Exploring the Relationship Between Language competence and Intercultural Communicative Competence Among English as a Foreign language Learners: A Mixed-Methods Study

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Abstract: This study explores the relationship between language competence and intercultural communicative competence (ICC) among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners through a mixed-methods approach. A sample of 196 Chinese EFL learners was divided into three proficiency groups (low, intermediate, and high), with data collected through Likert-scale questionnaires and semi-structured interviews involving 16 participants. Quantitative analysis revealed that higher language proficiency is linked to improved overall ICC scores and its specific dimensions. The Kruskal-Wallis H test confirmed significant differences in overall ICC, attitude, and skill across proficiency levels, with attitude showing the strongest effect. Spearman's correlation analysis demonstrated small but significant positive correlations between English proficiency and overall ICC, attitude, and skill. Qualitative findings further enriched the quantitative results, emphasizing the foundational and catalytic role of language competence in enhancing ICC and its dimensions. However, participants acknowledged that language competence alone is insufficient for fully successful intercultural interactions. This study expands Byram's model by offering detailed insights into the intricate relationship between language competence and various ICC dimensions. The study recommends that to fully cultivate ICC, it is essential to integrate the development of language competence into instructional practices.

Keywords: *Intercultural communicative competence, language competence, relationship, mixed-methods, Chinese EFL learners.*

Introduction

Language and culture are intrinsically linked, and this interconnectedness is increasingly acknowledged in the field of language teaching (Corbett, 2022; Kramsch, 2013; Shaules, 2016). Modern language teaching now focuses not only on linguistic skills but also on the ability to use the language in ways that are socially and culturally appropriate. This is known as the intercultural dimension of language teaching (Byram, 2009; Byram et al., 2002; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). The goal of this approach is to provide learners with the tools they need to effectively navigate and engage in diverse cultural contexts, thereby enhancing their intercultural communicative competence (ICC). ICC is broadly defined as "the ability to communicate effectively in cross-cultural situations and to relate appropriately in a variety of cultural contexts" (J. M. Bennett & Bennett, 2004, p. 149). In today's world, ICC has become a national and international imperative and a necessary ability for everyone (Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017; Fantini, 2021).

In China, since the beginning of the new century, foreign (mainly English) language teaching has been gradually reframed to integrate intercultural dimensions with language teaching. Sun Youzhong, vice-president of Beijing Foreign Studies University and President of China Intercultural Communication Association, pointed out that "in the context of all-round exchanges and mutual learning between Chinese and foreign civilizations, it can be said that modern China needs high-level international talents with ICC more than any other time in its history" (2016, p.21). In recent decades,

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ICC has been incorporated into the national guidelines and curriculum standards for foreign language teaching at all educational levels in China (Y. Wang & Kulich, 2015; Zhang & Wu, 2022).

Although the importance of ICC is well-recognized around the world, many studies have focused on understanding the construct of ICC (Arasaratnam et al., 2010; Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006; Munezane, 2021; Nadeem et al., 2017; Peng et al., 2020; Zhang & Yao, 2020) and how to develop ICC in the foreign language context (Higgins & Siritararatn, 2022; Huang, 2021; Liao & Li, 2023; Mu & Yu, 2023; Toyoda, 2016; X. Wu et al., 2024; Yu & Van Maele, 2018). However, few studies have thoroughly examined the relationship between language and ICC.

Fantini (2012, 2020) highlights the importance of language for developing ICC, arguing that a solid language foundation is necessary for learners to achieve genuine intercultural understanding and effectiveness. In 2021, he reiterated that host language ability is a fundamental component of ICC. J. M. Bennett et al. (2003) noted a correlation between language competence levels and stages of intercultural sensitivity, asserting that there is a "typical fit between language proficiency levels and developmental levels of intercultural sensitivity" (p.255). Namely, language learners must achieve a specific language competence level to effectively acquire knowledge, skills, and other competencies. However, many scholars and educators in intercultural communication often overlook the critical role of language in intercultural interactions. This oversight is apparent in various ICC educational programs, training models, and assessment tools (Fantini, 2012, 2020).

Given that scholars have not reached a consensus on the role of language competence in developing ICC (Dalib, 2014; Deardorff, 2006; LaRocco, 2011), further research is needed to address these ongoing discussions, as they significantly influence the field of international education (Deardorff, 2006; Kohli Bagwe & Haskollar, 2020).

Literature Review

Intercultural Communicative Competence

Throughout the literature, various terms have been used to name ICC. Such as intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997; Fantini, 2021), intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006; Kim, 2009), intercultural communication competence (Nadeem et al., 2020; Spitzberg, 1996), cross-cultural competence (Caligiuri & Tarique, 2012; Richter et al., 2023), and intercultural sensitivity (J. M. Bennett & Bennett, 2004; M. J. Bennett, 2017). To avoid terminology confusion, this study consistently uses the term "intercultural communicative competence (ICC)" based on Byram's (2021) model. Scholars and higher education administrators tended to avoid defining ICC by specific dimensions, instead opting for broader definitions (Deardorff, 2006). These broader definitions are valued for their flexibility and adaptability across different contexts and their capacity to evolve over time. However, "appropriateness" and "effectiveness" remain the two core principles in these definitions. Effectiveness refers to "the ability to achieve one's goals in a particular exchange," and appropriateness means "the ability to do so in a manner that is acceptable to the other person" (Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017, p.9). These two criteria highlight the inherent challenge of intercultural communication; communicators need to identify the rules of a given situation to achieve appropriate and effective communication.

