

Integrating Intercultural Communicative Competence in College EFL Teaching in China: Roles and Challenges for Teacher

Yan Ma^{1,a,*}

¹*The University of Manchester, Manchester, M13 9PL, UK*

a. ryannmyyy@gmail.com

**corresponding author*

Abstract: Under the background of globalization, the necessity and importance of intercultural communication have become increasingly prominent. As one of the world's major economies and a populous country, China's cultivation of talents with intercultural communication competence (ICC) deserves attention. This scholarly review examines the pedagogical implications and complexities faced by English language instructors in fostering ICC within Chinese tertiary education. Through a comprehensive analysis of both domestic and international scholarly literature, this investigation elucidates the conceptual framework, constituent elements, and significance of ICC. The study synthesizes existing research to illuminate the pivotal function of educators in facilitating intercultural competence within the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instructional paradigm. The challenges in intercultural English teaching include an overemphasis on language and cultural knowledge at the expense of intercultural communication skills, excessive reliance on textbooks, and insufficient practical experience and training for teachers. To augment educators' ICC, it is crucial to enrich their knowledge base, amalgamate cultural education with language pedagogy, and refine training programs centered on intercultural communication.

Keywords: Intercultural communication competence(ICC), Intercultural English teaching, Chinese English teacher, English as a Foreign Language (EFL)

1. Introduction

In the contemporary context of accelerating globalization, humanity has entered an unprecedented epoch characterized by intercultural dialogue and civilizational exchange. The interconnectedness of diverse civilizations manifests through intricate networks of mutual influence, fostering reciprocal communication channels and deepening interdependencies across cultural boundaries. Economic globalization and cultural diversification have made Intercultural communication competence (ICC) a new demand for high-quality talents in the 21st century [1]. As a language widely used by people all over the world, English plays a key role as a language bridge and tool in intercultural communication. China's advancement of ICC among its high quality talents and the integration of intercultural teaching methodologies in domestic English as a Foreign Language (ELT) settings warrant rigorous academic inquiry and comprehensive evaluation.

This research explores the development of ICC in tertiary English instruction in China. The manuscript explores four critical areas: a theoretical framework outlining the concept, elements, and educational importance of ICC; an examination of educators' intercultural expertise and its influence on intercultural teaching methods; an investigation into the challenges faced by Chinese educators in improving students' intercultural skills; and strategies for enhancing ICC among English faculty in Chinese higher education institutions.

2. Definition, Components and Importance of ICC

2.1. Definition & Components of ICC

In intercultural studies, definitions and components of ICC vary among scholars. Spencer-Oatey and Franklin describe ICC as the ability of individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds to engage in effective verbal and nonverbal communication while addressing the psychological impacts of these interactions [2]. Lustig and Koester identify ICC as comprising context, appropriateness, effectiveness, knowledge, motivation, and behavior [3]. Kim synthesized various factors influencing ICC into a model that includes cognitive, emotional, and behavioral elements, utilizing methods from social psychology, applied linguistics, and sociology [4].

Chinese researchers have varying perspectives on ICC. Some differentiate it from intercultural competence, with Wen asserting that ICC comprises both communicative and intercultural competence [5]. Conversely, others, like Hu, argue that the literature often treats them as equivalent [6]. Yang and Zhuang also note that equating intercultural competence with ICC is conducive to recognizing the importance of intercultural awareness, cognitive ability, non-verbal communication and communicative strategies in the cultivation of intercultural communication competence. Meanwhile, it pays attention to linguistic communication competence [7]. Thus, in academic discourse, these terms are often used interchangeably.

Although there is no universally accepted conclusion on the definition of ICC in academic circles, the definitions and theoretical generalizations made by scholars all acknowledge that “intercultural competence refers to the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people from different cultural backgrounds”[8]. ICC integrates cognitive, affective, and behavioral competencies, comprising knowledge acquisition, motivational factors, and skill development. The interdependence of linguistic proficiency, cultural understanding, and communicative competence forms the foundation of intercultural communication, with language serving as the primary cultural transmission vector.

