

A Study on Intercultural Communicative Competence of Chinese English Majors Based on Teacher Report Data

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Abstract

Most previous studies have used student self-reported data to investigate their proficiency in intercultural communication competence (ICC), while few have examined it from their teacher's perspective. This paper reports a qualitative case study on English major students' ICC in Chinese higher education. The instrument was adapted from the scale of Intercultural Ability developed by Fantini (2007). The data were collected from in-depth interviews from 8 English major teachers and analyzed by thematic analysis. The findings indicated that students had general intercultural knowledge, open attitudes and limited intercultural skills.

Keywords: intercultural communication competence, general intercultural knowledge, open attitude, limited intercultural skills

1. Introduction

To carry out effective intercultural communication in a multicultural environment while maintaining one's cultural identity largely depends on the communicator's ICC (Byram, 2020). In 2014, the Education Ministry of China has listed ICC as the core of the nine abilities of English majors. ICC assessment is an integral part of ICC teaching because it played a key role in helping educators understand and improve students' ICC, providing an empirical basis for tracking development, motivating learning, examining outcomes, and pointing out areas for building improvement (Sinicrope et al., 2007). However, compared with the efforts devoted to fostering the ICC, ICC assessment have long been in a gray area in China. The difficulty of ICC assessment in the foreign language teaching environment lies in the lack of consensus on the construction of ICC, the lack of ICC assessment tools and the limitations of ICC assessment procedures (Gu, 2021). The research on ICC assessment is far from satisfactory.

2. Literature Review

Perry and Southwell (2011) pointed out scholars had generally acknowledged that "intercultural competence refers to the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people of different cultural backgrounds", and ICC contains cognition (knowledge), affection (attitude), and behavior (skills) (Deardorff, 2004; Bennett, 2008; Odag et al., 2015). Chen and Starosta (1996) further studied on this basis and subdivided the specific elements of the three dimensions. In their opinion, affection refers to intercultural sensitivity, that is, the communicator's emotion or preference in a specific situation. Cognition refers to intercultural awareness, which mainly includes self-consciousness and cultural consciousness. Behavior refers to intercultural adroitness, which refers to the skills of communicators in implementing communicative behaviors and accomplishing communicative goals.

Kim (2005) expanded on the original theory to include the concepts of global mindset and global thinking. Fantini (2020) emphasized the ability to target languages as a fundamental component of skills, and suggested

that language issues should be placed at the heart of the ICC. Under the trend of globalization and multicultural communication, the ICC starts to shift from communicative competence, which adapts to the target language culture in a one-way manner, to the open intercultural personality with multi-cultural awareness, which requires the communicator to communicate beyond any specific culture while maintaining the original cultural identity (Dai, 2019). Zhou (2019) pointed out that native cultural literacy is an important elements of ICC, and learning English not only means understanding the culture of English-speaking countries, but also undertaking the task of spreading Chinese culture in intercultural communication in English. Zhang and Zhao (2021) proposed that the knowledge dimension refers to the knowledge of target language, the native language and the world culture, among which world cultural knowledge refers to the cultural literacy of countries, including their social norms, values, customs and traditions, history, geography, art, religion, etc.

According to Deardorff (2005), researchers generally agree that it is best to use multiple assessment methods to assess ICC, with case studies and interviews in qualitative methods considered to be the two most widely accepted techniques. ICC instruments can be divided into self-assessment and other assessment according to the subject conducting the assessment. To date, one of the most predominant methods to assess ICC has been self-report surveys featuring Likert-type responses (Luo & Chan, 2022). Altshuler (2003) argued that “there is a discrepancy between subjects’ perceptions of their self-competence and their actual competence”, and Matsumoto et al. (2001) regretted the predominance of retrospective self-report measures and drew attention to the dearth of study on ICC from the “reciprocal cultural perspective of the persons involved.” According to Deardorff (2016), the majority of the more than 100 assessment instruments already in use were self-report instruments, which means incomplete measurement results. The appropriateness of behavior and communication, which can only be judged from viewpoints other than self-report, is typically overlooked in assessments of ICC. This can be accomplished by seeing how people behave in real-world scenarios or by having other participants fill out surveys.

The starting point of ICC assessment is its cultivation goals and objectives, which in turn determine assessment measures and methods (Deardorff, 2016). Objectives are a specific set of expectations about student learning and performance, and their teacher, who knows best whether the students’ ICC is meeting those expectations and the gaps from those expectations. Therefore, teacher assessment can successfully overcome the drawbacks of self-assessment being overly subjective and vulnerable to social expectation bias.

