

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# A Research on Intercultural Communication Competence of Students from Sino-Foreign Universities

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Received: 22 August 2024 Accepted: 2 September 2024 Published: 12 September 2024

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## Abstract

With the continuous development of economic globalization and China's reform and opening up, Chinese-foreign cooperation in school administration is a new model in the reform of higher education in China, and it is of significant relevance to improving students' intercultural communication competence as well as cultivating talents that society urgently requires. In light of this, this study takes the senior undergraduates of XJ University, a Sino-British university as the research subject, assesses students' intercultural communication competence with a self-developed six-dimensional framework inventory based on the Knowing-Doing model, and analyzes the unresolved issues and influencing factors in quality cultivation in Sino-foreign cooperative education programs from the perspectives of schools and teachers. The study hopes to provide effective countermeasures for the effective development of students' intercultural communicative competence.

**Keywords:** Sino-Foreign Universities, Intercultural Communication Competence, Globalization, Knowing-Doing Model

## 1. Introduction

The term "intercultural communication" refers to communication between persons from diverse social, religious, ethnic, and regional backgrounds, as well as communication between people from distinct linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Piller, 2012). Typical intercultural communication refers to interactions between individuals from different nations, such as interactions between foreign lecturers and students from other countries in Chinese colleges. Many Chinese college students have excellent academic abilities, but they frequently lack information and comprehension of other cultures. Furthermore, they are accustomed to interpreting other nations' cultures in their own way of thinking, which is prone to misconceptions throughout the communication process and cannot produce the optimum learning impact. As a result, in the process of teaching to assist students in acquiring intercultural communication competence, it is not only a simple language instruction but also the cultivation of students' cultural awareness, so that students can

more appropriately use language, acquire knowledge, and improve their ability according to the context and cultural background.

For students in Sino-Foreign Joint Education Institutions (SFJEI), developing intercultural communication competence can be more important. Given that a substantial proportion of the personnel at SFJEIs comes from abroad and has diverse cultural experiences, ICC is vital to the regular interactions between students and professors (Meiqiong, 2009). Furthermore, the educational modes may differ not only in disciplinary settings such as curriculum and syllabus but also in more subtle aspects such as expectations for student-teacher relationships and students' self-management, which are largely embedded in the cultures from which the educational modes have been developed. It has also been established that a substantial percentage of SFJEI alumni intend to continue their studies overseas after graduation, which can be a powerful motivator for them to enhance their ICC.

**Citation:** Lu Wang, Juming Shen, A Research on Intercultural Communication Competence of Students from Sino-Foreign Universities. *Journal of Educational System*. 2024;6(1):12-21.

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Despite the fact that many researchers have produced extensive reports on the examination of ICC development and cultivation, the existing literature and studies do not give sufficient information on ICC development in SFJEIs, let alone that no inventory is tailored to assessing the ICC of students in SFJEIs. Nonetheless, as one of the most internationalized institutions, with students and teachers from diverse cultural backgrounds studying and working together, the status of their students' ICC may demonstrate the relationship between an institution's internationalization and the development of students' ICC.

In this study, XJ University, a Sino-British university will be used as an example, and the ICC status of its students has been investigated in a three-step procedure. As a first step, the previously established Knowing-Doing inventory to measure the students' ICC has been adapted and modified for students in SFJEIs. Second, more than 300 students from different majors and ages at XJ University were surveyed and investigated in relation to their status of ICC based on the inventory. The purpose of the study is to understand the present situation of students' ICC development in SFJEIs, analyze the various factors affecting students' ICC development, and provide references and suggestions for their future cultivation and improvement, both of which are of great practical significance.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 The Concept of ICC

In 1959, Edward Hall introduced the concept and associated theory of intercultural communication in the context of business, which marked the official emergence of intercultural communication. The term "communication competence" was introduced by Hymes (1972) and expanded to include four components: grammatical correctness, pragmatic application, contextuality, and language applicability. Research on intercultural communication competence has been conducted by a variety of researchers from different perspectives and domains since then, with various definitions established (Byram, 1997; Chen, 1989; Fantini, Arias-Galicia, & Guay, 2002; Kim & Hubbard, 2007). The conceptualization process of intercultural communication competency includes "multiple nouns," "various fields," and "numerous connotations." According to most academics, intercultural communication competence refers to a person's ability to carry out interaction tasks with members of another language cultural background

in a particular intercultural setting in an acceptable and effective manner (Chen & Starosta, 1996; Byram, 1997; Fantini et al., 2000; Spitzberg, 2000; Dearsdorff, 2004).

