



A Research on Needs Analysis from Students for Developing an Intercultural Communication Course

Yuxin Guo¹, and Prannapha Modehiran²

¹PhD Candidate, Graduate School of Human Sciences, Assumption University, Thailand, and
Professor, Heilongjiang International University, Harbin, China

²Graduate School of Human Sciences, Assumption University, Thailand

Email: 191069180@qq.com, ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-6270-0203>

Email: prannapha@gmail.com, ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-9471-4955>

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Abstract

Background and aims: This research aims to investigate the intercultural communicative competence (ICC) of English major undergraduate students at Heilongjiang International University. It delves into students' attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness to improve the students' ICC. The research reveals that while students possess some level of ICC, there are areas where they lack confidence and knowledge.

Materials and methods: The study draws on questionnaires to gather data from 181 participants and utilizes a five-point scale for interpretation.

Results: Results indicate that students are unsure about their knowledge of cultural aspects, specifically the history, etiquette, and lifestyle of English-speaking countries. Similarly, they exhibit uncertainty in their skills of interpretation and relating, especially regarding sensitivity to intercultural differences and their language capabilities. However, they show confidence in their skills of discovery, interaction, and critical cultural awareness. For attitude, students display a willingness to engage in intercultural experiences, although they lack confidence in suspending their perspectives in conversations. Cultural awareness is apparent, but some students recognize the influence of their cultural identity on communication. The study also explores students' experiences and difficulties in learning English, such as language barriers, cultural gaps, and limited exposure to foreign cultures.

Conclusions: The study concludes that while students have ICC potential, targeted interventions are necessary to improve their overall competence. Recommendations include enhancing language proficiency, cultural knowledge, and exposure to authentic language use and cultural references. Finally, students express their desire to improve listening skills, vocabulary, oral communication, grammar understanding, and intercultural competence, which should guide curriculum design and educational strategies.

Keywords: Intercultural Communicative Competence; Needs Analysis; Attitudes; Knowledge; Skills; Critical Cultural Awareness

Introduction

Jin (2015) investigated on intercultural competence of the students, undergraduates, and graduates, from 23 universities and found that most students lacked intercultural communication opportunities and intercultural context with no overseas experience, no intercultural opportunities from school extracurricular activities, intercultural awareness, and an intercultural attitude, their intercultural



knowledge still needs to be enriched. According to Zhang (2013), Chinese university students have a poor ability to introduce Chinese culture to foreign languages. Research showed that among the five abilities of listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation, the reading ability is the strongest and the weakest includes the translation ability. The development of students' foreign language ability can then be seen as unbalanced. College students' intercultural communicative competence therefore needs to be improved. Intercultural communication strategies, and speculative and analytical skills all need to be further trained and improved (Zhao, 2015). Zhong (2016) indicated in his research that, in communicating with people from different cultures, only a very few students were able to be fully aware of potential cultural conflicts and try to avoid them.

In the researcher's university, the ICC course has been offered for five consecutive years. This course has played a certain role in improving students' intercultural communicative competence, but the effect of the course was not yet apparent. The course was not built on a unified system and it lacked theoretical support. Also, the teaching and learning process and the outcomes of the students' intercultural competence were supposed to be recognized more evidently. Given the problems mentioned, a reform of the intercultural communication curriculum became an urgent problem to be solved by the college. Therefore, some improvement schemes were put forward in the course design for the current research, to improve students' intercultural communicative competence (Dai, 2016; Fantini, 2009; Fantini, 1985; Wu, 2014).

Therefore, to enhance students' intercultural communicative competence through the course, it is essential to analyze students' needs. Only courses designed based on these needs can effectively improve students' intercultural communicative competence.

