The Status of Intercultural Communicative Competence of Multilingual Learners in Chinese Universities

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Abstract: *Intercultural communicative competence has always been attracting the attention of linguistic scholars all over the world, and the attention paid to it increases as globalization advances further. Most studies investigate the intercultural communicative competence of people who master one foreign language, with little focus on that of multilingual learners. This study endeavors to probe into the current status of Chinese multilingual college students' intercultural communicative competence by collecting 267 responses of multilingual students' self-evaluation reports through an online questionnaire and conducting semi-structured interviews with 5 college students majoring in different languages. According to the analysis of quantitative and qualitative data, it is found that Chinese multilingual students are highly confident in intercultural attitudes and awareness but report to be weak in intercultural cognitive skills and intercultural communicative skills, revealing the imbalance between multilingual college students' cognition and performance. Besides, based on the quantitative data analysis, intercultural communicative experiences and intercultural communicative competence courses are found to have a weak but positive influence on certain dimensions of intercultural communicative competence. Interview data support statistical findings and provide insights into problems and enhancement measures for intercultural communicative competence courses. This study provides an empirical basis for the intercultural communicative competence development of multilingual learners and puts forward a targeted direction for the development of multilingual learners' intercultural communicative competence in Chinese universities.*
Keywords: *Intercultural Communicative Competence,Multilingual Learners,Development of Intercultural Communicative competence,Intercultural communicative experiences*

I. INTRODUCTION

As globalization and internationalization advance and extend into multiple aspects of worldwide people's lives, ICC has been universally acknowledged as one of the most important abilities for a "global citizen" to master. In China, the significance of possessing ICC has become increasingly prominent in recent years, in that the initiative "Telling Chinese stories, conveying Chinese voices" advocated by the Chinese government calls for talents qualified for spreading Chinese values and enhancing China's international influence. In this case, compared with other Chinese college students, multilingual learners who command more than one foreign language are more responsible for committing themselves to the establishment of China's positive international image and the improvement of China's cultural soft power. To cultivate multilingual talents to be competent in undertaking the mission of expanding Chinese cultures to nations and regions with diverse beliefs and values, the instruction of ICC to multilingual learners occupies a decisive position. Besides the consideration of national rejuvenation, multilingual learners themselves are supposed to be capable of IC, especially when their future jobs require interactions with foreigners.

As a response to both the government's appeals and multilingual learners' demands, the Teaching Guide for Foreign Language and Literature Undergraduate Majors in Higher Institutions issued in 2020, incorporated ICC as one of the core competence indicators for foreign language majors, and proposed to pay special attention to its development (Shen, 2023).

Since ICC plays such an important role in accomplishing the nation's rejuvenation and fulfilling multilingual learners' overall development, the issue of how to cultivate ICC more effectively deserves rigorous exploration and scientific research. Confucius, one of the greatest educators and philosophers throughout the history of China, emphasizes the necessity of "individualized teaching" which can be applied to the instruction of any subject and teaching in any domain. Consequently, to achieve a highly effective instruction of ICC, learning about the general level of multilingual students' ICC and their attitudes towards it is of huge significance. This is exactly what the present study attempts to do by collecting multilingual learners' self-evaluation of their ICC using a self-report scale in the form of an online questionnaire and interviewing

them about their knowledge and experiences related to ICC.

With the analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data, the current status of multilingual learners' ICC in Chinese universities will be defined and an insight into better cultivation approaches to ICC will be proposed.

II.   Literature Review
2.1 Research on intercultural communicative competence
2.1.1 The construct of intercultural communicative competence

The origins of the ICC concept could be traced to the 1970s when Hymes (1972) for the first time put forward communicative competence. He described it as both the innate ability to use grammar correctly and the capacity to do so in a range of communicative contexts, thus bringing the sociolinguistic perspective into Chomsky's linguistic view of competence. Since then, the manifold and complicated concept has been given a lot of attention, and extensive research has been conducted for insights into it.

Owing to the complex nature of ICC, an agreement about its constructs and components has not been reached to this day. Many scholars proposed their theoretical frameworks, among which was Byram's definition approved most widely according to Deardorff's Delphi study (2004). The following was cited from Byram's definition of ICC: attitudes; knowledge of self and others; skills to interpret and relate; skills to discover and/or to interact; critical cultural awareness (1997, p. 44). Preceding Byram, Lustig and Koester (1993) and Gudykunst (1993) put forward the components of ICC that they were concerned about, like knowledge, skills and motivation. After Byram, Fantini in 2006 brought forward his assumption of ICC components which consisted of awareness, attitude, skills, knowledge, and proficiency in the target language. What is worth noticing is that of all these ICC constructs, there are components in common, which implies that despite the absence of a unifying construct of ICC, there are core components generally confirmed, such as knowledge, skills and awareness.

In the early 1990s, 20 years later than Western scientists focusing on ICC, Chinese scholars commenced shining a spotlight on it. Discussion about the composition of ICC in the Chinese context was heated before 2010 when Chen and Starosta (2000) and Yang and Zhuang (2007) successively conceived their constructs. Intercultural awareness, sensitivity, and adroitness were included as essential elements by Chen and Starosta (2000, p. 2). Yang and Zhuang (2007, p. 3) believed that ICC was made up of knowledge, practical communicative competence, acculturation and global consciousness systems competence. In 2013, Wu, Fan and Peng hypothesized a new framework in which ICC contained six factors, including knowledge of China and the target nation, intercultural attitudes, communicative skills, cognitive skills and awareness.