With growing interest in assessing intercultural skills qualitatively, methods such as reflection and interviews have been widely used in research (Luo & Chan, 2022). However, quantitative method still dominates the measurement of ICC in China, with only a few studies using qualitative self-reported data. Due to the complex, multidimensional and dynamic nature of such competence, research on the assessment of ICC is even more rare (Gu, 2021). Yu and Zhang (2019) utilized quantitative and qualitative method to collect data at one Australian university to investigate Chinese international students’ ICC. They found that being restricted by intercultural practices and norms; students were not able to fully utilize communication techniques to fulfil the need of intercultural communication. Zhou and Burhanudeen (2023) conducted a qualitative design with self-reports and focus group interviews as instruments to measure students’ ICC and found that the challenges that EFL undergraduates encounter in intercultural communication were scant English proficiency, insufficient intercultural experience, and limited intercultural practice.

Teachers are the agents that can facilitate a language learning environment to promote students’ ICC, their experience can provide many insights into how to develop students’ ICC (Bal, 2022). Therefore, it is necessary to further examine students’ ICC from the perspective of teachers.

3. Research Design

Multiple case study was used in this study to obtain detailed information from in-depth interviews and classroom observations to provide an in-depth description of the case by analyzing and triangulating data from multiple sources. The participants in this study were English major teachers who have more than one year of teaching experience in public universities in China. Eight teachers from universities H and Y were selected according to purposive sample and stratified sampling method to provide detailed data for this study. Four of the teachers came from the English faculty of Y while other four teachers came from H universities. The subject strength, teaching quality and teacher resources of the two universities are in the middle level among the 678 universities offering English majors in China (China University Evaluation Research Report, 2021), and their ICC cultivation goals for English majors were the same. Teacher participants’ ages, professional titles, and length of teaching experience varied greatly. Seven of them are native Chinese speakers, and one is a native English speaker from the Philippines who could not speak Chinese. Because of different cultural backgrounds, the Filipino teacher may have different experience and perception of students’ ICC. Therefore, this study included this teacher in the research to examine students’ ICC level from different cultural perspectives.

Interview questions were adapted from Fantini’s (2007) scale of Assessment of Intercultural Competence. The

interview outline contained a total of 10 descriptive questions. The classroom observations began after the interviews. Two teacher participants (one from H university and another from Y university) were selected for classroom observation. This study mainly adopted non-participant classroom observations to record data and to provide first-hand experience in a real classroom (Cresswell, 2018). Data were analyzed by thematic analysis to provide information about students' ICC.

The following is the process of analyzing data using thematic analysis. Firstly, the researcher of this study read the data over and over again to familiarize herself with all the qualitative data pools; Secondly, open coding was first used to descriptively code the data after familiarizing it with the data. All attributes highly related to students' ICC were extracted from the interview data, clearly, some attributes have similar meanings or might overlap in their spheres of meaning. Before attempting to organize attributes in terms of frequency of citation, a cluster analysis would be required. An initial cluster, such as "interested in other cultures", "is interesting to different cultures", in which cases items could be grouped together for initial coding, "interested in other cultures".

Thirdly, the initial codes were revised in several coding cycles and generated according to cluster analysis to search for potential themes that could reflect and describe coherent, meaningful patterns in the data. Codes were developed into more analytical categories or clusters and identified and grouped based on the theme. For example, some initial codes might be: "positive acceptance of different cultures", "willing to try different cultures", "open-minded to different cultures" in which cases codes could be grouped together for the theme "open attitude".

Fourthly, the potential themes were reviewed. The links between potential themes were analyzed; some themes related to students' ICC and characteristics of knowledge, attitudes, skills were retained while some miscellaneous themes were dropped at this stage. Fifthly, based on the results of the iterative analyses, three themes were finally named and defined and finally, the report was produced.

A total of 16 codes were generated in the data, some of which share some unifying features and reflect and describe coherent and meaningful patterns in the data. These unified characteristics of the codes were grouped together and identified three themes, namely, general intercultural communication knowledge, open attitude and limited intercultural communication skills. These themes were interrelated, but do not overlap in concept. These codes provide a suitable framework for the three themes, allowing researcher of this study to obtain sufficient descriptive evidence of students' ICC.

