

# 13 Exploring a pedagogy for understanding and developing Chinese EFL students' intercultural communicative competence

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## Introduction

This chapter explores how Byram's (1997) intercultural communicative competence (ICC) framework can inform the development of an intercultural communication course delivered within English language education in a Chinese university. The theoretical concept of ICC represents a comprehensive set of criteria that provides a useful basis for designing intercultural language learning curricula and associated learning objectives in a systematic way. At the same time, the incorporation of such a theoretical concept into the language curriculum within the Chinese EFL context also presents a challenge to teachers, particularly given the exam-oriented education system and the traditional focus on grammatical knowledge and skills.

In this chapter, we report on an exploratory action research study which aimed to investigate how the integration of intercultural dimensions into an English as Foreign Language (EFL) syllabus can provide Chinese university students with opportunities to develop their ICC. This involved the first author, Qin, in the development and implementation of a 6-week sequence of intercultural teaching for undergraduate English language students across multiple majors in a Chinese university. The study reveals the emergence of complementary themes to the five *savoirs* in Byram's (1997) ICC framework, and recommends further development and implementation of contextualised intercultural pedagogies that integrate culturally appropriate teaching materials, and creative student-centred learning strategies.

In the next sections, we first provide an overview of ICC in English language teaching in the Chinese context, and then present the details of the study and the Intercultural English Course (IEC).

An intercultural approach in the Chinese EFL context

In the field of foreign language education in China, an intercultural language teaching approach is seen, in a general sense, as an expanded and more fully developed language pedagogy that increases opportunities for language students to develop their intercultural communicative competence (Gu, 2017; Wang, Deardorff & Kulich, 2017; Xu & Sun, 2013). The value of an intercultural approach centres on a shift from a view of language learning as merely acquiring linguistic skills accompanied by some factual knowledge about countries where the language is spoken, to the development of more comprehensive abilities for engaging with difference and cultivating relationships across cultural boundaries (Byram, 1997). In China, this idea of relating to otherness is understood both through the notion of ‘intercultural communicative competence’ (跨文化交际能力) (Sun et al., 2021) and also through the notion of ‘interculturality’—where people meet each other in different cultural spaces or contexts, learn about shared and unshared experiences, and negotiate different perspectives (e.g. Dai & Chen, 2015). From a pedagogical perspective, adopting an intercultural approach entails designing learning experiences in a way that students have opportunities to reflect on cultural differences and consider the consequences of these differences for themselves and others (Lu & Corbett, 2012).

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in China, especially in higher education, have shown an increasing interest in introducing intercultural dimensions in their classes (Yang & Li, 2017; Zheng & Li, 2016). Their attempts are often impelled by their own desire to innovate and improve their teaching practices, and more specifically, by the guidelines related to improving College English students’ ICC proposed in the *College English Teaching Guidelines* (2020) and *Teaching Guidelines for College English Language Majors* (2020).

The teaching objectives, curriculum, and standards for foreign language and intercultural education in the Chinese context are affected by China’s diverse social and cultural environment, and the political economy (Jin et al., 2017), and yet, are expected to conform to China’s national circumstances, as exemplified in Jia et al.’s (2019) textbook designed to develop the ICC of English language students in Chinese higher education. Throughout the English teaching guidelines, articulated in the *English Teaching Syllabus for College English Majors* (2000), learning the ‘target culture’ is clearly mentioned for courses aimed at English-major students, and those who must study English as a compulsory course in their first 2 years at university (called ‘College English’). Furthermore, ‘intercultural communication ability’ is also a teaching objective of students majoring in English in social and cultural courses. However, the concept of ‘culture’ has not been clearly defined, and was mostly replaced by ‘cultural knowledge’ (Qian & Garner, 2019). The recent *College English Teaching Guidelines* (2020) has seen a modification of the teaching objectives, emphasising ‘enhancing intercultural communication awareness and communication skills’ and ‘improving comprehensive cultural literacy’ (which means developing English learners’ ICC) (Wang, 2016, p.5). Meanwhile, the *National Standards for the Quality of Foreign Language and Literature Education* (2018) also incorporated the training goal of improving students’ ICC into the guidance for planning undergraduate courses for foreign language majors.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the increasing impetus for taking an intercultural approach, there are barriers to implementation within English language classrooms in higher education in China. First, like higher education generally, English language education is examination-oriented. Thus, teachers generally attach greater

importance to teaching knowledge about language itself than to the cultural aspects. Furthermore, teachers are not necessarily familiar with theoretical conceptions of ICC, and may view cultural content in terms of traditions and customs, history, geography or political conditions (Han, 2011; Zhang, 2009; Yan, 2014). This situation can be traced to the relative lack of relevant empirical studies on intercultural language teaching in the Chinese context, and the limited opportunities for systematic pedagogical training in ICC for EFL teachers (Han, 2014; Zhang, 2012). Despite their enthusiasm, teachers are often uncertain about which teaching approaches they should apply to develop their students' ICC (Sun et al., 2021).

In order to establish an intercultural approach that can be smoothly implemented into Chinese EFL classrooms and a College English language syllabus, Qin devised and carried out an action research study to explore students' intercultural learning from the viewpoint of ICC. As explained in the next section, both the design of the syllabus and the analysis of students' learning were largely informed by Byram's (1997) model of ICC.

Next, we present the action research project designed to address the research question, followed by the findings that emerged from its implementation.

