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Constructing Intercultural Competence Scale for Chinese English Majors

Dong Yujuan*, Shanti C. Sandaran, Marsha Lavania Manivannan

Language Academy, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, College of Foreign Languages, Hengshui University

*Corresponding Author Email: dongyujuan@graduate.utm.my

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Abstract

With globalization accelerating, the cultivation of intercultural competence (IC) has become a key objective of foreign language education. Despite extensive research in this field, assessment instruments specifically designed for Chinese English majors remain limited. The current study investigates the factors influencing Chinese college English majors' intercultural competence and develops a context-sensitive assessment scale. Drawing on Wu's Intercultural Communication Competence Assessment Scale and Zhang and Wu's framework for intercultural competence teaching in China, 36 initial items were generated in accordance with the learning characteristics of English majors. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted with data from 95 students to identify the underlying factor structure. The revised scale was then administered to 193 English majors and examined through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). The final Intercultural Competence Scale for Chinese English Majors (ICSCEM) consists of 19 items across five factors, demonstrating satisfactory construct validity and overall reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.836$). The results indicate that attitudes exert the strongest influence on intercultural competence, followed by knowledge of Chinese and foreign cultures, whereas linguistic and communicative competence play comparatively weaker roles. These findings provide empirical support for intercultural competence development and offer a practical assessment tool for improving English major education in the Chinese higher education context.

Keywords: Intercultural Competence, English Majors, Scale Development, Exploratory Factor Analysis, Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Introduction

In the era of globalization, intensified cross-cultural exchanges have made intercultural communication a central feature of contemporary society. As the dominant language of international communication, English plays a critical role in facilitating global interaction, which places English majors in a unique position as linguistic and cultural mediators.

Consequently, their level of intercultural competence (IC) directly affects the quality and effectiveness of intercultural communication. IC has therefore become a core objective in foreign language education, requiring not only linguistic proficiency but also appropriate attitudes, cultural knowledge, and communicative skills in multicultural contexts (Tan, 2017).

Early studies on intercultural competence, mainly conducted in Western contexts, focused on conceptual clarification. Spitzberg and Changnon (2009) defined IC as the appropriate and effective management of interactions among individuals with different affective, cognitive, and behavioral orientations, while Fantini (2006) emphasized the ability to interact effectively and appropriately with people from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Building on these definitions, scholars proposed a range of theoretical models, including the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (Bennett, 1993; Hammer, 2011), Byram's (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence, and Deardorff's (2006, 2009) Process Model of Intercultural Competence. These models commonly conceptualize IC as a multidimensional construct integrating attitudes, knowledge, skills, and behaviors.

In response to the Chinese educational context, Zhang and Yao (2020) proposed the "4-3-2-1" theoretical framework and the Integrated Model for Chinese Students' Intercultural Competence Development (IMCSICD), emphasizing the integration of global and local cultural perspectives. Furthermore, Zhang and Wu (2022) developed a framework of reference for intercultural competence teaching in Chinese foreign language education, providing pedagogical guidance for IC cultivation. Despite these theoretical advancements, empirical research focusing specifically on English majors remains limited. In particular, there is a lack of validated assessment instruments tailored to this group, whose intercultural competence is closely linked to both professional development and broader international engagement.

Within this context, the present study aims to construct an intercultural competence scale specifically for Chinese English majors. Taking Hengshui University as the research context, this study seeks to identify the key factors influencing English majors' IC and examine the extent to which these factors contribute to IC development. Based on Wu's (2013) intercultural communicative competence assessment framework and Zhang and Wu's (2022) reference framework, the Intercultural Competence Scale for Chinese English Majors (ICSCEM) was developed. Using questionnaire data analyzed through exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses, this study addresses the following research questions: (1) What factors contribute to intercultural competence among Chinese college English majors? and (2) How do these factors influence the intercultural competence of Chinese college English majors? The findings aim to provide both empirical evidence and practical implications for IC assessment and instruction in higher education.

