

Contextualization of Intercultural Communication Competence Framework and College EFL Learners' ICC

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Abstract: Cultivating students' intercultural communication competence (ICC) has emerged as a shared goal across global higher education sectors. Establishing a practical framework for intercultural pedagogy aligned with China's sociocultural environment remains crucial. This investigation sought to construct a contextualized ICC model while assessing the competence levels of 334 participants from targeted universities. Empirical data were collected through a standardized assessment tool. Analysis revealed that participants demonstrated ICC proficiency at an advanced stage. The study concludes by proposing targeted recommendations to enhance the effectiveness of intercultural competence development in educational settings.

Keywords: ICC Framework, Context, College EFL Learners

1. Introduction

In the context of global integration, as individuals from diverse cultural environments increasingly interact through various channels, whether directly or indirectly, cross-cultural communication has emerged as a defining feature of contemporary society. The ability to navigate intercultural exchanges is universally recognized as a crucial skill for university students in the modern age. Developing citizens with intercultural communicative competence has evolved into a shared priority for nations engaging in global affairs and fostering social cohesion within their borders^[1]. This reality underscores the pivotal role intercultural communication plays in facilitating worldwide cultural exchange and enabling productive collaboration across nations.

During an address delivered at UNESCO's headquarters, President Xi Jinping emphasized: "We must advocate mutual appreciation and harmonious co-development among diverse civilizations, transforming cultural exchanges and mutual learning into vital connectors that strengthen international friendships, act as catalysts for

advancing human civilization, and form linkages for global peace preservation. By drawing intellectual sustenance from various cultural heritages, we can offer spiritual guidance and emotional solace to humanity while collaboratively addressing shared challenges confronting our species."^[2] In the contemporary context of comprehensive cultural interaction between Chinese civilization and other global traditions, the current era demands highly competent graduates equipped with cross-cultural capabilities more urgently than any previous historical period.

Based on the practical demands of foreign language education in Chinese universities within globalized contexts, this research investigates intercultural communication competence frameworks and proficiency levels among undergraduate English learners. Centered on developing ICC within China's higher education system, the study addresses current pedagogical needs in cross-cultural training.

2. Intercultural Communication Competence

Language acquisition research fundamentally aims to improve learners' intercultural communicative capabilities. The conceptualization of ICC has undergone continuous scholarly examination, with evolving interpretations reflecting academic discourse development.

2.1 Definition

Academic consensus regarding ICC's conceptual boundaries remains fluid, with researchers proposing varying interpretations through multiple theoretical lenses. The dynamic nature of this field manifests through paradigm shifts within individual scholars' work over time, where conceptual priorities and analytical frameworks demonstrate significant evolution. Divergent academic perspectives emerge from differing methodological approaches and disciplinary orientations in ICC research.

Byram characterized intercultural communication competence (ICC) as the capacity to interact effectively with individuals from diverse linguistic

backgrounds and cultural environments.^[3]

Chen & Starosta propose that intercultural communication competence shares its foundational definition with general communication competence, while its distinctive aspect lies in prioritizing both efficacy and situational suitability within intercultural exchanges. This perspective particularly emphasizes contextual elements by focusing on participants' cultural origins during interactions.^[4]

Lustig and Koester highlight the context-dependent nature of intercultural communication, maintaining that successful cross-cultural interactions require participants to demonstrate thorough cultural understanding, proper communicative objectives, and proficient intercultural behaviors.^[5]

Spitzberg characterizes intercultural communication competence by stating that, broadly speaking, it can be interpreted as the perception that one's actions are both suitable and impactful within particular situational frameworks^[6].

Numerous scholars have attempted to conceptualize the notion of "intercultural communication competence," with widespread recognition that it encompasses the capacity to interact both efficiently and suitably across cultural boundaries within defined settings^[7]. Martin & Nakayama's theoretical contributions particularly inform this study's operational definition, which posits such competence as the ability to employ contextually appropriate linguistic strategies for effective cross-cultural exchanges, predominantly through spoken English as the primary communication channel. This conceptualization essentially combines environmental intercultural factors with fundamental communicative abilities, suggesting that intercultural communication competence emerges from the synergy between cultural context awareness and practical interaction skills.