## Integrating intercultural dimensions into English language learning: The study

The study, guided by the standpoint of Qin's own observation and teaching experience, was informed by action research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; McNiff et al., 2003) which starts with a problem or concern, then leads to planning, action, evaluation, and critical reflection. The planning consisted of the development of a specifically designed course, namely, the Intercultural English Course (IEC), followed by its implementation and evaluation. Qin, as teacher-researcher, taught the course to her students, tracked their ICC development, and gathered feedback from them on their experiences of the course. She also recorded her own reflections of the course—the students' experiences of and reactions to the content—in her researcher journal. From this analysis, implications for course revision and the development of learners' ICC in similar foreign language educational contexts emerged.

Unlike other undergraduate English courses at the university concerned, the IEC integrated linguistic and intercultural communication skills, and intercultural elements into its curriculum. In developing the curriculum for the IEC, Qin was guided conceptually by Byram's (1997) ICC framework since it was considered the most suitable in her teaching-researching context, influential in the Ministry of Education documents, and well-represented in foreign language education internationally. It also provides a guide to foreign language teachers to design their syllabus and plan their teaching.

### The five *savoirs*

The ICC framework consists of five separate but interdependent components or *savoirs*: knowledge, attitudes, skills of interpreting and relating, and skills of discovery and interaction, accompanied by critical

cultural awareness. The objectives Byram (1997) set for the five *savoirs* serve as guiding criteria to develop and evaluate learners' intercultural competence particularly in the foreign language education context. Accordingly, Corbett (2003, p. 31) argues that the five *savoirs* are a 'fully worked-out specification of intercultural competence, which involves the kinds of knowledge and skills needed to mediate between cultures'. The framework's emphasis on becoming an 'intercultural speaker' (Byram, 1997, p.32) makes it different from models that are solely based on communicative competence.

Among the five *savoirs*, Byram (1997) distinguishes *savoir s'engager*—'critical cultural awareness' (CCA) or 'political education'—as central. This dimension intentionally emphasizes the 'social' and 'political' domains in language awareness (James and Garrett, 1992), particularly important for critically analyzing and evaluating cultural viewpoints. *Savoir s'engager* is regarded as the core of ICC and the developed outcome of the other four *savoirs*. In addition to relating, interpreting and analyzing cultural differences, intercultural speakers should also be competent to generate their own critical opinions based on logical criteria from their own and other cultures. According to Byram (1997, p.103), CCA not only enhances the transferability of skills and attitudes but also functions as 'a basis for study of other cultures and languages or for coping with interaction in other culture and linguistic environments'. CCA also incorporates the idea of 'taking action' (Byram, 2008) and responsibility and ethical and moral action/communication as in the citizenship literature, and in more recent critiques of the terms 'competence' and 'intercultural competence' (e.g., Guilherme, 2002; Ferri, 2018).

## Key considerations in integrating Byram's ICC into EFL in the Chinese context

Any attempt to incorporate a model of ICC into classroom pedagogy in a new context needs to consider the model's theoretical 'fit' for that context and take into account any relevant critiques or limitations. In this vein, it was important to consider issues that have been raised in relation to Byram's ICC model.

First, Coperías-Aguilar (2002) suggests that teachers may face challenges in how to apply the ICC model to actual teaching, because some aspects of ICC cannot be taught in the classroom. For example, in developing the IEC, Qin found that some dimensions of the *savoirs* are abstract and may not be achievable in the timeframe of the IEC. So, in being purposeful in her syllabus design, she decided to incorporate the *savoirs* into the construction of the learning objectives, clarifying and simplifying them for students to understand (see the following section).

Another consideration is that the concept of culture embedded in Byram's ICC model has been suggested as based on 'essentialist' and 'nationalist' views (Belz, 2007). However, if sufficient attention is paid to the fundamental purpose of the 1997 book, this doubt can be removed (see Byram, 2021; Introduction, this volume). In Qin's view, both teachers and curriculum designers in the Chinese context could benefit from a concise framework and a systematic pedagogy and method of evaluation with illustrations.

In approaching pedagogical design, a further issue to consider is local contextualization. As Byram (1997) has emphasized, successful teaching and assessing of ICC requires sufficient contextualization, which means considering local factors such as the 'learners' origins, as well as the languages, cultures they are learning' (p.4). In this view, when applying Byram's ICC approach to the Chinese tertiary EFL context, context-sensitive points should be noted and reviewed purposefully and extensively before and after the study. It is impossible to define a general syllabus to teach ICC by listing only the guidelines to design a specific syllabus (Byram, 1997). Rather, evaluation and teaching should be closely interrelated, and supported by detailed objectives. For Chinese teachers, unfamiliar with how to incorporate ICC objectives into the EFL classroom, the model, with its specific ICC objectives, offers a starting point. Given the focus in this study on developing Chinese students' ICC through language education in the Chinese context, Byram's model was considered useful as a comprehensive framework to design the IEC syllabus, inform the research question and teaching practice, and scaffold the data analysis. Next, the IEC course is introduced.

### The Intercultural English Course (IEC): Approach and learning objectives

The teaching sessions in the IEC endeavoured to present learners with current socio-cultural issues in some English-speaking cultures such as the United Kingdom by using authentic examples and case studies. The purpose of this approach was to arouse learners' interest in conducting critical analysis of the examples and eventually provide learners with transferable intercultural attitudes and skills when encountering otherness. The course involved various types of assignments, including: implementing analysis of texts after reading, reflecting on videos, and discussion of intercultural topics.

