

# Exploring Debates in Intercultural Foreign Language Education in the Chinese Context

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**Abstract:** *In the world characterised by globalisation, internationalisation and multiculturalism, intercultural communication and intercultural conflicts have become part and parcel of people's daily lives. Thus, as a new direction of educational development advocated by most educational authorities, intercultural education emerges to facilitate mutual understanding and mediate conflicts in globalisation. As a teaching mode that combines language teaching with intercultural education, intercultural foreign language teaching is a significant direction of foreign language education development and the most effective intercultural education channel in the 21st century. This paper investigates the current practice and research of intercultural foreign language education, intending to identify problems existing in China. By analysing the definition, framework, and pedagogy of intercultural foreign language education, this paper aims to identify issues under debate and propose some challenges for future research and practice in China's intercultural foreign language education.*

**Keywords:** *Intercultural Communicative Competence, Intercultural Education, Intercultural Foreign Language Education*

## 1. Introduction

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which characterised by globalisation, internationalisation and multiculturalism, intercultural communication and intercultural conflicts have become part of people's daily lives. In the context of globalisation development, intercultural misunderstanding and disputes have not been dispelled or weakened but intensified with the increasing complexity of national or social interest conflicts. Therefore, intercultural education is of great significance and has become the trend of education to facilitate mutual understanding and mediate conflicts during the development of the social economy.

To meet the challenge of globalisation and internationalisation, there is a consensus among Chinese scholars that the goal of foreign language education has changed from cultivating instrumental language skills such as listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation to cultivating qualified international leaders who have adequate intercultural communicative competence (ICC) and behave appropriately in the globalised world (Wang 2016; Xu, 2000; Zhuang 2012; Zhang, 2021). Therefore, as a teaching mode that combines language teaching with intercultural education, intercultural foreign language teaching is a vital development direction of foreign language education and is expected to become the most potent field of intercultural education in China.

With more and more attention paid to the significance of intercultural education in foreign language teaching, the theoretical research and practical exploration of intercultural foreign language teaching have been enriched. A variety of scholars, practitioners and policymakers have been engaging in the discussions about various issues concerning intercultural foreign language education to cultivate students' intercultural competence effectively (Han, 2014; Liu, 2022; Sun, 2016; Zhang, 2018). These discussions including the relationship between language, culture and language teaching, the definition of intercultural communicative competence, models and frameworks of intercultural communicative competence, the pedagogy for integrating intercultural competence with language teaching. However, due to the ICC's complexity, the research and practice of intercultural foreign language teaching in China are still relatively undeveloped and have many controversies.

## 2. Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) and Intercultural Foreign Language Education (IFLE)

The concept of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) was developed from Hymes' (1972)

“Communicative Competence” (cited in Byram, 1997:7), which emphasises the sociolinguistic competence of using language appropriately in language acquisition and communication. Then, this pattern of first language acquisition and communication among native speakers was transferred into the pattern of foreign language teaching and learning and became fundamental to the development of communicative language teaching. However, Byram (1997, 2021) criticises that the transfer is misleading as it fails to consider the importance of the learner's social identities and cultural competence in any intercultural interaction. By emphasising on sociocultural competence, Byram's critiques have thrown some light on putting foreign language teaching (FLT) into a broader context.

Gudykunst (1994) points out that when judging about communication competence, it is often made by others and depend on the context they are in (cited in Byram, 1997:15). Thus, he presents three components of perceived competence, including motivation, knowledge and skills. Wiseman's (2011) finding of ICC's structure reconciles with Gudykunst that ICC consists of knowledge, skills and motivation essential for effective and appropriate interaction with people from different cultures. Likewise, Dearsdoiff (2006) argues the components involved in the concept of ICC are “awareness, valuing and understanding of cultural differences, experiencing other cultures, and self-awareness of one's own culture” (P. 247). These scholars widely agree that intercultural competence is comprised of three components, including attitudes (the affective perspective), knowledge (the cognitive perspectives) and skills (the behavioural perspective), though the further interpretation of these elements varies.