To better understand the dimensions of ICC, scholars have proposed numerous models from different perspectives. Deardorff's (2006) process model emphasizes the ongoing development of intercultural attitudes and skills, which lead to internal outcomes that subsequently manifest as external behaviors. Spencer-Oatey and Franklin (2009) introduced the Global People Competence Framework, which focuses on intercultural adaptation, communication management, and relationship management, stressing the dynamic nature of intercultural interactions. Arasaratnam and Banerjee (2011) introduced a culture-general model aimed at understanding and predicting effective communication across cultural boundaries, incorporating elements such as sensation seeking, ethnocentrism, attitudes towards other cultures, and motivation. Overall, most ICC models emphasize psychological factors, behaviors, and communication norms, yet inadequate attention is given to language (Fantini, 2020; Jackson, 2020).

Byram's ICC Model

This study employs Byram's (2021) ICC model as its theoretical foundation. Originally introduced in 1997, Byram's model was updated in 2021 to incorporate recent research and critiques, while maintaining its core dimensions and content. Firmly rooted in foreign language teaching, the model outlines specific objectives to help foreign language teachers deliberately incorporate intercultural dimensions into their pedagogical goals. The model is widely recognized as one of the most influential and comprehensive frameworks for developing and assessing learners' ICC across various educational contexts (Tran & Seepho, 2016; Q. Wang & Teo, 2024). Byram's model is distinguished by its detailed articulation of the dimensions' objectives, providing specific guidance for educators in lesson planning and ICC assessment in foreign language education (Hoff, 2020).
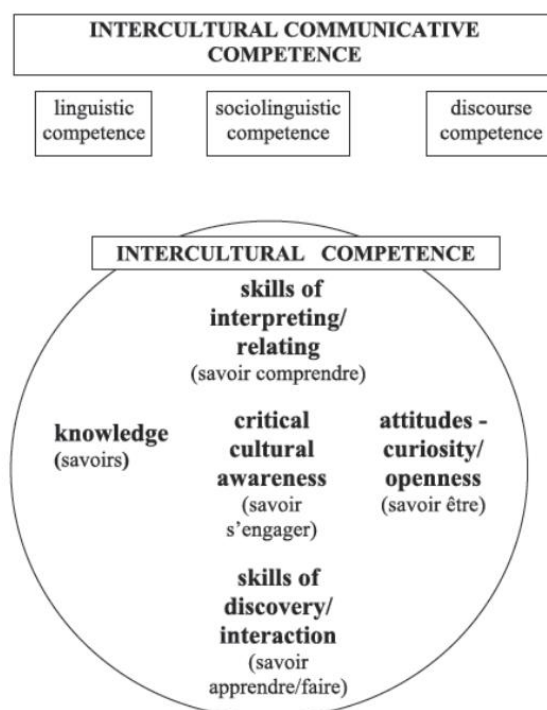
Figure 1. Byram's (2021) Intercultural Communicative Competence Model

Byram's (2021) model divides ICC into two main parts: language competence and intercultural competence. Language competence includes linguistic, sociolinguistic, and discourse competencies. Byram emphasizes the essential role of language competence within ICC, stating that "each component of intercultural competence is interrelated with language competencies" (2009, p.76). In this study, "language competence" according to Byram, is an overarching term that encompasses different aspects of language abilities, while "language proficiency" specifically refers to the measurable aspects of this ability. However, it is important to note that in some studies, the term "language proficiency" is used interchangeably with the broader concept of "language competence" as defined in this study.

Intercultural competence includes knowledge, attitudes, skills, and awareness. "Knowledge and attitude factors are preconditions" (Byram, 2021, p.43). "Knowledge includes both understanding of one's own and others' cultures, as well as knowledge of interaction, which entails recognizing how communication conventions and social practices differ across cultures (Byram, 2021). Attitudes encompass openness to engagement, interest in diverse perspectives, adaptability to cultural differences, and respect for cultural norms; collectively, these attitudes reflect the ability to "decentre" (Byram et al., 2002, p. 7). Skills are divided into skills of interpreting and relating; and skills of discovery and interaction. The former involves the ability to compare culture, interpret culture, and connect it to one's own experience. The latter includes the ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes, and skills to communicate and interact in a real-time context. Critical cultural awareness is the ability to evaluate and compare values in one's own and other cultures through a reflective and reasoned approach.

