

*Original Paper*

An Investigation of the Intercultural Communicative  
Competence of Students from Sino-foreign Joint Education  
Program in HBUT

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**Abstract**

*This study employed a questionnaire survey to assess the intercultural communicative competence (ICC) of 113 students enrolled in the Sino-foreign Joint Education Program at Hubei University of Technology. The Assessment of Intercultural Competence of Chinese College Students (AIC-CCS) was utilized to investigate their ICC. The findings indicate that the participants' overall ICC reached an intermediate level. Notably, proficiency in knowledge pertaining to domestic culture is the highest, while competence in understanding foreign culture is comparatively lower. The study identifies varying degrees of influence among the six dimensions of ICC, with knowledge related to foreign culture and intercultural communicative skills demonstrating a more pronounced positive impact on overall ICC levels. Furthermore, students who participated in intercultural courses exhibited significantly higher ICC compared with their counterparts who did not partake in such courses.*

**Keywords**

*Intercultural communicative competence (ICC), Sino-foreign Joint Education Program, Investigation*

**1. Introduction**

The phenomenon of globalization has propelled an unprecedented surge in cross-national and cross-regional cultural interactions, occurring both in physical and virtual realms (Chi et al., 2020). With nations becoming increasingly interconnected, international competition has reached new heights. Consequently, it is imperative to cultivate the intercultural communicative competence of today's youth. This proficiency is crucial for effectively sharing China's narrative, amplifying its voice on the global stage, and actively participating in international discourse. Additionally, the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative is expected to elevate the demand for research in intercultural communication

within China.

Pertinent research indicates that international studies on ICC predominantly center around real-world societal issues such as intercultural education and intercultural adaptation of students studying abroad or immigrants. Qualitative research stands as the primary method, offering highly practical results (Shi & Shang, 2016). In the domestic research field, ICC studies have flourished due to China's increasing demand for global communication. Most studies conducted in China concentrate on cultivating intercultural competence within the context of foreign language instruction, contributing significantly to the conceptualization, theoretical model development, and investigation of assessment methods (Zhang & Yao, 2020). Despite the burgeoning interest, empirical research on ICC studies in China remains limited. In comparison to the prevailing "practicality" trend in global research, there exists an opportunity to enhance the application of intercultural research findings for societal benefit (Hu, 2006). In this study, a quantitative research method is employed to assess the ICC of 113 students enrolled in Sino-foreign Joint Education Program of Hubei University of Technology. The evaluation scale developed by Wu Weiping, Fan Weiwei, and Peng Renzhong (Wu et al., 2013) is employed to analyze the current status of ICC among these students. Given that participation in the Sino-foreign Joint Education Program often paves the way for further study abroad, the possession of strong ICC by students is crucial. Consequently, this research holds substantial practical significance.

## 2. Research Background

Numerous scholars have proffered diverse definitions of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). According to Byram (2000), ICC involves the ability to interact effectively with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. Besides, Deardorff (2006) defines it as the capacity to engage in appropriate and effective communication within an intercultural context through intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes. In the domain of second language education in China, Sun Youzhong (2016) delineates core ICC components, such as respect for global cultural diversity, intercultural empathy, critical cultural awareness, mastery of basic theoretical knowledge and analytical methods of intercultural research, comprehension of the history and current state of the target country, understanding of the fundamental characteristics and disparities between Chinese and foreign cultures, interpretive and evaluative capabilities regarding various cultural phenomena, texts, and products, and the ability to facilitate effective intercultural communication among individuals with distinct linguistic and cultural backgrounds. In essence, while scholars may offer distinct interpretations of ICC, the central focus remains on appropriateness and effectiveness.