Learners who attended the IEC had studied English for at least eight years, having matriculated in English from secondary school, and were considered upper-intermediate or advanced language speakers (at university level). The primary teaching objectives sought to engage learners in ICC development. In constructing the course objectives, Qin simplified Byram's *savoirs* to facilitate learners' understandings and accommodate the purposes of the IEC. The course objectives were as follows:

- a) to gain knowledge of English-speaking cultures via reading authentic texts addressing different English-speaking cultures, and discuss issues in different disciplines
  - b) to find information about English-speaking cultures, compare or/and contrast them with similar aspects in Chinese culture, and explain the perspective and/or sources of misunderstanding
  - c) to gain curiosity and openness, via reflecting on their attitudes towards members of English-speaking countries
  - d) to acquire new knowledge of an English-speaking culture and cultural practices in various ways available
  - e) to achieve 'critical cultural awareness', an ability to evaluate critically, and on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries
- (based on Byram, 1997, p.63)

Next, the course materials and instruction methods directed toward developing students' ICC are outlined.

## Intercultural English course content

When choosing language teaching materials, most Chinese EFL teachers place a high priority on matching the language level of the students and there is normally little concern about the socio-cultural facets of the materials or the students' intercultural level. Byram et al. (2002, p.7) claimed that an intercultural speaker will succeed not only in 'communicating information but also in developing a human relationship with people of other languages and cultures'. Socio-cultural knowledge can also be drawn from many resources such as surveys, television programs, films (Durant, 1997).

Qin therefore considered materials that enabled students to find socio-cultural perspectives embedded both in the text and in their own socio-cultural context. She wanted to include topics that addressed elements of Byram's (1997) model, i.e., topics that would encourage students to consider their own socio-cultural knowledge and intercultural attitudes. Therefore, readings, pictures, and video clips were used as the teaching materials and the topics were chosen mainly based on students' preferences, elicited through discussion with the students of their feedback given in the pre-course questionnaires.

## Instruction methods in accordance with the ICC model

The IEC included varying instructional techniques to arouse learners' interest, such as task-based group work, individual presentations, and group discussion.

The six teaching sessions engaged students with socio-cultural issues (e.g., dining habits, greeting customs, and education systems) in some English-speaking cultures, using authentic examples and case studies. The course involved various types of assignments, for example, reading and analysing texts, reflecting on video clips, and discussion of intercultural topics. For example, the readings for the first teaching session (five sojourner students' diary entries) revolved around 'culture shock'. Students discussed evidence of difficulties, or 'cultural bumps' in groups, then reported their interpretations to the whole class, which the teacher then responded to. The purpose of this approach was closely interrelated with ICC *savoirs* and aimed to arouse students' interest in conducting critical analysis of some socio-cultural issues in intercultural communication, and eventually provide students with transferable intercultural attitudes and skills when encountering otherness, whether in China or beyond.

## Data collection and analysis

The data collection instruments (see Table 13.1) used in this study contained students' pre-course and post-course questionnaires, students'

learning process worksheets, and the teacher's reflective journal based on her teaching reflection. These were used to look for indicators of intercultural development, and to shape and evaluate the IEC.

**Table 13.1** Data collection stages

Stages	Data collection activities	Materials
1 Preparation	Syllabus design Ethical matters Induction session for the study Students' pre-questionnaire	Lesson plans Consent forms Fine-tuning topics for lessons
2 Intercultural English Course	The six teaching sessions:  Teaching Session 1 Culture shock (critical incidents) Teaching Session 2 International greetings Teaching Session 3 Food and eating habits Teaching Session 4 Study in the UK Teaching Session 5 Festivals Teaching Session 6 Developing intercultural skills	Video-taping teaching sessions; Teacher's class observation field notes Teaching reflective journal Students' learning process worksheets
3 Post-course	Students' post-questionnaire Focus group interviews	Gathering and presenting the data; undertaking the analysis

### Questionnaires

Two sets of structured questionnaires (pre- and post-course) with open questions (see Appendix 1) were implemented in the project to elicit students' views. The pre-course questionnaire, taken by the students prior to the course, was important in establishing learners' positions and perspectives before starting the course and shaping the content. The questionnaire focused on the following topics: previous learning experiences; expectations of the IEC and suggestions for cultural topics to be included in the teaching sessions; and a self-evaluation of previous intercultural knowledge and skills.

Four categories were identified as learners' expectations from the IEC: curiosity in cultural knowledge; linguistic proficiency; practical purposes; and personal development. Qin took these factors into account when designing the course syllabus, especially the teaching contents and instruction methods. Overall, students' responses from the pre-course questionnaires revealed that the socio-cultural aspects learners were introduced to in their previous language learning experiences were mainly general cultural facts, and different cultural values or beliefs, though these tended to be expressed stereotypically.

The purpose of the post-course questionnaire was to understand, rather than assess, whether the students' expectations for the IEC were met, and identify how students perceived any potential development in their intercultural knowledge and skills, or change of attitudes, having undertaken the course (see Appendix 2). Students were generally greatly satisfied with the course and their attainment.

### Students' learning process worksheets

Students completed learning process worksheets (LPWs) before and after each teaching session of the IEC. The LPWs were embedded in every IEC teaching step within each of the six teaching sessions. (See Appendix 3 for an illustration of the indicative questions that the students were required to answer, which is taken from a teaching step in Session Two.)