While Byram's model presents language and intercultural competencies together. He does not explicitly explain the relationship between language competence and ICC or its dimensions. Byram himself acknowledges this, stating, "The model does not, however, represent links of dependency or interdependency among the competencies; it is a "list model," not a "structural model" (Byram, 2009, 2021). This present study seeks to empirically explore the relationships between language competence and ICC.

Empirical Studies on Language Competence/ Proficiency and ICC

Empirical studies have primarily focused on identifying the factors that influence ICC, with some studies highlighting language as a key factor contributing to effective interactions (Ghasemi Mighani et al., 2020; Huang, 2021; Mu & Yu, 2021; Sercu, 2023; Sobkowiak, 2019; X. Wu et al., 2024; Zhou & Burhanudeen, 2023). However, few studies specifically examine the relationship between ICC and language competence (Kohli Bagwe & Haskollar, 2020; Miauw & Guo, 2021). Notably, Sarwari and Abdul Wahab's (2018) study explored this relationship among Arab students in Malaysia, finding that higher English proficiency scores corresponded with higher overall ICC, with significant correlations between the two. They noted that higher English proficiency facilitated daily interactions with peers from diverse linguistic backgrounds, thereby enhancing both language skills and ICC. Similarly, Sobkowiak (2019) found that ICC is positively

related to foreign language proficiency, with advanced English speakers scoring higher in ICC than their less proficient counterparts.

Contrasting findings have been reported in other studies. For instance, Ghasemi Mighani et al. (2020) conducted an intervention in an intercultural course among English majors and found no significant correlation between language proficiency and overall ICC levels. Likewise, other scholars (Weng, 2018; J.-F. Wu, 2016) found no significant differences in ICC acquisition between EFL students with lower and higher language proficiency. These mixed findings underscore the need for further research to clarify the nuanced relationship between language competence and ICC. Kohli Bagwe and Haskollar (2020) emphasized that the limited research on this relationship makes it difficult to draw substantive conclusions, highlighting the necessity for further investigation.

In addition, most of these studies employed quantitative methods to examine the relationship between language competence and ICC. Dalib et al. (2019), through a qualitative study on Malaysian students' perceptions of ICC, revealed that participants regarded language competence as a crucial component of ICC, emphasizing that the development of language and communication skills enhances ICC. Given the mixed results and the scarcity of qualitative studies exploring on the role of language in ICC, this study employs a mixed-methods approach to investigate the relationship between language competence and ICC among Chinese EFL learners. By integrating quantitative analysis with qualitative insights, this research seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how language competence influences ICC development and to explore the dynamic interplay between language and ICC. Hence, this study aims to address these questions:

1. How does English language proficiency influence the development of ICC among EFL learners? What specific dimensions of ICC are influenced?

2. Are there statistically significant differences in the dimensions of ICC based on varying levels of English language proficiency?

3. Is there a positive correlation between English language proficiency and dimensions of ICC among EFL learners?

4. How do EFL learners perceive the role of language competence in shaping ICC?

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach to explore the relationship between language competence and ICC among EFL learners in China. Quantitative data is collected through a questionnaire and analyzed using SPSS 27 to identify significant relationships and correlations between English language proficiency and the dimensions of ICC (knowledge, attitudes, skills, and awareness). Qualitative data is gathered through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using NVivo 12 to uncover students' personal experiences and perceptions of the role of language competence in shaping ICC. The integration of both data sets provides a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of how language competence influences ICC development.

Participants

For the quantitative phase, participants were selected using a convenience sampling method. They included 196 third-year Chinese undergraduates from five intact classes at a local Chinese university specializing in foreign language programs. All participants majored in foreign languages (excluding English), providing a diverse linguistic background that enriches the exploration of the nuanced relationship between language competence and ICC among EFL learners. Of the total participants, 21.43% were male, and 78.57% were female. English language proficiency was classified based on students' performance on the College English Test (CET), a standardized examination administered by the Chinese Ministry of Education. In this study, 11.73% (23 students) scored Below CET4 (low proficiency), 51.53% (101 students) at CET4 (intermediate proficiency), and 36.73% (72 students) at CET6 (high proficiency). The participants represented a range of majors, including German (17.35%), Spanish (18.37%), French (14.29%), Russian (10.71%), Italian (8.67%), Portuguese (8.16%), and Polish (2.04%).

For the qualitative phase, a purposive sampling approach was used, specifically employing a maximum variation sampling strategy (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Sixteen participants from different majors, proficiency levels, and intercultural experiences were selected to ensure diverse perspectives (see Table 1). The participants represented three English proficiency levels: low, intermediate, and high. Their intercultural interactions varied, ranging from once to three times per week, primarily with foreign instructors. Additionally, the sample included some students with study abroad experiences to provide deeper insights into the development of ICC.

