

An Investigation of Intercultural Communicative Competence Among Junior High School English Teachers in Less Economically Developed Areas: A Case Study of Laibin, Guangxi

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Abstract: Driven by the 2022 English Curriculum Standards, this study investigates the intercultural communicative competence (ICC) of 43 junior high school teachers in Laibin, Guangxi. Utilizing a mixed-methods design, the research reveals that while teachers possess positive intercultural concepts, they lack practical skills in cultural comparison and resource utilization. Key constraints include examination pressure, limited time, and insufficient technical proficiency. Consequently, the study proposes improvement strategies at individual, school, and policy levels to enhance ICC cultivation in less economically developed areas.

Keywords: Less Economically Developed Areas; Junior High School English Teachers; Intercultural Communicative Competence

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

The English Curriculum Standard for Compulsory Education (2022 Edition) emphasizes cultural awareness as a core competency, shifting English education from mere language instruction to fostering intercultural communicative competence (ICC). However, regional disparities in China pose significant challenges. Less economically developed areas, such as Laibin, Guangxi, often lack the educational funding and teacher training opportunities available in developed regions. For instance, in 2022, Laibin's education investment was only 65% of the Guangxi average, and fewer than 40% of teachers participated in intercultural training.

Existing literature on teachers' ICC predominantly focuses on developed regions or higher education, leaving a scarcity of empirical studies on junior high school teachers in ethnic minority and economically less developed areas

(Wu Qilin, 2022; Sui Zan, 2021). Furthermore, recent pedagogical approaches like the output-oriented approach and teaching of promoting writing by reading offer new pathways for integrating intercultural teaching with language instruction (Du Chunlei, 2025; Rui Chen, 2025), yet their application in these specific contexts remains underexplored. This study addresses these gaps by investigating the ICC of junior high school English teachers in Laibin.

1.2 Purpose

This study aims to systematically investigate the current status, classroom practices, and influencing factors of ICC among junior high school English teachers in Laibin. Specifically, it seeks to: (1) evaluate teachers' intercultural attitudes, knowledge, and skills; (2) analyze the practical application of intercultural strategies and their integration with language teaching; and (3) identify constraints on ICC development to propose targeted improvement strategies for professional development in resource-constrained settings.

1.3 Significance

Theoretically, this study enriches the regionalized research on intercultural communication by constructing an evaluation framework that includes the mutual learning of local and international cultures. It also expands the application of theories like the output-oriented approach in basic education (Du Chunlei, 2025; Rui Chen, 2025). Practically, the findings provide empirical evidence for education authorities to formulate targeted training policies and optimize resource allocation. For front-line teachers, this research offers insights to identify teaching deficiencies and improve classroom design, serving as a reference model for other less economically developed areas.

1.4 Research Questions

Based on the objectives above, this study addresses the following three questions:

RQ1: What is the current level of intercultural communicative competence among junior high school English teachers in Laibin?

RQ2: How is intercultural communicative competence reflected in classroom teaching practice?

RQ3: What factors influence the development of the intercultural communicative competence of teachers?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) of Teachers

Research on teachers' ICC has evolved from theoretical construction to empirical application, with a growing focus on the specific contexts of less economically developed areas.

2.1.1 Foreign Research

Foreign studies on teachers' ICC started earlier, emphasizing the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. Idris and Muhammad (2020) found that while teachers in less developed areas of Indonesia possessed adequate cultural knowledge, they lacked practical skills in intercultural interaction and reflection. Avalos (2011) highlighted that continuous professional training and peer assistance are crucial for overcoming these deficits. Furthermore, international research supports the integration of cultural elements into language skills teaching (e. g., reading and writing), a trend that aligns with current domestic pedagogical reforms.

2.1.2 Domestic Research

Domestic research has extensively explored the dilemmas and strategies of ICC teaching in China's less economically developed areas.

Current Status and Dilemmas: Studies by Wu Qilin (2022), Sui Zan (2021), and Xu Zhouxiazhi (2018) consistently reveal that teachers in regions like Shaanxi and Chongqing suffer from insufficient knowledge reserves, a lack of teaching resources, and a heavy reliance on textbooks. Zhao Jingjing (2018) specifically noted the difficulty teachers in ethnic minority areas face in expressing local culture in English.