Research Questions

What are the learners' needs of the course to improve the intercultural communicative competence of English majors in Heilongjiang International University undergraduate students? Results indicate that students are unsure about their knowledge of cultural aspects, specifically the history, etiquette, and lifestyle of English-speaking countries. Similarly, they exhibit uncertainty in their skills of interpretation and relating, especially regarding sensitivity to intercultural differences and their language capabilities. However, they show confidence in their skills of discovery, interaction, and critical cultural awareness. For attitude, students display a willingness to engage in intercultural experiences, although they lack confidence in suspending their perspectives in conversations. Cultural awareness is apparent, but some students recognize the influence of their cultural identity on communication. The study also explores students' experiences and difficulties in learning English, such as language barriers, cultural gaps, and limited exposure to foreign cultures.

Objectives

This study investigates the intercultural communicative competence (ICC) of English major undergraduate students at Heilongjiang International University. The study draws on questionnaires to gather data from 181 participants and utilizes a five-point scale for interpretation.



Literature Review

The theory of needs analysis plays an important role in teaching. Making clear the needs of all aspects is the most critical basis for formulating the teaching syllabus, determining the teaching content, and deciding the teaching method.

There are various methods of needs analysis, mainly including "current situation analysis", "target situation analysis" and "teaching needs analysis". Dudley-Evans and St. John believe that "current situation analysis" refers to the advantages and disadvantages of current language, skills, and learning experience". West believes that "teaching needs analysis" includes defect analysis, strategy analysis or learning needs analysis, and means analysis. Defect analysis covers the path from point A (status quo) to point B (goal), always keeping learning needs in mind. Strategy analysis or learning needs analysis is concerned with the strategies learners use to learn another language (Chambers, 2003).

The needs analysis includes three parts, Lacks and Wants and Necessities. Applying this theory to curriculum design aims to discover what needs to be learned and what learners want to learn. Demand analysis focuses on the objectives and content of the course. It examines what learners already know and what they need to know. Needs analysis ensures that the course contains relevant and useful content. Good requirements analysis involves asking the right questions and finding the answers in the most efficient way possible (Macalister & Nation, 2020).

Research Methodology

The current study applies an explanatory mixed-method design. A survey of needs analysis was used to explore how to develop a course that could improve students' intercultural communicative competence. Given that quantitative approaches are typically used to achieve the aim, they are suitable approaches for gaining a detailed understanding of learners' needs and developing a course that corresponds to learners' demands, and the qualitative approach with open-ended questions to see the students' preference of the course. To determine how to develop an effective course for learners, the researcher needs to gain insight into learners' beliefs about how they learn and what their needs, wants, and necessities from the course.

Empirical Results and Analysis

This research mainly presents the needs of undergraduate students majoring in English at the Heilongjiang International University regarding intercultural communication. The needs findings from the questionnaire were derived from the university students majoring in English. The components of the needs were obtained from analyzing the data from one set of questionnaires for students. Each set of questionnaires included three parts: Part A - the personal information section, Part B - the needs questionnaire items, and Part C-open-ended questionnaire.

The student questionnaire consisted of three parts, A, B, and C. Part A pertained to basic information about the respondent. Part B is related to the objective requirements for enhancing intercultural communicative competence. The questions specifically consisted of five parts: attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness. Part C was some open-ended questions, including the problem of students' language learning.



The first group of the needs analysis questionnaire respondents included 181 university third-year English major students, 26 males and 155 females, with ages ranging from 20 to 22. Fifty-three students have studied English for less than 10 years, while 128 students have studied English for more than 10 years.

The questions in Part B required students to answer by filling in numbers 1-5. The corresponding meanings included: 5 = Strongly agree, 4 = Agree, 3 = Undecided, 2 = Slightly disagree, 1 = Disagree.

The results from the needs questionnaire revealed how the research participants responded to the intercultural communicative competence by the following data interpretation (Bergman, 2009): 5 meant 'strongly agree' with the components (Mean=4.50-5.00), 4 meant in a 'agree' (Mean=3.50 -4.49), 3 meant in a 'undecided' (Mean=2.50 -3.49), 2 meant in a 'slightly disagree' level (Mean=1.50 -2.49), and 1 meant in a 'Disagree' level (Mean=1.00 -1.49)

The questions in Part C were about students' failure experience in intercultural communication and problems in learning, teachers' and professional staff's suggestions for the course design, and the way to the development of students' ICC.

