and experience in dealing with different cultures. Similarly, providing opportunities for intercultural interaction may be limited by factors such as lack of ICC training programs for both teachers and students.

### **3. Research Questions**

The research questions that were developed based on the purpose statements are as follows

- i. How does ICC-based English programs affect students' intercultural communicative competence?
- ii. How do students perceive the implementation of ICC-based English programs on developing their intercultural communicative competence?
- iii. How do teachers perceive the implementation of ICC-based English programs on developing students' intercultural communicative competence?

#### **4. Purpose of the Study**

Since the seminal work of Canale and Swain (1980), there has been a continued push to incorporate culture within foreign language curricula (Cabello, 2015). The conflict regarding how to assimilate the debatable (in terms of definition) and adequate (in terms of efficiency) inclusion of culture into foreign language curricula and assessment has been an ongoing process. Stern (1983) advocated for a “mediating discipline” in order to ease the tension between “linguistic theory” and “language pedagogy” (p. 186). Building a bridge implies an equal contribution from both sides, thus refraining from leaning too heavily on linguistics or on culture in foreign language pedagogy.

As foreign language learning and pedagogy have shifted in focus to a more communicative emphasis in the curriculum and as guidelines for proficiency have advanced since the 19th and 20th century models, previous models (e.g. grammar-translation) have proven themselves outdated or in a desperate need of a shift in core usage as regards to their relevance (Li & Song, 2019) to developing an intercultural and global competence pertinent for increasingly globalized world. The communicative approach has “allowed for” an acknowledgment of the relationship between language and culture; “in order to become proficient in a language, students must also understand the cultural contexts in which the language is spoken” (Pasterick, 2015, p. 1). Previous studies have shown that a fusion of ICC and English program is appropriate for certain aspects of foreign language learning. There has been a theoretical shift in foreign language learning in order to address the lack of adequate focus on the nature of language and culture, which incorporates culture into the curriculum in an attempt to increase foreign language learners’ contextual communicative capabilities (Canale & Swain, 1980).

Nevertheless, few empirical studies focus on the practical approaches to incorporate ICC into language teaching programs while a large amount of research remain at the theoretical level. Furthermore, there are few programs are ICC-based or integrate ICC into the EFL program. In response to this governmental call, it is a necessity to incorporate the cultivation of global intercultural communicative competence into English language teaching (ELT) programs at international universities.

It has been long argued that internationalization of higher education should be integrating the intercultural communicative competence into the language teaching syllabus (Byram, 2008). However, in the context of English as a Foreign Language in China, the intercultural teaching contents are always giving ways to the vocabulary and grammar teaching at the classroom level. Killick (2013) once conceptualized that it is of vital importance to cultivate the language learners’ ICC in the language teaching domains at the tertiary level which should incorporate elements of intercultural competence and a sense of global sensitivity. Thus, Fang (2016) emphasized that this is the key issue for the international institute to combine intercultural education with ELT programs because students are supposed to immerse in intercultural contexts in which they encountered more intercultural communication and related linguistic and cultural issues than the students in the common higher education institutions.

#### **5. Research Methods**

This research adopts a mixed-methods approach which combine the quantitative and qualitative method that enables the researcher investigates the project from diverse perspectives. Specifically, the

researcher can acquire quantitative data from questionnaires and qualitative data from semi-structured interviews and focus group. The selected criterion of participants will adopt the convenience sampling who are Chinese EFL students and users of English as a foreign language at a newly founded international institute. In total, there are 300 participants, 10 English language teachers who teach English for General Purpose and Academic Purpose are interviewed and there are 5 focus group participants, which not only cover the teachers and students' experience of a range of academic disciplines, but are manageable for the researcher to do the quantitative and qualitative analysis. In order to adopt a longitudinal and developmental perspective on intercultural communicative competence, data is collected from students and teachers before, during and after their reaching and learning experiences.

## 6. Findings

The concept of ICC has become prominent in international higher education. But many research focus on the international students who study abroad (Bodis, 2021), few studies' subjects are the Chinese students who pursue higher education in the international institute which more and more students choose to study at home country during the post pandemic era. They want to enjoy the high-quality international higher education as well as the international students. It is urgent for the language teachers to equip the students with the intercultural communicative competence, which can enable them to interact effectively in intercultural settings across various communities, because students do not naturally learn ICC when enrolling in the ELT programs (Mai, 2018). Through language and culture studies, teachers should teach students ICC competencies instead. Intercultural competence program especially the structured program is needed to create opportunities for the students to connect in a global context (Habacon, 2014). It aims to create meaningful opportunities for mixed ability learners so they don't have to go abroad and develop their intercultural competency skills towards becoming global citizens. The teacher need to create opportunities for concrete experiences in the classroom and integrate the ICC skills into the curriculum framework because global citizen has been identified as a priority across all education sectors as well as within workplace (Nadeem et al., 2020). There is a consensus that ICC is essential for 21st century learners, and global companies are recognizing the benefits of culturally literate employees (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2018).

Researchers also believe that ICC training for teachers is vital in order to foster ICC skills in their students (Ghanem, 2017). Educators need to provide teachers with adequate and suitable training in order for their students to become interculturally-literate citizens who are able to communicate with, partner with, and negotiate understandings with people from different cultures. Students have to be equipped with the knowledge, skills and values needed to embrace any sort of opportunities they come across, and challenges that they are going to encounter on their journey and start to create the kind of world they want to live in. There is neither formal intercultural communicative competence skills education for the Chinese students before or after the enrolment of the international institutes (Wagner et al., 2016). Equipping with the linguistic skills and the intercultural competency, EFL learners could participate competently both socially and professionally in global contexts.