Chinese and international researchers define ICC generally in two ways. One group believes that intercultural communication competence and intercultural competence are two distinct ideas. For example, as Byram (1997:70-73) suggests, intercultural communication requires linguistic competence, social language competence, and discourse competence in addition to intercultural competence that comprises knowledge, attitudes, skills, and critical cultural awareness, among other things. The other group is represented by Lustig and Koester, who argue that these two notions are interchangeable.

### 2.2 The Constituents Element of ICC

There are many aspects to the construction of intercultural communication competence. Fantini (2000) et al. propose that intercultural communication competence encompasses three main categories, namely relationship building and maintenance, appropriate communication, and mutual understanding, and its construction can be characterized by five dimensions, including awareness, attitudes, skills, knowledge, and proficiency. In Bennett's (1993, 2011) definitions of intercultural communicative competence, three abilities are included - transcending ethnocentrism, considering other cultures, and responding appropriately. Lusting and Koeste (2007) identified knowledge, motivation, and conduct as the three primary components of intercultural communication competency, while Chen (1989; 2010) argues that there are four elements, namely personal attributes, communication abilities, psychological adjustment, and cultural awareness.

Although researchers' interpretations vary and research on intercultural communication competence is disputed, academics' view of the intercultural communication components is congruent with the psychological definition of "competence," which includes "knowledge" or "cognitive ability" and "skill" or "behavioral ability." Typically, knowledge includes "the information required for appropriate and effective interaction as well as the cognitive dispositions required to obtain such information," and frequently contains information about people, communication rules, situations, and standard expectations governing interaction with members of other cultures. In communicative settings, skills are the visible manifestations of effective and appropriate behavior.

## 2.3 The Models of ICC

In order to understand people’s intercultural communication competence level, applied research mostly relates to the use of measures to assess intercultural communication competence. There are many different types of models of ICC, including scales on communication behavior, intercultural sensitivity, intercultural adaptation, etc., that have been developed as a result of considerable research on the assessment of intercultural communication skills. The following provides a detailed introduction regarding the dynamic of intercultural communication competency that has developed into four modalities with high acceptability, influence, and operability.

### 2.3.1 Chen’s Four-Dimensional Model (1989)

Chen incorporated personal attributes, communication skills, psychological adjustment, and cultural

awareness in his four-dimensional intercultural communication model, each of which is further subdivided (represented below). Personal attributes pertain to the communicator’s personality traits such as self-disclosure, self-awareness, and self-concept. The verbal and nonverbal interactions which communicators use to effectively communicate, such as information transmission, social skills, behavioral flexibility, and management of interactions, are all communication skills. A communicator’s ability to adapt to a new cultural environment, including coping with setbacks, pressure, alienation, and ambiguity, is part of the psychological adaptation dimension. Understanding cultural variety and overcoming ethnocultural centralization, encompassing social values, social practices, social norms, and social systems, are two concepts that fall under the umbrella of cultural awareness.