Comparing Western and Chinese scholars' explorations of ICC, it can be discovered that different perspectives are adopted to view ICC, whereas both of them agree that ICC generally includes four dimensions, respectively, knowledge, attitudes, skills and cultural awareness (Shen, 2021).

2.1.2 The assessment of intercultural communicative competence

Constructs of ICC form the cornerstone of overall studies on it. Therefore, without a unanimous opinion on what ICC is comprised of, nor does a universally recognized assessment tool for ICC exist. Despite this, both Western and Chinese researchers have always been delving into the effective methods and tools for assessing ICC. As an umbrella term covering diverse abilities necessary for people to engage in intercultural activities appropriately, ICC makes it hard for scholars to design an appropriate approach to attaining a comprehensive evaluation of it.

In the West, the earliest scale designed for assessing ICC was Koester and Olebe's (1998). They put an emphasis on behavior and skills. Later than them, another important scholar in ICC studies, Fantini in 2006 laid out the Assessment of Intercultural Competence which has been applied in various fields since its invention. These early tests of ICC, however, have a common problem, that is, the data collected are all from respondents' own subjective judgement of themselves, which may differ from reality. As a result, later appraisal of one's ICC orients to assessing learners' actual performance by means of classroom observations, questionnaires and the like. Deardoff (2004) argued that ICC could be best measured by various qualitative and quantitative methods.

Although there are many ICC assessment tools and methods discussed in the Western context, few similar studies have been found in the Chinese context (Peng, Wu & Fan, 2015). In 1995, China's first International Conference on Intercultural Communication was held, and the Chinese Association for Intercultural Communication was established, which served as the advent of studies about ICC assessment (Bai, 2016). Not on the grounds of assessing ICC though it is, the cultural knowledge test in Wang's (1990) Analysis of Social Culture Test was the earliest attempt to measure learners' cultural competence and of great significance to the design of knowledge tests in ICC assessment. Later than his, a study worth noting was Liu's (2004) large-scale empirical research in which the culture test used was found to be theoretically sound and practically feasible for assessing students' ICC. Then, Zhong in 2013 hypothesized the components and evaluation system

of ICC based on Byram's constructs. On the whole, China's research into ICC evaluation is not abundant.

Absent as a widely accepted approach to assessing ICC is, there are three important facts to which the academic community generally consent (Deardorff, 2006, pp. 257-258): first, ICC can be evaluated; second, it should be assessed from various perspectives with a combination of various quantitative and qualitative methods, such as case study, in-depth interviews, diary analysis, self-evaluation, other people's evaluation, triangulation and the like; thirdly, in assessments of ICC, numerous variables like respondents, purposes of these assessments, concrete situations, even the social situations and history need considering.

In summary, a single perspective and means are inadequate for evaluating ICC thoroughly, to attain which demands a panoramic view.

2.2 Previous research on developing intercultural communicative competence

As the importance of ICC in the globalized new era increases, the issue of how to develop it captures a lot of attention. ICC development occurs in a context where at least two languages are involved. Hence, the subsequent section reviews research on developing ICC in second language learning classrooms.

2.2.1 Developing intercultural communicative competence in second language learning classrooms

The notion of ICC occurs as second language learning prevails and exerts a profound influence around the world. Being competent in ICC requires people to adapt themselves in terms of both language and identity so that the communication can be completed smoothly. To achieve the goal is important but tough. Therefore, the cultivation of ICC for second language learners triggers attention. The initial research priority is given to establishing ICC models used to assist teachers in cultivating students' ICC. In second language learning in particular, the most commonly referenced ICC models are those developed by Bennett, Fantini, Byram and Deardorff (Álvarez Valencia & Michelson, 2022).

However, when it comes to pedagogical practice of these models, according to Matsuo (2012), they are not so useful as aiding teachers properly because although they permit teachers to discern when elements of a particular competence are present or absent in students, it is difficult for teachers to operationalize them in terms of establishing relations and dependencies among the competencies, let alone align pedagogical practice with these outcomes. To comply with institutional demands, assessment models of ICC have become desirable in that results produced by them can facilitate approaches in cultivating ICC in second language learning classrooms.

With decades of development, the focus of developing ICC has varied from such relatively macroscopic perspective as the establishment of ICC teaching models and exploration of effective teaching methods or tools to a microscopic one. One of the manifestations is that more studies probe into the necessity of and effective methods for specialized intercultural teacher training. For example, Figueredo-Canosa conducted an empirical survey in which 320 students and 80 teachers were provided questionnaires to explore the effects of training teacher programs on teachers' performances in cultivating students' ICC. A surprising conclusion was drawn that despite strengths, the program might also do harm to teachers' teaching of ICC.

In addition to the narrow perspective of ICC development studies, it is also found that many recent studies are aimed at investigating the ICC development of learners at a young age, like students in secondary or even primary school (Okumura, 2020; Turabay et al., 2023; Li, 2023). This can be attributed to people's increasing awareness of the significance of developing ICC. Li (2023) presented data on Chinese primary school EFL teachers' beliefs about incorporating ICC into foreign language teaching, uncovering the reality that ICC teaching has been absorbed in EFL instruction since the primary school period.

Okumura (2020) and Turabay et al. (2023) also discussed the relationship between ICC cultivation and web-based tools, which has been another focus in recent investigations. For example, Shen (2021) presented a pedagogical case, exploring the application of the online ICC training model and focusing on how the online ICC teaching could be achieved.

No matter how the focus of developing ICC changes, researchers' concerns for it do not diminish a little, fully justifying its implications for learners and thus demanding continuous attention to it.