The LPWs had three functions: 1) check students' reflections on their intercultural communicative knowledge, attitudes, skills, and critical cultural awareness both before and after the teaching session; 2) record their evaluation of the IEC teaching contents and instructional methods; and 3) record any changes students perceived in their own ICC development. Therefore, as well as showing students' self-reflections and self-evaluations of perceived ICC development during the course, the worksheets also had a pedagogical and a research function for the teacher-researcher.

The questions in the first part addressed functions one and three above. These questions were purposefully designed to guide students' reflection on whether their ICC knowledge, skills and attitudes had been enhanced, for example: cultural knowledge of English-speaking cultures; stereotypes of English speakers and how students felt about discussing these stereotypes; identification of the similarities and differences between their own culture and English-speaking cultures; explanation of misunderstandings across cultures; and suggestions to improve interaction with English-language speakers. As the questions were closely related to the teaching content and included repeated questions before and after the teaching session, the teacher-researcher was able to make sense of students' progress through their different or changed answers to the same question.

The questions in the second part concerned the second function (the IEC evaluation), and aimed to analyse the teacher's course design in more detail, and specifically, to detect particular content and instructional methods that were effective in arousing students' interest and/or enabling the achievement of the programme's learning outcomes.

### Data analysis

Borghetti (2017) highlights the ethical dilemmas and other difficulties associated with assessing ICC, and recommends self-report/reflection, peer and expert evaluations. To this end, the teacher-researcher combined students' self-evaluations and self-reflections provided in their responses in the pre- and post-questionnaires, learning process worksheets, and focus group interviews, as well as her observations and reflections (recorded in her researcher journal) to analyse and make sense of students' engagement in learning and their perceptions of their own ICC development. For example, students' responses in the post-questionnaire (specifically questions 4-9)



were analysed together with their individual responses in their pre-questionnaires and learning process worksheets. Furthermore, when reflecting on their own ICC development, students were specifically asked to provide examples or ‘instances’ which they believe illustrate their sense of growth in terms of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Thus, the aim was not to generate a linear picture of ICC development but rather to capture evidence of engagement in learning that corresponded to the learning objectives established for the course, as informed by Byram’s model of ICC. As will be presented below, this involved drawing on the five *savoirs* to locate understandings of students’ ICC development, as well as looking out for other emergent themes that represented notions of intercultural learning outside this main framework.

### Students’ ICC development (following Byram’s *savoirs*)

Altogether, 194 instances were identified which corresponded to Byram’s (1997) five *savoirs* (see Table 2 for details). The *skills of discovery and interaction* (S2) dimension has the largest number of instances with 78 (40%), while *critical cultural awareness* showed no evidence. The dimensions of *knowledge* and *attitudes* contain similar amounts of instances, 55 (29%) and 53 (27%) respectively. The *skills of interpreting and relating* (S1) and *skills of discovery and interaction* (S2) were analyzed separately according to Byram’s (1997) original *savoir* categorization, but if combined into the *skills* dimension, there were 86 instances in total (44%).

**Table 13.2** Instances of ICC learning objectives in students’ feedback

ICC Learning Objectives	Number of instances	Percentage
Knowledge	55	29%
Attitude	53	27%
Skills of interpreting and relating (S1)	8	4%
Skills of discovery and interaction (S2)	78	40%
Critical Cultural Awareness	0	0
Total	194	

The following table (Table 3) presents a synthesis of indicative data showing how learners’ comments were mapped onto the five *savoirs* (Byram, 1997) to demonstrate their engagement in learning.

**Table 13.3** Indicative data mapping onto the *savoirs*

<i>Savoirs</i>	Overview of analysis	Evidence
KNOWLEDGE: Of social groups and their products and practices in one’s own and in one’s interlocutor’s country, and of the general processes of societal and individual interaction.	<p>Students’ responses demonstrate features in more than one dimension of the <i>Knowledge</i> objective. Approximately one third of students’ feedback is concerned with knowledge about ‘non-verbal behaviour of interaction’, like shaking hands when greeting.</p> <p>While students may have already had this knowledge, their feedback suggests that they understood the differences more clearly after the course. Another most commonly addressed aspect is ‘conventions of</p>	<p>‘Different country has <b>different greeting culture</b>.’ (TS2, G1-3-FB).</p> <p>‘I like to study in the UK. Firstly, I think it has an <b>advanced higher education system</b>. It <b>stresses on improving students’ creativity</b>. In addition, it helps students to find a way to solve tomorrow’s problems.’ (TS4, G3-3-FE)</p>