Table 1. Qualitative Participants' Demographics and Characteristics

Variables	Characteristics	Number	Percentage
Gender	Male	5	31.25%
	Female	11	68.75%
Major	Japanese	5	31.25%
	French	2	12.50%
	Russian	3	18.75%
	Polish	1	6.25%
	Spanish	4	25.00%
	German	1	6.25%
CET level	Below CET 4	3	18.75%
	CET 4	6	37.50%
	CET 6	7	43.75%
Interacting frequency	1 time per week	3	18.75%
	2 times per week	6	37.50%
	3 or more times per week	7	43.75%
Travel abroad	Yes	5	31.25%
	No	11	68.75%

Instruments

The ICC is measured using the Assessment of Intercultural Competence of Chinese College Students (AIC-CCS, W.-P. Wu et al., 2013). This scale includes 28 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (very low) to 5 (very high), based on Byram's (1997) ICC model. W.-P. Wu et al. (2013) validated the AIC-CCS through a four-step process: (1) content validity was established by expert review and revisions; (2) a pilot test was conducted to refine item clarity; (3) exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses (EFA and CFA) were performed on a larger sample (n = 331); and (4) the AIC-CCS demonstrated strong reliability and validity throughout the process. Some Chinese scholars (Li, 2021; Mu & Yu, 2021; Q. Wang & Teo, 2024) have confirmed the questionnaire's high validity and reliability. Due to the similarity of the sample in this study to those contexts, only reliability testing was conducted. The reliability of the AIC-CCS scale was evaluated using Cronbach's Alpha, resulting in a high overall reliability of 0.929 (n=28). Each sub-dimension also showed strong internal consistency: knowledge (0.883, n=10), attitude (0.761, n=3), skill (0.897, n=12), and awareness (0.890, n=3). These results confirm that the AIC-CCS is a reliable tool for assessing ICC among this study's participants.

The interview questions were structured according to Seidman's (2006) three-phase interview series: (a) icebreaker questions designed to help participants feel at ease and open up, (b) questions about intercultural interaction experiences and difficulties aimed at exploring participants' real-life encounters, and (c) questions on the relationship between language competence and ICC to elicit participants' opinions and reflections. The interview protocol was developed through a comprehensive review of existing literature on ICC and language competence. To ensure the appropriateness and scope of the questions, the finalized protocol was first reviewed by two scholars specializing in language learning and intercultural communication. Following this, a pilot test was conducted with three participants to assess the clarity and flow of the questions.

Data Collection and Analysis

The questionnaire data were collected through the Wenjuanxing platform (https://www.wjx.cn/) during regular class sessions to maximize participation and minimize disruption. Normality tests, including the Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests, revealed that the data for three ICC dimensions significantly deviated from a normal distribution ($p < .05$). Additionally, a few outliers were identified in two dimensions. Upon further examination, these outliers were found to represent genuine variations among participants and were thus retained in the analysis. To account for the non-normal distribution and mitigate the potential influence of outliers, non-parametric methods were employed. The Kruskal-Wallis H test, which is suitable for comparing independent samples when the assumption of normality is violated, was used to compare ICC scores across the three proficiency groups. Descriptive statistics, including mean scores and standard deviations for each ICC dimension, were calculated to assess differences across language proficiency levels. Further analysis was conducted using Spearman's correlation coefficients to examine the relationships between English language proficiency and the various ICC dimensions. All analyses were performed using SPSS 27.

The thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework, beginning with familiarization, where interview transcripts were read and re-read to gain a deep understanding of the data. The next step involved open coding using NVivo 12, highlighting keywords such as "foundation," "adaptability," "confidence," "effectiveness," and "cultural understanding," capturing elements relevant to the role of language competence in ICC development. During the theme search, similar or related codes were grouped into broader themes, including "communication adaptability,"

"communication flexibility," and "communication confidence." This was followed by theme review, where constant comparison ensured that each theme accurately reflected the dataset patterns. Defining and naming each theme then helped establish their distinctiveness and alignment with research objectives. In producing the report, illustrative participant quotes were selected to construct a coherent narrative of the findings.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the themes, the second author independently reviewed them, cross-checking against original data to verify that they accurately reflected participants' experiences and perspectives. This review process reinforced that the themes were representative and grounded in participants' responses, enhancing the robustness of the findings.

Results

This section presents and analyzes the research results in relation to the four research questions posed in this study. The first three questions are addressed through quantitative analysis, while the final question is explored using qualitative analysis.