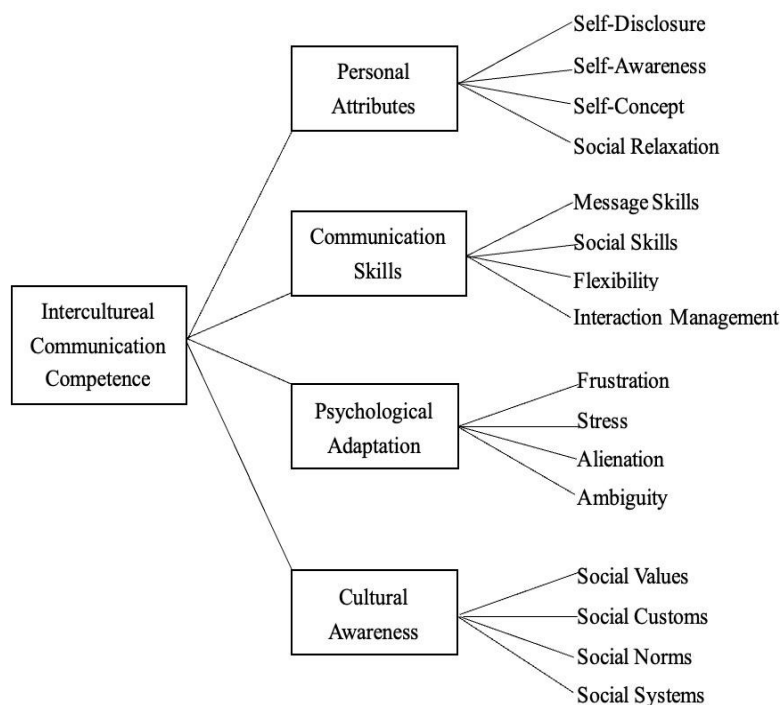


Figure 1. Chen’s four-dimensional model of ICC

Chen’s approach illustrates an appropriate classification of intercultural communication competence in earlier days. However, it overlooks the intrinsic link between the four dimensions, therefore, while it is highly operational, it is not currently employed in many survey scales and still has room for further expansion.

### 2.3.2 Byram’s Model (1997)

Byram’s paradigm argues that intercultural communication competence is formed on the basis of intercultural competence, which plays a role in combination with linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, and discourse competence

in intercultural communication activities. Specifically, intercultural competence has five distinct components. The first is attitudes, which relate to curiosity and an open mind, not passing negative judgment on other cultures while remaining exclusively favorable comments towards their own culture. The second element is knowledge, which refers to having a general cognition of how people communicate with one another, with various cultural and social groups, with society as a whole, and specifically with one’s own circle of friends and family. The third element is interpretive/relating skills, which means the ability to interpret communication and events from other cultures in the context of one’s own relevant cultural

experience. The ability to acquire new cultural knowledge and capitalize on real-time communication by inquiring about other cultures' values, beliefs, and behaviors is known as discovery/interaction skills, the fourth component of Byram's model. Finally, critical cultural awareness, or the ability to assess, critically and on the basis of explicit criteria, stances, and practices in one's own and other cultures, is a fifth key component.

Byram's approach broadens the intercultural communication system by highlighting capacity interdependence while emphasizing the dynamic link between distinct components. However, the model fails to distinguish between the two categories of intercultural communication competency and intercultural competence, nor does it account for the hierarchical relationship between the various abilities.