	behaviour and beliefs and taboos in routine situations’.	
<p>ATTITUDES: Curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one’s own.</p> <p>a) Willingness to seek out or take up opportunities to <b>engage with otherness</b> in a <b>relationship of equality, distinct from seeking out the exotic</b> or the profitable</p> <p>e) Readiness to engage with the <b>conventions and rites</b> of verbal and non-verbal communication and interaction</p>	<p>Both <i>Attitude e</i>) and <i>Attitude a</i>) (66% in total) are the most frequently identified dimensions. Learners are potentially open to interactions with culturally different others, and ready for change while encountering differences. However, in terms of initiating interactions with culturally different others involving suspending one’s original cultural beliefs and discovering different perspectives, there is less clear evidence of learners’ development.</p>	<p>‘Every culture has their own beliefs or values. We cannot ignore it or push others accept us. We should be open to them.’ (TS1, G4-3-ME).</p>
<p>SKILLS of INTERPRETING and RELATING (S1): Ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents or events from one’s own.</p>	<p>Students’ responses are concentrated on ‘identify[ing] <b>ethnocentric perspectives</b> in a document or event and <b>explain[ing]</b> their origins’ and ‘<b>mediate[ing]</b> between <b>conflicting interpretations</b> of phenomena’. While confronting different cultural perspectives, they were active in identifying the common ground and trying to solve conflicting understandings.</p>	<p>‘Different country has their different culture, for example, a country love a thing, but another country all hate it. ... <b>Through some stories (Hong Kong students’ diary, i.e. critical incidents), I know the differences between China’s &lt;Chinese&gt; culture and other cultures.</b> And I know how to do when I meet that situation (conflict/cultural differences).’ (TS1, G1-5-FB).</p>
<p>SKILLS of DISCOVERY and INTERACTION (S2): Ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction.</p> <p>c) identify <b>similar and dissimilar processes of interaction, verbal and non-verbal</b>, and <b>negotiate an appropriate use</b> of them in specific circumstances</p> <p>e) identify <b>contemporary and past relationships</b> between one’s own and the other culture and society</p>	<p>The S2 <i>savoir</i> was most evidenced with 78 instances, which mainly focused on students’ ability to identify similar and dissimilar cultural interactional forms and negotiate a proper reaction. S2 instances were concentrated in two dimensions. They tended to acquire knowledge of a new culture by ‘reading a document or watching an event’, rather than ‘conducting an inquiry through the interlocutor’. The latter may be difficult to achieve given the limited ‘face-to-face’ interactional opportunities with non-Chinese during the course. These outcomes suggest that the simulation scenarios and other imagined real-time interaction processes employed in the EIC may have supported this development.</p> <p>S2c indicates two phases in achieving a successful intercultural interaction: recognising the similarities and differences between cultural conventions; and being aware of the need to ‘change’ and ‘accept’ the differences, or negotiate a ‘compromise’.</p> <p>The examples in S2e indicate students’ capability of ‘identify[ing] contemporary and past relationships between one’s own and the other culture and society’.</p>	<p>‘<b>Don’t be shy and afraid</b> when communicate with others &lt;English speakers&gt;. ... We should <b>accept the different cultures</b> based on the different environment.’ (TS1, G2-2-FB)</p> <p>‘In my view it is not enough to talk about western culture. It is better to recognize western values from their histories such as Revival of Learning in which</p>

		individualism occurred. These factors influence their behaviors and in this way we can better comprehend the differences between Eastern cultures and Western cultures.’ (TS1, G3-5-ME)
CRITICAL CULTURAL AWARENESS (CCA): Ability to evaluate, critically and on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices and products in one’s own and other cultures and countries.	CCA is indispensable to an intercultural interaction and is a consequence of utilizing ‘one’s knowledge, skills and attitudes’ in collaboration. Unfortunately, no clear evidence of this <i>savoir</i> was identified from IEC students’ responses. The reasons for this outcome are uncertain, but may be due to the short nature of the course, the nature of the materials students worked with, or the lack of opportunity for prolonged real-time intercultural communication.	

### Additional emergent themes related to intercultural learning

In this section we illustrate additional themes in students’ intercultural learning which emerged in the students’ feedback, which shed further light, in the Chinese EFL context, on Byram’s (1997) five *savoirs*.

#### Knowledge

Two additional themes linked to the *Knowledge savoir* emerged: *Knowledge of Cultural Facts* and *Knowledge of Intercultural Communication*. These represent students’ understandings of general types of knowledge considered useful for intercultural communication.

In relation to the former, students’ responses showed their belief that gaining knowledge and understanding of other cultures is essential for further understanding of otherness and implementing intercultural interaction. For example: ‘I have **known foreign culture more**, this is **useful** in my communication with foreigners’ (PQ-4, G1-10-MB). Yet very few students referred to deeper understandings of cultural knowledge that addressed values and beliefs. For students who are only beginning to learn about culture within English language learning, there may be a tendency to think that cultural knowledge is the initial step for successful communication with English-speakers, and only when they understand the different cultures well can they engage in intercultural dialogue.

Students also emphasised the importance of acquiring *Knowledge of Intercultural Communication*, which they considered useful in promoting their successful intercultural communication. For example, ‘... this course helped me to know **the most essential information for me to make good communication with people outside China**, especially people in the UK’ (PQ-1, G3-2-FT). Overall, their responses seemed to indicate that they appreciated having the chance to go beyond their previous intercultural learning, which had been limited to knowledge from a traditional perspective, mainly revolving around knowledge about food, customary clothing, holidays, and cultural stereotypes, rather than knowledge for future

intercultural understanding and communication when interacting with people from other cultures.

## Attitudes

In addition to instances corresponding to Byram's (1997) *Attitudes savoir*, three additional *Attitudes* themes emerged: *More 'openness' than 'curiosity'*, *Chinese spiritual essence of 'harmonious society'*, and *Chinese students' learning concept*.

