

Intercultural Contact and Communicative Competence Among EFL Learners: A Case Study in Guangzhou

Shuang Wang

School of Foreign Languages, Guangzhou City University of Technology, Guangzhou 510800, Guangdong, China

Abstract: *This study investigates the relationship between intercultural contact and intercultural communicative competence (ICC) among Chinese EFL learners at a university in Guangzhou. It adopts an integrated framework combining communicative and intercultural competence, analyzing how direct and indirect intercultural contact influences ICC development. Using questionnaires to assess intercultural contact and ICC, data from 185 students reveal that overall ICC is below the intermediate level, with linguistic competence being the weakest dimension. Intercultural contact is similarly limited, with indirect pathways such as multimedia dominating. The study confirms a strong positive correlation between intercultural contact and ICC, highlighting the reciprocal reinforcement between these factors. These findings provide practical insights for designing educational strategies to enhance ICC through increased and diverse intercultural engagement opportunities.*

Keywords: Intercultural communicative competence, Intercultural contact, Correlation, EFL learners.

1. Introduction

In an increasingly globalized world, Chinese college students have more opportunities to engage in international communication and intercultural contact, which play a vital role in developing their intercultural communicative competence (ICC). ICC refers to effective and appropriate communication in cross-cultural contexts and involves cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components. Despite its importance, research on the relationship between intercultural contact and ICC among Chinese students remains limited.

Early studies on intercultural contact primarily focused on controlled or idealized settings, emphasizing voluntary, frequent, and equal-status interactions [1]. While valuable, these studies do not fully reflect the diversity and complexity of real-world intercultural interactions. Recent research has examined the role of intercultural contact in shaping attitudes and behaviors, particularly in study-abroad contexts, or its impact on language learning motivation [2]. However, few studies explore the broader relationship between intercultural contact and ICC, particularly in Chinese higher education.

Scholars have highlighted that intercultural contact encompasses both direct and indirect interactions, including communication with native speakers and exposure to cultural products like media. These studies suggest that intercultural contact significantly influences the development of ICC. However, gaps remain in understanding how intercultural contact affects Chinese college students' ICC.

This study aims to explore the relationship between intercultural contact and ICC among Chinese college students. The findings will provide theoretical insights into ICC development and practical guidance for educators in designing effective strategies to enhance students' intercultural experiences. By addressing these gaps, this research contributes to the growing field of intercultural communication in higher education.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Intercultural Communicative Competence

Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) has been a prominent research focus in foreign language education, yet its definition and theoretical framework remain diverse and multifaceted. Byram's model, widely regarded as foundational, defines ICC as the ability to interact effectively and appropriately across cultural boundaries [3]. His model identifies four key components: skills, knowledge, attitudes, and critical cultural awareness, emphasizing the integration of linguistic, sociolinguistic, and discourse competence with intercultural understanding.

Western scholars have expanded upon these ideas. Ruben highlighted behavioral aspects of ICC through his seven-dimension model, which includes empathy, respect, and tolerance for ambiguity, later evolving into the Behavior-skill Approach Model. Similarly, Spitzberg and Cupach defined ICC as a combination of motivation, knowledge, and skills, with Spitzberg later emphasizing the role of context in effective communication. Chen categorized ICC into three dimensions-affective, cognitive, and behavioral-highlighting cultural sensitivity, awareness, and adaptability as core elements.

In China, ICC research has evolved to align with local educational needs. Wen Qiufang defined ICC as a combination of communicative and intercultural competence. Communicative competence includes language proficiency, pragmatic skills, and strategic abilities, while intercultural competence emphasizes sensitivity, tolerance, and flexibility. Zhang Hongling further divided ICC into attitudes, knowledge, and behaviors, emphasizing the application of cultural knowledge in real-life contexts.

The combination of Western theories and local perspectives has significantly advanced ICC research in China. Zhong Hua et al. integrated Byram's and Wen's models, defining ICC as

a fusion of communicative and intercultural competence, emphasizing behavioral, cognitive, and emotional dimensions [4]. This study adopts this integrated framework, which conceptualizes intercultural communication competence as comprising two key components: communicative competence and intercultural competence. Communicative competence includes linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence, while intercultural competence encompasses knowledge, skills, attitudes, and awareness.

2.2 Intercultural Contact

Intercultural contact, rooted in intergroup contact theory, fosters mutual understanding and reduces biases between diverse groups. Williams introduced key elements like cooperation and equality, while Allport refined these into the Intergroup Contact Hypothesis, emphasizing equal status, shared goals, cooperation, and institutional support. Pettigrew and Tropp later showed that positive outcomes can occur even without all these conditions.

In language learning, Clément extended the theory, showing that frequent, meaningful contact boosts confidence, motivation, and cultural adaptation. Kormos and Csizér expanded the definition to include direct interactions (e.g., face-to-face communication) and indirect exposure (e.g., media), noting that both pathways enhance intercultural competence, with direct contact fostering confidence and indirect contact building awareness.