Literature Review

The construction of the Intercultural Competence Scale for Chinese English Majors (ICSCEM) requires a clear theoretical grounding in the conceptualization of intercultural competence (IC) and an informed understanding of existing assessment approaches. Accordingly, this section reviews major definitions and dimensions of IC proposed by Western and Asian scholars, followed by an examination of commonly used assessment methods and representative measurement instruments. Particular attention is given to Wu's (2013) Intercultural Communicative Competence Assessment Scale (ICCAS) and Zhang and Wu's

(2022) framework of reference for intercultural competence teaching in Chinese foreign language education, which jointly inform the design of the ICSCEM.

Definitions and Dimensions of Intercultural Competence

Intercultural competence is widely regarded as a multidimensional construct with broader connotations than intercultural communicative competence alone (Jiang, 2013). Despite over five decades of scholarly inquiry, no universally accepted definition has emerged, largely due to disciplinary differences and varied research purposes (Deardorff, 2006; Lustig & Koester, 2007; Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009). As Chao (2016) notes, definitions of IC often reflect the specific contexts and analytical priorities of researchers.

Among Western scholars, Byram (1997, 2020) conceptualizes intercultural competence as the ability to mediate between languages and cultures, emphasizing four core components: knowledge, attitudes, skills, and critical cultural awareness. Fantini (2009) similarly identifies knowledge, attitudes, skills, and awareness as essential elements applicable to both the target culture and one's own culture. Deardorff (2006, 2009) further advances this multidimensional view through the well-known pyramid model of intercultural competence, which integrates attitudes, knowledge and comprehension, skills, and internal and external outcomes within a developmental framework. Across these models, attitudes, knowledge, and skills consistently emerge as foundational dimensions of IC.

Asian scholars have enriched the conceptualization of intercultural competence by incorporating local educational traditions and value orientations. Wen (1999) distinguishes between communicative competence and intercultural communicative competence, arguing that the latter requires sensitivity, tolerance, and flexibility in dealing with cultural differences. Yang and Zhuang (2007) propose a model comprising global awareness, cultural adaptation, knowledge, and communicative practice, viewing communicative practice as the ultimate goal of IC development. Gao (2014), drawing on both Chinese and Western perspectives, presents a model integrating theory and practice, in which intercultural competence consists of interconnected knowledge and behavior systems. Dai (2019) further extends existing models by emphasizing moral considerations, arguing that ethical awareness becomes increasingly important as cultural differences widen. Despite their diverse emphases, these studies reach a consensus on the importance of attitudes, knowledge, and behavioral competence.

To address differing perspectives, Deardorff (2004) conducted a Delphi study involving American university administrators and leading scholars in intercultural communication. The resulting consensus definition describes intercultural competence as "the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in the practice of intercultural communication based on intercultural attitudes, knowledge, and skills" (p. 194). This definition has gained wide acceptance due to its clarity and integrative nature and is therefore adopted in the present study. Nevertheless, while agreement on a general definition has been achieved, consensus regarding specific components and their operationalization remains limited, reflecting the coexistence of multiple theoretical models. Consequently, the development of the ICSCEM in this study incorporates both theoretical insights and measurement considerations.

Most scholars agree that intercultural competence is not a single ability but a comprehensive construct composed of three interrelated dimensions: attitudes, knowledge, and behavior (Chen & Starosta, 1996; Deardorff, 2006; Wiseman, 2002; Dai & Chen, 2015). The attitude dimension serves as the psychological foundation of intercultural interaction, encompassing openness, motivation, adaptability, and respect for cultural differences. It influences individuals' willingness to engage in intercultural encounters and their capacity to overcome cultural barriers. The knowledge dimension refers to individuals' understanding of cultural norms, values, customs, and social practices at both macro and micro levels, enabling them to interpret and predict behavior across cultural contexts. The behavioral dimension represents the external manifestation of intercultural competence, including communicative skills, conflict resolution strategies, adaptability, and cultural sensitivity in real interactional settings. Together, these three dimensions form a coherent framework for intercultural competence assessment and provide a theoretical basis for scale development.