The Influence of English Language Proficiency on the Development of ICC

The bar chart (Figure 2) illustrates descriptive statistics of the mean scores across different ICC dimensions for varying CET proficiency levels: Below CET4, CET4, and CET6. As proficiency levels increase, there is a clear improvement in overall ICC scores and specific dimensions such as attitude, skill, and awareness. CET6 participants demonstrate the highest mean scores compared to CET4 and Below CET4. However, the knowledge dimension remains relatively constant across all proficiency levels, showing no noticeable improvement.
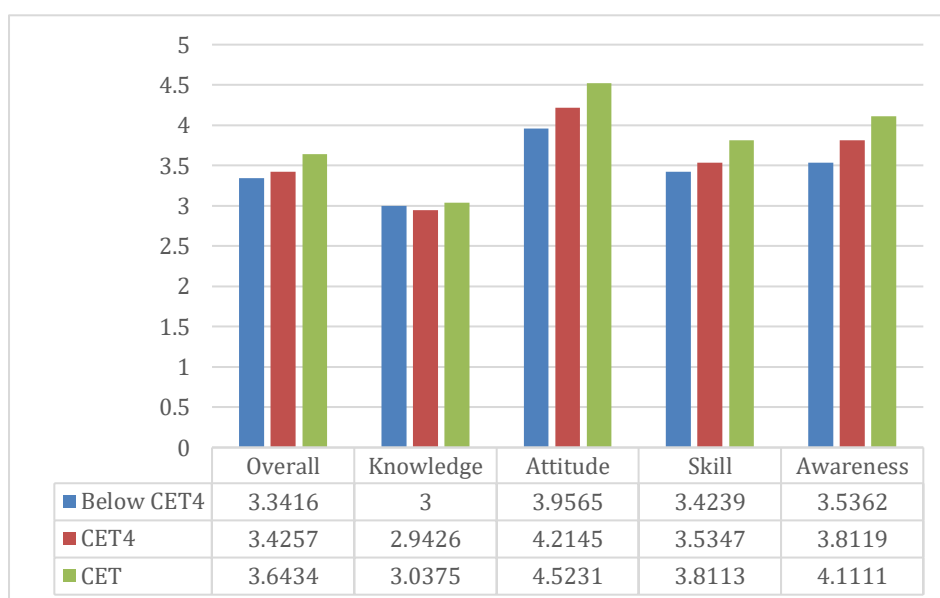

	Overall	Knowledge	Attitude	Skill	Awareness
Below CET4	3.3416	3	3.9565	3.4239	3.5362
CET4	3.4257	2.9426	4.2145	3.5347	3.8119
CET	3.6434	3.0375	4.5231	3.8113	4.1111

Figure 2. Comparison of ICC Scores Across CET Proficiency Levels

Significant Differences in ICC Dimensions by English Proficiency Levels

The results of the Kruskal-Wallis H test (Table 2) reveal significant differences in overall ICC, attitude, and skill dimensions across CET proficiency levels. The overall ICC dimension shows a significant difference (H = 8.960, p = .011), with a small effect size (η^2 = 0.046), indicating that proficiency levels moderately influence students' overall ICC. The attitude dimension has the most considerable effect, with a highly significant difference between proficiency levels (H = 16.555, p < .001) and a medium effect size (η^2 = 0.085), suggesting that higher English proficiency is associated with more positive attitudes toward intercultural communication. The skill dimension also shows a significant difference (H = 10.255, p = .006) with a small-to-medium effect size (η^2 = 0.053), indicating a moderate relationship between English proficiency and intercultural communication skills. Conversely, no significant differences are found in the knowledge (H = 1.103, p = .576, η^2 = 0.006) and awareness (H = 4.694, p = .096, η^2 = 0.024) dimensions, with very small effect sizes, suggesting that language proficiency has minimal influence on these aspects of ICC.

Table 2. Kruskal-Wallis H Test Results and Effect Sizes for ICC Dimensions Across CET Proficiency Levels

Dimension	Kruskal-Wallis H	*p*-value	η^2 (Effect Size)
Overall ICC	8.960	.011	0.046 (small)
Knowledge	1.103	.576	0.006 (very small)
Attitude	16.555	< .001	0.085 (medium)
Skill	10.255	.006	0.053 (small-medium)
Awareness	4.694	.096	0.024 (small)

The Correlation Between English Language Proficiency and ICC Among EFL Learners

Table 3 shows the results of the Spearman's correlation analysis between English proficiency and various ICC dimensions. The analysis indicates that English language proficiency has a small but significant positive correlation with the overall ICC score (ρ = .189, *p* = .008), and stronger correlations with the attitude (ρ = .289, *p* < .001) and skill (ρ = .212, *p* = .003) dimensions. This suggests that higher English proficiency is associated with better attitudes toward intercultural communication and stronger communication skills. However, there is no significant correlation between English proficiency and the knowledge or awareness dimensions (*p* > .05), indicating that language proficiency does not necessarily influence these aspects of ICC. Additionally, the ICC dimensions themselves are highly correlated, particularly between overall ICC score and skill (ρ = .902, *p* < .001), indicating a strong internal relationship between these aspects of ICC.

Table 3. Spearman's Correlation Between English Proficiency and ICC Dimensions

	English Proficiency	Overall ICC	Knowledge	Attitude	Skill	Awareness
English Proficiency	1.000	.189**	.038	.289**	.212**	.131
Overall ICC	.189**	1.000	.767**	.615**	.902**	.609**
Knowledge	.038	.767**	1.000	.276**	.523**	.287**
Attitude	.289**	.615**	.276**	1.000	.523**	.486**
Skill	.212**	.902**	.523**	.523**	1.000	.486**
Awareness	.131	.609**	.287**	.486**	.486**	1.000

Notes**:** p < 0.01 (2-tailed) for all correlations marked with **.