2.2 Frameworks of ICC

Scholars exhibit differing perspectives regarding the conceptualization of ICC, leading to the development of varied theoretical frameworks. Notable models include Byram's ICC construct, Chen's four-dimensional approach, Martin & Nakayama's structural paradigm, and Gao's Knowing-Doing ICC model.

Byram's ICC Framework. This scholar posits that foreign languages serve as essential instruments for intercultural exchanges, highlighting their crucial role in cross-cultural interactions. Building upon foundational work by Ruben and Gudykunst in intercultural communication theory, Byram

established a multidimensional competence model. His framework identifies five critical elements required for effective ICC: attitudinal orientation, cultural understanding, practical competencies, and reflective consciousness. Additionally, Byram stressed the necessity of incorporating contextual factors like social environments and non-verbal communication patterns when operationalizing ICC, advocating for a comprehensive approach to its conceptualization.

Byram's ICC framework is widely recognized for its numerous strengths and remains a foundational framework in the field. Firstly, it prioritizes the role of linguistic competence in intercultural contexts, addressing gaps observed in earlier models that overlooked language skills. Additionally, Byram introduces the concept of critical cultural awareness, enabling individuals to discern cultural disparities and engage in evaluative thinking during cross-cultural encounters.

Martin and Nakayama's ICC framework. They outlines four core elements: cognitive understanding, affective attributes, behavioral tendencies, and contextual influences. Their approach stands out for encompassing a broad spectrum of variables that shape intercultural exchanges, ranging from individual perceptions to environmental factors. Widely regarded as a practical and systematic model, it effectively balances theoretical depth with real-world applicability, offering clear guidelines for analyzing communication dynamics across cultures.

Gao's Knowing-Doing ICC Model. Gao established his Knowing-Doing ICC model to evaluate intercultural competence among Chinese university students. In this model, the "Knowing" component represents a cognitive system rooted in value-based intercultural understanding, while "Doing" constitutes a behavioral system governed by these cultural values. The knowledge dimension not only emerges through practical application but also serves as the foundational guide for behavioral decisions. Intercultural interactions inherently operate through value-driven cognitive frameworks, where observable behaviors manifest internalized knowledge. This behavioral dimension simultaneously validates existing understanding through real-world application, challenges preconceived notions, and integrates new insights into the cognitive framework, thereby driving continuous development of intercultural competence. The dynamic interaction between theoretical understanding and practical application creates a cyclical process that systematically

enhances both knowledge acquisition and behavioral adaptation in cross-cultural contexts. Gao's ICC model conceptualizes intercultural competence through two interconnected systems. The cognitive domain, termed "Knowing," integrates three foundational components: informational knowledge, cultural consciousness, and analytical reasoning abilities. This tripartite structure is mirrored in the behavioral "Doing" system, which emphasizes communicative conduct through three principal aspects: intercultural disposition, practical competencies, and adaptive approaches.

Distinct from earlier intercultural models, this framework demonstrates particular relevance for Chinese educational environments through its synthetic methodology. By synthesizing three prominent ICC theories and specifically targeting Chinese university students as its primary focus group, the framework offers enhanced applicability in China's sociocultural context. The model's contextual effectiveness stems from its dual emphasis on theoretical integration and practical implementation strategies tailored to Chinese EFL learners' needs.

3. A New Framework for Chinese Efl Learners

3.1 The Contextualized ICC Framework

Gao's model for evaluating ICC demonstrates a practical and focused approach, particularly tailored for Chinese university students engaged in EFL learning. While this model effectively addresses specific assessment needs, it insufficiently addresses contextual influences during practical application. The educational trajectory of college EFL learners typically involves continuous immersion in Chinese and Eastern cultural environments from primary education through higher education. Their linguistic development occurs predominantly within monolingual settings, with limited exposure to authentic English communication contexts and minimal intercultural exchanges with native speakers. This educational reality creates dual challenges: students struggle to internalize English's idiomatic expressions and face difficulties comprehending nuanced cultural-linguistic patterns. Consequently, when developing ICC cultivation frameworks for this demographic, the researcher emphasizes the critical need to incorporate contextual considerations to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical intercultural communication competencies.