Theoretical models of ICC are continually evolving. From a sociolinguistic perspective, the study of intercultural communicative competence has long been interconnected with communicative competence (Xu, 2011). Hymes, among scholars studying communicative competence, has wielded significant influence. He challenged the concept, contending that Chomsky's notion of "linguistic competence" was too narrow, focusing solely on grammatical knowledge and neglecting language

adaptability in specific contexts. Hymes proposed that communicative competence comprises grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, strategic competence, and discourse competence. Hymes' "communicative competence" model primarily focuses on the social interaction and communication of individuals within a shared language social group, making it less relevant to foreign language teaching and intercultural communication research. Pioneers like Canale and Swain, as well as Van Ek, introduced the concept of "communicative competence" into foreign language teaching. According to Canale and Swain (1980), competencies for effective communication include grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence—interrelated yet relatively independent. Van Ek proposed a detailed "communicative competence" model, including linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, strategic competence, sociocultural competence, and social competence. However, criticisms have arisen, particularly regarding the implicit consideration of the native language or strong cultural community's linguistic competence level in Van Ek's definitions of "linguistic competence" and "sociolinguistic competence" (Byram, 2020).

Alptekin (2002) criticized the evaluation criterion of native speaker proficiency. Firstly, he argued that the ideal native speaker does not exist due to multiple varieties within the same language system. Secondly, pursuing the "standard of linguistic competence of native speakers" too much is deemed unrealistic. Language is a tool for communication, and achieving the purpose of communication is paramount, especially between non-native speakers. Thirdly, using native speaker proficiency as a standard may limit the autonomy of teachers and students in language-teaching classrooms. Byram (2020) also questions this standard, stating that "native speaker proficiency standards" are unattainable goals that may lead to frustration among language learners and negatively impact their native language and culture.

Amidst doubts surrounding "communicative competence," research focus has shifted towards intercultural communicative competence. Byram has significantly influenced the study of international ICC, proposing four dimensions for evaluating intercultural competence: knowledge, attitude, skill, and awareness. Knowledge involves understanding one's own national culture and foreign cultures, attitude encompasses respecting and tolerating foreign cultures with an open and curious mindset, skill includes intercultural communication skills and intercultural cognitive skills, and awareness involves critical cultural awareness, self-awareness, sociolinguistic awareness, and more.

Building upon Byram's multi-dimensional model, this study developed an evaluation scale to comprehensively assess the intercultural communicative competence of students in the Sino-foreign Joint Education Program at Hubei University of Technology. The assessment covers four dimensions: knowledge, skills, attitudes, and awareness, offering a detailed description of their proficiency in intercultural communication.

### 3. Research Methodology

#### 3.1 Research Questions

- (1) What is the current state of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) among students enrolled in the Sino-foreign Joint Education Program at Hubei University of Technology?
- (2) Among the six dimensions employed to assess ICC, which dimension exerts the most significant influence on elevating overall ICC proficiency?
- (3) Is there a notable improvement in the ICC of students within the Sino-foreign Joint Education Program at Hubei University of Technology as a result of participating in intercultural courses?

#### 3.2 Research Participants

The participants in this questionnaire survey were selected from classes of the Sino-foreign Joint Education Program at Hubei University of Technology. The distribution of the questionnaire was conducted electronically, resulting in a collection of 128 responses. After excluding 15 invalid submissions, a final sample of 113 valid questionnaires was retained, achieving an effective rate of 88.28%.

Among the 113 respondents, there were 68 males and 45 females. Across their respective majors, 22 students specialized in Electrical Engineering and Automation, 38 in Mechanical Design and Manufacturing and Automation, and the largest cohort of 53 students were enrolled in Electronic Information Engineering. Notably, 78 students participated in various cross-cultural courses offered by the school, while only 9 had study-abroad experiences in English-speaking countries. English proficiency was assessed based on their CET-4 scores, revealing that 12 students scored above 600, 84 scored between 425 and 600, 8 scored below 425, and 9 had not taken the exam.

#### 3.3 Research Instrument

In this research, we conducted a questionnaire survey utilizing the Chinese College Students' Intercultural Communication Competence Assessment Scale (AI-CCS), a tool developed by Wu Weiping, Fan Weiwei, and Peng Renzhong. The questionnaire comprises two parts: the initial segment gathers personal information, including gender, major, CET-4 scores, overseas experience, and participation in intercultural courses. The second segment assesses Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) with a total of 28 questions, encompassing six main dimensions: three questions on awareness (AW), three on attitude (AT), nine on intercultural communication skills (SKA), three on intercultural cognitive skills (SKB), three on domestic cultural knowledge (KNA), and seven on foreign cultural knowledge (KNB). Employing a five-level Likert scale scoring method, each question's score is determined by the subject's selected number, with scores tallied in the forward direction. Higher numbers signify greater proficiency on the respective item. The overall reliability (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ ) coefficient of the scale is 0.916, and the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficients for the six dimensions range from 0.747 to 0.893, indicating the scale's commendable reliability.