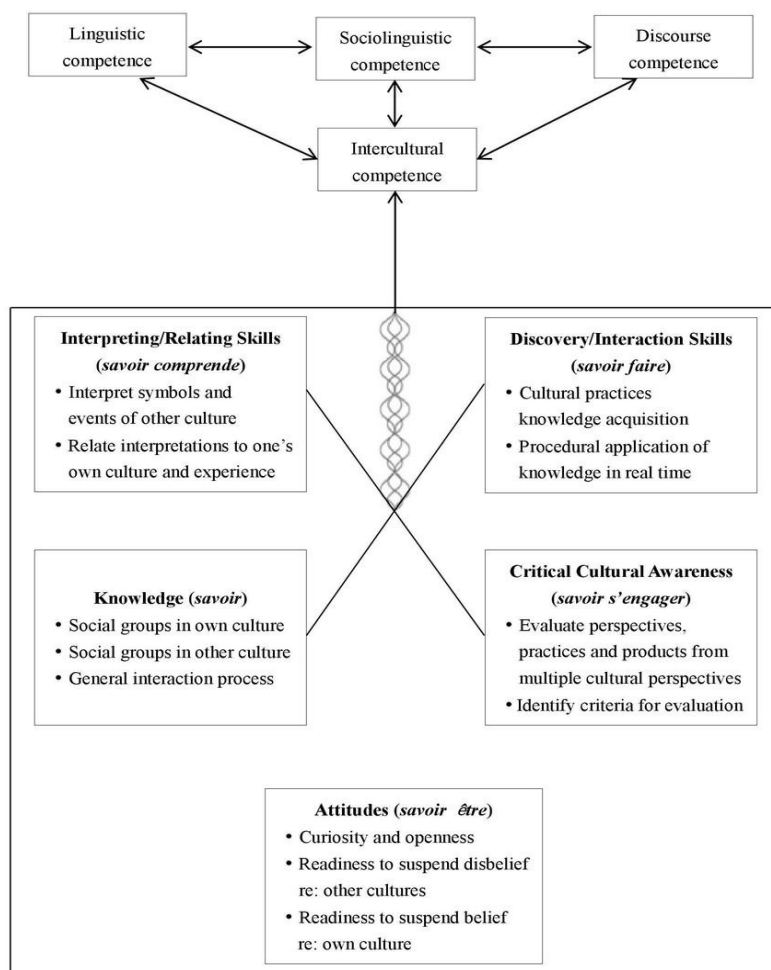


Figure 2. Byram's model of ICC

### 2.3.3 Deardorff's Pyramid Model (2004)

Intercultural communication is a process of adjustment and adaptation. Deardorff's model encompasses the process through which individual communicators' attitudes, knowledge, understanding, and abilities evolve, as well as the internal and outward outcomes of the communication process. The pyramid model is composed of four layers. The initial tier of the pyramid serves as the basis and framework for subsequent intercultural communication competency development, including respect (valuing other cultures and cultural diversity), openness (learning intercultural knowledge, understanding people from different cultural backgrounds, and not being easy to judge), curiosity and discovery (tolerating ambiguity

and uncertainty). The second layer consists of knowledge, understanding, and skills, which are mutually reinforcing. An in-depth understanding of intercultural communication and a solid knowledge base aid in improving intercultural skills such as listening, observation, interpretation, analyzing, evaluating, and relating, while a greater understanding of cross-cultural skills supports reflection and the linking of previously learned information and skills. The components of attitude, knowledge, and skills at the bottom two levels of the pyramid model combine to generate the third (desired internal outcome) and fourth levels (desired external outcome). Intercultural competence is equated with intercultural communicative competence in Deardorff's pyramidal model of ICC.

The pyramid model highlights the progressive nature of intercultural communication, with an emphasis on the transition of attitudes, knowledge, understanding, and skills to intrinsic and extrinsic objectives. However,

it bypasses cultural values, cultural sensitivity, local and global culture consciousness, self-identity and empathy, and other related issues.