EFL Learners' Perceptions of the Role of Language Competence

The qualitative results revealed a reciprocal relationship between language competence and ICC, with language playing a key role in shaping intercultural communication. Five main themes emerged from the data (refer to Figure 3), highlighting language as the foundation of ICC, its role in enhancing cultural understanding, promoting communication effectiveness, fostering openness, adaptability, and confidence to cultural differences, as well as recognizing its limitations without other essential competencies.
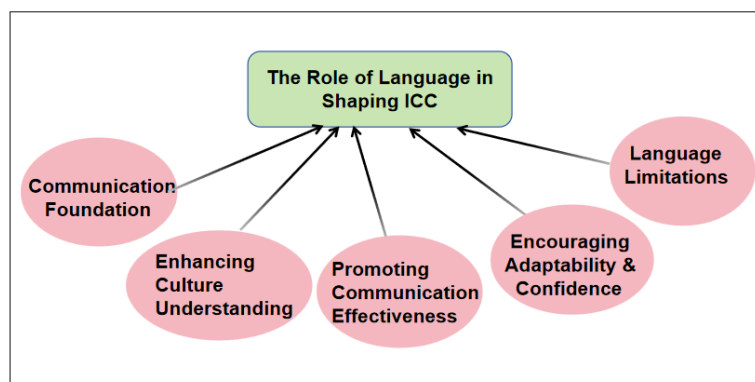

Figure 3. Themes on the Role of Language in Shaping ICC

Theme 1 highlights that language is perceived as closely linked to ICC and as the foundation for intercultural communication. Many participants emphasized that language serves as the fundamental basis for any intercultural interaction. Without a solid grasp of the language, they felt that meaningful communication could not take place. Participant 2 stated, *"If you can't express yourself clearly and fully, it's hard to connect with people from other cultures. Language competence is the first step."* Participant 10 added, *"It's really interconnected between language competence and ICC; language competence is the catalyst of intercultural communication. How well we communicate with someone or*

make them feel at ease during a conversation is directly influenced by our language competence." The keywords participants mentioned in this theme are that language is the "bridge", "catalyst", and "foundation".

Theme 2 suggests that having a good command of language competence enhances one's ability to understand different cultures and avoid misunderstandings. Participant 11 expressed: *"Intercultural communication encompasses many aspects, and can be quite complex. To communicate better with people from different cultures, we need higher language competence. With it, we can understand well different communication styles, values, taboos and social norms, which helps us avoid misunderstandings and increases our opportunities for listening and learning from others."* Participant 1 mentioned, *"I believe that learning a language is deeply intertwined with understanding the culture behind it. During communication, we can not only reinforce our language skills but also acquire new cultural knowledge through the language. As language competence grows, it can further enhance our understanding of culture."*

Theme 3 emphasizes the way language competence enhances the effectiveness and depth of communication. Participant 5 noted that *"higher language competence enabled us to express our thoughts more precisely, understand others better, and provide more acceptable responses, which is vital in avoiding misunderstandings and miscommunications."* Participant 16 commented, *"Improving language competence can lead to deeper exchanges, such as in areas like literature and art, as these fields involve specialized vocabulary that allows for better expression of ideas. However, if language competence is not good enough, interactions are limited, and there may be instances of inappropriateness and miscommunication."*

Theme 4 emphasizes how language competence enhances confidence and adaptability in intercultural interactions but also shapes learners' attitudes toward intercultural communication by fostering openness and willingness to engage. Participant 13 mentioned, *"Previously, my limited language competence and lack of motivation held me back from engaging in communication. However, as my competences improved, I became more open to new experiences and motivated to engage with people from different cultures."* Participant 10 added, *"Language competence gives me the confidence not only to adapt to new situations but also to embrace different cultural practices without feeling lost or resistant."*

Theme 5 highlights that, despite its importance, language competence alone may not be sufficient to guarantee successful intercultural communication, as other factors, such as cultural awareness and cultural understanding, also play a critical role. Participant 9 stated: *"Language competence is crucial, but by itself, it cannot ensure effective intercultural communication. If it could, cultural gaps and other conflicts wouldn't exist."* Participant 8 expressed that: *"Advanced language competence alone is insufficient for effective intercultural communication; Positive attitudes towards cultural exchange are essential, alongside cultural understanding, communication strategies are also necessary. "*

Discussion

Table 4. Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings on the Relationship Between ICC and Language Competence

ICC Dimension	Quantitative Finding	Qualitative Insight	Interpretation
Overall ICC	Higher proficiency consistently led to better ICC scores	Language competence is the foundation or catalyst for ICC and is influential for better communication	Consistent
Attitude	Higher proficiency participants had significantly higher attitude scores	Better language competence boosts openness and willingness to engage as well as confidence, motivation, and adaptability	Expanded
Knowledge	No significant difference in knowledge scores across proficiency groups	Language competence deepens cultural understanding and contributes to knowledge acquisition	Inconsistent
Skill	Higher proficiency is linked to significantly better communication skills	Higher language competence reduces misunderstandings and enhances clarity and appropriateness	Consistent
Awareness	No significant difference in awareness scores	Language competences foster a better understanding of cultural differences, flexibility, and adaptation in diverse contexts	Inconsistent