Assessments of Intercultural Competence

Given the multidimensional nature of intercultural competence, the use of systematic and scientific assessment tools is essential, particularly for English majors whose academic and professional development depends heavily on intercultural abilities. Reflecting diverse definitions of IC, existing assessment approaches vary considerably in focus and methodology. Sinicrope et al. (2007) categorize intercultural competence assessments into three main types: indirect assessments, direct assessments, and combined assessments. Among these, indirect assessments are the most commonly used, largely due to their efficiency and suitability for large-scale data collection.

Indirect assessments typically employ questionnaires and self-report scales to measure individuals' intercultural attitudes, knowledge, and behaviors. Representative instruments include the Sociocultural Adaptation Scale (SCAS; Searle & Ward, 1990), the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS; Chen & Starosta, 2000), the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI; Hammer et al., 2003), the Cultural Intelligence Scale (CQS; Ang et al., 2007), and the Intercultural Effectiveness Scale (IES; Portalla & Chen, 2010). These instruments are grounded in specific theoretical frameworks and provide quantifiable indicators of intercultural competence. In the Chinese context, Wu et al. (2013) developed the Intercultural Communicative Competence Assessment Scale (ICCAS) based on Byram's (1997) model and Fantini's (2000, 2006) YOGA framework, making it suitable for assessing Chinese college students' intercultural competence.

Direct assessments, by contrast, evaluate individuals' performance in actual or simulated intercultural situations through methods such as observation, interviews, and role-playing. Byram (1997) highlights the value of direct assessment in capturing nuanced behavioral and interactional features that may not be reflected in self-report data. However, such methods are often time-consuming, resource-intensive, and limited to small samples or specific contexts.

Combined assessment approaches seek to integrate the strengths of both indirect and direct methods. Portfolio assessment, for example, incorporates self-assessment, peer assessment, and observational data to provide a more comprehensive picture of intercultural competence development (Fantini, 2009). Although combined approaches enhance reliability and validity,

their complexity and cost pose practical challenges, particularly in large-scale educational settings.

Despite differences in methodology, scholars generally agree on three principles of intercultural competence assessment: intercultural competence is measurable; multiple assessment methods are preferable to a single approach; and assessment tools should align closely with the adopted definition of intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006). While existing instruments have matured, assessment tools specifically designed for English majors remain underdeveloped both in China and internationally. To address this gap, the present study draws on Wu's (2013) ICCAS and Zhang and Wu's (2022) framework of reference for intercultural competence teaching in Chinese foreign language education.

The ICCAS comprises six factors, including cultural knowledge of self, cultural knowledge of others, attitudes, intercultural communication skills, intercultural cognitive skills, and awareness, measured across 28 items. Zhang and Wu's (2022) framework, by contrast, outlines three dimensions (knowledge, attitudes, and skills) and nine components with developmental descriptors across educational stages. Integrating these two frameworks and informed by teaching practice at Hengshui University, the present study localized and refined the measurement items, initially generating 36 descriptors. Through pilot testing and factor analysis, the scale was subsequently revised to 19 items, forming the Intercultural Competence Scale for Chinese English Majors (ICSCEM). The research methodology and validation procedures are detailed in the following chapter.

Methodology

This study employs a quantitative approach to investigate the factors influencing Chinese college English majors' intercultural competence and to test the reliability and validity of the Intercultural Competence Scale for Chinese English Majors (ICSCEM). The methodology includes research design, sampling, data collection, instrumentation, and data analysis, as detailed below.

Research Design

A quantitative research design was adopted to systematically evaluate English majors' intercultural competence. The study used exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to identify the key factors influencing intercultural competence and the relationships between these factors and their observed variables. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was then employed to validate the factor structure and test the construct validity of the ICSCEM. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS 26.0 and AMOS 28. Figure 1 presents the research framework.