## 4. Findings and Discussion

### 4.1 The Overall ICC Level of Participants

As depicted in Table 1, the average score is 3.26 points, signifying that the Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) of students in the Sino-foreign Joint Education Program at Hubei University of Technology generally falls within a moderate level. However, this score may be deemed suboptimal for students with an urgent aspiration to study abroad. Within the six dimensions, only the dimension related to knowledge of foreign culture received a score of 2.83, which is below the 3-point threshold, while the averages for the other dimensions exceeded 3.0, placing them in the upper-middle level. Specifically, the highest average value is observed in the attitude dimension (4.09), followed by knowledge related to local culture (3.72), awareness (3.51), intercultural cognitive skills (3.21), intercultural communication skills (3.12), and knowledge related to foreign culture (2.83).

**Table 1. The Overall Level of ICC**

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
ICC	113	2.04	4.25	3.26	0.44
KNA	113	2.00	5.00	3.72	0.78
KNB	113	1.57	4.00	2.83	0.59
AT	113	1.67	5.00	4.09	0.73
SKA	113	1.89	4.22	3.12	0.52
SKB	113	2.00	4.33	3.21	0.63
AW	113	1.00	5.00	3.51	0.75

The collective Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) of students enrolled in the Sino-foreign Joint Education Program at Hubei University of Technology reflects the positive impact of recent advancements in national policies, academic research, and technology. Over the years, national policies have been instrumental in guiding the enhancement of ICC. Initially, China's policies on ICC were broad and lacked specific objectives and curriculum requirements for intercultural education. This led to challenges in implementing effective intercultural education within the realm of foreign language teaching in China (Zhang, 2012). However, as intercultural communication research has advanced in China, the goals and content of intercultural education in foreign language teaching have become more defined. The College English Teaching Guide (2020 edition), released in October 2020, explicitly emphasizes the necessity of bolstering students' intercultural communication awareness and competence, along with an emphasis on improving their comprehensive cultural literacy. The guide advocates for the inclusion of general English, English for specific purposes, and intercultural communication courses. This top-down reform in intercultural education within foreign language education has created a more conducive environment for elevating students' ICC.

The ongoing progress in intercultural education research in China provides a systematic approach for students to enhance their ICC. Theoretical research on intercultural competence has led to the development of localized models and theories, offering valuable guidance for educators. For instance, Zhang Hongling et al. (2020) have proposed an integrated model for cultivating Chinese students' intercultural competence by establishing connections between intercultural competence teaching in Chinese universities and middle schools. Gao Yihong (1998) interprets the conceptual aspects of intercultural communication using the "Tao" and "Qi" concepts in Chinese culture, while Gao Yongchen (2014) proposes a theoretical model that integrates intercultural knowledge and action. The theoretical insights derived from intercultural education research serve as a foundation for practical teaching, providing educators with scientifically informed methods and aiding students in enhancing their intercultural communicative competence.

The rapid advancements in science and technology have opened up vast opportunities for intercultural education. Current developments in Internet technology continuously reshape the methods employed in intercultural education, exposing students to foreign cultures in their daily lives. For example, during the pandemic, students engaged in intercultural academic exchanges through online conferences. AI-generated models like ChatGPT have entered the education sector, assisting students in improving their English listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. Various short video platforms offer a plethora of content for learning about foreign cultures, and the online broadcast industry has given rise to virtual idols from overseas. The evolution of Internet technology provides students with numerous opportunities for intercultural communication, playing a pivotal role in fostering a harmonious global community.

The survey results indicate that students in Sino-foreign joint education programs exhibit high levels of motivation and enthusiasm toward intercultural communication, as evidenced by their attitude dimension score surpassing 4 points. This enthusiasm can be attributed to the learning requirements and goals of these students, who are slated to study in foreign universities in their final year. As they anticipate utilizing English for daily communication and academic exchanges in the future, their need to enhance intercultural communication skills strengthens, further fueling their motivation.

