

## Enhancing Intercultural Communicative Competence in Chinese English Language Classrooms through Telecollaboration and Virtual Mobility

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### Abstract

*This study investigates how telecollaboration and virtual mobility can enhance intercultural communicative competence (ICC) in English Language Teaching (ELT) classrooms in China. Using Byram's ICC model as a framework, the research explores how virtual exchanges between Chinese and international students improve cross-cultural communication. Key variables identified include mode of interaction, instructor guidance, technology use, group composition, and cultural sensitivity. A mixed-methods approach was employed: five studies were analyzed qualitatively using the PRISMA framework, while quantitative data from 415 Chinese English teachers were examined using SPSS. The analysis revealed strong interrelationships among variables, with all regression results showing statistical significance ( $p < 0.05$ ). The study also examines differences in ICC among pre-service English teachers based on gender and family background. Findings highlight the value of virtual mobility in promoting ICC and provide practical insights for integrating technology into ELT for global competence.*

**Keywords:** ICC, ELT, Telecollaboration, Virtual Mobility.

### Introduction

Telecollaboration and virtual mobility play a crucial role in developing intercultural communicative competence (ICC) and are increasingly recognized by English teachers as a means to improve learning outcomes. As globalization becomes a dominant trend in education, universities are working to internationalize their curricula more effectively (Emir, 2024). In this context, adopting innovative teaching methods is essential to advancing the quality of virtual learning (Zečević, 2022). However, despite the growing use of technology, telecollaboration remains underutilized in English language classrooms. Many English teachers still lack a clear understanding of its benefits and applications (Batunan, 2023). In countries like China, the number of telecollaboration initiatives at the university level remains low, limiting their impact on enhancing ICC (Liu, 2024; Lan, 2023). Therefore, further research into this area is necessary to gain deeper insights and improve implementation.

### Literature Review

Research has highlighted that fostering creative and effective teaching strategies is a central aim of intercultural education (Hoff, 2020; jaimellenberger.com, 2024). This underscores the need to critically evaluate the theoretical models that underpin both research and instructional practices (Liu Y., 2021). Over the past decade, Byram's widely used model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) (1997) has faced increasing scrutiny within the field of intercultural education (Ilyas, 2021). His model outlines five key components of ICC: knowledge, attitudes, interpretive and relational skills, discovery and interaction skills, and critical cultural awareness (Byram, 1997; edulearn2change.com, 2024). Byram emphasized that mindset and knowledge are essential foundations for developing critical cultural understanding and communication skills (Jiang, 2022).

Despite its enduring influence, the model itself has seen little revision since its inception over two decades ago (Safa, 2021).

The concept of intercultural competence generally refers to the communicative ability developed through learning foreign languages and engaging with cultural "otherness" (Stevkowska, 2024). Byram distinguishes between the roles of "tourists" and "sojourners" to illustrate the deeper educational value of cultural immersion over surface-level exposure (Ilyas, 2021). As modern language teaching increasingly centers around ICC, it becomes crucial for educators to understand and apply its core elements in their teaching practices (Thongpan, 2023). Teachers should carefully consider these dimensions when designing intercultural content, strategies, and activities (M. Zaenal Abidin, 2024).

This perspective suggests that culture, in its broadest sense, must be integrated into language proficiency instruction (Jiang, 2022). Successful intercultural communication starts with cultivating a "dialogue of cultures" within learners' minds (Ilyas, 2021). In this context, intercultural competence involves the ability to communicate effectively across cultural boundaries while acknowledging and respecting cultural differences (Liu Y., 2021). In addition to language skills, educators should foster personal qualities in learners such as tolerance, openness, receptiveness, and the ability to engage in reflective and strategic communication (Stevkowska, 2024). In the context of this study, intercultural communicative competence (ICC) refers to the ability to effectively interact with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds by recognizing and understanding cultural differences (Wuestenenk et al., 2022). It includes the skill to express ideas clearly and appropriately by taking into account both verbal and non-verbal elements of intercultural communication (Sun, 2021). ICC also encompasses self-

awareness of one's own cultural assumptions and an understanding of the cultural norms of others within the same environment (Ulbricht et al., 2022). In English language classrooms in China, this competence supports more empathetic and culturally sensitive communication (Gan, 2021).