The best-known model in foreign language education was proposed by Byram (1997). He identifies five factors that make up intercultural competence, including *Savoirs* (knowledge), *Savoir-comprendre* (skills of interpreting and relating), *Savoir-faire* (skills of discovery and interaction), *Savoir-être* (attitudes of openness and curiosity), and *savoir s'engager* (critical cultural awareness) (1997, p. 34). Byram (1997) stresses the significance of language (linguistic competence), identity, social and cultural dimensions of communication in his comprehensive framework. In practice, this model allows foreign language teachers to plan their syllables and design their teaching and become very influential in foreign language teaching.

With intensified globalisation and internationalisation, educators witnessed a novel cultural turn in FLT which implies the exploration of learners' ICC. The term intercultural foreign language education (IFLE) is, in some sense, similar to Byram's conception of intercultural language teaching and learning. IFLE re-emphasises the goal of learning by shifting away from a narrow focus on linguistic or communicative competence to a more comprehensive goal of intercultural competence. However, these broadly accepted ideas of IFLE are still contested in China, some of which are contested vehemently.

### 3. Research on IFLE in the Chinese Context

Based on intercultural education research in the West, Chinese scholars have been trying to adapt intercultural communicative competence within the Chinese context conceptually. From the perspective of traditional Chinese philosophy, Gao (1998) proposes two levels of intercultural competence: *dao* (going across) and *qi* (going beyond). The former focuses on increasing target cultural proficiency, whereas the latter focuses on the gaining of cultural awareness and reflective, tolerant attitudes. Yang & Zhuang (2007) presents a framework of intercultural communication competence, including global mentality, cultural adaptation, knowledge, and communicative management. Gu (2017)'s theoretical model also includes the components of attitude, knowledge and skills. Though it is agreed among these scholars that ICC involves competence at cognitive, affective, and behavioural levels, which resonates with some western scholars, the specific interpretation for the components in these models still varies.

Previous models lack a thorough discussion on integrating Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) into diverse foreign language courses and implementing effective intercultural teaching. Scholars, such as Zhang & Chen (2012), have attempted to address this gap by experimenting with diverse intercultural practices in college English teaching. Zhang & Chen integrated ICC regularly before, during, and after classes, resulting in positive outcomes. Huang (2015) also contributed a process-oriented model for comprehensive English courses, emphasizing steps like formulating hypotheses, research, reflective journaling, and fostering new cultural insights. Huang's study demonstrated a significant enhancement in students' ICC, encompassing both emotional and behavioural dimensions. Additionally, Peng et al. (2020) introduced theoretical and practical models to integrate intercultural competence development into various foreign language courses at both macro and micro levels. These models aim to guide college and university foreign language instructors in intercultural teaching, although their scientific validity and effectiveness require confirmation through empirical studies. Currently, there remains a dearth of

representative and applicable intercultural foreign language teaching models.

The assessment of ICC in classroom activities is increasingly recognized as crucial for language education development. Scholars, including Byram (2021), Deardorff (2006), and Fantini (2009), unanimously acknowledge the ability of educators to evaluate ICC outcomes. Despite this consensus, there is a notable lack of studies exploring how Chinese foreign language teachers design and implement practical ICC assessments. Recent initiatives by Chinese educators have introduced diverse models for ICC assessment, covering a theoretical framework for building assessment tools (Zhong & Fan, 2013), principles and objectives of ICC assessment (Wang, 2012), and principles and approaches for ICC assessment (Zhang, 2018). However, the application of these objectives, principles, and methods in assessing ICC within Chinese IFLE practice remains uncertain.

#### **4. Debated Issues in IFLE in the Chinese Context**

Since China's reform and opening in the 1980s, intercultural competence has emerged as a focus of foreign language education in China and developed rapidly with increasing awareness and pressure to keep up with the pace of globalisation and international exchanges. Though it is clear that some consensus has been reached internationally on the importance of intercultural foreign language education (Byram, 1997; Zhang, 2012; Peng et al, 2020), various issues concerning ICC in IFLE in China are still under debate. These debates are in both research and practice, such as how to define ICC, what components ICC contains, what ways to cultivate ICC, and at what stage should ICC be assessed.