2.2.2 Developing intercultural communicative competence in multilingual classrooms

In a world where people from diverse countries interact quite frequently, being multilingual now is significant because it boosts one's competitiveness in the present globalized world. Multilingualism is therefore brought into focus. The European Commission in 2007 referred to multilingualism as "the ability of societies, institutions, groups or individuals to engage regularly with more than one language in their day-to-day lives" (Cenoz, 2013, p. 5). Multilingual learners are defined as individuals whose linguistic practices transcend traditional monolingual norms, drawing flexibly from a unified linguistic repertoire that includes all their languages to communicate and learn (García & Kleyn, 2016, p. 15). In this paper, the studied multilingual learners include the foreign language majors in universities only.

For multilingual learners, ICC is indisputably an important ability. However, research related to the issue is limited and most of them do not come up until 2010. After reviewing recent literature about ICC in a multilingual context, it is concluded that papers examining how to develop ICC for multilingual learners are in the majority, in which elements like learners themselves, teachers, teaching environment and the like are discussed. For example, Pastena (2023) and Tsang (2022) concentrated on the relationship between multilingual learners' backgrounds, like the foreign languages they commanded as well as what previous intercultural experiences they had had, and their competence in intercultural sensitivity, ideas, and behaviors. Ganesan (2024), by examining teachers' experiences in multilingual circumstances, investigated how they influenced teachers' approaches to developing students' ICC in a multilingual classroom. Some scholars attempted to reason out the feasibility and effective methods of ICC development for students at the primary and secondary levels in a multilingual classroom (Heinzmann, 2024; Krotik, 2021).

In the Chinese context, college students are all required to learn English as a second language. Their ICC is examined a lot, while multilingual learners' ICC is explored much less (Wu, 2013). Compared with studies on ICC of students majoring in LOTE, research on the development of ICC for English majors has a leading position in China (Yang, 2020). Investigations focusing on ICC of Chinese students specializing in French, German and Japanese are not rich, while research on Chinese college students majoring in Spanish and Russian is little. Although there are ICC studies probing into students majoring in LOTE in China, the number of ICC studies on Chinese multilingual college students as a whole (including students majoring in both English and LOTE) is quite small, so research in this direction is promising.

2.3 Research gap

To sum up, research into the construct and assessment tools of ICC is abundant and has always been produced, and studies focusing on developing ICC in second language learning context abound. However, little attention is paid to developing multilingual learners' ICC, although possessing it is a prerequisite for multilingual learners to bring their advantages into full play. The majority of the existing research on the topic focuses on a specific subset of multilingual learners, such as Japanese majors, with little attention paid to them as a whole. Also, studies focusing on multilingual learners themselves are few because scholars' attention is diverted to teachers, environment and teaching tools in ICC development.

Based on the research gap identified, this paper attempts to provide a current and overall view of the current status of ICC of multilingual learners in China. Knowing how well they perform in terms of ICC, curriculum or methods targeting at cultivating these learners' ICC can be adapted to be more accurate and effective so that Chinese multilingual learners will become more competent in intercultural interactions and distinguish themselves in the international arena.

This paper tries to address the following questions:
RQ1: What is the current status of Chinese multilingual college students' intercultural communicative competence?
RQ2: What are Chinese multilingual college students' attitudes towards intercultural communicative experiences?

III.   Methodology
3.1 Context

This study was conducted at a college of foreign languages and literature at a comprehensive university in central China. The investigated participants were undergraduate and post-graduate students of different grades in the college. All participants were multilingual as they majored in foreign languages and literature, knowing at least three languages. Apart from their mother tongue, Chinese, English majors need to learn a second foreign language like French or Japanese, and those majoring in LOTE also know English. This study was carried out by a combination of an online questionnaire and semi-structured interviews.

3.2 Participants

Participants filling in the online questionnaire validly totaled 267. The demographic distribution of them is presented in Table 1. As shown in the table, the share of female students is the biggest, accounting for 82.4%, which accords with the fact that females are in the majority of foreign language majors. When it comes to grades of students, seven grades in higher education from freshman to third-year postgraduate are covered in the study, with seniors the most, juniors in the second place, and second-year postgraduates ranking the lowest. Students in different grades exhibit normal distribution, paving the way for further analysis.

Table 1. Participants' background information

Background information	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	47	17.60
	Female	220	82.40
	Freshmen	23	8.60
	Sophomore	53	19.90
	Junior	76	28.50
Grades	Senior	94	35.20
	First-year postgraduate	16	6.00
	Second-year postgraduate	2	0.70
	Third-year postgraduate	3	1.10

The semi-structured interview involved 5 participants who were selected from five foreign language majors randomly. Including 5 majors is targeted at providing comprehensive data for multilingual college students' ICC. Interviewees' information is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Interviewees' background information

Participants	Majors	Foreign language learning experiences	Studying abroad	ICC courses
Lucy	Russian	10-year English + 4-year Russian learning	Yes	No
Mary	Spanish	10-year English + 4-year Spanish learning	No	No
Sarah	English	14-year English + 1.5-year French learning	Yes	Yes
Jane	French	10-year English + 4-year French learning	No	No
Anna	Japanese	10-year English + 4-year Japanese learning	No	Yes

3.3 Instruments
3.3.1 Questionnaire
The questionnaire used in this paper was based on the tool called Assessment of Intercultural Competence of Chinese College Students (AIC-CCS), which was proposed by Wu et al. (2013). It was an ICC assessment tool specially designed for Chinese college students. Its structure was based on theories such as the multidimensional ICC model (Byram, 1997), the pyramid ICC model (Deardorff, 2006), and assessment of ICC (Fantini, 2006). As regards its reliability and validity, Wu et al. (2013) conducted exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to confirm its high quality (the Cronbach's a was 0.913). AIC-CCS had been confirmed by other studies, too. Hence, it is also applicable in this study to examine multilingual students' ICC self-evaluation.