Drawing upon Gao's ICC model tailored for Chinese university learners and integrating Martin

& Nakayama's foundational ICC principles, this research develops an enhanced analytical structure that embeds contextual considerations. The resulting tripartite model, which addresses contextual factors in intercultural communications, is graphically illustrated in the subsequent diagram (Figure 1):

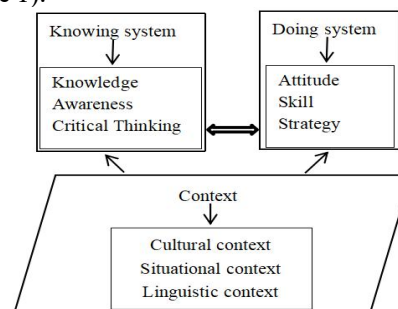


Figure 1. A Contextualized ICC Framework

The development of EFL learners' intercultural communication competence (ICC) necessitates not only the acquisition of knowledge and its application through behavior but also emphasizes the particular context in which intercultural communications occur. Consequently, knowing, doing and context emerge as the three primary components shaping the enhancement of EFL learners' ICC, with each element exerting mutual influence. Knowing serves as the foundation for effective intercultural communication, where knowing directly governs the performance of doing. During the transformation of externalizing knowledge into behavior, context factors significantly mediate this process. The implementation of doing remains inseparable from specific contextual parameters, while outcomes of doing conversely contribute to the advancement of knowing.

Accordingly, the cultivation of ICC among college EFL learners should encompass three fundamental dimensions: the knowing system that facilitates knowledge acquisition, the doing system that develop communicative skills, and the contextual considerations essential for effective competence development. These interconnected dimensions operate synergistically, with contextual awareness informing both knowledge assimilation and behavioral adaptation, while doing engagement simultaneously modifies knowing structures and contextual interpretations.

3.2 Component

This framework integrates knowing systems, doing systems, and contextual systems to develop intercultural communication competence among college EFL learners within globalized

environments. The knowing system establishes a foundational structure structured around three interrelated elements: cultural knowledge, intercultural consciousness, and analytical reasoning capabilities. These components work synergistically to enhance learners' understanding of diverse cultural paradigms.

The doing system complements the knowing system through practical application, consisting of three operational aspects: intercultural attitude, communicative skill, and adaptive strategy. These dimensions translate theoretical understanding into real-world interaction capabilities across cultural boundaries.

contextual system encompasses both verbal and non-verbal elements shaping communication dynamics. This operational context extends beyond linguistic features to incorporate temporal-spatial conditions, interaction scenarios, participant profiles, discourse frameworks, and situational prerequisites that collectively influence communicative exchanges in both spoken interactions and written discourse.

The contextual dimension encompasses the sociocultural foundations of source language communities and the corresponding linguistic conventions that EFL learners are expected to accurately comprehend and acknowledge during language acquisition. This dimension functions as a critical component within the developmental process of intercultural communication competence. It integrates three key elements: cultural context, situational context and linguistic context, collectively forming the essential parameters for effective intercultural understanding. The cultural context reflects historical traditions and value systems, while situational context addresses immediate communicative settings, and linguistic context encompasses conventionalized language usage norms particular to the target culture.

4. Research Design

The research methodology of this investigation is structured into two sequential phases. During the initial phase, the study focuses on establishing a clear definition of intercultural communication competence, which serves as the foundation for identifying key elements within the competence framework tailored for college EFL learners. Subsequent to framework development, the second phase conducts a comprehensive assessment of EFL undergraduates' intercultural communication competence using the established framework. This evaluation aims to identify influential variables

impacting students' intercultural performance while simultaneously investigating potential educational strategies for enhancing these competencies through targeted curriculum development.

4.1 Survey Subject

This empirical study employed a survey-based approach through questionnaires to assess the extent of students' intercultural communication competence. Participants consisted of second or third-year undergraduates from four higher education institutions in Dongguan, all having fulfilled a minimum of one semester's training in English-mediated intercultural communication courses.

4.2 Research Instrument

The investigation utilized a custom-designed Likert-scale questionnaire adapted and refined from Shen & Gao's ICCICCS framework [8]. To evaluate the instrument's consistency, preliminary testing was administered to a sample of 55 college EFL students. Subsequent statistical analysis and compilation of pilot data revealed the measurement tool's demonstrated exceptionally high reliability levels.

5. Analysis

The survey involved administering and retrieving 334 questionnaires to evaluate Chinese college EFL learners' intercultural communication competence across three domains: knowing system, doing system, and contextual dimension. Subsequent sections present descriptive statistical outcomes regarding participants' ICC levels, aiming to establish an overall understanding of their intercultural communication competence. Table 1 displays the self-assessed intercultural communication competence levels among these learners, structured according to knowing, doing, and contextual frameworks.