Firstly, students' responses indicated that they were more inclined to show 'openness' rather than 'curiosity'. On the one hand, openness manifested in their eagerness to initiate and develop interactions with culturally different others. However, because they do not have opportunities to implement real-time interactions with English-speakers, their feedback was mainly concerned with their speculations to initiate and develop interactions. For example, 'I will try to find more materials to improve my skills and communicate more with foreigners' (PQ-8&9, G2-4-MB). However, concerning 'curiosity', students were only able to ask simple or surface questions about other cultures. Thus, whilst they were open to engaging with otherness, they often did not seem to have clear areas of interest or curiosity. This finding contrasts with Byram's (1997) model where openness and curiosity are presented in parallel. In line with the ICC model, this would mean that there is a gap between their current position and the objective, which expects them to seek out and articulate answers to complex questions about other cultures and reflect multiple cultural perspectives.

A second feature of students' *Attitudes* concerned the *Chinese spiritual essence of harmonious society*, linked to the principle of 'harmony' in interpersonal relations within the Confucian philosophical system (Xiao & Chen, 2009). Students' responses conspicuously showed their reluctance to break from this communicative integrity, seen in their frequent use of words such as 'positively', 'in a right way', and 'enthusiastic', demonstrating their efforts to implement a peaceful and smooth communication process.

For example: 'We should accept the difference of foreign culture **positively**' (TS1, G1-4-FB).

Concerning the third emergent *Attitude*, *Chinese students' learning concept*, students highlighted 'determined effort' as a core element for successful interaction and to accomplish successful learning outcomes. They recognised their progress but kept in view how they wanted to go further. For example:

I **can** perform better in communicating with members of English-speaking cultures **now**, and **will be better in the future**. I will keep attention on information of different cultures, and try to get more chances communicating with natives speakers of English. (PQ-8&9, G1-10-MB)

I feel **a little more comfortable** speaking with native English speakers. I think [it] **will be better** [in the future]. I will get more culture books and try to communicate with others [English speakers]. (PQ-8&9, G2-5-MB)

I also **feel nervous** [when I perform communication with members of English-speaking cultures]. **But if I practice more, I can change [develop] more**. I will try to find more materials to improve my skills and communicate more with foreigners. (PQ-8&9, G2-4-MB)

While all three students revealed their attitudes towards communicating with native English speakers—from being ‘considerably comfortable’ (‘can’, G1-10-MB), to ‘moderately comfortable’ (‘a little more’, G2-5-MB), and to ‘not sufficiently comfortable’ (‘feel nervous’: G2-4-MB)—all of them added supplementary explanations indicating future action and effort towards developing their intercultural competence.

#### Skills of interpreting and relating (S1)

Although the analysis did not reveal strong evidence of engagement which corresponded to the dimension ‘identify areas of misunderstanding and dysfunction in an interaction and explain them in terms of each of the cultural systems present’ (S1b, Byram, 1997, p.61), a number of related themes did emerge: *‘ethnorelative reflection’* and *‘keeping neutral’*.

*Developing an ethno-relative view via reflection.* Whilst pre-course questionnaires revealed that students had some stereotypical views of foreigners, students’ responses after the whole course indicated recognition that their own stereotypes of others may play a role in intercultural communication and the adoption of a more ethnorelative view. For example, ‘I always think foreigners have stereotype of Chinese, however, we should not have this thought’ (PQ-3, G2-9-FA). Supported by IEC teaching methods (e.g. critical incident analysis), they modified their preconceived ideas through continuous reflection and realised that to ‘have stereotyping views on others by the first impression’ may limit understandings of that other. In Byram’s terms, they have made some progress towards ‘identify[ing] causes of misunderstanding and dysfunction’ (1997, p.61) which illustrates their potential development in *Skills of interpreting and relating (S1)*.

*‘Keeping neutral’ as the foundational stage of mediation.* Although four instances illustrated students’ development in S1c, which is the ability to ‘mediate between conflicting interpretations of phenomena’ (Byram, 1997, p.61) student comments reveal a tendency of ‘keeping neutral’, which is the starting point of ‘learning to mediate between conflicting interpretations of phenomena’ (Byram, 1997, p.61) when they are asked to respond while encountering misunderstandings of their own culture. The neutral attitudes represented in students’ feedback while confronting misunderstandings may be linked to the ‘harmony’ orientation within interpersonal relations mentioned earlier. However, ‘keeping neutral’ is merely a passive way for mediation, and there is still a gap between ‘neutrality’ and ‘successful mediation’. The students’ responses within this dimension suggested that it had been a comparatively demanding task for them to interpret the sources of misunderstanding, analyse the differences and solve the problem.

#### Skills of discovery and interaction (S2)

The student feedback in this *savoir* coalesced around three major themes: *the underdeveloped ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture, speculated reactions in an imagined real-time interaction, and broadening the domain in searching for knowledge of a new culture.*

*The underdeveloped ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture.* Students’ absence of the two dimensions in S2 are closely related to the

ability to 'acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practice'. One dimension emphasises the method of 'conducting an inquiry through the *interlocutor*' in search of implications, whereas the other underlines 'reading a document or watching an event' for hidden references. To achieve the former, 'conducting an inquiry with an interlocutor' is the precondition, which is easier and more accessible for students who have various opportunities to interact with people from other cultures. In many College English classrooms, it may be difficult for language students to obtain such opportunities, particularly via real-time interactions. By comparison, the latter, which highlights 'reading a document or watching an event' for implicit references, is more easily attainable, e.g., via the Internet.