The original assessment tool consisted of two major parts, one surveying the background information of respondents and the other reporting college students' self-evaluation of their own ICC. In the first part, questions examining participants' gender, grade, whether they have ICEs (If yes, what are they?), whether they have taken an ICC course (If yes, what do you think of it?) as well as whether they have studied abroad are involved. The second part comprised six dimensions, namely knowledge of China, knowledge of target nation, attitudes, intercultural communicative skills, intercultural cognitive skills and awareness, with 28 items in total.

3.3.2 Semi-structured interview
Interviews are the most commonly used data collection method, and the semi-structured format is the most frequently used interview technique in qualitative research (Kallio et al., 2016). Semi-structured interview serving as a general data collection method can be attributed to its versatility and flexibility since the rigidity of its structure can be altered according to the research aim and questions. One of the main advantages of the method lies in its enabling reciprocity between the interviewer and participant, allowing the interviewer to improvise follow-up questions on the grounds of the participant's response.

The semi-structured interview requires a focused guideline for the discussion, but it should not be followed strictly. As to the guideline, it is conceived with previous knowledge about the research questions and existing data, and it is aimed at delving into the research area by collecting similar types of information from each participant using a certain outline.

3.4 Data collection procedure

Through the questionnaire and semi-structured interview, participants' responses were collected.

In terms of the questionnaire used in this paper, on account of the research aim and research questions, small modifications were made to the Assessment of Intercultural Competence of Chinese College Students (AIC-CCS) scale proposed by Wu et al. (2013). The question in the original questionnaire, "whether you have studied abroad" was excluded on the grounds that overseas learning experiences would not be specially explored in the study. Meanwhile, questions examining whether participants have had ICEs or taken ICC courses are equipped with a skipping setting which only requires students clicking "yes" to fill in the following open-ended questions, namely, "What are your ICEs?" and "What do you think of ICC courses you have taken?". The response format of the scale in the questionnaire was the Likert scale. Surveyed students responded to each statement in the second part on a rating scale from "very low" to "very high", with five options in total. The complete modified questionnaire is attached in Appendix A.

After the modification was done, the questionnaire was distributed online between 10th and 24th February to collect Chinese multilingual students' background information and their self-reported evaluation of their own ICC. Most questionnaires were given out person to person, which highly guaranteed the quality of responses. With 277 responses being retrieved, 267 questionnaires were eventually assessed as valid.

The interview questions in the study, taking into account the quantitative data having been collected, were planned to gather information about interviewees' understanding of ICC, ideas about ICEs together with their evaluations of ICC courses. 12 open questions concerning the above themes were included. The interview guideline is presented in Appendix B.

Five interviewees voluntarily participated in interviews and were well-informed of the ethical issues. All semi-structured interviews were conducted face to face in quiet environments between 5th and 13th March, each lasting for 20 to 26 minutes, and all interviewees were calm and sober when being interviewed.

3.5 Data analysis

3.5.1 Quantitative data analysis

With 277 responses collected, 10 samples were dismissed as they were filled in by working participants who were not targeted research subjects. Immediately following data collection and data cleaning, the reliability analysis of the scale responses was conducted. It can be found from the results in Table 3 that the Cronbach's a corresponding to each dimension is more than 0.85, and that the Cronbach's a of the whole scale is 0.941, which indicates that the data are highly reliable and appropriate for further research.

Table 3. Reliability analysis of the scale

Dimensions	The number of items	Cronbach's a
Knowledge of China	3	0.868
Knowledge of target nation	7	0.876
Attitudes	3	0.885
Intercultural communicative skills	9	0.914
Intercultural cognitive skills	3	0.850
Awareness	3	0.861
The whole scale	28	0.941

With reliability analysis done, the response scale was coded. "Very low" was coded as 1, "low" as 2, "average" as 3, "high" as 4 and "very high" as 5. Coding was conducted for statistical reasons and a simpler and more transparent comparison of the results. After the reliability analysis and coding, descriptive analysis of participants' scores of each dimension was conducted to provide a specific picture of Chinese multilingual students' ICC level. Independent-samples t-test was used to investigate differences that ICEs and ICC courses may make to students' self-evaluation of ICC. These findings will be presented in the next chapter.
The data were processed and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, i.e., SPSS 27.0.

3.5.2 Qualitative data analysis

The first step after semi-structured interviews were conducted was to transcribe the interviewees' answers to scripts. With scripts produced, revisions to them were made, such as correcting spelling mistakes, asking for interviewees to confirm ambiguities, deleting repeated phrases or sentences, complementing incomplete sentences and paraphrasing sentences as syntactically correct without changing their original

meanings. With prior transcription and revisions finished, exploration of interview data was conducted by means of thematic analysis which prevails in qualitative research. With clear interview aims in mind, the study employs deductive thematic analysis that starts with a predefined set of themes and then looks for evidence in texts that matches these themes (Corder & Mackey, 2015). Data were coded using NVivo 15.0. The researcher first defined themes that existed in the questionnaire, such as attitudes, awareness, intercultural communicative skills and the like, so that the interview data could better complement questionnaire data. And then two important themes emphasized in interviews were coded, respectively participants' responses to ICEs and ICC courses. After predefining major themes, the researcher first scanned the scripts carefully to familiarize herself with the texts. And then, while figuring out statements in coordination with major themes, the researcher also deduced sub-themes according to detailed contents.