Table 4 presents the integration of quantitative and qualitative findings on the relationship between ICC and language competence. It highlights areas where these two methods align, diverge, or expand on one another. The quantitative findings indicated that EFL learners with higher language proficiency consistently achieved higher overall ICC scores, with significant differences observed in dimensions such as attitude and skill. For instance, learners at the CET6 level outperformed those at CET4 and Below CET4, demonstrating the impact of language proficiency on ICC development. Moreover, quantitative analysis revealed a small but significant positive correlation with overall ICC ($\rho = .189$, $p = .008$),

as well as stronger correlations with the attitude (ρ = .289, p < .001) and skill (ρ = .212, p = .003) dimensions. These findings suggest that as learners' language competence improves, various aspects of their ICC also develop. This supports previous research highlighting the role of greater language proficiency in promoting ICC development (Huang, 2021; Miauw & Guo, 2021; Sarwari & Abdul Wahab, 2018; Sobkowiak, 2019) and underscores the importance of target language proficiency in fostering ICC (Fantini, 2020). However, this study extends prior research by examining specific ICC dimensions in greater detail.

Consistent Findings

As mentioned above, the finding for overall ICC shows consistency between quantitative and qualitative data, both demonstrating that higher language proficiency leads to improved ICC. Participants frequently emphasized the importance of language competence, often describing it as a "bridge", "foundation" or "catalyst" for intercultural interactions. This echoes Byram's (2009, 2021) and Fantini's (2020) assertion that language competence is essential to ICC. Such alignment reinforces the idea that language competence is not merely a skill, but a key enabler (Dalib et al., 2019) for successful cross-cultural communication. In the skill dimension, quantitative analysis shows that learners with higher language proficiency demonstrate enhanced communication skills. This finding aligns with Huang's (2021) study, which found English proficiency to be a significant factor in the development of communication skills. The qualitative findings further illustrate this, suggesting that improved language competence helps reduce misunderstandings and enhances both clarity and appropriateness in expression. This is consistent with Hismanoglu's (2011) observation that students with higher proficiency levels respond more appropriately in communicative situations than those with lower proficiency. Together, the quantitative and qualitative data indicate that language competence positively impacts communication skills, enabling deeper and more appropriate intercultural interactions.

Inconsistent Findings

The knowledge and awareness dimensions reveal some inconsistencies between the quantitative and qualitative findings. While the quantitative results show no significant difference in knowledge scores across proficiency levels, the qualitative data suggest that higher language competence facilitates a deeper understanding and appreciation of cultural nuances, and exposure to diverse perspectives, and contributes to the acquisition of cultural knowledge. This discrepancy may stem from the fact that the quantitative assessment primarily focuses on knowledge of foreign and native cultures, potentially overlooking the knowledge of interaction—a key component of knowledge as outlined by Byram (1997, 2021). In contrast, the qualitative findings provide richer insights into these interactive dynamics, showing how language proficiency enhances intercultural understanding and fosters knowledge exchange.

Similarly, the quantitative findings show no significant differences in awareness scores, aligning with Huang's (2021) conclusion that higher proficiency does not necessarily lead to the build-up of awareness. However, the qualitative data indicated that proficient learners demonstrated a heightened ability to recognize and understand cultural differences, which allowed them to adjust their communication style more effectively in diverse cultural contexts. This increased awareness of the subtleties of intercultural communication helped them become more flexible and sensitive to the cultural nuances of their interactions, thus making them more effective communicators. The inconsistencies can be attributed to the fact that awareness is not as directly measurable and may be more challenging to capture through quantitative assessments (Byram, 2002). Awareness often involves more nuanced, subjective experiences and the ability to perceive subtle cultural cues, which are difficult to quantify. In contrast, qualitative data can capture these subtleties, providing deeper insights into how proficient learners recognize and adapt to cultural differences, making them more effective communicators.

Expanded Findings

The attitude dimension highlights how qualitative findings build on the quantitative results. Quantitative analysis shows that participants with higher language proficiency had significantly higher attitude scores, likely because English as the language of instruction provides students with continuous exposure to Western language and culture, fostering curiosity and openness toward it (Peng et al., 2015). Qualitative insights add depth by revealing that improved language competence not only enhances openness and willingness to communicate but also boosts learners' confidence, motivation, and adaptability in intercultural situations. This finding aligns with scholars such as Menglikhanovna (2024) and Nieto and Zoller Booth (2010), who noted that enhanced language proficiency can increase learners' confidence and deepen their understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity, ultimately promoting more positive attitudes toward intercultural engagement. Similarly, Miauw and Guo (2021) found that students with high English proficiency demonstrated greater ICC, along with a stronger willingness to communicate and confidence in interacting with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. These expanded findings suggest that language competence not only shapes learners' attitudes toward intercultural communication but also enhances their emotional readiness and adaptability when facing cultural differences.