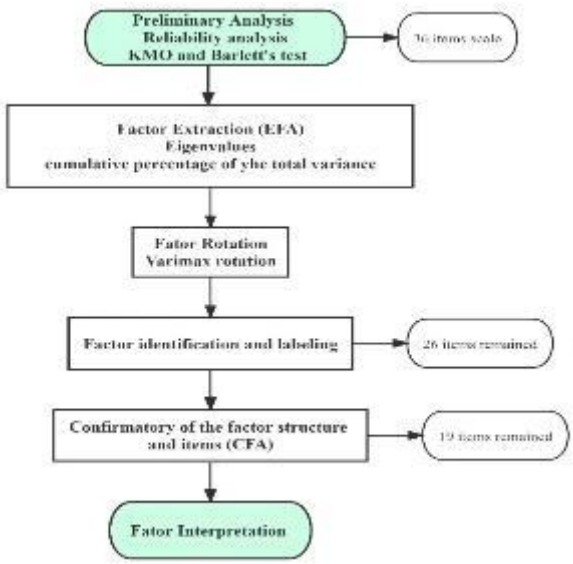

Figure 1: Research flowchart

Sampling

The study population comprised first- to third-year English major students at Hengshui University. Senior students were excluded due to heightened academic and employment pressures that could compromise data quality. A two-stage simple random sampling approach was employed. For the EFA stage, 95 students were randomly selected to ensure breadth and representativeness. This sample size meets established criteria for factor analysis and captures the developmental stages of English majors' studies (Thompson, 2012).

For the CFA stage, an additional 193 students were randomly selected to provide sufficient statistical power for model validation. This two-stage sampling approach allowed for the identification of latent factors in EFA and subsequent confirmation of their stability and reliability through CFA, ensuring a comprehensive analysis of the factors influencing intercultural competence.

Data Collection and Instrumentation

Data were collected via the ICSCEM questionnaire, administered in classroom settings under the supervision of the researcher. Of 95 distributed questionnaires, 91 valid responses were retained after removing incomplete or invalid entries. The instrument was developed by localizing Wu's (2013) ICCAS and integrating Zhang and Wu's (2022) reference framework for intercultural competence teaching in Chinese foreign language education, guided by Deardorff's (2006) Intercultural Competence Model.

The initial ICSCEM included 36 descriptive items covering three dimensions: attitudes, knowledge, and behavior. Items addressed foreign and Chinese cultural knowledge, intercultural awareness, empathy, adaptability, communication skills, and conflict resolution, among others. A five-point Likert scale was used, ranging from 1 ("Strongly Disagree") to 5 ("Strongly Agree"), allowing for quantification of students' intercultural competence levels.

After pilot testing, EFA and CFA were conducted to refine the scale. Items with low factor loadings, cross-loadings above 0.40, or insufficient representation were removed, resulting in

a final 19-item scale. This localized ICSCEM is tailored to Hengshui University's English majors, reflecting both theoretical models and practical teaching experience, ensuring relevance and applicability for assessing intercultural competence in the Chinese higher education context.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was performed using SPSS 26.0 and AMOS 28 to assess reliability, validity, and the factor structure of the ICSCEM. Internal consistency was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha, while the suitability of factor analysis was confirmed via the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity. High KMO values and significant Bartlett's test results indicated the appropriateness of factor analysis.

EFA was conducted using principal component analysis (PCA) with Varimax rotation to extract core factors. Following Costello and Osborne (2005), multiple decision rules were applied: factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 were retained; each factor required a minimum of three variables; items with cross-loadings above 0.40 were removed; and the cumulative variance explained was set at a minimum of 60%, consistent with standards for humanities research (Williams et al., 2010). These criteria ensured that the extracted factors were both statistically robust and interpretable.

Subsequently, CFA was conducted using AMOS 28 to test the fit between the observed data and the theoretical model. Goodness-of-fit indices were used to evaluate model adequacy, confirming the stability and reliability of the identified factors. The combination of EFA and CFA allowed for rigorous verification of the ICSCEM's structure, providing empirical support for its use in assessing Chinese English majors' intercultural competence.