IV.   Findings And Discussion
4.1 Current status of Chinese multilingual students' intercultural communicative competence
Measures examining central tendency (the mean and standard deviation) were used to analyze data from the questionnaire. The mean (M) and standard deviation (S.D.) were produced as descriptive statistic results calculated by SPSS 27.0.

4.1.1 Knowledge of China
"Knowledge of China" as the first dimension in the scale consists of three items which examine participants' self-evaluation of their understanding of Chinese history, norms and values. Item three has the highest score with M=3.98, while the lowest mean score belongs to item one with M=3.66. The lowest score of "understanding Chinese history" may be attributed to the fact that throughout the long history of China, there are so many memorable figures and events that students find it difficult to completely and clearly acquire, whereas Chinese values, as a collective set of abstract principles which determine the individual's behavior pattern, attitudes and perception of others, have been established and developed since birth and practiced so frequently as to manipulate people's thinking and conduct spontaneously.

Table 4. Descriptive analysis of "Knowledge of China"

Items	Minimum value	Maximum value	Mean	S.D.
1. understanding Chinese history	2	5	3.66	0.698
2. understanding Chinese social norms	2	5	3.88	0.667
3. understanding Chinese values	1	5	3.98	0.685

4.1.2 Knowledge of target nation
Next to "Knowledge of China" is the second dimension, "Knowledge of target nation", including seven items, three of which test participants' understanding of the foreign country from the same perspectives as in dimension one. The other four items focus on how well students know about foreign cultural taboos, foreigners' speech, concepts of and successful strategies for IC.

As shown in Table 5, item six obtains the highest score with M=3.42, while item four scores the lowest with M=3.01. It should be noticed that mean scores of items one, two and four are very close to 3, which signifies that most respondents regard their competence in these respects as "average". These three items study students' acquisition of foreign history, social norms and cultural taboos, all of which are in effect knowledge-based, their low scores demanding more attention and calling for better instructions in the three perspectives.

Table 5. Descriptive analysis of "Knowledge of target nation"

Items	Minimum value	Maximum value	Mean	S.D.
1. history knowledge of the target nation	1	5	3.04	0.693
2. social norms of the target nation	2	5	3.07	0.645
3. values of the target nation	1	5	3.20	0.686
4. cultural taboos of the target nation	1	5	3.01	0.761
5. recognizing speech of people in the target nation	2	5	3.39	0.744
6. basic notion of intercultural communication	1	5	3.42	0.816
7. knowing successful intercultural communicative strategies	2	5	3.26	0.765

4.1.3 Attitudes

Following the above two dimensions comes the third one, probing into students' attitudes in IC. This dimension primarily concentrates on participants' readiness to learn from and respect people differing from themselves as well as the readiness to study foreign languages and cultures well. It can be summarized from Table 6 that the mean scores of the three items are close and also high, all of which exceed 4.2. Compared with previous dimensions whose biggest minimum value is 2, the minimum values in "Attitudes" are higher, with two items attaining 3. It cannot be ruled out that the high scores of attitudes in IC may be associated with unconscious self-glorification driven by self-esteem needs, which is deemed by psychologists as common in self-report evaluations. Nevertheless, the results indeed to some extent demonstrate that multilingual college students harbor a high readiness to prepare themselves psychologically for actively engaging in IC.

Table 6. Descriptive analysis of "Attitudes"

Items	Minimum value	Maximum value	Mean	S.D.
1. ready to learn from people who are different from oneself and their culture	3	5	4.21	0.589
2. ready to honor the customs and ways of people in the target nation	3	5	4.29	0.634
3. ready to gain a thorough understanding of foreign languages and cultures	2	5	4.31	0.624

4.1.4 Intercultural communicative skills

The fourth one researches participants' ICC from the perspective of intercultural communicative skills utilizing nine items covering consulting misunderstandings, being polite and impartial, maintaining tolerance and intercultural sensitivity and the like. As the most inclusive dimension, the distribution of mean scores of each item is concentrated, ranging from 3.41 to 3.75 (as presented in Table 7). Of nine items, mean scores of six fluctuate between 3.59 and 3.69, embodying a central tendency, which means the majority of surveyed students' self-evaluation of intercultural communicative skills is in the middle of "average" =3 and "high" =4. This tendency reflects that while students think they can use these skills, they are not sure about the effects. Further teaching and practice of these skills are recommended, as they can be efficiently enhanced when students have reached a certain level of acquisition, thereby significantly improving their performance in IC.

Item four "being polite to foreigners" is the top scorer. This item is related to participants' cognition, while the item with the lowest mean, i.e., "consulting with foreigners when misunderstandings arise" is concerned with performance in practical situations. Higher scores in cognition present a cheerful implication that participants are aware of and willing to employ cognitive strategies to distinguish themselves in IC. However, less positive responses to performances in consulting with foreigners mirror their uncertainty in authentic IC contexts, which may result from a lack of IC practice opportunities in real situations.

Table 7. Descriptive analysis of "Intercultural communicative skills"

Items	Minimum value	Maximum value	Mean	S.D.
1. consulting with foreigners when misunderstandings arise	1	5	3.41	0.711
2. communicating with foreigners using nonverbal communication when language is not an option	2	5	3.63	0.756
3. communicating with foreigners effectively	2	5	3.47	0.706
4. being polite to foreigners	2	5	3.75	0.698
5. refraining from using offensive language or acting in ways that annoy foreigners	1	5	3.61	0.769
6. preventing discrimination against foreigners	1	5	3.62	0.758
7. refraining from invading foreigners' privacy	2	5	3.63	0.711
8. being sensitive in intercultural communication	2	5	3.59	0.782
9. comprehending various viewpoints when dealing with different cultural issues	2	5	3.68	0.731

4.1.5 Intercultural cognitive skills

Three items are involved in the "intercultural cognitive skills" dimension, which highlights the word "learning" as shown in Table 8. It assesses participants' capacity to learn from foreigners, acquire IC strategies and manage cultural conflicts. It can be found from Table 8 that item one scores the highest (M=3.64) and item three the lowest (M=3.38), with the variance of 0.26. The variance suggests that participants may be better at passively receiving cultural knowledge but less motivated to transform knowledge into the ability to resolve real conflicts.