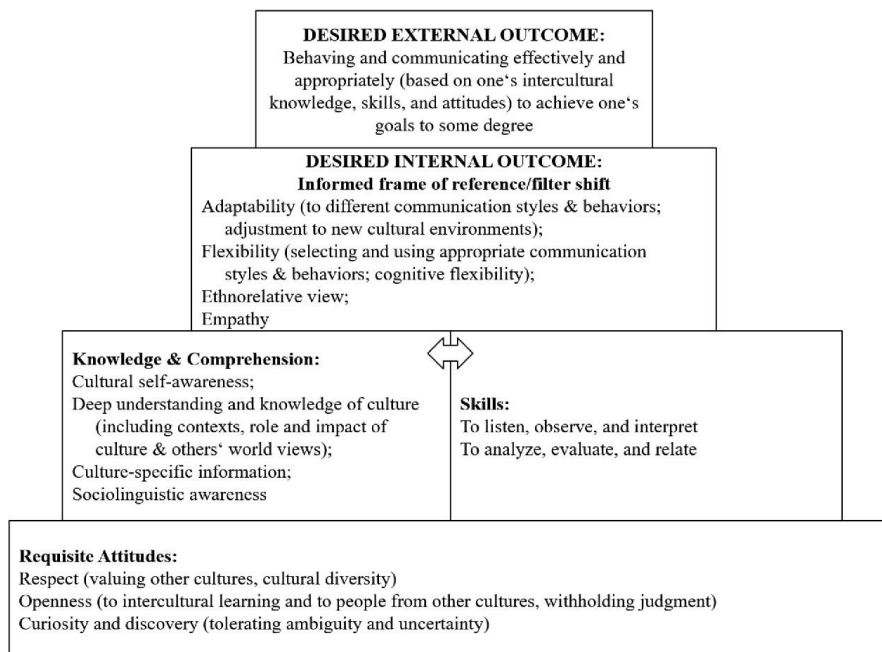


Figure 3. Deardorff's Pyramid Model of ICC

### 2.3.4 Gao's Knowing-and-Doing Model (2004)

As an extension of an earlier model, Gao (2014) interpreted and applied the philosophical proposition of Knowledge-and-Doing and created an assessment of the intercultural communication competence that is suitable for Chinese college students based on the conceptual framework of Knowing-and-Doing.

The Knowing-and-Doing Model consists of two systems - The knowledge system and the Doing system. The intercultural communication knowledge system is a system of knowledge, awareness, and critical thinking, all of which are interrelated and interact with each other to form a metaphysical knowledge system that plays a guiding role in intercultural communication behaviors and activities in intercultural communication competence. Specifically, knowledge is portrayed as surface-level and in-depth cultural knowledge, which is manifested in intercultural communication as cultural conceptions and knowledge reservoirs. Awareness relates to cultural sensitivity, self-identity, and local and global cultural awareness, and is particularly reflected in the sensitivity to the similarities and differences between foreign culture and domestic culture, as well as the consciousness of adjusting one's own cognition to achieve effective communication in cross-cultural settings. Critical thinking refers to theoretical and conceptual thinking using logical

reasoning in intercultural communication, which is composed of logic and inference. The Doing system of intercultural communication that is intrinsically relevant and corresponds to the knowledge system is further divided into three modular of attitudes, skills, and strategy. Attitude is the behavioral propensity of individuals to evaluate or judge others or objects in accordance with certain cultural norms, primarily characterized by openness, inclusivity, and flexibility. The skill set includes verbal and non-verbal skills, interactivity, and adaptability, and the strategy consists of code-switching strategies, cooperative strategies, and transference strategies.

In the Ming Dynasty, a Chinese philosopher named Wang Yangming elaborated on the idea of the unity of knowledge and doing from the perspectives of developing a conscience and upholding moral standards, which advanced Chinese traditional culture's comprehension of the connection between knowledge and doing to its pinnacle. Gao's (2004) inventive design of the connected but distinct Knowledge-and-Doing system encourages the transformation of western conceptual categories in China, meanwhile facilitating the modern application of Chinese traditional cultural theory and conducive to evaluating one's level of competence based on the sum of their knowledge and doing in the contexts of cross-cultural communication.