In China, Peng and Wu adapted this framework for Chinese students, categorizing contact into direct and indirect dimensions across six factors, including social media, cultural products, and courses [5]. Due to limited opportunities for direct interactions, Chinese students rely heavily on indirect contact, which still positively influences intercultural competence.

This study adopts Peng and Wu's model to explore how Chinese college students' direct and indirect intercultural contact contributes to developing intercultural communicative competence in foreign language education.

2.3 The Relationship between Intercultural Contact and Intercultural Communicative Competence

Intercultural contact is a key factor in developing intercultural communicative competence (ICC), with both direct and indirect contact positively influencing ICC development [6]. Direct contact, such as interactions with native speakers, exchange programs, and immersive experiences, enhances intercultural attitudes and skills. Digital platforms like blogs and video conferencing also foster ICC by enabling collaborative and meaningful cultural exchanges.

Indirect contact, including exposure to films, books, and music, deepens cultural understanding and language proficiency. Studies in China reveal that foreign TV programs and English movies increase students' cultural awareness and interest in foreign lifestyles. High-quality interactions characterized by openness and respect are particularly effective in reducing anxiety and promoting positive attitudes.

When direct contact is limited, indirect pathways like online forums and multimedia platforms provide accessible and practical alternatives to enhance ICC. This study examines the relationship between direct and indirect intercultural contact and ICC among Chinese college students, focusing on their roles in foreign language education. Thus, this study addresses the following three research questions:

- (1) What is the status quo of participants' intercultural communicative competence?
- (2) What is the status quo of participants' intercultural contact?
- (3) How does participants' intercultural contact correlate with intercultural communicative competence?

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

In this study, 200 students from Guangzhou City University of Technology were randomly selected as participants. After excluding 15 incomplete questionnaires, 185 valid responses were obtained, achieving a validity rate of 92.5%. The participants included students of different genders, academic majors, and grade levels, ensuring a diverse and representative sample for the analysis.

3.2 Measurements

3.2.1 The Intercultural Communication Competence Self-Assessment Scale (ICCSAS)

The Intercultural Communication Competence Self-Assessment Scale evaluates college students' ICC using a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). Based on Zhong Hua et al.'s framework, the scale was refined through multiple revisions with feedback from 50 pilot participants to ensure reliability and validity [1].

The final questionnaire includes 46 items across eight ICC dimensions: linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, strategic competence, skills, knowledge, attitudes, and cultural awareness. It provides a comprehensive assessment of students' ICC levels.

3.2.2 The Intercultural Contact Scale for Chinese College Students (ICSCCS)

The Intercultural Contact Scale of Chinese College Students evaluates the extent and frequency of intercultural contact in English learning using a five-point Likert scale ("seldom or never" to "very often"). It assesses two dimensions: direct and indirect contact.

Originally developed by Peng and Wu, the 31-item scale was refined to 29 items by removing obsolete entries to maintain structural reliability. The revised scale offers a valid and comprehensive tool to measure students' diverse intercultural engagement.

3.2.3 Research procedure

The questionnaires on intercultural contact and ICC were administered during class or breaks, requiring 20-25 minutes

to complete. Participation was voluntary, with confidentiality and ethical compliance assured.

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS 21.0. Descriptive statistics identified patterns in ICC and intercultural contact, while Pearson Product-Moment Correlation assessed the strength and significance of their relationship.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 General Situation of College Students' Intercultural Communicative Competence

Using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (totally agree), a scoring method with a median value of 3 was applied. If the mean value exceeds 3, it suggests good performance; otherwise, it reflects areas needing improvement. Descriptive statistics in Table 1 summarize the overall situation of college students' intercultural communication competence (ICC), including minimum, maximum, mean, and standard deviation values.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of the College Students' Intercultural Communication Competence

Category	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
ICC	1.0	5.0	2.9231	0.5123
Communicative competence	1.0	5.0	2.7425	0.5743
Linguistic competence	1.0	5.0	2.2312	0.6432
Sociolinguistic competence	1.0	5.0	2.9654	0.9213
Discourse competence	1.0	5.0	2.7512	0.8425
Strategic competence	1.0	5.0	3.2175	0.8134
Intercultural competence	1.0	5.0	3.0673	0.4876
Knowledge	1.0	5.0	2.5143	0.6251
Attitudes	1.0	5.0	3.6234	0.7295
Awareness	1.0	5.0	3.6512	0.9056
Skills	1.0	5.0	3.1654	0.7345

The data show that the mean ICC score is 2.9231, slightly below the median of 3, indicating a relatively low overall ICC level among college students. Communicative competence scores 2.7425, below the intermediate level, while intercultural competence slightly exceeds it at 3.0673, reflecting better performance in intercultural aspects than communicative ones.