The questionnaire findings highlight students' robust understanding of their own cultural knowledge, which is closely linked to the enhancement of cultural identity and self-confidence. In recent years, there has been an increasing recognition of the importance of integrating traditional Chinese culture into English language education to address the issue of "cultural aphasia" in schools. The emphasis on effectively conveying Chinese stories in English and promoting Chinese culture has become a prominent focus for English language learning. For example, in the 2019 edition of high school English textbooks, Chinese culture accounts for the highest proportion at 32.59% (Sheng, 2023). Universities have introduced courses on traditional local cultures, and native cultural knowledge is being incorporated into school education through various explicit and implicit means. Students subconsciously absorb this knowledge.

Conversely, students' proficiency in foreign cultural knowledge is below average, primarily due to the perception of cultural teaching as a supplementary element to language instruction. Constraints in time and teaching conditions limit the emphasis on culture, with occasional teaching moments amidst language instruction. This approach hinders the development of students' systematic understanding of foreign cultures, resulting in fragmented and one-sided cultural knowledge. Introducing and learning culture as isolated information can lead to one-sided or even inaccurate perceptions of the target language, negatively impacting students' ICC (Zhang, 2012).

The questionnaire results reveal that students exhibit a heightened awareness of cultural differences with foreigners, as indicated by their above-average score on the awareness dimension. This suggests their capability to approach different cultures with a rational and critical attitude. However, their scores for intercultural cognitive skills and intercultural communication skills fall below ideal levels, potentially attributed to limited opportunities for authentic intercultural communication scenarios. Students typically acquire theoretical knowledge in classrooms and textbooks, lacking practical experience in authentic intercultural interactions.

#### 4.2 Regression Analysis

Regression analysis is a statistical method employed to scrutinize the causal relationships between variables. As depicted in Table 2, the high R-square value of 0.996 implies that the six dimensions can effectively elucidate the variations in intercultural communication competence. The Derbin Watson value of 2.08, closely approaching 2, signifies favorable sample independence and the absence of autocorrelation. Moreover, with all Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values below 5, it indicates the absence of multicollinearity in the sample. These outcomes collectively suggest the reasonableness and validity of the model. A P-value less than 0.01 underscores the significant impact of the six dimensions on intercultural communicative competence. Simply put, enhancements in each dimension will contribute to an amelioration in ICC.

**Table 2. Regression Analysis**

	Unstandardized		Standardized		t	sig	VIF	R <sup>2</sup>	D-W
	coefficients		coefficients						
	B	Std. Error	Beta						
KNA	0.103	0.004	0.182		26.755	0.00	1.322		
KNB	0.265	0.006	0.355		45.437	0.00	1.752		
AT	0.103	0.004	0.172		25.62	0.00	1.285	0.996	2.08
SKA	0.336	0.007	0.398		48.481	0.00	1.928		
SKB	0.103	0.006	0.147		16.543	0.00	2.256		
AW	0.081	0.005	0.139		15.646	0.00	2.252		

Dependent variable: ICC

Upon scrutinizing the results of the regression analysis, it becomes apparent that the six dimensions exert varying degrees of influence on intercultural communicative competence. Notably, intercultural communication skills and knowledge about foreign cultures emerge as the most substantial contributors. Consequently, in the realm of intercultural education, prioritizing these two dimensions as pivotal teaching content is imperative for effectively enhancing students' ICC.

Intercultural communication skills play a pivotal role in bridging the gap between individuals hailing from diverse cultural backgrounds. The absence of shared knowledge and the necessity to uphold cultural identities during communication can give rise to challenges and complications in intercultural communication. To navigate these complexities, the application of communication strategies becomes crucial, facilitating adaptation and coordination between communicators. Intercultural communication skills serve as a bridge connecting both parties, enabling them to accurately convey and comprehend their communicative intentions. For instance, when engaging in conversations with individuals from foreign cultures, adept communicators can expound upon their own cultural characteristics using language and expressions comprehensible to their counterparts. This proficiency becomes particularly evident when dealing with the translation and interpretation of "culture-loaded words." Individuals endowed with excellent intercultural communication abilities can precisely convey and interpret communicative intentions across diverse scenarios, resulting in effective communication.