The IOC score for the student questionnaire was 0.922, indicating that the items in the questionnaire were consistent with the research objectives. At the beginning of the research questionnaire design, the questionnaire was distributed to three experts who provided feedback. Extract test papers from 181 participants according to certain requirements. First, calculate the variance of the total scores for these individuals. Each individual had a score for each question, and the variance of the scores for each question for these individuals, then the sum of the variances. Finally, use the Kuder-Richardson formula to calculate the value of α . the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.82, indicating that the consistency results were satisfactory.

Analyzing the needs of the students included investigating their assumption of their ICC state of being in five aspects: attitudes, knowledge, two types of skills, and critical cultural awareness. These five aspects were the necessities of the ICC. The students' state of being that could not satisfy the necessities therefore demonstrated the 'lack.' The 'wants' which would be reflected in some questionnaire items, especially in the open-ended questions revealed their preferred ways in how they wanted to have the ICC.

The results from the five-point scale part revealed that although the students generally thought they had the ICC at some level with the 'agree' mean average in total ($M=3.77$; $SD=0.85$), they still showed uncertainty by reporting 'undecided' in several items, particularly in five items of 'knowledge' (Items 13, 14, 15, 16, and 19), two items of 'skills – interpreting and relating' (Items 28 and 29), and one item of 'attitudes' (Item 5). Only in the aspects of 'skills – discovery and interaction' and 'awareness' that they show 'agree' in all the items, while there was no item reaching the level of 'strongly agree' (see Table 1).



Table 1 Students' ICC Needs Analysis-Questionnaire for Students

Title/Options	M	SD	Interpretation
Attitudes			
(1) I have the openness to have foreign friends or foreign teachers around me.	3.92	0.98	Agree
(2) I have the curiosity to communicate with foreign friends or foreign teachers.	3.9	0.90	Agree
(3) I am willing to have a job related to foreign languages.	4.01	0.85	Agree
(4) I am willing to have a strong level of foreign languages.	4.02	0.96	Agree
(5) I am willing to suspend belief in one's meanings and behaviors and to analyze them from the viewpoint of the others with whom I am engaging.	3.49	1.02	Undecided
(6) I am willing to learn about foreigners from different cultures.	4.17	0.79	Agree
(7) I am willing to tolerate foreigners' different values, eating habits, and taboos as much as possible.	4.01	0.86	Agree
(8) I am still willing to continue learning a foreign language outside the classroom.	3.89	0.89	Agree
(9) I am willing to take an intercultural communication course.	4.2	0.78	Agree
Knowledge			
(10) I know the history, geographical environment, and socio-political knowledge of my country.	3.85	0.80	Agree
(11) I know the social etiquette and religious culture of my country.	3.83	0.82	Agree
(12) I know the lifestyle and values of my country.	4.04	0.73	Agree
(13) I know the history, geographical environment, and social politics of English-speaking countries.	3.45	0.86	Undecided
(14) I know the social etiquette and religious culture of English-speaking countries.	3.43	0.84	Undecided
(15) I understand the lifestyle and values of English-speaking	3.45	0.85	Undecided



Title/Options	M	SD	Interpretation
countries.			
(16) I know the cultural taboos in English-speaking countries.	3.31	0.87	Undecided
(17) I want to understand and compare the basic norms and behavioral knowledge of my own country with those of English-speaking countries.	4.04	0.77	Agree
(18) I have a basic knowledge of concepts such as culture and intercultural communicative competence.	3.61	0.85	Agree
(19) I know some strategies and skills for successful intercultural communicative competence.	3.35	0.92	Undecided

Skills:

Skills of interpreting and relating

(20) In the process of intercultural communicative competence, if there is a misunderstanding, I can negotiate with the other party and explain the national culture to satisfy both parties.	3.6	0.87	Agree
(21) In case of language barriers in intercultural communicative competence, I can communicate with body language or by other non-verbal means.	3.66	0.88	Agree
(22) When communicating with foreigners, I can try to avoid offending them in terms of their language, dress, and behavior.	3.94	0.81	Agree
(23) I can see things from different cultures and perspectives when looking at events in other countries such as politics, economy, and religion.	3.78	0.76	Agree
(24) When communicating with foreigners, I can avoid prejudice against foreigners.	3.86	0.79	Agree
(25) When communicating with foreigners, I can treat them politely.	4.09	0.71	Agree
(26) When communicating with foreigners, I can avoid mentioning private topics related to foreigners.	3.98	0.76	Agree
(27) I can successfully communicate in English with people from different cultural backgrounds and fields.	3.39	0.92	Agree
(28) I am sensitive to intercultural communicative differences.	3.41	0.92	Undecided



Title/Options	M	SD	Interpretation
(29) I think my current listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translating skills can meet the needs of intercultural communicative competence.	3.16	1.09	Undecided
(30) I think the goal of the intercultural communication course is to improve intercultural communicative competence.	3.98	0.85	Agree
Skills:			
Skills of discovery and interaction			
(31) I can use a variety of methods, techniques, and strategies to learn foreign languages and cultures.	3.6	0.87	Agree
(32) When intercultural conflicts and misunderstandings occur, I can reflect learn, and seek proper solutions.	3.75	0.77	Agree
(33) I can directly acquire knowledge related to intercultural communicative competence through contact with foreigners.	3.52	0.96	Agree
Critical cultural awareness			
(34) I think there must be cultural similarities and differences when communicating with foreigners.	4.05	0.74	Agree
(35) I am aware that when cultural styles and languages are used differently, they have different impacts on social and working situations.	4.09	0.72	Agree
(36) I believe that the differences between my own cultural identity and the cultural identity of the other party will have an impact on intercultural communicative competence.	3.93	0.81	Agree
Total	3.77	0.85	Agree

It can be seen from Table 1 that ‘knowledge’ was the aspect of ICC where the students reported the most items of ‘undecided,’ as in, ranking from least to most mean averages, Item 16 - *I know the cultural taboos in English-speaking countries* (M= 3.31; SD=0.87), Item 19 - *I know some strategies and skills for successful intercultural communicative competence* (M=3.35; SD=0.92), Item 13- *I know the history, geographical environment and social politics of English-speaking countries* (M=3.45; SD=0.86), Item 15 - *I understand the lifestyle and values of English-speaking countries* (M=3.45; SD=0.85), and Item 14 - *I know the social etiquette and religious culture of English-speaking countries* (M=3.43; SD=0.84). The ‘undecided’ responses showing uncertainty could mean a ‘lack’ of the ICC in that aspect.



In addition, the three top highest mean averages in the aspect of ‘knowledge’ which included Item 17 - *I want to understand and compare the basic norms and behavioral knowledge of my own country with those of English-speaking countries* (M=4.04; SD=0.77), Item 15 - *I know the lifestyle and values of my country* (M=4.04; SD=0.73), and Item 10 - *I know the history, geographical environment, and socio-political knowledge of my country* (M=3.85; SD=0.80) yielded some information about the students’ wants in the aspect of ‘knowledge’ and also reported their state of being in that they knew their own country.

For the aspect of the two types of ‘skills’ in ICC, ‘skills – interpreting and relating,’ had two items of ‘undecided,’ while ‘skills - discovery and interaction’ had no item of ‘undecided.’ That could indicate that the students agree that they had some ICC skills of discovery and interaction; however, they still showed uncertainty in their skills of interpretation and relating in Item 28 - *I am sensitive to intercultural communicative differences* (M=3.41; SD=0.912) and Item 29 - *I think my current listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating skills can meet the needs of intercultural communicative competence* (M=3.16; SD=1.09). The student was not sure about their sensitivity to the intercultural communicative differences and they didn’t have confidence that their language ability could meet the needs of intercultural communicative competence.