2.2. Importance of ICC

The development of ICC is crucial in a globalized society. Languages and cultures are inseparable. As the basis and prerequisite of intercultural communication, the cultivation of ICC in foreign language education has become a key topic. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) emphasises the cultural dimension of language teaching and envisages the teaching of modern languages (including English) with the goal of developing learners' intercultural competence and skills [9]. This shows that teaching a foreign or second language is not only teaching a subject, but also teaching a means of intercultural communication [10]. In a globalized world, English plays a key role in facilitating intercultural communication between people of different cultures. It is spoken by millions of native and non-native speakers and is widely used as a common language in global communication between speakers of different first languages.[11]

For China, one of the world's major economies and cultural powers, the cultivation of ICC is an important aspect of English learning for Chinese EFL learners and one of the important goals of EFL teaching [12]. ICC is the ability to effectively apply linguistic and cultural knowledge for appropriate

communication with individuals from diverse backgrounds, playing a crucial role in successful intercultural interactions [13].

3. Teachers' ICC and its Role in Intercultural EFL Teaching

Teachers are the key to achieve the goal of ICC training. To cultivate students' ICC, teachers are the subject and guide. Teachers' teaching behaviors affect the formation and development of students' ICC. "Teachers' intercultural sensitivity and their ICC can influence students' intercultural sensitivity and ICC to some extent [14]."

Liu pointed out in her article on intercultural communication and its cultivation in Chinese universities that, when EFL learners are exposed to the target language discourse or text, they come into contact with culture [15]. When Chinese students engage with original English texts, they undergo intercultural communication, connecting with an unseen author. Teachers should guide students to explore not just the text's surface meaning but also its authorship, audience, and the cultural contexts influencing its content. This approach fosters "cultural" learning, enabling students to actively construct and understand complex ideas with teacher support. It emphasizes the importance of teachers' cultural competence, sensitivity, and insight in language instruction.

Teachers' perceptions of ICC and its teaching are influenced by their life experiences [16]. Iswandari & Ardi observed that teachers often fail to recognize their limited knowledge input, which primarily stems from prior learning and observations [11]. As essential facilitators of ICC in classrooms, their understanding of ICC and its pedagogical development is vital for effectively integrating ICC into ELT.

4. Challenges for Chinese EFL Teachers in Cultivating Students' ICC

English Teaching Syllabus for English Majors in Higher Education clearly states that "emphasis should be placed on cultivating intercultural communicative competence". The challenge of college English is to enable non-English major students whose mother tongue is Chinese to learn English and understand English culture under the background of their mother tongue culture, and on this basis, they can calmly mediate between two languages. This process necessitates developing students' capacity for bilingual mediation and cross-cultural navigation, ultimately enabling them to engage in effective intercultural discourse and knowledge transfer. [17].

4.1. Teaching Practice

In teaching practice, the knowledge center model emphasizes the teaching and testing of cultural knowledge. The popular "culture introduction" in the field of language teaching in China can be regarded as a knowledge center concept [18]. If educators focus solely on the overt aspects of culture, they primarily address the "knowledge" dimension of ICC in their instruction. This approach involves conveying established cultural facts through teaching content and methods, and incorporating direct, objective "cultural points" alongside "language points", such as the historical context, social structures, customs, values, etiquette, and taboos of the target language's culture. Such cultural instruction is often externally imposed and may operate independently or semi-independently from language education [15]. The current foreign language teaching model in China is more inclined to the combination of teacher-centered and knowledge-centered. Shu and Zhuang pointed out: "In the foreign language classroom, language knowledge is still the core focus, teachers give priority to explanation, and students are always in a passive position." [19]

In the classroom, many teachers depend on textbooks. For instance, Yan found that some educators follow textbooks rigidly, lacking in-depth discussions and failing to engage students in communicative activities, which hampers the development of their ICC [20]. Additionally, certain

textbooks are disconnected from reality, potentially misleading students. Gao noted a new intercultural communication textbook introduced in China in 2000, which has become popular in universities [18]. However, its portrayal of Chinese communication concepts and salary structures is outdated. When learners are in a foreign language setting and the teacher is not from the target culture, assessing the accuracy of cultural descriptions becomes challenging, leading to the teaching of obsolete or incorrect information [18]. Overall, a teacher's ICC and intercultural background are crucial in bridging the gap between textbooks and the actual target culture.

4.2. Teachers' Lack of ICC

4.2.1. Lack of Awareness of ICC

Han analyzed over 1,000 questionnaires on English teachers' ICC in Chinese universities [21]. Language and cultural knowledge are seen as core to ICC by teachers, who often focus on familiar content, overlooking less familiar areas.

Yan indicated that 95% of the tested teachers believe that strong language ability is the primary condition for foreign language teachers and the primary quality for intercultural communication [20]. Yan mentioned that, language knowledge is the foundation of ICC [20]. Without cultural knowledge, cultural awareness and communication practice, ICC cannot be truly improved.