Pedagogical Integration: Recent studies have begun to explore methodological innovations. Du Chunlei (2025) proposed that the Output-Oriented Approach (POA) can bridge the gap

between learning and application, while Rui Chen (2025) demonstrated that Promoting Writing by Reading effectively cultivates cultural awareness.

Development Strategies: Scholars suggest adaptive strategies such as "local internationalization" (Liu Chang, 2024) and hierarchical training (Zhu Meiling, 2016) to address resource shortages.

2.1.3 Research Gaps

Despite these achievements, existing literature shows limitations. First, geographically, research focuses on areas like Shaanxi and Yunnan, leaving a gap regarding southwestern ethnic minority areas like Guangxi. Second, methodologically, few studies systematically integrate innovative pedagogies (like POA) with ICC cultivation. Third, the research objects are often senior high school teachers, with junior high school teachers receiving less attention. This study aims to fill these gaps.

2.2 Theoretical Basis

This study is grounded in three interrelated theories that provide a comprehensive framework for analysis.

2.2.1 Intercultural Communication Theory

As the core theory, Intercultural Communication Theory defines the dimensions of ICC. Originating from Hall (1959), who emphasized the role of implicit cultural norms, and developed by Byram (1997), this theory provides the classic four-dimensional model (attitudes, knowledge, skills, and critical cultural awareness). This model serves as the direct basis for the questionnaire design and evaluation framework in this study, helping to measure the teachers' intercultural quality comprehensively.

2.2.2 Teacher Professional Development Theory

This theory explains the growth mechanism of teachers. Shulman (1986) proposed that professional development relies on the integration of content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge. Fullan (1991) further emphasized that teacher growth is not just an individual effort but requires organizational support and systematic training. This perspective guides the analysis of external constraints (e. g., training opportunities) faced by teachers in Laibin.

2.2.3 Social Capital Theory

Social Capital Theory (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988) offers a sociological perspective, suggesting that resources embedded in social

networks (trust, norms, relationships) are vital for individual development. For teachers in resource-poor areas, accumulating social capital through school-based research and inter-school cooperation is a key pathway to compensating for the lack of external resources (Zhang Xiaomei, 2015). This theory supports the proposed strategies for regional teacher collaboration in this study.

3. Research Method

3.1 Participants

The participants of this study are 43 junior high school English teachers from three schools in Laibin, Guangxi: Laibin No. 10 Junior High School, Laibin Minzu Junior High School, and Liangjiang Town Junior High School. All participants hold a bachelor's degree or above. the sample includes 29 female (67.44%) and 14 male (32.56%) teachers, covering a range of ages and teaching experience to ensure representativeness and facilitate subsequent comparative analysis.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Variable	Category	Number	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	29	67.44
	Male	14	32.56
Age	20–30	18	41.86
	31–40	14	32.56
	41–50	10	23.26
	51+	1	2.33
Teaching years	1–5 years	19	44.19
	6–10 years	11	25.58
	11–15 years	4	9.30
	>15 years	9	20.93

3.2 Data Collection Methods

This study adopted a sequential mixed-methods design, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches through questionnaires, classroom observations, and semi-structured interviews.

3.2.1 Questionnaire

A self-designed questionnaire based on Byram's (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) was used to measure the teachers' current ICC level. the questionnaire consists of 37 items across four parts:

Basic Information: 4 items on demographics.

ICC Concepts and Practices: 26 items on a 5-point Likert scale measuring attitudes, knowledge, skills, and reflection.

Obstacles to Teaching: 10 items on a 5-point

Likert scale identifying constraints.

Open Suggestions: 2 open-ended items for qualitative feedback.

The questionnaire was distributed in paper format, yielding 43 valid responses from 45 distributed, with an effective recovery rate of 95.56%.