4. Data Analysis

4.1 General Intercultural Communication Knowledge

The theme "general intercultural communication knowledge" was formed by five codes cluster, namely "know little about cultures except mainstream countries", "basic understanding of Chinese culture", "general knowledge about British and American culture", "lack of in-depth and comprehensive understanding of Chinese cultures" and "basic knowledge of intercultural communication".

Teachers reported that by comparing and contrasting the different aspects of their own culture with those of European and American cultures, students had the opportunity to realize that their own cultural community was both different and similar to other societies. They saw the different values and perceptions of different communities. With increased knowledge of the subject, students could explain these differences in lifestyle and other aspects in other ways and make their own evaluations. The exposure to the differences between their own and other cultures allows students to broaden their views on value systems. Almost every teacher reported these codes, whereas all of them described explicitly about how students' lack of knowledge about the other cultures except mainstream countries, they also either explained how these knowledge proficiencies limited students' ICC.

Almost all teachers claim that students have "general knowledge about British and American culture". Teachers reported that students learned about some of the cultures of developed countries such as the UK and the US through indirect intercultural contact via social media on the internet, cultural products such as TV programmes and intercultural communication courses. Because of the frequent media campaigns, these indirect contacts are the easiest form for students to acquire intercultural communication knowledge. As T8 explained:

They know some cultural taboo of English culture, American culture, such as "split the bill" and "not prying into the privacy of other people's lives" through the internet, social media and other channels (T8).

We often recommend some classic European and American films to students, and some colleagues even show European and American films in class, and these help students understand different cultures (T7).

However, teachers were explicit in describing how students lacked knowledge of other cultures outside of the mainstream countries and also explained how this knowledge limited students' ICC.

They're not exposed to other cultures, like the Philippine, my home country, they know almost nothing about Philippine, even though China and the Philippine are geographically close. (T8).

The Chinese teachers' opinions were compared with the Filipino teacher's perspective. The view of six Chinese teachers concurred with T8. They pointed out that in terms of intercultural communication knowledge, students knew very little about the culture other than the mainstream countries. This was because, in students' indirect intercultural contact, the mainstream national media dominate the propaganda, and the textbook content of intercultural communication courses is dominated by the cultures of English and American countries.

The avenues where they learn about foreign culture is through social media, the oral English textbook now is only a touch on the UK culture, American culture (T4).

T1 is responsible for teaching the British and American Culture course to the juniors in this semester. These courses are the only two courses in the English major that aim to cultivate students' intercultural knowledge and attitude. Due to the content of the textbook and the limitation of class time, T1 reported that she did not have opportunity to teach students about other cultures.

Textbook is all about British and American cultures... the courses only last for 8 weeks, we don't have time to share other countries' cultures with the students (T1).

The limitations of contact channels, contents, and course duration have resulted in students knowing little about cultures other than the mainstream culture, causing misunderstandings and conflicts in intercultural communication. As T8 said:

Students don't even take their shoes off when they enter my room. I know they didn't do it intentionally, but it was really not a pleasant experience for me. (T8)

I was often visited by students in my office or dormitory without prior appointment. I am unaccustomed to it. But later the students apologized and said, they didn't know they had to make an appointment ahead of time. (T8)

Although the students realized afterwards that they had caused T8 unhappiness due to their lack of understanding of Philippine culture and apologized to T8, the fact remains that unhappiness from such cultural misunderstandings continues to occur and impact on the outcome of intercultural encounters.

As for codes "basic understanding of Chinese culture" and "lack of in-depth and comprehensive understanding of Chinese cultures", although Chinese and Philippine teachers used different terms, they expressed similar views regarding students' Chinese cultural knowledge. The Chinese teacher believed students understand general cultural knowledge of China, as the English major programme currently emphasises the teaching of Chinese native culture. Especially after the revision of the new syllabus, the "Chinese Culture Course", which takes traditional Chinese culture as the main teaching objective, has become a compulsory course for English majors, providing students with the opportunity to study Chinese culture in depth and systematically.

However, some teachers pointed out that Chinese culture was so profound and far-reaching, and had made great achievements in philosophy, thoughts, language and literature, and arts, etc. Philosophical alone includes Taoism, Mohism, Legalism, Confucianism and so on, and it was far from enough for students to understand only the general content in terms of depth and breadth.