<div align="center">Table 8. Descriptive analysis of "Intercultural cognitive skills"</div>

Items	Minimum value	Maximum value	Mean	S.D.
1. learning about other cultures from people from other countries	2	5	3.64	0.729
2. acquiring intercultural communicative techniques	2	5	3.48	0.706
3. learning how to resolve cultural disputes	2	5	3.38	0.782

To achieve the transformation, the knowledge acquired should be equipped with opportunities where it can be applied, such as studying abroad.

4.1.6 Awareness

Examination of participants' intercultural "Awareness" falls into the last place, which is comprised of three items. As shown in Table 9, the mean scores of the three items are high, with two reaching 4 and one scoring 3.84, indicating that respondents regard their awareness of IC as "high" =4. In addition to the high mean, the minimum value of all items is 2, denoting that participants generally evaluate themselves as   meeting the basic requirement in "Awareness". Both the mean and the minimum value statistics show that multilingual students display confidence in intercultural awareness. However, item three has the lowest mean probably suggesting that respondents are less able to apply multi-perspective analysis in real-world situations, uncovering a barrier to the transfer of knowledge to practice, which is also embodied in interviewees' responses.

<div align="center">Table 9. Descriptive analysis of "Awareness"</div>

Items	Minimum value	Maximum value	Mean	S.D.
1. knowing cultural similarities and differences when speaking with people in the target nation	2	5	4.06	0.631
2. knowing cultural identity disparities when speaking with people in the target nation	2	5	4.00	0.646
3. assessing cultural circumstances from one's own and the others' cultural perspective	2	5	3.84	0.670

4.1.7 An overview of Chinese multilingual students' intercultural communicative competence

After descriptive analysis of each dimension, findings of exploring the scale generally are presented in this section. According to statistics in Table 10, respondents show the strongest confidence in the "Attitudes" dimension with M=4.271, and "Awareness" in the second place, next to which is "Knowledge of China". With M=3.198, "Knowledge of target nation" is regarded as their weakest competency. Under such circumstances, it is necessary for us to determine which is important among so much knowledge about a foreign country and how teachers can effectively instruct the core information to students. Knowledge of the target nation to IC is what a cornerstone to a building. Without a solid base, the building is prone to shudder. Without an overall understanding of the country, students are much more likely to fail in an intercultural interaction. Hence, to improve students' ICC, the teaching of knowledge of target nation should be paid more attention to.

"Intercultural communicative skills" and "Intercultural cognitive skills" are the two dimensions ranking just ahead of the dimension "Knowledge of target nation". Their mean scores are close to 3.55, indicating that participants are not confident in their performances in intercultural activities. The discrepancy between high scores of "Awareness" and "Attitudes" and the low scores of the "Intercultural communicative skills" and "Intercultural cognitive skills" implies the imbalance between participants' cognition and actual performance. In other words, participants have prepared themselves for adapting themselves to intercultural activities, but they do not think they are competent enough in actual intercultural engagement. This demands more opportunities given to multilingual learners for practicing their skills and transforming their cognitive knowledge and high willingness into appropriate performance.

<div align="center">Table 10. Descriptive analysis of the whole scale</div>

Dimensions	Minimum value	Maximum value	Mean	SD
1. Knowledge of China	2	5	3.841	0.608
2. Knowledge of target nation	2	5	3.198	0.554
3. Attitudes	3	5	4.271	0.555
4. Intercultural communicative skills	2	5	3.599	0.566
5. Intercultural cognitive skills	2	5	3.501	0.649
6. Awareness	2	5	3.968	0.574

4.2 Chinese multilingual students' attitudes towards intercultural communicative experiences

It is widely held that contact with other cultural elements or interaction with people from other cultures is indispensable to an individual's intercultural growth (Bennett, 2017). In the current study, intercultural experiences are used as an umbrella term to cover the varying depth and forms of contact or interaction. Intercultural experiences refer to contact with other cultural elements or interaction with members from a foreign culture (Li & Kulich, 2024, p. 2). In this section, ICE(s) will be explored, first generally and then one of these interactions will be specifically discussed, that is ICC course, which plays an important role in multilingual students' ICC development and thus is worth studying.

4.2.2 Intercultural communicative competence courses need improvement in content and form.

Following the t-test and correlation analysis conducted on ICEs, the same examination was done on ICC courses, with results shown in Table 11. It can be observed that in statistically significant differences (p<0.05), respondents with ICC courses have better performances than those without them in dimensions one, two and three. In light of the negative correlation coefficient (r), the same conclusion made to ICEs in ICC can be drawn, that is, people without ICC courses are likely to do worse in certain dimensions, including "Knowledge of China", "Knowledge of target nation" as well as "Attitudes". This to some extent suggests that students expect to obtain such knowledge in ICC courses.