### Research Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods research approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative data to enhance the effectiveness of the findings. This design offers the advantage of producing both broad and detailed insights, making the research rich in information (Dawadi, 2021). It also allows for flexibility by covering multiple aspects of the topic (Taherdoost, 2022).

There are three hypotheses as follows,

H1: Technology usage significantly influences cultural sensitivity.

Research indicates that students in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) often perform below expected learning outcomes (Hennessy, 2022). Effective early education and continued professional development for teachers play a vital role in improving educational results (Shadiev, 2021). Teacher training programs positively impact primary education in LMICs (Hennessy, 2022). However, factors such as cultural influences, time constraints, administrative oversight, and the need for digital communities affect teachers' engagement in online learning environments (Song, 2023). Prior studies highlight the many advantages of using technology for language and cultural learning (Shadiev, 2021), including the development of digital, linguistic, and intercultural skills, as well as increased motivation (Ismailov, 2021). Despite this, the link between technology use and cultural sensitivity remains underexplored (Salih, 2021; Liu G. M., 2023). Investigating this relationship can provide valuable insights for educators, learners, and policymakers.

H2: Group composition significantly affects cultural sensitivity. The question of how to enhance students' understanding of their native culture through language education has been a topic of interest for over a decade (Stahl, 2021), yet few effective solutions have been identified (Alam, 2023). This challenge appears across universities in China, regardless of their prestige (Salih, 2021). Studies have shown that many university students struggle to express their own cultural identity in English (Baber, 2020). Byram's (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) offers a theoretical basis for addressing this issue (Ilyas, 2021). It is essential to explore how diverse learning groups engage in cultural exchange using English as a global language (Wu, 2021). Intercultural education aims to promote inclusion, reduce bias, encourage mutual respect, and support equality among individuals from varied cultural backgrounds (Stahl, 2021; Wu, 2021).

H3: Cultural sensitivity significantly impacts intercultural communicative competence (ICC).

Cultural sensitivity enables individuals to recognize and respect differences in cultural norms, values, and communication styles, which is essential for effective interaction in intercultural contexts (Aririguzoh, 2022). It helps individuals avoid stereotypes and biases, encouraging them to see others as unique and to understand their perspectives (Guan, 2024). This open-

minded approach leads to improved intercultural communication (Zhou, 2024). Given the close link between language and culture, many education systems worldwide now prioritize the development of ICC (Heinimäki, 2021; Joia, 2021). In China, the English Teaching Syllabus for Higher Education Majors (2000) emphasizes cultivating ICC as a key teaching objective (Luo, 2022; Lei, 2020).

Both primary and secondary data are utilized. Primary data is collected through surveys, which are useful for gathering responses from a large number of participants and are easy to monitor and administer (Karunaratna, 2024). Secondary data is obtained through selected academic articles, offering in-depth analysis and supporting a comprehensive understanding of the subject.

To manage the large population of English language teachers in China, sampling is applied for quantitative analysis. With the population numbering in the millions (Gamlam, 2021), the Krejcie & Morgan table recommends a sample of 384 for populations of 100,000 or more (nursesrevisionuganda.com, 2023). Accordingly, a sample of 415 participants was selected for the survey. For the qualitative component, the PRISMA framework is employed to ensure the selection of the most relevant and credible secondary sources. Based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria, five articles were selected for the secondary data collection. The study incorporates both quantitative and qualitative analysis methods. Quantitative analysis is conducted using IBM SPSS software, which enables the generation of statistical results useful for examining relationships among variables (Fiandini, 2024). Qualitative analysis of the secondary data is carried out using thematic analysis, which involves steps such as data familiarization, coding, theme development, and thematic reporting (Christou, 2022).