According to Byram (2020), the development of intercultural communication skills is contingent upon both knowledge and attitude. Devoid of a foundational understanding of intercultural knowledge, the cultivation of these skills becomes unattainable. Through the acquisition of knowledge about foreign cultures, students can comprehend taboos or customary etiquette in those cultures before engaging in intercultural communication. This knowledge forms the bedrock for practicing politeness in cross-cultural interactions. For instance, individuals can discern appropriate or inappropriate topics for discussion, adhere to specific codes of conduct, and steer clear of actions that may offend individuals of different religious backgrounds. The absence of this reservoir of knowledge heightens the risk of causing offense in cross-cultural communication, potentially leading to unsuccessful interactions.

#### 4.3 Correlation Analysis

According to the statistical results described in Table 3, the average score of ICC of students who participated in intercultural courses was higher than that of students who did not participate.

**Table 3. Descriptive Statistics**

	Intercultural Courses	N	Mean	Std. deviation
ICC	participated	78	3.359	0.4233
	not participated	35	3.028	0.3961



As for the results of the independent sample T-test presented in Table 4, it is evident that there are significant differences in the total score of ICC and each dimension's variance between participants and non-participants of intercultural courses. Specifically, the significance test for the total score of ICC when comparing those who have taken intercultural courses to those who haven't yielded a p-value less than 0.01. This suggests that the intercultural courses offered by Sino-foreign joint education program at Hubei University of Technology have significantly enhanced students' ICC.

**Table 4. Independent Sample t-test**

Dimensions	t	sig
ICC	3.924	<0.01
KNA	1.608	0.111
KNB	3.956	<0.01
AT	7.024	<0.01
SKA	1.159	0.249
SKB	2.695	0.008
AW	2.323	0.022

By comparing the results across the six dimensions, it was found that the significance levels of foreign cultural knowledge, attitude, intercultural cognitive skills, and awareness were all significantly less than 0.05. This suggests that participation in intercultural courses has a significant positive impact on these four dimensions. The findings indicate that the content of intercultural courses is beneficial in enhancing students' understanding of foreign cultural knowledge and increasing their shared knowledge reserve for future intercultural communication scenarios. Additionally, students who have taken intercultural courses tend to view cultural differences more objectively and positively, accept the impact of culture shock more readily, and learn to reflect on differences while finding strategies to solve problems. However, due to the lack of authentic communication scenarios in teaching, students' intercultural communication skills have not been significantly improved. This aspect deserves adjustments in future course content settings.

## 5. Conclusion

This study employs a quantitative research method to explore the intercultural communication competence (ICC) of students enrolled in Sino-foreign joint education programs at Hubei University of Technology. The findings reveal the following key insights: The average ICC score among students in Sino-foreign joint education programs at Hubei University of Technology is 3.26, indicating an intermediate level. Significant differences are observed across six dimensions: knowledge related to domestic culture, knowledge related to foreign culture, attitude, intercultural communication skills,

intercultural cognitive skills, and awareness. Regression analysis highlights that the dimensions of knowledge related to foreign culture and intercultural communication skills wield the most substantial impact on ICC. Correlation analysis results indicate that participation in intercultural courses significantly enhances students' overall ICC. Notably, students engaging in intercultural courses demonstrate superior performance in the dimensions of foreign cultural knowledge, attitude, intercultural cognitive skills, and awareness.

The implications drawn from this study include: Curriculum designers should augment content related to knowledge about foreign cultures and intercultural communication skills. In course design and implementation, educators should craft authentic intercultural communication scenarios and leverage multimedia teaching aids to enhance students' practical abilities. Collaborative initiatives with foreign student classes and the organization of regular classroom exchange activities can be effective strategies. However, this study is not without limitations. The number of valid samples collected is limited, offering a partial reflection of the current ICC landscape among students in Sino-foreign joint programs. Consequently, future research endeavors should seek increased participation from diverse universities to conduct more comprehensive empirical studies.

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