Table 11. Differences in ICC related to ICC courses

Dimensions	ICC courses	Mean	SD	T-test results		Correlation analysis results	
				t	p	r	p
1. Knowledge of China	Yes	3.902	0.616	2.354	0.020	-0.140	0.022
	No	3.722	0.577				
2. Knowledge of target nation	Yes	3.252	0.544	2.219	0.028	-0.136	0.026
	No	3.092	0.562				
3. Attitudes	Yes	4.332	0.542	2.487	0.014	-0.153	0.012
	No	4.152	0.566				
4. Intercultural communicative skills	Yes	3.613	0.561	0.563	0.574	-0.035	0.570
	No	3.572	0.578				
5. Intercultural cognitive skills	Yes	3.524	0.650	0.808	0.420	-0.050	0.420
	No	3.456	0.649				
6. Awareness	Yes	3.998	0.566	1.221	0.223	-0.075	0.223
	No	3.907	0.589				

185 responses are reported to have taken ICC courses. Participants trained by ICC courses were required to evaluate them on a scale ranging from "very unsatisfactory" =1 to "very satisfactory" =5. The mean score of this statement is calculated to be 4.06 which is defined as high. However, what contradicts the figure is that five interviewees more or less expressed their dissatisfaction with the courses.

Of the five interviewees, only two, Sarah and Anna, have attended a specialized ICC course (shown in Table 2), and the other three have taken a course named by International Dissemination of Chinese Stories that involved plenty of IC knowledge. However, what is surprising is that when being asked about whether or not a specialized ICC course was necessary to be set up for multilingual students, only Sarah and Anna gave a firm no, with the other three evaluating it as crucial but demanding improvement measures. Both Anna and Sarah spoke of the problem that ICC courses were useless to their actual performances in IC, here listing Anna's response as a representative argument:

As far as my experience in the course is concerned, I don't think it's necessary (to set up the course) because my actual ICEs and my acquisition of knowledge about ICC are not obtained from this class. (Anna, interview)

With comprehensive elements and ambiguous characterization, ICC is also a concept that is evolving as time forges ahead. As a result, while teaching it, the lack of up-to-date information and the absence of focus in terms of the content are other main problems regarded as impairing the effectiveness of ICC courses, as illustrated by Sarah:

Moreover, the content in this course is very general, and also the form is rather dull. The ICC course I

have taken mainly talked about theoretical knowledge which I did not remember much after the course was over. (Sarah, interview)

With defects proposed, the interviewees also envisioned what an ideal ICC course was like in terms of its content and format. As some responses overlap in key points, only some of them are selected as representative evidence. For example, Sarah underlined the necessity of adding contemporary content to ICC courses:

My American teacher in charge of the ICC course talked about the niangpao culture being heatedly discussed in China at that time. He searched for relevant videos from different sources for us to watch, which I thought was quite useful and novel. (Sarah, interview)

The addition of contrasting Chinese culture with foreign cultures in ICC courses was also advocated by Jane who responded as follows:

My teacher proposed an important point that (as multilingual students) we focused too much on learning the culture of other countries but forgot our own. In the ICC course, while target nation culture is taught, Chinese culture should also be introduced. (Jane, interview)

Besides conceiving types of knowledge to be imported to ICC courses, interviewees were also asked to picture desirable methods to carry it out if they were teachers taking charge of the course. Two principal points were stressed by more than one participant, that is to manifest interactivity and to provide opportunities to communicate face-to-face with overseas students. Anna's opinions are typical:

The course cannot be only me teaching. I hope students and I can interact through such activities as scenario simulation or by conducting some activities by ourselves, so that students can engage in some fun games. (Anna, interview)

To sum up, it can be found that based on both statistical results and interviewees' perception, ICC courses do have an impact on students' ICC development. Nonetheless, although participants responded to being satisfied with the important course in the questionnaire, the interviewees told the opposite. Taking into account data from both sources, it can be deduced that existing ICC courses need improving. Faced with problems that contents are too general, forms are not attractive enough and chances for communicating with people from target nations are absent, a couple of corresponding suggestions are put forward. Some of them include introducing recent events and comparison of cultures between two nations as well as involving interactive activities and increasing opportunities to interact with foreigners.

4.2.1 Intercultural communicative experiences positively influence Chinese multilingual students' intercultural communicative competence.

Besides gender and grades, such background information as "Whether you have had ICEs?" and "Whether you have taken ICC courses?" is also surveyed in the questionnaire. Concerning the two questions, the majority of participants fall into the "yes" option, and the percentage of participants answering "yes" to the two questions is more than 60%, indicating that most Chinese multilingual students have been exposed to ICEs (as shown in Table 12).

Table 12. Participants' background information

Background information	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
ICEs	Yes	163	61.00
	No	104	39.00
ICC courses	Yes	177	66.30
	No	90	33.70

Of 267 responses analyzed, 163 responses (61%) state they have had ICEs, and 150 responses fill in what ICEs they had in keywords. To visualize the results, here is a word cloud picture produced through the word-counting function performed by NVivo 15.0. As presented in Figure 1, Of the six keywords highlighted in orange, "abroad" and "exchange" imply that many participants might have experienced direct interactions with intercultural elements. Besides absorbing themselves in overseas life, activities like interpreting, communicating with foreigners and traveling are prominent in participants' ICEs.

Figure 1. Participants' specific intercultural communicative experiences

According to the American sociologist Milton J. Bennett, an important scholar in ICC research, ICEs are essential for intercultural learning. According to his understanding, intercultural learning necessarily occurs as a process of intercultural study experience or exchange programs, during which ICC is developed, and intercultural knowledge is acquired, which can then be transferred into the experience and coexistence of one's own culture and relationships (Bennett, 2009, p. 3). Statistics in Table 13 verify the significance of ICEs in ICC. Table 13 displays the results of the t-test and correlation analysis examining the relation between ICEs and each dimension in ICC. It is noticeable that except for the "Knowledge of China" dimension, ICEs play a role (p<0.05) in participants' evaluation of their ICC. It also shows that students with ICEs (M=3.725; M=4.082) significantly differ (p<0.001, t=3.034) in "Intercultural communicative skills" and "Awareness" compared with students without such experiences (M=3.403; M=3.789). As to why "Knowledge of China" is not correlated with ICEs is conspicuous.