As a teacher from a different culture, T8 believed that her students were very knowledgeable about Chinese culture because they always explained to her some Chinese common cultures. But it was clear from T8's explanations that the students' exchanges with her also consisted of only general knowledge of Chinese culture, and seldom touched on deeper cultural content such as the traditional thoughts and how they impact Chinese culture.

They always said to me China has a long history and is brilliant. When we ask them something they always have answers about culture dynasty, about the past life. If we ask them questions, for example, they told me the way to eat fish means in Chinese "to have good luck" (T8).

An analysis of interview data revealed that students were indirectly exposed to American and British cultures through textbooks as well as the internet, social media, movies and TV dramas, which could help them develop their intercultural communication knowledge. Most students were able to grasp the general knowledge about the mainstream countries' cultures such as British and America, had a basic understanding of Chinese culture, but knew little about the cultures outside the mainstream countries.

4.2 Open Attitude

Regarding the students' intercultural communication attitude, the codes abstracted from interviews included "open-minded", "curious about different cultures", "respect for different cultures", "avoiding ethnocentrism", "tolerance of cultural differences", "culture stereotypes" and "strong sense of culture identity", which clustered

together and formed the theme “open attitude”. Students transcend their cultural position and show a greater sense of respect. They emphasized that people should look beyond their own culture and stressed the value of respect in intercultural interactions. Instead of evaluating others’ cultures positively or negatively, students’ neutral understanding of them rose noticeably, which appeared to demonstrate a more objective position among the students.

“Open-minded” turned out to be most frequently mentioned by teachers. As T2 reported that students, as the most receptive group, were able to accept different cultures with an open mind. She reported students’ attitude change progress in contact with different cultures.

I think students nowadays are still very tolerant of different cultures. When they come into contact with different cultures, there will be a gradual change in their emotional process towards different cultures, and they are usually surprised at first, then they accept them, and finally, they will respect different cultures (T2).

Most of teachers mentioned students’ curiosity about different cultures and an interest in exploring cultural products and perspectives. The example below shows one teacher’s view about curiosity to other cultures.

When we’re talking about different cultures, they are always pay attention listening, interested during the class. If I have a chance I would incorporate culture lessons, they are interested, they are curious and they are fast learning other cultures, so I think the students, they are eager to learn, they are respectful other cultures, they are open (T1).

After they learnt about different culture or behavior of other countries, they also try to apply these different behavior styles in their interactions with me (T1).

As for codes “respect for different cultures”, “tolerance of cultural differences” and “avoiding ethnocentrism”, students were considered as able to respect the cultures of foreign countries, and hold tolerant attitude of different cultures to reduce the negative influence of cultural stereotypes and ethnocentrism on their understanding of multiculturalism and cultural differences. This means that students were willing to relativize their own values, views and behaviors, consciously reduce the negative impact of ethnocentrism on their understanding of multiculturalism, were able to see their own culture from the perspective of an outsider with different values, beliefs and behaviors, and avoid the notion that their own culture is the only viable or inherently right choice, and can move from a cultural assertion of their own culture to the acceptance of others’ cultures. As T7 explained:

They are neither naive and conceited nor blindly inferior; they know that they should not measure the behavior of foreign teachers by Chinese concepts. (T7)

However, these teachers also noted that students still had some attitudes that affected the success of intercultural communication. For example, “lack of understanding of other cultures” reflects the inability of one to understand, while “culture stereotypes” imply oversimplification and generalization at the expense of individual differences and diversity.

Students were aware of and accepted different cultural viewpoints, expressed some degree of awareness of their own culture and its impact on their worldview, and could shift from native knowledge claims to personal processes for adopting others’ knowledge claims. However, students lacked knowledge of cultures other than the mainstream countries, and therefore a multicultural worldview and a multicultural framework seemed unlikely to be established. And negative attitudes that limit effective intercultural communication still exist, such as the incapacity to comprehend other cultures and cultural stereotypes.

T4 used to be in charge of training students to participate in the Intercultural Communication Skills Competition. During her preparation for the competition, she often shared with her students their views on different cultures. She found that the students’ attitudes towards different cultures over the years tended to be more and more neutral. They no longer blindly worshiped European and American cultures and no longer thought that these cultures were superior to those of other countries as they did in previous years. But sometimes they still showed a lack of understanding of the cultures of some economically backward countries. For example, they may think that some cultures are “barbaric”.