##### **4.1. The Complexity on Conceptualising ICC**

As is reviewed above, there is a wide consensus among Chinese scholars that ICC involves competence at cognitive, affective and behavioural levels, but the specific interpretation of these models' components still varies. Some Chinese scholars equate intercultural communication competence with intercultural competence. For example, Yang & Zhuang (2007) claim that the equivalence between intercultural communicative competence and intercultural competence is helpful to free our ideas from the narrow vision of language communication. The intercultural awareness, critical thinking and communication strategies are crucial when cultivating the linguistic and communicative competence for ICC. Some Chinese scholars tend to demonstrate the specific components of ICC. For example, Gu 's (2017) theoretical model includes the components of attitude, knowledge and skills. These components are further divided into various subcomponents related to language, culture, and communication, facilitating interactants' transformation from intracultural identity to intercultural identity through cooperation, negotiation and adaptation. Recently, Zhang & Yao (2020) have proposed a theoretical framework for the development of ICC in Chinese students, starting from the analysis of the practical needs. This framework, named "Four Three Two One," encompasses four perspectives, three levels, two contexts, and one platform, aiming to construct an integrated model for the development of ICC in Chinese students. However, those American-European and indigenous ICC models make it much complicated and challenging for educational practitioners to conceptualise ICC in language education in China, not to mention implementing those models into practice.

##### **4.2. Contested Views on Teaching Culture in IFLE in China**

It is widely known that the process of learning a foreign language is always accompanied by acquiring its culture. By reviewing culture and language learning, Byram & Feng (2004) propose that language educators should emphasise cultural teaching and ICC in language teaching. Though the importance of integrating cultural teaching in IFLE has been widely recognised, the way of understanding and teaching the complex culture is still debated among some researchers and teachers.

Culture has been understood as national attributes, societal norms, symbolic systems in language teaching and learning (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013: 17). However, many teachers believe that introducing some cultural knowledge in class is intercultural education and pays attention to culture teaching only when time and conditions are permitted (Zhang, 2012). For example, in my university, teachers often introduce to students what they have read or heard about the cultures in other countries in class, including foods, customs, tradition, arts, festivals. They also tend to focus on the familiar or interesting knowledge they know and avoid unfamiliar knowledge. Thus, culture teaching in foreign language teaching is sometimes unsystematic, and learners often learn incomplete and biased cultural knowledge that will quickly lead to stereotyping or even wrong cognition of the target language.

According to Feng (2009), effective intercultural language teaching enables students to build relationships between two or more cultures and understand the gaps between values, beliefs and behaviours to express interculturally. However, in practice, many teachers often focus merely on target culture, neglecting their home/local culture in the language class, not to mention analysing the differences and similarities among various cultures.

#### ***4.3. Contested Views on the Cultivation of ICC in Foreign Language Syllabus in China***

In China, the Ministry of Education has actively promoted the integration of intercultural communication into foreign language education through various policy documents. An illustration of this is the Chinese English Syllabus for English Majors (CESEM) of 2000, which marked the first emphasis on cultivating intercultural competence for English majors. In this syllabus, the teaching principles underscore the importance of "cultivating intercultural communicative competence" and paying attention to students' "sensitivity, tolerance, and flexibility in dealing with cultural differences." However, the practical implementation of this task primarily occurs in culture courses designed for senior foreign language majors.

Similarly, the Chinese College English Curriculum Requirements (CECR) in 2007 highlighted intercultural communication in teaching objectives, defining College English as a system guided by foreign language teaching theory. While intercultural communication is acknowledged as teaching content, the CECR lacks details on how to cultivate Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), offering no specific guidance on implementation in foreign language textbooks.

The 2011 English curriculum standard for Compulsory Education explicitly mentions the goal of cultivating intercultural communicative competence for primary and secondary school students. Despite presenting a more straightforward interpretation of intercultural competence in terms of culture, cultural awareness, and intercultural communicative competence, the specific requirements for ICC remain unclear. Concerns have been raised, such as Hu's argument that cultivating intercultural communication awareness in primary and secondary schools is challenging, aligning with Byram's notion that teachers can only lay the foundation for ICC in these educational levels, recognizing it as a long-term and arduous task.

In summary, the varying interpretations of ICC by educators and policymakers in China's language teaching syllabuses indicate different requirements for intercultural communication. This policy gap emphasizes the need for a unified understanding of ICC in Intercultural Foreign Language Education (ICLE) in China to effectively integrate intercultural communication into language teaching curricula.