Awareness (3.6512) and attitudes (3.6234) are the strongest dimensions, highlighting good intercultural sensitivity and openness. Strategic competence (3.2175) and skills (3.1654) also perform moderately well, showing students' ability to manage communication challenges effectively.

However, linguistic competence (2.2312) and knowledge (2.5143) are the weakest areas, indicating significant deficiencies in language mastery, particularly in listening and speaking. Interviews reveal that 88% of students are dissatisfied with their current ICC levels.

Higher standard deviations in sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, strategic competence, and awareness indicate notable individual differences. Overall, students' ICC is at a lower-middle level, with strengths in intercultural attitudes and awareness but clear weaknesses in linguistic and cultural knowledge.

4.2 General Situation of College Students' Intercultural Contact

The Intercultural Contact Scale for Chinese College Students

(ICSCCS) used in this study was adapted from Peng Renzhong and Wu Weiping's original scale. It measures two types of contact (direct and indirect), six dimensions (domestic social media, foreign social media, domestic intercultural communication activities, foreign intercultural communication activities, cultural products, and multimedia and courses), and includes 29 items.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of the College Students' Intercultural Contact

Category	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Intercultural contact	1.0	5.0	1.9235	0.4832
Direct contact	1.0	5.0	1.5274	0.4512
DSM (Domestic social media)	1.0	5.0	1.4235	0.6025
FSM (Foreign social media)	1.0	5.0	1.3124	0.5786
DICA (Domestic intercultural communication activities)	1.0	5.0	1.8453	0.6324
FICA (Foreign intercultural communication activities)	1.0	5.0	1.3657	0.6145
Indirect contact	1.0	5.0	2.8673	0.9123
CP (Cultural products)	1.0	5.0	2.7152	0.8721
MMC (Multimedia and courses)	1.0	5.0	3.5124	1.0345

Table 2 shows that the mean value of students' overall intercultural contact is 1.9235, well below the intermediate level of 3, indicating limited intercultural engagement. Direct contact scores 1.5274, reflecting a severe lack, while indirect contact is higher at 2.8673 but still inadequate.

Among the six dimensions, only multimedia and courses score above 3 (3.5124), making it the most accessible pathway. The other dimensions, including social media, intercultural activities, and cultural products, all score below 3.

In summary, college students' intercultural contact is generally low, with indirect contact serving as the primary pathway for engagement.

4.3 The Correlation between College Students' Intercultural Contact and Intercultural Communication Competence

To explore the third research question, "How does participants' intercultural contact correlate with intercultural communicative competence?", a Pearson correlation analysis was conducted using data from the ICCSAS and ICSCCS. This analysis not only assessed the overall correlation between intercultural contact and ICC but also examined the relationships between specific ICC dimensions and different types of intercultural contact. The correlations were categorized into five levels for interpretation: extremely strong (0.8-1.0), strong (0.6-0.8), moderate (0.4-0.6), weak (0.2-0.4), and extremely weak or no correlation (0.0-0.2).

Table 3: Correlation between the College Students' Intercultural Contact and Intercultural Communication Competence

	Direct contact	Indirect contact	Intercultural contact	Sig. (2-tailed)
Communicative competence	0.645	0.698	0.865	0.000
Intercultural competence	0.521	0.612	0.712	0.000
ICC	0.745	0.789	0.865	0.000

Table 3 shows a strong positive correlation ($r=0.865$, $p \leq 0.01$) between intercultural contact and ICC, indicating that students with more intercultural contact tend to have higher ICC levels.

Direct contact strongly correlates with communicative competence ($r=0.645$) and moderately with intercultural competence ($r=0.521$). Indirect contact shows even stronger correlations, with communicative competence ($r=0.698$) and intercultural competence ($r=0.612$).

Overall, both direct and indirect contact significantly enhance ICC, with indirect contact having slightly more impact. These

findings highlight the importance of promoting diverse intercultural engagement opportunities to improve students' ICC.

5. Conclusion

This study analyzes college students' intercultural communication competence (ICC), their intercultural contact, and the relationship between the two. The findings show that students' ICC is generally below intermediate, with strong performance in awareness and attitudes but weaknesses in communicative skills, particularly linguistic competence.

Intercultural contact is limited, with indirect contact through multimedia and courses being most common. Direct contact, especially via foreign social media, is minimal, highlighting a need for more opportunities for direct interactions.

A strong positive correlation exists between intercultural contact and ICC, with discourse competence showing the strongest link. Both direct and indirect contact enhance ICC, while higher ICC motivates students to engage more in intercultural contact.

These findings emphasize the need to improve language skills and provide diverse intercultural engagement opportunities to strengthen students' ICC.

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Author Profile

Shuang Wang was born in Henan, China. She received the B.A. degree in English from Taiyuan Normal University, Taiyuan, China, in 2011, and the M.A. degree in Foreign Linguistics and Applied Linguistics from South China University of Technology, Guangzhou, China, in 2014. She is currently a teacher with the School of Foreign Languages, Guangzhou City University of Technology, China.