According to the ICC models (see Table 1), the pedagogical sequence of the ICC-based, lesson plan and curriculum framework are designed as follows (see Table 2 and 3).

**Table 1.** ICC models (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009)

Compositional models	Intercultural competence components model	Attitude	Awareness Understanding Appreciation
		Skills	Awareness Understanding Appreciation
		Knowledge	Awareness Understanding Appreciation
Co-orientational models	Intercultural competence model	ICC	Linguistics competence Sociolinguistics competence Discourse competence
		IC	Interpreting /relating skills Knowledge Discovering/interaction skills Critical cultural awareness Attitudes
Adaptational models	Attitude acculturation model	Integration Assimilation Separation/Segregation Marginalization	
Causal path models	Intercultural competence process model	Attitudes Knowledge Desired internal outcome Desired external outcome	

**Table 2.** ICC-based lesson plan (Corbett, 2022)

Aims	<p>This lesson gives the learner the opportunity to analyze critical incidents and reflecting on how they can apply certain skills in their personal lives</p> <p><b>The development of ICC</b></p> <p>To enhance comprehension and engagement with diverse cultures</p> <p>To analyze resemblances and discrepancies among locations across the globe, including one's own context</p> <p>To generate innovative and affirmative solutions to conflicts</p> <p>To demonstrate consideration towards distinct viewpoints and cultural conventions while handling conflicts</p> <p>To assimilate novel or revised perspectives into one's own learning, cognition, and conduct.</p> <p>To develop awareness of the importance of contributing and constructively in a class or group situations</p> <p><b>The development of linguistic skills</b></p> <p>To review / learn past tenses for describing events</p> <p>To review / learn questions forms</p> <p>To review / learn language related to giving suggestions</p> <p>To refine paraphrasing skills</p>
Suggested procedure	<p><b>Awareness activities</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Write 'critical incident' on the board and elicit students understanding of this concept</li> <li>2. If possible, give an example from your own experience</li> <li>3. Highlight aims (The Development of ICC – see above) to students so</li> </ol>

	they are clear about the purpose of the activity.
	<b>Developing understanding</b>
	4. Organize the class into groups. Hand out Worksheet A1 and A2. Worksheet A1 provides students with some questions to assist in their interpretation and analysis of the cultural incidents. Worksheet A2 describes some critical incidents and requires students to interpret the situations. You may want to do one together with the whole class as an example. Ask learners to read the incidents and discuss the questions in their groups. There are 7 separate incidents. You could ask each group to consider at, or you could cut them up and distribute them to different groups. This would then give the opportunity for students to be re-grouped to discuss the different incidents.
	5. Conduct whole group feedback.
	6. Allocate a period for students to reflect individually on a critical event from their personal experiences. If necessary, propose scenarios like confusion about being on time, giving presents, or dressing appropriately for a class or social gathering
	<b>Facilitating learner autonomy</b>
	7. In their groups, students share their stories and try to explain why the incident may have occurred, possible ways of avoiding the miscommunication and ways of improving communication
	8. Based on previous discussion, each group develops a list of strategies to avoid miscommunication or for improving communication.
	9. Whole group feedback based on these strategies.
Possible problems and solutions	Depending on the level of your class you may need to do some vocabulary or language work with them before they do the task. See the Aims: Language skills development for an outline of the language that will be needed for this task. Students may find it difficult to identify a critical incident. Provide examples and anecdotes to assist with this Teachers should be careful about stereotyping and reinforcing misrepresentations about people from other cultures in their own anecdotes.
Additional resources	<a href="http://www.hitmag.co.uk/jun09/109.htm">http://www.hitmag.co.uk/jun09/109.htm</a>
Extension activities	This could be extended by asking students, individually to revise their original description of their critical incidents based on the discussion with their group and post to class blog/discussion board

**Table 3.** ICC-based curriculum (Caon-Parsons & Dimmell, 2020)

Domain: Attitudes			
Demonstrate reverence and appreciation for diverse cultures			
Maintain a receptive attitude and abstain from passing judgments			
Display inquisitiveness and forbearance towards vagueness and uncertainty			
Possess awareness of sociolinguistic, discourse, and linguistic factors.			
Elements	Level of development		
	Awareness Raising	Understanding	Autonomy
Sense of identity and self-esteem	Awareness of and pride in own individuality	Esteeming one's and others' uniqueness Being receptive to fresh concepts and perspectives that may challenge one's own	Appreciation of multi-faceted and flexible nature of personal identity
Respect for people	Show consideration for others' sentiments and	Acknowledging the outcomes of one's	Analyzing and evaluating consequences



	notions.	speech, conduct, and decisions.	of words, actions and choices
Appreciation and regard for differences.	Positive outlook towards diversity and differences being open to learning from others' experiences	Acknowledging multiple perspectives on issues, and realizing that the majority view may not always be accurate Respecting everyone's right to express their viewpoint and actively evaluating and overcoming personal biases and prejudices	Actively evaluating and overcoming personal biases and prejudices Desire to enhance one's understanding of diverse cultures and engage in meaningful interactions with them.
Dedication to participation and inclusion	Recognizes the importance of involving and enabling every individual to take part.	Willingness to reach agreement through compromise	Dedication to the values of inclusivity and proactive encouragement of others' participation in the decision-making process

## 7. Conclusions

This paper has highlighted the situation of ICC teaching in China and the importance of integrating ICC-based English program into EFL curriculum and syllabus to develop Chinese students' ICC. Given its multi-level nature and urgency of ICC, the integration and investigation of ICC-based English programme is not only worth but also crucial in developing Chinese students' ICC, which gives rise to strong assumptions concerning the designing and implementation of ICC-based curriculum and syllabus in EFL programs of Chinese international institutes.

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