Through this methodology, the study systematically identified the key dimensions of intercultural competence and validated the ICSCEM as a reliable and theoretically grounded instrument. The resulting scale enables a detailed exploration of the relationships between attitudes, knowledge, and behavior in intercultural competence, supporting both research and educational applications.

Findings and Discussion

This section examines the factors influencing Chinese college English majors' intercultural competence (IC) and evaluates the reliability and validity of the Intercultural Competence Scale for English Majors (ICSCEM). The study employed a three-step factor analysis: assessment of data suitability, factor extraction, and factor rotation and interpretation. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was further conducted using AMOS 28 to verify the model fit.

Assessment of the Suitability of the Data

Explanatory Factor Analysis (EFA) was conducted on 36 items adapted from Wu's ICCAS and Zhang and Wu's framework. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure was 0.828, exceeding the recommended 0.6, and Bartlett's test was significant (χ^2=2645.004, df=630, p<.001), confirming the dataset's suitability for factor analysis. Normality tests showed skewness <2 and kurtosis <7 for all items, indicating acceptable data distribution. Cronbach's alpha for the overall scale was 0.928, demonstrating high internal consistency and reliability (Brown, 2015).

Factor Extraction

Principal Component Analysis (PCA) with varimax rotation was applied to extract the minimum number of factors representing the data. Criteria included eigenvalues >1, minimum three items per factor, cross-loadings <0.40, and cumulative variance ≥60%. Items failing these criteria were removed through iterative EFA analyses, resulting in a stable factor structure with five factors.

Factor Rotation and Interpretation

Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) with Varimax rotation was conducted to identify the core dimensions of intercultural competence among English majors. The analysis converged after six iterations, yielding five factors that together accounted for 72.56% of the total variance.

Table 1

Total Variance Explained

Total Variance Explained

	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings		
Component	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	10.339	39.766	39.766	10.339	39.766	39.766	7.359	28.304	28.304
2	4.192	16.124	55.891	4.192	16.124	55.891	3.650	14.039	42.343
3	1.775	6.827	62.718	1.775	6.827	62.718	3.547	13.641	55.984
4	1.406	5.408	68.126	1.406	5.408	68.126	2.573	9.896	65.879
5	1.154	4.439	72.564	1.154	4.439	72.564	1.738	6.685	72.564

The first factor, Attitudes, comprising 11 items and explaining 39.77% of the variance, reflects openness, respect, empathy, adaptability, and a positive orientation toward cultural diversity. High mean scores, particularly on items concerning respect for foreigners' language, dress, and behavior (M = 4.52), suggest that English majors generally demonstrate favorable intercultural dispositions. This finding aligns with prior studies emphasizing the centrality of attitudes in intercultural competence (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2004; Wu, 2013), indicating that affective factors constitute a foundational component of students' intercultural capability.

The second and third factors, Foreign Cultural Knowledge (4 items, 16.12% variance) and Chinese Cultural Knowledge (3 items, 6.83% variance), together accounted for 22.95% of the variance and represent the cognitive dimension of intercultural competence. While students exhibited solid understanding of domestic culture (M = 3.63–3.75), their knowledge of foreign societies, including history, social customs, etiquette, religious culture, and taboos, was moderate (M = 2.97–3.19). This suggests that although students are well-grounded in their own cultural heritage, further pedagogical efforts are needed to deepen their awareness of foreign cultural norms, consistent with the findings of Wang (2021) and Li (2011). The differential performance across these two factors underscores the importance of a balanced cultural curriculum that integrates both domestic and international perspectives.