Table 1. The perceived level of ICC of College EFL learners

Sub-variables	WM	Verbal Interpretation
Knowing System	3.98	High
Doing System	3.99	High
Context Dimension	3.91	High
Grand WM	3.96	High

The weighted average score measuring respondents' intercultural communication competence (ICC) within the knowing system reached 3.98, demonstrating that participants perceived their cultural awareness capabilities as considerably developed. Detailed examination of domain-

specific weighted averages revealed three significant findings: 1) college EFL learners exhibit acute awareness of cultural contrasts between Chinese and foreign traditions, maintain respectful approaches to these distinctions during intercultural interactions, and demonstrate intentional behavioral modifications in intercultural contexts. These findings align with the research outcomes documented by Shen and Gao^[8].

The average weighted score for intercultural communication competence among Chinese participants in the doing system dimension reached 3.99, indicating a pronounced tendency toward proactive intercultural engagement behaviors. This finding aligns with prior findings documented by Huang Limin^[9] through empirical investigations. From an educational standpoint, the data underscores the necessity to prioritize reinforcement of exploratory behaviors and empathetic engagement among Chinese learners. Pedagogical strategies should emphasize developing investigative skills via intercultural immersion programs, particularly nurturing self-regulated learning capacities and sustainable educational development. Such approaches aim to equip students with skills to proactively gather knowledge, identify relevant resources, exercise critical thinking, generate innovative solutions to challenges, and ultimately navigate authentic intercultural scenarios with self-directed initiative.

As indicated in Table 1, the average weighted score for the context dimension reached 3.91. This numerical value suggests that college EFL learners demonstrated an advanced proficiency level in intercultural communication competence concerning contextual awareness. Li Qinghua's research emphasizes context's critical function in intercultural communication abilities^[10]. The interactive process of communication involves three interdependent elements: participants (both speakers and listeners) and their contextual environment. Effective intercultural communication requires not just mutual foundational understanding among communicators but also collaborative construction of context during interactions. Consequently, contextual factors significantly impact the outcome of intercultural communication attempts, with proper contextual adaptation being crucial for successful intercultural communication.

In summary, college EFL learners demonstrate the ability to effectively interact with individuals from different cultural backgrounds. An analysis of the data presented reveals that the composite score for context (WM=3.91) slightly trailed behind those for

knowing system (WM=3.98) and doing system (WM=3.99). This discrepancy suggests educators should prioritize developing authentic intercultural contexts within instructional settings while enhancing learners' cultural awareness, particularly regarding national characteristics and social conventions across cultures (WM=3.66). The overall composite score measuring intercultural communication competence stood at 3.96. Participant responses consistently reflected similar self-assessments across all three competency domains- knowing system, doing system and context dimension- indicating uniform perceptions of their intercultural communication competence.

6. Conclusion

The research outcomes lead to the formulated conclusion that Chinese college EFL learners demonstrate advanced intercultural communication proficiency across knowing system, doing system and context dimension domains. Statistical analysis reveals hierarchical performance levels among these components: doing system surpass knowing system, which itself exceeds contextual dimension. The calculated averages position doing system at the superior range, followed by knowing system, with context dimension metrics registering comparatively lower evaluations across measured parameters.

This study offers several implications for enhancing College English education and its reform. Primarily, it is essential for educators to prioritize the development of intercultural communication competence among EFL learners. This can be achieved through establishing authentic intercultural interaction scenarios and improving learners' contextual awareness within such environments. Additionally, technical institutions should leverage available academic assets to organize diverse cultural activities like thematic seminars and intercultural exchange events, thereby strengthening students' intercultural communication skills. Furthermore, higher education institutions need to systematically design immersive intercultural experiences by facilitating international collaborations and exchange programs, which would holistically improve learners' capacity to navigate intercultural communication scenarios effectively.

This research has provided insights into the existing conditions of ICC among college EFL learners in China. However, the investigation remains limited in scope regarding geographical and institutional diversity. Future investigations should incorporate a

broader array of participants and academic institutions across multiple regions. Furthermore, various categories of higher education establishments- including both public institutions and private colleges with distinct educational philosophies- need to be systematically represented and examined in subsequent studies.

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