*Speculated reactions in an imagined real-time interaction.* 'Real-time interaction' is emphasised in two S2 dimensions, and the ability to practice 'knowledge, attitudes and skills in real time interactions' requires extensive real-time communication. Since IEC students did not obtain opportunities to interact with English language speakers, unsurprisingly, no convincing examples were identified within students' responses. However, there were instances indicating reflection on how they would react in an imagined real-time interaction, together with some consideration of potential strategies. For example: 'If they talk with me about weather, I think I will respond enthusiastically, although it is a boring topic in China' (PQ-8, G1-3-FB). Such imagined scenarios provide a way of allowing students to consider their own responses to cultural differences.

*Broadening the domain in searching for knowledge of a new culture.* According to Byram (1997, p.63), an important skill within the S2 *savoir* is 'to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices'. Regarding 'identify contemporary and past relationships between one's own and the other culture and society', Byram states that the intercultural speaker is expected to 'use sources (e.g. reference books, newspapers, histories, experts, lay informants)' to understand and analyse the relationships between cultures. The students' responses demonstrated a broadening of the domain of these sources, indicating their strong intention to continuously acquire new knowledge about a foreign culture via diverse kinds of routes and procedures. In searching for the information, they showed more interest in strategies such as surfing the Internet, watching films or TV plays, listening to radio broadcasts, or travelling abroad.

Similarly, learners are supposed to 'identify and make use of public and private institutions which facilitate contact with other countries and cultures' (Byram, 1997, p.63), e.g., the British Council and Confucius Institutes (personal communication). Byram expects intercultural speakers to 'use knowledge of these institutions . . . to establish and maintain contacts' with another culture. Again, IEC students' feedback indicates a broadened range of strategies used to 'establish and maintain contacts' with another culture, e.g., 'search the Internet', 'communicate with English speakers', 'keep in contact with foreign friends', 'watch films/listen to radio broadcast', and 'travel abroad'. These strategies complement the original domains in Byram's model, and thus, provide a valuable supplement to ICC framework construction, particularly in the Chinese educational context.

Critical cultural awareness

The IEC students' feedback gave no identifiable evidence of instances of Critical Cultural Awareness (CCA), which, as a consequence of utilising 'one's knowledge, skills and attitudes' in collaboration, is a key dimension among the five *savoirs* in intercultural interaction.

The three dimensions of CCA consist of three progressive steps, the third being 'the ability to interact and mediate in intercultural exchanges' (Byram, 1997, p. 63) as the final outcome. Although the students' feedback demonstrated no clear evidence recognized as CCA instances, their feedback did evidence learners' development of CCA including ability to: 'a) identify and interpret explicit or implicit values in documents and events in one's own and other cultures' and 'b) make an evaluative analysis of the documents and events which refer to an explicit perspective and criteria'. For example, in Teaching Session Three 'Food and Dining Habits', students' discussions on Western fast food as an aspect of globalization and their evaluation of the issue in the context of China's current development reveal their capability in a) and b). 'It is a way of globalization. We cannot avoid it. Maybe we can combine our traditional Chinese food with western food and create a new kind of cuisine.' (G3-3-FE). However, there was no evidence of students having achieved the final step.

The lack of clear evidence of CCA suggests that it may be challenging to bring about development in this area within a short course like IEC, or without well-structured intentional guidance from teachers and appropriate materials conducive to deeper analysis and reflection.

## Conclusions

In this chapter we have reported on an exploratory action research study which sought to investigate ICC development in Chinese students who are studying College English in higher education in China. Byram's (1997) ICC framework informed the materials construction of the 6-week intercultural English course (IEC) delivered by the teacher-researcher, Qin, and provided the theoretical basis for analysing students' feedback through and after the course. The study has shown the utility of Byram's (1997) framework in identifying and supporting this group of Chinese College English language learners' ICC development in this specific Chinese EFL context. The focus on Byram's (1997) ICC learning objectives had four outcomes in this study: 1) providing guidance to the EFL teacher (Qin) in shaping the construction of methods and content in the IEC; 2) helping to make the teaching and learning more purposeful through the inclusion of specific ICC objectives; 3) providing specific and focused learning outcomes for students; and 4) enabling the teacher to understand elements of students' ICC development, supported by the learning process worksheets.

Three pedagogical implications emerge from this study. First, the development of certain intercultural skills, for instance, CCA will, ideally, require real time interaction opportunities with people from other cultures. Since this was not feasible in this IEC course, we recommend offering examples of 'imagined real-time interaction', creating possibilities for 'virtual exchange' in contexts where students do not have the opportunity for face-to-face or virtual intercultural communication, and creating opportunities for perspective taking and simulation through carefully

designed activities (Cunico, 2005; Timlin et al, 2021) or through the interpretation of cultural narratives (Kearney, 2012). Second, achieving a comprehensive range of objectives, exemplified in Byram's model, was demanding in this study as not all objectives were easily achievable or transferable to the Chinese EFL context. Our findings have illustrated that certain aspects of the *savoirs* were considered abstract and difficult to directly implement into English language teaching and learning. And third, while the desirability of programmes that enable students to achieve all aspects of ICC, and especially critical cultural awareness, is not in doubt, the practical limitations of time and resources need consideration (e.g., the IEC programme was 2 hours per week over 6 weeks). A future iteration of the IEC course design would need to be aware of and account for the challenges posed above, for example: by focusing the topics of the IEC around a singular theme that supports the development of CCA; or by designing activities that allow for perspective-taking within a global simulation or real-time intercultural communication project; or through inclusion of consistent simulations and debriefs, and critical incident analysis of case studies. Above all, care should be taken to match IEC course objectives with well-aligned curricular choices and instructional activities from which student learning and development can be analysed.