While Table 4 outlines the relationship between language competence and ICC dimensions, it's important to note that language competence alone is insufficient for successful intercultural communication. As highlighted by the qualitative

findings, other competencies, such as cultural awareness and understanding, are essential to navigating intercultural interactions effectively. This echoes the views of scholars like Dimitrova-Gyuzeleva (2019) and Huang (2021), who argue that language competence does not guarantee effective intercultural communication. The findings address the complex relationship between language competence and the development of ICC, highlighting the critical role of other competencies (Huang, 2021; Tajeddin et al., 2022; J.-F. Wu, 2016). These expanded insights underscore the multifaceted nature of intercultural communication, where language competence serves as an important foundation but must be complemented by other essential competencies. Without these additional competencies, even high levels of language proficiency may not be enough to navigate complex intercultural situations effectively.

This interconnectedness suggests that language competence does not merely contribute to each ICC dimension individually; rather, it supports holistic development across all areas. The findings reinforce Byram's assertion that language competence is integral to ICC, as it deepens engagement with the sub-competencies of ICC. While Byram's model acknowledges the importance of language, it presents ICC as a set of distinct dimensions without fully exploring the complex interrelationships among them (Byram, 2009, 2021). This study demonstrates how language competence serves as a catalyst for enhancing cultural knowledge, fostering positive intercultural attitudes, strengthening communication skills, and contributing to intercultural awareness. These findings provide detailed evidence that language competence enhances the development of other ICC competencies, extending Byram's (1997) claim that each ICC dimension is interrelated with language competence. By illuminating the interconnectedness between language competence and ICC dimensions, which has been underexplored in prior literature (Byram, 2021; Fantini, 2020; Kohli Bagwe & Haskollar, 2020), this study offers a more prescriptive and comprehensive understanding of how these dimensions interact. The study thus contributes empirical insights into the interdependent nature of ICC, underscoring the importance of a cohesive approach to ICC development in educational contexts.

Conclusion

This study explored the relationship between language competence and ICC among Chinese EFL learners. The findings suggest that language competence is integral to enhancing ICC, with higher proficiency in language competence being directly associated with improved ICC scores across various dimensions. The correlation analysis revealed a close and intricate connection between language competence and ICC. The qualitative findings complemented the quantitative data by offering deeper insights into how language competence enhances different aspects of ICC, as well as its limitations. The specific context of Chinese EFL learners may have uniquely shaped these results. Given China's relatively homogenous linguistic and cultural landscape, the need for stronger language competence may be more pronounced, as learners have fewer opportunities for authentic intercultural interactions. This study extends Byram's model by offering detailed explanations of how language competence is intricately connected with each component of ICC, providing educators with insights for designing more effective language and cultural education programs. This research contributes to the broader discourse on the interplay between language competence and ICC, emphasizing the need for a holistic approach to fostering EFL learners' ICC. It also calls for further comparative studies across diverse educational and cultural contexts to deepen our understanding of these dynamics.

Recommendations

Future research could further explore the nuances of this relationship and investigate specific aspects of language competence that influence the development of ICC. For instance, it would be valuable to examine how different components of language competence, such as linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, and discourse competence, uniquely contribute to ICC. Additionally, research could investigate how these competencies interact with each other and with other dimensions of ICC, such as attitudes, skills, knowledge, and awareness. By understanding these interactions, educators and curriculum designers can better support learners in comprehensively developing ICC.

The implications for education are profound. Language education programs must move beyond mere language training or mere cultural training (Fantini, 2020). Educators should integrate ICC development with language competence development, this holistic approach will equip learners with the necessary tools to navigate and engage with different cultures successfully.

Limitations

The study has several limitations. Firstly, its findings are based on a specific sample size of non-English majors specializing in language, potentially limiting their generalizability to broader student populations or varied educational contexts. Future research could improve by including larger and more diverse participant groups and other cultural contexts. Secondly, the study relies on self-reported data, which may introduce bias or inaccuracies. Future research could benefit from combining self-reported data with other instruments, such as tests, observations, or performance-based assessments to strengthen the study's validity. Thirdly, the cross-sectional design of the study captures only a snapshot of the relationship between language competence and ICC. Future research could adopt longitudinal methods to track changes over time and provide deeper insights into the long-term effects of language competence on ICC development.

Authorship Contribution Statement

Feng: Conceptualized and designed the study, conducted data analysis, interpreted results, and drafted the manuscript. Abdul Aziz: Reviewed and validated the qualitative themes to ensure reliability, cross-checking them against the original data to confirm they accurately represented participants' experiences and perspectives. Contributed to the interpretation of findings. Dalib: Provided insights on the role of language in ICC and offered guidance for the literature review on ICC.

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