3.2.2 Classroom Observation

Classroom observation was conducted to collect qualitative data on the practical application of ICC in teaching. One experienced teacher was selected for a 45-minute observation. The Classroom Observation Scale for Junior High School English Intercultural Teaching, based on Byram's (1997) model, was used. It assesses seven dimensions (e. g., cultural attitude, knowledge, comparison skills) on a 1–5 scale. Two researchers scored simultaneously to ensure objectivity, with any discrepancies resolved through discussion.

3.2.3 Semi-structured Interview

A semi-structured interview was conducted with the observed teacher (Teacher Z) to explore the underlying reasons for the quantitative findings and the challenges in professional development. the interview, lasting approximately 15 minutes, focused on four core questions regarding the integration of culture into teaching, practical difficulties, resource management, and strategies for improving ICC. the interview was recorded and transcribed for analysis.

4. Data Analysis and Discussion

This chapter presents a systematic analysis of the data collected from questionnaires, classroom observations, and interviews. the findings are discussed in relation to the research questions to clarify the current status, practical performance, and influencing factors of teachers' Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) in Laibin.

4.1 Data Analysis

This section reports the key results from the three data sources.

4.1.1 Questionnaire Results

A total of 43 valid questionnaires were analyzed using SPSS 26.0. the participants were predominantly female (67.44%) and young to middle-aged (74.42% under 40), with all holding a bachelor's degree.

The analysis of intercultural concepts and practices (Table 2) reveals that teachers hold positive attitudes. the compliance rate is highest for helping students understand their cultural

identity (93.02%) and cultivating an open attitude towards foreign cultures (90.70%). However, a significant gap exists in practical application, particularly in the use of modern technology like AI, which has a compliance rate of only 55.81%.

Table 2. Compliance Rate of Intercultural Concepts and Practices

Item	Core Aspect	Total Compliance Rate (%)
8	Help students understand their cultural identity	93.02
9	Cultivate students' open attitude to foreign cultures	90.70
10	Integrate English language and culture teaching	88.38
12	Guide students to contact English media	83.72
20	Use AI and other technologies	55.81

Regarding obstacles to intercultural teaching (Table 3), examination pressure is the most prominent barrier, with an obstruction rate of 67.44%. Limited teaching time and unfamiliarity with technical means are also significant obstacles (both over 44%).

Table 3. Obstruction Rate of Intercultural Teaching

Item	Core Obstacle	Total Obstruction Rate (%)
30	Examination pressure	67.44
27	Limited teaching time	44.18
33	Unfamiliarity with technical means	44.19
28	Limited cultural teaching resources	30.24

4.1.2 Classroom Observation

A 45-minute observation of a representative teacher was conducted using a scale based on Byram's (1997) model. the teacher achieved an excellent overall average score of 4.83 out of 5.

As shown in Table 4, the teacher scored full marks (5/5) in five dimensions: Cultural Awareness, Intercultural Communication, Cultural Adaptability, Classroom Interaction, and Diversity of Teaching Materials. This indicates a strong ability to integrate cultural elements, design interactive tasks, and use varied materials. the only dimension that did not receive a perfect score was Cultural Comparison (4/5, Good), suggesting that while surface-level differences were addressed, the exploration of deep-seated values and historical contexts was insufficient, a finding consistent with the time constraints reported in the questionnaire.

4.1.3 Interview Findings

The interview with Teacher Z provided

qualitative insights that triangulated the quantitative data. the teacher confirmed integrating culture by following textbook themes but admitted that tight class schedules limit in-depth cultural discussions. To cope with resource and technology limitations, the teacher relies on low-cost methods like PPTs, role-playing, and sourcing materials from social media, which aligns with the questionnaire's findings on technical unfamiliarity.

Student feedback further revealed that while they find the integration of culture and vocabulary helpful, 65% desire more time for in-depth discussions on cultural differences. Notably, 82% expressed interest in learning about local ethnic minority cultures in English, an area currently underrepresented in teaching.