Currently, there is a growing interest in researching cultural and intercultural teaching pedagogy in the Chinese EFL context, as evidenced in the *College English Teaching Guidelines* (2020). For example, the 3-year Chinese-European capacity building project 'Resources for Chinese Higher Education' (RICH-Ed)<sup>2</sup> has developed modules for the teaching of ICC accompanied by teacher training. Language courses that promote ICC should find a place in the university curriculum, but training is needed to support teachers in learning how to integrate intercultural communication into the EFL syllabus, and to prepare teachers to effectively facilitate students' ICC development (Sun et al., 2021). While many teachers are willing to implement intercultural aspects in their language classrooms, their teaching practices tend to be based on incidental or limited experiential learning. This exploratory study, supported by Byram's (1997) ICC framework, provides a specific and local understanding of how an intercultural approach in English language teaching could be implemented into an EFL programme. With a particular focus on College English, it offers a possible theoretical perspective and pedagogy for the language curriculum that aims to facilitate and understand students' ICC development. However, caution is advised when transferring the outcomes from this small-scale exploratory study conducted in one university in Eastern China to other EFL programmes and classrooms. Further exploration of the IEC and the emergent ICC themes linked to Byram's *savoirs* is required in other EFL contexts in China.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Byram was influential in the inclusion of ICC into the Standards through invitations by the National College English Teaching Advisory Board and the Beijing Education Committee to give lectures and workshops on his ICC model between 2015 and 2020, which included a short course on ICC in foreign language education in 2015.

<sup>2</sup> See [www.rich-ed.com](http://www.rich-ed.com) for further information on this project.



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## Appendix 1

### Pre-questionnaire for course learners

Thank you for your precious time. Your responses are very valuable to this investigation. It won't take you more than 20 minutes to complete this form. Please feel free to use as much space as necessary.

Pseudonym (choose any English name you like) \_\_\_\_\_

Gender: \_\_\_\_\_

English entrance result: \_\_\_\_\_

1. What aspects of English-speaking cultures are you familiar with?  
Please give some examples.
2. Have you had any English classes where the discussed cultural aspects that are different from your culture (e.g. values, beliefs system etc.) If yes, what topics were addressed?  
Yes: \_\_\_ No: \_\_\_  
Explain: \_\_\_\_\_
3. Have you been taught in your previous English classes how to interact with English speakers? (For example, use of gestures or facial expressions when talking with them)  
Yes: \_\_\_ No: \_\_\_  
Explain: \_\_\_\_\_
4. What aspects of the language do you feel you need to improve?
5. Do you practice English with native speakers? Yes: \_\_\_\_\_ No: \_\_\_\_\_  
When? \_\_\_\_\_  
Who with? \_\_\_\_\_  
How often? \_\_\_\_\_
6. Do you find you have difficulties when you interact with native English speakers?  
If so what types of difficulties?
7. Besides the formal language classes, what do you do to improve your English?
8. Why are you taking this course?
9. What are your expectations of this course?
10. What culture-related topics would you suggest to discuss in this course?
11. Give an example of a situation in which you experienced a misunderstanding when you interacted with a native speaker:  
- Misunderstanding:  
-How you solved the problem:
12. Do you know the term intercultural communicative competence?  
Whether yes or no, what does the term mean to you?

## Appendix 2

### Post-questionnaire for course learners

Thank you for your precious time. Your responses are very valuable to this investigation. It won't take you more than 20 minutes to complete this form. Please feel free to use as much space as necessary.

Pseudonym

(please ensure you give the same name with your pre-questionnaire)

Gender: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Has the Intercultural English Course met your expectations? Why? Explain and give specific samples.
2. What was the most interesting part of it? Explain
3. What did you find lacking in the course? Explain
4. What new knowledge have you gained? Explain
5. What new skills have you developed? Explain
6. Are you more aware now of how culture impact communication than you were at the beginning of the course? Explain
7. Do you feel more comfortable speaking with native speakers of English?
8. Do you think you can perform effectively and appropriately with members of English-speaking cultures? Explain your response and give examples.
9. What do you intent to do to continue developing your intercultural skills?

## Appendix 3

### Excerpt from Student Learning Process Worksheet (partial questions from Teaching Session Two)

#### Before Class

1. Suppose you meet your foreign teacher, a 50-year-old gentleman for the first time and his name is Thomas Smith, what is the exact way you call him?
2. If he tells you that he doesn't like others call him Mr. Smith, what will you do when you meet him again?
3. Are you curious to know more about different styles of international greetings? Why or why not?
4. If you are in a foreign country and people treat you with their social greeting custom (for example, in France, they hug and kiss on your cheeks), what will you do?
5. If you don't like others' (especially foreigners') greeting style or body language, what will you do?

#### After Class

After you have learned from this class, please answer the following questions (there are some questions you have encountered already, but you might provide different answers this time):

6. Suppose you meet your foreign teacher, a 50-year-old gentleman for the first time and his name is Thomas Smith, what is the exact way you call him?
7. If he tells you that he doesn't like others call him Mr. Smith, what will you do when you meet him again?
8. Are you curious to know more about different styles of international greetings? Why or why not? If you want to investigate deeper on this topic, what will you do?
9. If you are in a foreign country and people treat you with their social greeting custom (for example, in France, they hug and kiss on your cheeks), what will you do?
10. If you don't like others' (especially foreigners') greeting style or body language, what will you do?