One student told me that he had seen a documentary film about a foreign countryside. The inhabitants there often use all sorts of bugs as ingredients to cook with. They ate them while showing a satisfied expression, which looked so horrible that I couldn’t understand why they would eat something so disgusting. (T4)

Some teachers indicated that students’ cultural stereotypes create unfair and narrow impressions of individuals from certain cultures. For example, T1 argued that students had too little exposure to foreigners to dispel stereotypes about certain cultures based on popular anecdotes, or standardized and simplified ideas about particular groups based on preconceived notions.

Some students said that it was OK to get along with the French teacher as they wished, without caring about the details, because “the French are very casual”. However, this was not the same as the French teacher I knew. He is a scholar, very serious in academics and in life. (T1)

Education with an international mindset should strive to dispel preconceptions and encourage students to view people as unique individuals rather than as belonging to a group that has certain stereotypes that are unfairly and narrowly applied to them. More frequent and long-lasting contacts are suitable to develop students’ thinking and help them form complex and positive attitudes about people from different cultures.

In terms of their attitude to cultural identity, it centered on how people perceive their own cultural identity. This was variously referred to as identity development, ego development, developing a sense of identity, or self-development. This wide area covers many identity-related subjects, such as how people see and interpret their social identities depending on characteristics like race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, and religious affiliation, as well as how they utilize their values and beliefs to guide decisions in life.

All eight teachers indicated that students made obvious progress in each aspect in this decade and their identity is at a very high level as they were becoming more and more confident in their nation and national culture, words such as “very proud of national culture”, “strong sense of national identity”, “culture confidence” and “clear self-identity” were mentioned frequently by the participants. As T1 and T8 explained:

There is now the phenomenon of great mass fervour of Hanfu (traditional Chinese clothes) on university campuses, and student organizations often hold Hanfu cultural activities, and it is also common to see students wearing Hanfu on campus. This reflects that students love their national culture very much. (T1)

They are proud of their own culture, they always said to me China has a long and brilliant history. (T8)

Similar findings were reported by Chinese teachers, who found out the students’ positive national identities had developed significantly over the past decade. Students became aware of how rooted they are in their culture, showing a strong interest in traditional Chinese culture and had a very strong motivation and willingness to learn.

Because our country’s comprehensive strength has been increasing over the years... students have become more and more confident in our own cultures, and the sense of multiculturalism has gradually increased, with a high sense of cultural identification. (T1)

While students respect and understand the perspectives and cultural experience of others, they also true to their own beliefs and values. This indicated a shift from egocentric perspectives to perspectives that acknowledge the differences in the values and cultural experiences of various social groups. The exploration of cultures also led students to leave their positions and consider cultural practices from different perspectives. These characteristics were consistent with moderate levels of ICC in that they put themselves in other person’s shoes and demonstrated an ability to think independently of the learned norms identified in their culture or environment.

4.3 Limited Intercultural Communication Skills

Intercultural communication skills turned out to be the most frequently mentioned term by teacher participants. Some teachers noted that students were able to use basic intercultural communication strategies, such as empathy and cooperation. T8, the Filipino teacher described her experience with Chinese students and used the word “respected”, “considerate” to express her feelings. She believed that the students were able to take care of her feelings as a foreigner, change their minds, and put themselves in her shoes, even though many times they do not understand the Filipino culture.

He (a student) is very considerate because he said that: “I don’t know about the culture of Philippine. But you can tell me which do you think is the most suitable like arrangement for you? What is more important in your culture because I want to consider that”. (T8)

Teacher participants were asked to rank the three dimensions of ICC in order of proficiency. Although they ranked knowledge and attitudes differently, all eight teachers agreed that skills were at the lowest level of the three dimensions of ICC. Compared to the positive comments related to skills, negative attributes were mentioned frequently by teachers. T2, T3, and T6 described students’ unsuccessful and unpleasant intercultural communication experience due to limited intercultural communication skills.

Knowledge is the best and skills are the worst. ... but they do not have frequent intercultural communication opportunities to apply what they have learned, they are still a bit weaker in skills. (T2)

Attitude is the best, skills are the worst, as there were almost no foreign teachers in the school during the years of COVID-19, and the students seldom encountered people from different cultures in their normal study and life. (T3)

Some negative and neutral codes, such as the “unable to fully express”, “unable to accurately express Chinese

culture” and “can not deal with culture conflicts flexibly” were frequently mentioned than the positive codes. Students are able to use some basic communication skills and avoid religious and cultural taboos. However, they lack the ability to fully express themselves and lack flexibility when dealing with cultural conflicts.