As the research involves human participants, ethical considerations were strictly followed. No participants were harmed or manipulated during the survey, and principles of integrity, confidentiality, and transparency were upheld throughout the process (Cysneiros, 2021). Through this approach, the study aims to uncover key factors and underlying concepts related to intercultural communicative competence, telecollaboration, and virtual mobility.

### Findings

The analysis revealed that the t-statistic for the relationship between instructor guidance and cultural sensitivity was calculated at 15.45, indicating a highly significant positive correlation between these two variables. This suggests that the level and quality of guidance provided by instructors play a critical role in shaping learners' cultural sensitivity. Furthermore, the t-statistic for the relationship between the mediating variable and the dependent variable—presumably cultural sensitivity and intercultural communicative competence—was found to be consistently high at 26.331. This consistent value underscores a strong and statistically significant link, reinforcing the importance of the mediating factor in influencing the outcome variable. These findings highlight the central role of instructional support and intermediary variables in enhancing students' intercultural awareness and communicative competence.

Coefficients <sup>a</sup>		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B	
Model		B	Std. Error	Beta			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	(Constant)	1.128	.128		8.790	.000	.876	1.380
	IG	.632	.041	.605	15.450	.000	.551	.712

a. Dependent Variable: CS

**Table 1:** Relationship between Instructor guidance and Cultural sensitivity.

**Figure 1:** Sobel test for Instructor guidance.

Using the previously calculated t-statistics, a Sobel test was conducted to assess the mediating effect of cultural sensitivity on the relationship between instructor guidance and intercultural communicative competence (ICC). The result of the Sobel test yielded a t-statistic value of 13.325. This value is substantially higher than the critical threshold of 1.96, which is typically used to determine statistical significance at the 0.05 level. As such, the result confirms that cultural sensitivity significantly mediates the effect of instructor guidance on ICC. In other

words, the guidance provided by instructors not only directly influences students' development of intercultural competence but also does so indirectly by enhancing their cultural sensitivity, which in turn contributes to improved ICC. This finding emphasizes the importance of fostering cultural awareness as a key mechanism through which effective instructional support translates into stronger intercultural communication skills.

Coefficients <sup>a</sup>		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B	
Model		B	Std. Error	Beta			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	(Constant)	.873	.108		8.084	.000	.661	1.086
	TU	.745	.036	.716	20.853	.000	.674	.815

a. Dependent Variable: CS

**Table 2:** Relationship between Technology usage and Cultural sensitivity.

The t-statistic for the relationship between technology usage and cultural sensitivity was calculated to be 20.853, indicating a statistically significant result that meets the criteria for the analysis.

**Figure 2:** Sobel test for Technology usage.

The data presented in Table 2 was utilized to perform the Sobel test for the relationship involving technology usage. The resulting t-statistic from the Sobel test was 16.347, which

strongly indicates a statistically significant mediating effect of cultural sensitivity in the link between technology usage and intercultural communicative competence.

Coefficients <sup>a</sup>		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B	
Model		B	Std. Error	Beta			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	(Constant)	.678	.096		7.084	.000	.490	.866
	GC	.816	.032	.784	25.677	.000	.753	.878

a. Dependent Variable: CS

**Table 3:** Relationship between Group composition and Cultural sensitivity.

The t-statistic for the relationship between group composition and cultural sensitivity was found to be 25.677, indicating a strong and statistically significant association. Additionally, as

with previous analyses, the value between the mediating variable and the dependent variable—referenced in Table 5—remains consistent.