Table 13. Differences in ICC related to ICEs

Dimensions	ICEs	Mean	SD	T-test results		Correlation analysis results	
				t	p	r	p
1. Knowledge of China	Yes	3.830	0.606	-0.376	0.707	0.023	0.707
	No	3.859	0.614				
2. Knowledge of target nation	Yes	3.280	0.538	3.034	0.003	-0.185	0.002
	No	3.070	0.558				
3. Attitudes	Yes	4.352	0.515	2.928	0.004	-0.183	0.003
	No	4.144	0.594				
4. Intercultural communicative skills	Yes	3.725	0.511	4.549	<0.001	-0.278	<0.001
	No	3.403	0.595				
5. Intercultural cognitive skills	Yes	3.601	0.636	3.22	0.001	-0.194	0.001
	No	3.343	0.641				
6. Awareness	Yes	4.082	0.517	4.039	<0.001	-0.250	<0.001
	No	3.789	0.615				

In the study, "yes" (having ICEs or ICC courses) was coded as 1 and "no" as 2. According to the negative coefficient (r) calculated by correlation analysis, participants without ICEs tend to score lower. Following the Cohen's effect size guidelines (Cohen, 1988), a correlation coefficient (r) with the absolute value from 0.10 to 0.29 is identified as a small effect size, which signifies that ICEs do have a weak but also positive influence on ICC.

The finding that ICEs have a positive influence derived from statistics can be supported by interview data in which interviewees attached great importance to the paramount role of ICEs in ICC improvement and expressed their urgent need for ICE opportunities. Lucy responded as follows:

In my belief, it's practice in more activities and communication with more people from different cultures that function as the most effective methods for the enhancement of ICC. (Lucy, interview)

The beneficial effect that is brought about by engagement in ICEs on specific ICC dimensions is shown in interviewees' expressions. For instance, Anna stated that it was only after she encountered and communicated with the Japanese that she understood the concept of respecting different cultures and learning how to resolve

cultural disputes:

Respecting different cultures was like a slogan for me before, but after interacting with the Japanese, I realize culture conflicts are frequent and practical. ICEs rendered me understanding of respecting their cultures and keeping my cultural position at the same time. (Anna, interview)

Besides the enhancement of intercultural communicative skills, five interviewees all referred to their improvement in cognition after experiencing intercultural interactions:

But with more ICEs, I can't say I completely agree with target nation cultures, but I now can understand why they are like this, and my tolerance of and respect for them improve. (Mary, interview)

According to Trang and Phuong (2023), real-world tasks are fundamental. In the context of language learning, they refer to activities that simulate or replicate authentic situations and tasks that learners may encounter outside the classroom. These tasks provide learners with opportunities to apply their language skills in practical and meaningful ways. When it comes to ICC learning, ICEs are the real-world tasks and thus are indispensable and crucial.

V. Conclusion

This study investigates the current status of ICC among Chinese multilingual college students and their attitudes towards ICC and ICEs. Through a mixed-methods approach combining a quantitative questionnaire survey and qualitative interviews, several key findings emerge.

In terms of Chinese multilingual college students' ICC level, in intercultural attitudes and awareness, they demonstrate higher self-evaluated competence but exhibit relatively weaker confidence in knowledge of target nation, intercultural communicative skills and intercultural cognitive skills. This imbalance highlights a gap between cognition and actual performance. This study also finds that ICEs and ICC courses exhibit a weak but positive correlation with students' self-reported ICC, particularly in dimensions like "Attitudes" and "Knowledge of target nation". ICC courses are reported to be satisfactory according to quantitative statistics, though qualitative data reveal interviewees' dissatisfaction with the course content and form. Some recommendations for improvement approaches to the courses are proposed, like introducing comparison of different cultures and increasing interactivity in terms of the class form.

These findings are pedagogically valuable, as they demonstrate which areas of ICC development for Chinese multilingual students should be prioritized. According to interview data, fostering students' practical communicative skills should be prioritized. Additionally, integrating real-world tasks like scenario simulations and updating course contents with current events could bridge the theory-practice gap. Institutions should also expand ICE opportunities, such as exchange programs or partnerships with international students, in order to enhance multilingual learners' practical performance in IC.

Despite the implications for ICC cultivation, several limitations of the study should be acknowledged. The first one is the limited quantitative and qualitative sample size, potentially hindering the generalizability of the research findings. The second deficiency lies in the possible unreliability of data that arises from the reliance on self-report data. Both the evaluation of ICC and the interviews were completed by students. Without other information sources, reliance on self-assessment may inflate scores due to social desirability bias or self-perception bias. What is more, the interview data were coded by the researcher alone, which might hinder the objectivity and consistency of the results. Last but not least, it is the lack of diachronic data that blocks the chance to analyze students' ICC development over time.

Future research should aim to expand the sample size and even involve participants from diverse regions, so that findings generated will have higher validity and can then be generalized to direct multilingual students' ICC cultivation nationwide. Secondly, conducting longitudinal studies would benefit the examination of how ICC develops over time and provide insights into boosting ICC in the long run. By resolving the identified limitations and researching further, we can advance the field and provide valuable insights for both researchers and practitioners in the realm of ICC development.

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