Table 4. Classroom Observation Scores

Observation Dimension	Score (1-5)	Performance Level
Cultural Awareness	5	Excellent
Intercultural Communication	5	Excellent
Cultural Adaptability	5	Excellent
Classroom Interaction	5	Excellent
Diversity of Teaching Materials	5	Excellent
Cultural Comparison	4	Good
Average Score	4.83	Excellent

4.2 Discussion

This section interprets the key findings to answer the research questions.

4.2.1 The Current State of Teachers' ICC

The findings indicate that junior high school English teachers in Laibin possess a relatively stable level of ICC, characterized by a distinct imbalance: strong awareness but insufficient practical skills. While teachers demonstrate positive attitudes and recognize the importance of intercultural teaching, their knowledge reserve is limited, particularly regarding non-Western cultures and the English expression of local ethnic cultures. Their teaching skills are adequate for basic tasks but lack the depth required for systematic design and critical cultural comparison.

4.2.2 ICC Performance in Classroom Practice

In practice, teachers can naturally integrate cultural elements into textbook explanations. However, the application of intercultural skills remains superficial. Teaching tends to focus on introducing surface-level cultural phenomena rather than guiding students to analyze the underlying values and causes of cultural differences. the cultivation of students' critical

and comparative thinking is not yet fully realized, partly due to the constraints discussed below.

4.2.3 Constraints on ICC Development

The development of teachers' ICC is hindered by a combination of factors:

Individual Factors: A lack of systematic learning opportunities and targeted training limits teachers' professional growth in this area.

Resource Factors: A shortage of diversified and localized teaching materials, especially those adapted for less economically developed areas, makes effective lesson design difficult.

Systemic Factors: Examination pressure emerges as the most significant obstacle, restricting the time and energy teachers can devote to intercultural teaching. This is compounded by a lack of institutional support, such as specialized teaching research activities and platforms for professional exchange.

5. Conclusions

5.1 Main Findings

This study systematically investigated the intercultural communicative competence (ICC) of junior high school English teachers in Laibin. Based on the analysis of questionnaires, classroom observations, and interviews, the main findings corresponding to the three research questions are summarized as follows:

First, regarding the current status of ICC, teachers demonstrate positive attitudes but uneven competence.

The findings indicate that teachers generally hold a medium-upper level of ICC with a strong willingness to integrate culture into language teaching. However, an obvious imbalance exists among different dimensions. While their awareness of cultural identity and openness is high, their knowledge reserve is limited, particularly concerning non-Western cultures and the English expression of local ethnic cultures.

Second, regarding the performance in classroom practice, teaching application remains superficial. In actual teaching, teachers can naturally integrate basic cultural elements into textbook explanations and create interactive classroom atmospheres. However, the depth of intercultural teaching is insufficient. Teachers tend to focus on introducing surface-level cultural phenomena rather than guiding students to analyze deep-seated values or historical causes. Furthermore, the utilization of modern educational technology,

such as AI tools, is relatively weak in facilitating intercultural learning.

Third, regarding the influencing factors, development is restricted by a combination of internal and external constraints.

The improvement of ICC is hindered by multiple factors. Externally, heavy examination pressure and limited teaching time are the most prominent obstacles, followed by a shortage of localized teaching resources. Internally, the lack of systematic professional training and the teachers' own insufficient technical application abilities jointly restrict the further development of their intercultural teaching quality.

5.2 Implications

The findings of this study offer both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, it enriches the empirical research on teachers' ICC in less economically developed and ethnic minority regions, providing a referential framework for similar contexts. Practically, the results can inform the development of targeted teacher training programs, the optimization of teaching resource allocation, and the improvement of school-based teaching research systems. Furthermore, the study encourages front-line teachers to reflect on their practices and better integrate intercultural elements into their daily instruction.

5.3 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This study has several limitations that suggest directions for future research. First, the sample was limited to three junior high schools in Laibin, which affects the generalizability of the findings. Future studies should expand the sample size to include more schools and regions. Second, the research instruments could be further localized by incorporating more elements of local culture. Finally, this study employed a cross-sectional design; future research could adopt a longitudinal approach to track the development of teachers' ICC over time and evaluate the long-term effects of different training and support mechanisms.

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