In addition, the three top highest mean averages in the aspect of ‘Skills of interpreting and relating’ which included Item 25 - *When communicating with foreigners, I can treat them politely* (M=4.09; SD=0.71), Item 26 - *When communicating with foreigners, I can avoid mentioning private topics related to foreigners* (M=3.98; SD=0.76), and Item 22 - *When communicating with foreigners, I can try to avoid offending them in terms of their language, dress, and behavior* (M=3.94; SD=0.81) could impart that they thought they could cope with the communication situations in the presence of foreigners for a certain degree.

The three top highest mean averages in the aspect of ‘skills-discovery and interaction’ which included Item 32 - *When intercultural conflicts and misunderstandings occur, I can reflect and learn and seek proper solutions* (M=3.75; SD=0.77), Item 31 - *can use a variety of methods, techniques, and strategies to learn foreign languages and cultures* (M=3.6; SD=0.87), and Item 33 - *I can directly acquire knowledge related to intercultural communicative competence through contact with foreigners*. (M=3.52; SD=0.96) could indicate that the students thought that they had the skills to find solutions for the intercultural conflicts that occurred, could acquire ICC knowledge when interacting with foreigners, and could use various ICC methods and strategies. This indicated that, to some extent, the students had self-confidence in the aspect of the ICC skills – discovery and interaction without any item of ‘undecided.’

For the aspect of attitude which had only one ‘undecided’ mean range, the top three highest mean averages included Item 9 - *I am willing to take an intercultural communication course* (M=4.20; SD=0.78), Item 6 - *I am willing to learn about foreigners from different cultures* (M=4.17; SD=0.79), and Item 4 - *I am willing to have a strong level of foreign languages* (M=4.02; SD= 0.96), which indicating the students showed positive attitudes towards having a ICC course, willing to learn about foreigners from different cultures, and willing to have a strong level of foreign languages respectively. The only item that the students showed uncertainty in the aspect of attitudes included Item 5 - *I am willing to suspend belief in one’s meanings and behaviors and to analyze them from the viewpoint of the others with whom I am engaging* (M=3.49; SD= 1.02), which could show that the students did not quite understand about holding up one’s own belief and trying to get into the viewpoint of the other



communication partner, which could represent the 'lack' in the aspect of ICC attitudes.

For the aspect of 'cultural awareness had no item of 'undecided', the top three highest mean averages included Item 35 - *I am aware that when cultural styles and languages are used differently, they have different impacts on social and working situations.* (M=4.09; SD=0.72), Item 34 - *I think there must be cultural similarities and differences when communicating with foreigners.* (M=4.05; SD=0.74), and Item 36- *I believe that the differences between my own cultural identity and the cultural identity of the other party will have an impact on intercultural communicative competence.* (M=3.93; SD= 0.81), which could indicate that the students were aware of the significance of cultural variations in communication, willing to learn about foreigners from different cultures, and willing to acknowledge the influence of cultural identity on intercultural interactions.

Discussion

There were two open-ended questionnaire items from which the data was analyzed by the content analysis as follows.

Question1. Have you ever had a failure in intercultural communication? If you have, please share the experience. What do you think were the reasons for the failure?

Based on the responses provided by the 181 students, it can be observed that a majority of them (approximately 155 out of 181) reported that they have not had any experience of failure in intercultural communication. This indicates that a significant portion of the students surveyed either have limited exposure to intercultural interactions or have not encountered situations where communication barriers or cultural differences led to failures.

While the reasons for the lack of failure experiences varied among the students, several common themes can be identified from their responses:

Limited language proficiency: Many students mentioned that their poor language skills, such as limited vocabulary, pronunciation issues, or lack of fluency, hindered their ability to express themselves effectively in English or other foreign languages. This language barrier often led to communication breakdowns and difficulties in conveying their intended messages.

Insufficient cultural knowledge: Some students acknowledged that their lack of understanding of foreign cultures, customs, and social norms contributed to their potential failure in intercultural communication. They recognized the importance of cultural awareness and expressed a desire to learn more about different cultures to avoid misunderstandings.