Linguistic Competence (4 items, 5.41% variance) and Communicative Competence (4 items, 4.44% variance) reflect the skill-based dimension, assessing English proficiency, cultural analysis, and verbal and non-verbal communication abilities. Scores ranging from 3.40 to 3.69 indicate that students possess above-average language and communication skills, which are

essential for intercultural interactions (Byram, 2020; Zhang & Wu, 2022). However, slightly lower scores in conflict resolution and explanation of misunderstandings suggest room for improvement in applying these skills effectively in intercultural scenarios.

Reliability analysis indicated high internal consistency for all five factors, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.869 to 0.948, confirming the robustness of the measurement instrument.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)

To validate the factor structure identified by EFA, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed using AMOS 28 on a sample of 193 English majors. The modified ICSCEM, comprising 19 items after item reduction based on modification indices, demonstrated good fit: CMIN/DF = 1.415, CFI = 0.969, NFI = 0.903, TLI = 0.963, RMR = 0.031, and RMSEA = 0.047. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure was 0.806, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant (χ^2 = 1989.606, $p < .001$). Collectively, the five factors explained 72.09% of the variance, confirming the multidimensionality of English majors' intercultural competence.

Consistent with EFA results, Attitudes emerged as the most influential factor, accounting for 26.60% of the variance, followed by Foreign and Chinese Cultural Knowledge (29.64%) and Linguistic and Communicative Competence (15.85%). These findings corroborate prior research highlighting the primacy of affective and cognitive components in intercultural competence development (Fantini, 2006; Yu, 2016) and support the theoretical validity of the ICSCEM in assessing English majors.

Summary of Findings

The integrated EFA and CFA analyses identified five key dimensions shaping English majors' intercultural competence: Attitudes, Foreign Cultural Knowledge, Chinese Cultural Knowledge, Linguistic Competence, and Communicative Competence. Attitudes, encompassing openness, respect, empathy, and adaptability, play a central role in facilitating effective intercultural interactions. The differential performance in cultural knowledge, with stronger competence in domestic culture and more moderate competence in foreign culture, suggests that students' intercultural awareness is shaped by both educational exposure and personal experience. Linguistic and communicative skills provide the practical means for cross-cultural negotiation and conflict resolution, yet development in these areas remains uneven.

Overall, these results indicate that English majors generally demonstrate positive attitudes and moderate proficiency in knowledge and skills, highlighting the need for a balanced pedagogical approach that integrates affective, cognitive, and skill-based training. Specifically, educators should focus on cultivating openness and empathy, deepening foreign cultural knowledge, and providing practical opportunities to apply language and communication skills in intercultural contexts. The findings not only enhance theoretical understanding of the multidimensional nature of intercultural competence but also offer actionable guidance for curriculum design and student self-assessment.

Implications and Conclusions

This study identifies five key factors influencing English majors' intercultural competence: attitude, foreign cultural knowledge, Chinese cultural knowledge, linguistic competence, and communicative competence. Attitude is the most influential, followed by Chinese and foreign cultural knowledge, while linguistic and communicative skills are relatively weaker.

The findings offer practical guidance for teaching. Educators should prioritize cultivating positive intercultural attitudes through case studies, discussions, and engagement with intercultural literature, while balancing instruction in Chinese and foreign cultures to develop comprehensive cultural cognition. Enhancing linguistic and communicative skills via practical scenarios, language exchanges, and international cultural activities further strengthens students' cross-cultural effectiveness.

For students, self-assessment using the Intercultural Competence Scale for Chinese English Majors (ICSCEM) helps identify strengths and weaknesses, enabling targeted improvement. Active learning of both domestic and foreign cultures, participation in intercultural activities, and use of modern technology for cross-cultural interaction support adaptability and competence development. The ICSCEM, developed from Wu's ICCAS and Zhang and Wu's framework, demonstrates high reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.836$) and construct validity, offering a robust tool for research and teaching. Future studies should expand samples, examine factor weights, and explore cultural differences to refine the scale and enhance guidance for cultivating intercultural competence. In sum, this study provides practical teaching strategies, a validated assessment tool, and new empirical insights, advancing understanding of English majors' intercultural competence.

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