4.2.2. Lack of Intercultural Communication Practice and ICC Training

Compared with non-English major teachers, English major teachers have a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of intercultural communicative competence [21]. Communicative practice is the active engagement in intercultural communication and serves as a vital tool for effective interaction. Research indicates that exposure to diverse cultural environments and interactions with individuals from various backgrounds are key methods for acquiring ICC [13]. British higher education recognizes that optimal communication competencies are cultivated through authentic intercultural language engagement [22].

Due to political, economic, geographical and other restrictions, many foreign language teachers lack intercultural practice, experience and vision, and can only teach language and cultural knowledge to students based on book knowledge. Wu and Zhou's research indicates that "teachers themselves lack intercultural experience." [23] Ideally, foreign language teachers should have at least one year of study or living abroad, along with personal intercultural communication experience. However, Yan found that most teachers possess only 2-4 weeks or less of short-term overseas experience, such as travel or seminars [20]. This results in a superficial understanding of foreign cultures, leading to "cultural dislocation" [24]. Short-term travel is unlikely to enhance intercultural communication skills and may mislead teachers in guiding students based on limited intercultural perspectives. Survey data reveals 67% of Chinese EFL instructors lack formal intercultural competency training, relying solely on intuitive pedagogical approaches [25]. Teachers' intercultural communication teaching practice is more about intuition and imitation [26]. It can be seen that the intercultural communication background and the lack of ICC of EFL teachers in Chinese colleges affect their teaching and ICC imparting.

5. Ways to Cultivate the ICC of Chinese College English Teachers

5.1. Supplement Intercultural Communication Knowledge

EFL teachers must enhance their cultural sensitivity and ICC. They should continually improve their knowledge of intercultural communication and deepen their understanding of both native and foreign

cultures. Engaging with English literature, films, and native speakers, such as foreign teachers or experts in intercultural communication, allows them to acquire cultural knowledge through diverse channels. Zhang asserts that EFL teachers need to grasp the concept and importance of ICC, recognize the challenges in intercultural communication, and remain open to learning about foreign cultures while reflecting on their own cultural frameworks [25].

5.2. Integrate Cultural Learning and Language Learning

The integration of cultural and language learning goes beyond merely analyzing cultural references to aid text comprehension. It emphasizes understanding the ideological themes and cultural significance within language materials, particularly focusing on students' perceptions and thoughts [15]. This helps to cultivate students' ability to accept different cultures, compare and understand the similarities and differences between their own culture and other cultures, broaden their cultural horizons, tolerate cultural differences and think critically and independently.

The cultivation of ICC should permeate all aspects of foreign language instruction, focusing on listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation as vehicles for cultural awareness, integration, and communication strategy training [7]. Educators can utilize English films, television, and new media to provide students with relevant contexts and authentic materials.

5.3. Strengthen ICC Training for Teachers

Workshops and seminars in teacher professional development programs can refresh EFL teachers' ICC knowledge and pedagogy and provide new insights [27]. In investigating the participation of English teachers in study groups, Cuartas-Alvarez found that English teachers have changed their understanding of ICC and its teaching practice [28]. Study groups serve as a professional space to stimulate collaborative dialogue and reflection among teachers, thus leading to more intercultural communication efforts.

Educational institutions and universities have the capacity to standardize teacher training and facilitate increased opportunities for educators to engage with international colleagues, specialists in intercultural communication, and various guest speakers, as well as provide avenues for overseas exchange and study. This multifaceted approach allows teachers to comprehend, experience, and assimilate foreign cultures through diverse channels, thereby advancing their ICC in practical contexts.

6. Conclusion

The primary goal of EFL teaching is to facilitate effective intercultural communication, enabling students to engage with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds across various contexts. Developing students' ICC is a long-term and challenging endeavor. Coperias believes that the acquisition of ICC is an impossible process, because all the knowledge learners need in all occasions and all times can not be predicted, so the acquisition of ICC is a lifelong activity [29]. As a key facilitator and guide, teachers need to use a progressive, multi-channel and diversified approach to gradually improve their ICC. Teachers are required to maintain a high level of professional competence, equip with strong ICC and possess both comprehensive theoretical knowledge and extensive practical experience. Otherwise it is difficult to achieve the improvement of students' cultural awareness and intercultural communication ability.

ICC spans multiple disciplines, necessitating foreign language researchers to adopt an interdisciplinary approach and broaden their research scope. ICC training requires collaboration among educators, universities, and educational authorities. Future ICC assessments can integrate with diverse fields, examining the roles and impacts of academic and educational institutions.

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