#### ***4.4. The Contest on the Approaches to Cultivate ICC***

As is widely agreed by scholars internationally that ICC is comprised of three components, including attitudes (the affective perspective), knowledge (the cognitive perspectives) and skills (the behavioural perspective) (Byram, 1997; Wiseman 2011; Zhang, 2018), the cultivation of ICC in classroom foreign language teaching in China is also mainly focused on three dimensions. For cultivating knowledge, lectures, reading related materials, using audio-visual products and online education are generally adopted in teaching. Educators adopted various training tasks to cultivate attitude, including case analysis, interaction with people from different cultural backgrounds, field trip. For cultivating skills, as linguistic competence is specific and can be scientifically tested, it can be acquired through lectures, but other communicative skills need to be developed from intercultural encounters in real life (Byram, 2008; Holmes & O' Neill, 2012).

At present, classroom-based teaching and learning is generally the primary approach for cultivating ICC in IFLE in China. Many Chinese educators have already recognised it is difficult for intensive lectures and training to significantly affect the cultivation of interpersonal skills, flexibility and specific ability in different cultural environments. Zhang (2007) holds that the cultivation of ICC should be regarded as "the advanced goal of foreign language teaching", which needs not only the careful design of classroom language teaching activities (P. 193). Both Liu (2022) and Hu (2013) further emphasise that ICC's cultivation also needs extracurricular programmes, including working with intercultural encounters or studying abroad. In addition, some foreign language colleges and universities already have the arrangement of combining domestic study with foreign study, which is beneficial for the ICC cultivation. However, studying with intercultural encounters or studying abroad is confronted with many difficulties. Therefore, there is much to explore the practical approaches to cultivate ICC in IFLE in China.

#### **4.5. The Contest on the Assessment of ICC in IFLE**

As ICC becomes more widely recognised as an essential goal of foreign language education in China, its assessment increasingly attracts attention. For example, Sun (2016) stresses that educators must integrate the ICC's assessment into the English language evaluation system to help teachers understand and improve students' intercultural competences. Though some Chinese educators start to explore various issues concerning the ICC's assessment (Liu, 2022; Wang, 2012; Zhang, 2018), involving objectives, principles and approaches, there is no explicit assessment tool of ICC to be applied in Chinese IFLE practice. Moreover, there are no specific requirements for assessing ICC in any foreign language syllabus mentioned above.

At present, there are many linguistic-related foreign language tests at national levels in China, including College English Test (Band 4 & 6) and Test for English Majors (Band 4 & 8). These tests involve some cultural knowledge, intercultural communication skills and attitudes in the part of translation and writing. However, this kind of assessment is typical linguistic-based, and it is not the test for ICC.

Zhang (2018) present an ICC assessment approach for foreign language learners based on contests. They develop an ICC assessment system with indicators, which serves as the guidelines for designing the Shanghai Intercultural Competence Contest (SFLEP). The ICC assessment in this contest involving various activities with distinctive cultural characteristics, such as sharing cultural stories, developing and presenting intercultural conflict cases, cultural knowledge quizzes, scenario comments and telling China stories. Though the study demonstrates the feasibility of adopting contests to assess ICC, it only focuses on a specific group of students who participated in the contest. Diverse groups of students and different intercultural foreign language learning contexts should also be considered to ensure the assessment approach's accuracy and effectiveness. Therefore, there leaves much to be explored in the assessment system of ICC in IFLE in China.

#### **5. Conclusion**

This paper has addressed some debated issues in intercultural foreign language education in China and how intercultural education can and should become part of all foreign language educators' research and practices, irrespective of the specific disciplines they teach. The central idea is that the "intercultural communicative competence", a perspective that traverses the school curriculum in China, needs specific implementation plans rather than a general concept to be addressed alone by language policymakers and language educators. Scholars and practitioners in foreign languages should deeply explore the theoretical and practical problems of intercultural foreign language teaching and ICC development. The concept of intercultural education should be embedded in foreign language teaching and train international talents for the globalisation's development. Educators and policymakers should endeavour to formulate the syllabus, adjust the curriculum system, update teaching methods and activities, and improve the evaluation system. Moreover, the paper puts forward the idea that the cultivation of ICC in IFLE in China become even challenging in pandemic times, and there is an urgent need for future research and practice to meet this challenge.

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#### **Notes on Contributor**

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