Input:		Test statistic:	p-value:	
$t_a$	26.331	Sobel test:	18.38324368	0
$t_b$	25.677	Aroian test:	18.37645208	0
		Goodman test:	18.39004282	0
<input type="button" value="Reset all"/>		<input type="button" value="Calculate"/>		

**Figure 3:** Sobel test for Group composition.

The Sobel test performed to examine the relationship between group composition and intercultural communicative competence yielded a t-statistic of 18.383. This value exceeds the standard threshold for statistical significance, thereby confirming that cultural sensitivity serves as a significant mediating factor in this relationship. In other words, the composition of learning groups influences intercultural communicative competence both directly and indirectly through its effect on cultural sensitivity.

Based on the results presented in Tables, all proposed hypotheses are supported by the findings of this study. Hypotheses were evaluated using multiple linear regression analysis, and examined using the Sobel test. The majority of participants indicated that the mode of interaction fosters self-directed learning and promotes a deeper understanding of course content. Additionally, instructor guidance was shown to raise students' awareness of the intercultural communicative competence (ICC) framework. The use of digital technologies was also found to enhance students' ability to exchange knowledge effectively. Furthermore, cultural sensitivity enables educators to emphasize the value of diverse cultures to students, promoting intercultural engagement and the development of behavioural and cognitive skills necessary for intercultural competence.

Based on qualitative analysis, the use of translanguaging in virtual Chinese language exchange programs has proven effective in fostering intercultural communicative competence by enhancing both cultural and linguistic awareness. Translanguaging involves the flexible use of multiple languages, allowing learners to switch between them fluidly within communication. This creates a dynamic and engaging learning environment. When students use Chinese alongside other languages, they gain deeper insights into the cultural contexts underlying communication (Guo, 2023). Virtual language partnerships provide authentic opportunities for learners to engage in meaningful conversations with native speakers, thereby improving both their linguistic proficiency and intercultural sensitivity. Additionally, the translanguaging approach supports a learner-centered model by enabling students to overcome language barriers in personalized and adaptive ways.

### Discussion

In this context, web-based interactions play a vital role in fostering intercultural communicative competence within the process of language learning. Online platforms, including business-oriented social networks, connect learners with peers from diverse cultural backgrounds, enabling dynamic and informed collaboration. Activities such as discussions, group projects, and cultural performances encourage learners to

embrace tolerance and respect for differing viewpoints. These interactions allow participants to use language in realistic, socially relevant situations with greater cultural awareness and effectiveness (Alsubaihi, 2024). Additionally, virtual environments offer a low-risk space for practicing language skills, which boosts learners' confidence and perceived ability. Integrating cultural elements into online language tasks further helps students build global competencies, promoting multicultural understanding and appreciation of cultures beyond their own.

Telecollaboration has proven highly effective in improving EFL learners' language skills and strengthening their intercultural communicative competence by offering authentic, real-world communication experiences. Through engaging in intercultural exchanges with native speakers from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, learners enhance their speaking, listening, reading, and writing abilities (Yeh, 2023). These collaborative activities expose students to a variety of accents, speech patterns, and cultural perspectives, enriching their linguistic understanding and cultural awareness. Additionally, telecollaboration encourages critical thinking and adaptability as learners navigate both linguistic challenges and cultural differences. Importantly, the benefits extend beyond language development; telecollaboration equips learners with the communication strategies needed to effectively participate in an interconnected and culturally diverse global society.

One key limitation of this study lies in the sampling method, as the number of participants may not be sufficient to represent the diverse population of English language teachers across China. Additionally, the research relies primarily on survey questionnaires, which carry the risk of social desirability bias, where respondents may provide answers they believe are more socially acceptable rather than reflecting their true opinions. Another limitation is the study's focus on a single geographic region, which restricts the generalizability of the findings to other areas or countries with different educational systems.

Despite these limitations, the study highlights the importance of incorporating telecollaboration and virtual mobility to strengthen the learning environment in English language classrooms. The results suggest that the use of technology, effective teaching methods, and diverse group composition all play significant roles in fostering intercultural communicative competence (ICC). While the findings show a positive short-term impact on ICC, further research is necessary to explore long-term effects, ensure alignment with national educational policies, and consider the diverse characteristics of student populations.

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