Lack of experience and exposure: A considerable number of students mentioned that their limited opportunities for intercultural communication, either due to personal circumstances or the lack of foreign interactions in their daily lives, prevented them from encountering failure experiences. This indicated that their responses were influenced by their limited exposure rather than their competence in intercultural communication.

Question 2. Have you got any problems or difficulties with your learning English? If yes, please specify.

Based on the given responses, 18 out of the 181 students responded with "no" difficulty. Here is a breakdown of the students' responses based on their difficulties:

(1) Attitudes: Lack of motivation and interest in learning English (e.g., finding it boring, lacking patience) Shyness and timidity in speaking English



(2) Knowledge: Limited vocabulary and difficulty in remembering words; Weak grasp of grammar rules and sentence structures; Lack of knowledge about Western culture and intercultural communication

(3) Skills of interpreting and relating: Difficulty in expressing feelings accurately in English; Inability to understand and translate complex sentences; Problems with English comprehension and understanding the intended meaning; Inadequate ability to analyze grammar and sentence patterns.

(4) Skills of discovery and interaction: Poor listening skills, struggling to catch important information in conversations and audio materials; Insufficient oral communication skills, including pronunciation, fluency, and self-expression; Inability to organize language and respond effectively in English conversations; Lack of confidence in speaking English, fear of making mistakes.

(5) Critical cultural awareness: Limited understanding of cultural differences between China and English-speaking countries; Lack of exposure to authentic English language use and cultural immersion; Difficulty in comprehending idioms and cultural references in English texts;

What do students most want to learn?

From the students' responses, the most common needs in learning English are:

- (1) Improving listening skills and comprehension.
- (2) Enhancing vocabulary and word retention
- (3) Developing oral communication skills, including pronunciation and fluency
- (4) Gaining a deeper understanding of grammar rules and sentence structures.
- (5) Increasing cultural awareness and intercultural communication competence.

These areas should be prioritized in designing English language learning programs and providing targeted support to address the student's needs effectively.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has provided insights into the intercultural communicative competence (ICC) of English major undergraduate students in a university setting. The analysis of students' attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness reveals both areas of competence and areas where improvement is needed.

The findings indicate that students generally possess a certain level of ICC, with positive attitudes towards intercultural experiences and an openness to learning. However, there are specific areas of concern. In terms of knowledge, students display uncertainty in their understanding of cultural aspects, such as the history, etiquette, and lifestyle of English-speaking countries. They also lack confidence in their ability to apply their language skills effectively in intercultural contexts.

Regarding skills, students exhibit self-assurance in skills related to discovery, interaction, and critical cultural awareness. However, some areas, particularly skills of interpreting and relating, show uncertainty. This includes sensitivity to intercultural differences and language capabilities.

The study also highlights students' desires for improvement in various aspects of language learning. These include enhancing listening skills, vocabulary, oral communication, grammar understanding, and intercultural competence. These preferences should inform curriculum design and educational strategies, emphasizing targeted interventions to enhance students' overall ICC.

Additionally, the study identified limited exposure to foreign cultures, language barriers, and cultural gaps as challenges faced by students in learning English and developing intercultural



competence. The importance of bridging these gaps through authentic language use, exposure to idioms, and cultural references is emphasized.

Recommendations

To address these findings, the study recommends focused interventions. These interventions should target enhancing language proficiency, cultural knowledge, and exposure to intercultural experiences. The study advocates for the cultivation of skills such as interpreting and relating, which are crucial for effective intercultural communication.

In conclusion, while English major undergraduate students demonstrate potential for intercultural communicative competence, there is a need for systematic and strategic efforts to improve their overall competence. This includes aligning curriculum design with student needs, offering opportunities for authentic intercultural experiences, and providing training in critical skills for effective intercultural communication. By addressing these areas, educators can better prepare students for successful communication in a diverse and globalized world.

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[190]

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