Regarding “unable to fully express” and “unable to accurately express Chinese culture”, the potential explanations proposed by several teachers included “limited vocabulary”, “insufficient knowledge of Chinese culture” and “insufficient structural accuracy”. The vast majority of teachers indicated that students have basic expression and communication skills in intercultural communication, but due to vocabulary constraints, they are unable to express themselves adequately in English or accurately describe and summarize Chinese culture. Most of the teachers believed that oral English proficiency is important because English is a commonly used medium in intercultural communication. Their statements are as follows:

Most students can basically express Chinese culture (in English), but if he is asked to go deeper, students will be limited by their vocabulary. They will also encounter the problem of not knowing enough about the culture because our country's culture is so rich. (T7)

Sometimes they cannot express it clearly. They used to say “该怎么说呢” (Chinese characters, means How should I say in English) when they don't know how to express themselves... The foreign teacher come from France can not understand them as well as me because of the cultural barriers. (T8)

Some teachers indicated that students' limited oral proficiency hindered their success in intercultural communication. T2 told a story about her students' intercultural experiences and explained students did not know how to deal with cultural conflict in intercultural communication.

My student told me that she met a foreigner while travelling on a bus. When they made eye contact, the foreigner smiled and said “Hi” to her. She was at a loss for words and did not respond, not even a smile. (T2)

Data from classroom observations and teacher interviews were triangulated. The following excerpts are from classroom observation.

Table 1. Excerpt of observation transcript (1)

No.	
1	T: Could you explain the meaning of “Chinese
2	traditional gentleman”?
3	S3: “Chinese traditional gentleman” means a gentleman
4	of high moral character in traditional Chinese thoughts...ah...I
5	mean, the Thought ...ah... “儒家思想” (Chinese characters, which
6	means Confucian thoughts. The student did not know the English word say “confusion” of), how should I
7	say “儒家思想” in
8	“Confucianism”, so she used Chinese words instead.) How should I say
9	“儒家思想” in English?
10	(asked help for her classmates, and they helped to search the word and
11	meanings through internet and translated it to English using telephone dictionary).

Notes: T=teacher; S3=student 3; ...= pause; slanting typeface= researcher's interpretation.

As shown in Table 1, the results from the interviews and class observations suggested that students could express Chinese culture roughly in intercultural communication but lack accuracy, their ability was limited by the depth of their understanding of the culture and the limited ability of oral expression (lines 4-8).

To sum up the findings in this section, the data revealed that teachers perceived that students' had general intercultural communication knowledge, open attitudes and limited skills. Students were exposed to cultures of mainstream countries like those of the United States and Britain well, but they knew little about the cultures of other nations. They held a positive attitude toward different cultures and kept open-minded during intercultural communication. They could use empathy strategies and explain Chinese cultural statutes to avoid misunderstandings in intercultural communication, but they could not fully express themselves in intercultural communication and could not effectively avoid and flexibly deal with cultural conflicts. Students had the basic

ability to express and communicate Chinese culture in intercultural communication, but they were unable to accurately describe and summarize Chinese culture in English.

5. Discussion

The findings echo to some extent the same concern of several studies (Dai, 2016; Zhou, Y. & Burhanudeen, 2023) when reporting the ICC of undergraduates in China even though the studies did not use the same data collection and analysis methods. According to ICC cultivation standards proposed by Education Ministry of China, cognitive (knowledge) includes knowledge of the national culture and other cultures in the world. It is clear that the students lacked knowledge of cultures outside the mainstream countries and did not have a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of Chinese culture.

A possible explanation for the issue might be the limited access to understand intercultural communication knowledge. Students mainly depended on indirect intercultural contact from textbooks, movies, television works and the internet to acquire intercultural communication knowledge. Cultural products and courses contribute to the expansion of students' intercultural knowledge, foregrounding their intercultural awareness and skills. However, the resourcefulness of cultural products may also result in a lack of systematic and targeted intercultural exposure for students, and students who lack the ability to think independently and learn critically will find it difficult to judge right from wrong and discern truth from falsehood (Zhou, Y. & Burhanudeen, 2023). It is evidence that their knowledge is insufficient for the success of intercultural communication. But it does not mean that intercultural communication courses should teach students information on Italians daily routine or Philippines eating customs, in other words, these courses may teach students how to acquire intercultural knowledge, which sources to consult, and, most importantly, in line with Byram's (1997) suggestions, raise their awareness towards the importance of familiarity with cultural products and practices of others.

Gu (2015) pointed out that Intercultural Communication textbooks for English majors were dominated by intercultural communication expertise and theory, with a lack of multicultural and indigenous cultural content. Yuan (2011) addressed the importance of selecting appropriate English textbooks containing varied cultural content and reflecting the status of ELF. In addition, English major students in Chinese universities are exposed to Anglo-Saxon culture because they study American and British literature, culture as well as history. They can therefore have the cultural knowledge the intercultural communication requires because of their acquaintance with the target language and culture; for example, awareness of key figures and occasions that are ingrained in the target nation's memory, as well as occasions and symbols that serve as markers of the nation's identity or the socioeconomic divisions within the particular culture (Byram, 1997). McKay (2002) suggested that the three types of cultures (for example, target, local, and international) should be integrated into teaching materials to reflect the status of EFL and satisfy the practical needs of EFL users in intercultural contexts.

The second issue apparent in students' ICC was their limited intercultural communication experience. Scholars have considered direct and external contact platforms as effective ICC development pathways. According to Zhang and Yao (2020), intercultural behavioral skills include practical application skills such as listening, observing, communicating, and conflict management. These skills rely heavily on intercultural communication practices to be acquired. Students must receive practical experience in intercultural communication in order to develop their communication skills (Lv, 2007). Through a series of dynamic processes, individuals or groups interact, recognize each other, adapt to each other practically and psychologically, and ultimately develop into intercultural individuals (Wang & Kulich, 2015).

The development of ICC clearly depends on experiences, interactions, and encounters (Wang & Kulich, 2015). Corbett (2003) and Stier (2006) noted that the processual character is often hidden behind the word "encounters". It is in the interaction with others that we develop ICC (Alred & Byram, 2003). Previous studies by Kormos and Csizer (2007), Peng and Wu (2016) classified intercultural contact as direct and indirect. Peng and Wu (2016) demonstrated that direct contact involves China and international social media intercultural communication activities, while indirect contact involves cultural products, multimedia, and curricula.

As other empirical studies (Dombi, 2011; Faubl, 2009) indicated that students who had direct contact with people from different cultures tend to be more accepting of other cultures, less biased, and more adept at navigating intercultural situations. As the majority of the students do not have opportunities to communicate with people from other cultures, it is more likely that the knowledge, attitude and skills required for intercultural communication were acquired through indirect contact in intercultural communication course studies.

This study found that students had a high degree of cultural identity. However, because of their limited vocabulary and incomplete knowledge of Chinese culture, they were also unable to accurately describe and disseminate Chinese culture in English during intercultural conversation. This finding echoes Hua's (2020) study on college students' Chinese cultural communication competence. Liu (2018) pointed out that the overemphasis on negative native language transfer, the excessive weakening of Chinese language and culture have resulted in

the lack of students' Chinese cultural communication competence.

While factual knowledge is relevant to developing ICC, "ICC does not simply involve familiarizing learners with facts, figures or behaviour patterns in the target country, but also a reflection of cultural identities, cultural changes and meta-awareness of cultures" (Gu, 2016). Identity involves the subjective cognition and psychological emotion of the communicating subject in a multicultural environment, reflecting the deep realm of intercultural competence internalized in the heart. Identity is at the core of Zhang and Yao's (2020) model and is the basis for other elements of ICC. Identity determines attitudes and behaviors in ICC. Therefore, in ICC cultivation, emphasis should be placed on cultivating students' ability to disseminate native culture and appropriately increase the output of Chinese culture in the teaching content and classroom activities.

The goal of ICC assessment is to gather evidence of ICC development and to guide the course or project improvement (Deardorff, 2016). The findings of this study should lead us to rethink instructional methods in our classrooms, faculty and practitioners should intentionally tailor their teaching and programming accordingly (Bowman & Brandenburger, 2012). This study pushes higher education professionals to adapt educational programs appropriately and to continuously reevaluate theoretical presumptions in light of our period and place.

6. Implication

In terms of practical significance, firstly, this study is unique in that it relies on data about the ICC level of English majors in China from teachers' perspective. These data provide a new pool of information that adds to existing research that has relied primarily on quantitative or qualitative self-reports. The findings are encouraging in terms of instruction meanings because the teachers know better than students themselves about the gap between students' intercultural skills proficiency and their expected performance. It provides insight on students' ICC level to policymakers.

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