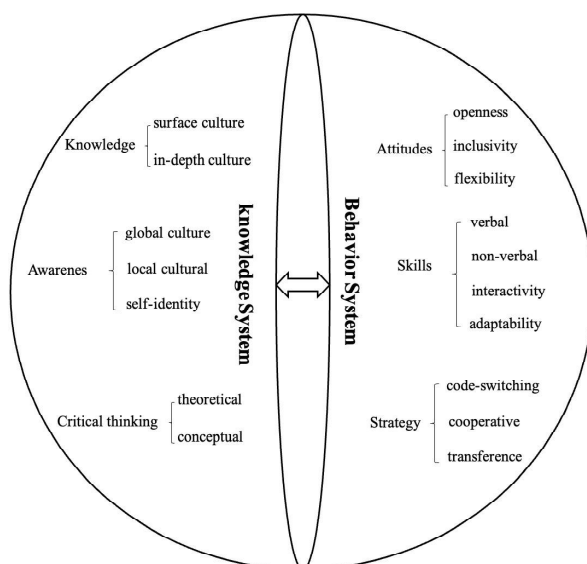


Figure 4. Gao's Knowing-and-Doing Model of ICC

### 2.3.5 The Assessment of ICC

Empirical studies on intercultural communicative competence assessment have been carried out in foreign countries for a long time (e.g. Ruben, 1976; Bennett, 1993; Kelly & Meyers, 1995; Chen & Strostga, 1996; Hammer et al. 2003). In China, many attempts have been made to develop ICC assessment instruments that specifically target students in China. Xie & Fan (2004) created a scale to assess students' ICC in China with an emphasis on those majoring in English. From the vantage points of knowledge, skills, and awareness, Adams & Song (2009) explored a test model of intercultural communication competency. Gao (2014) established a set of evaluation systems suitable for Chinese college students, which used the conceptual framework of integrating Knowledge-and- Doing to test students' knowledge, awareness, critical thinking ability, attitude, skills, strategies, and the amid interrelationships. However, the volume and complexity of research articles and monographs on intercultural communication skills training are not proportional to its relevance and practical demands domestically.

### 3. Research Question

The purpose of this study is to investigate and analyze the intercultural communication competence of senior students at XJ University, as well as to investigate the students' performance and norms in areas such as intercultural verbal communication, intercultural nonverbal communication, empathy ability in intercultural communication, and the ability to resolve contradictions and conflicts. The research question of this study is "What is the status of students' intercultural communication competence in Sino-Foreign Universities?" The study also intends to

investigate the applicability of the model of Knowing-Doing to analyze students' ICC in SFJEIs, as well as to explore the problems encountered in the process of improving students' intercultural communication competence and propose possible solutions.

### 4. Methodology and Results

This study examines the state of ICC in SFJEIs using the method of questionnaire survey and unstructured interviews. XJ university, a Sino-British University has been chosen as the subject, and the investigation has been done via three steps. First, an inventory that is tailored to assess the students' ICC in XJTLU has been established by adapting the one created for regular Chinese college students based on the Knowing-Doing model. Second, a survey of more than 400 students from all majors at XJTLU has been carried out to learn about their ICC status. A total of 398 valid questionnaires were collected. The questionnaire consists of two sections. The first section contains basic information about the respondents, such as occupation, age, profession, nationality, and current location. The second section is an inventory that measures the students' present intercultural communication ability using the modified inventory from the Knowing-and-Doing Model. This inventory consists of six parts which focus on the following aspects: 1) knowledge of culture and cultural differences; 2) awareness of cultural differences and potential impact; 3) critical and logical thinking; 4) attitude toward cultural differences and intercultural communication; 5) skills of intercultural communication; 6) strategies for improving intercultural communication competence. The inventory followed the Likert scale with "1" indicating least competent and "5" indicating most competent.

This study used the anonymous self-completion questionnaire approach, and all questionnaire responses are neither correct nor incorrect. Respondents must reply based on the objective circumstances as well as their subjective evaluation. 400 questionnaires were distributed, and 320 questionnaires were returned with The details can be viewed as below:

Gender		Year			
Male	Female	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4
119	183	143	79	41	41
39.1%	60.2%	47%	26%	13.50%	13.50%

School/Department						
School of Advanced Technology	Design School	School of TV and Film Art	School of Humanities and Social Sciences	Business School	School of Science	School of Entrepreneurship
39	28	8	37	101	73	18
12.80%	9.20%	2.60%	12.20%	33.20%	24%	5.90%

According to the survey, the average score of all the six aspects is 3.93, with the highest score (4.3) achieved in the aspect of “awareness of cultural differences and potential impact” and the lowest in the aspect

a recovery rate of 80%, of which 304 were valid and the effective rate was 95%. The value of Cronbach  $\alpha$  is 0.963, indicating that the research has very high reliability; the result of KMO is 0.944, indicating that the research has very high adequacy.

of “knowledge of culture and cultural differences” (3.24). The scores achieved in detail can be presented as below:

1) knowledge of culture and cultural differences	3.24
2) awareness of cultural differences and potential impact;	4.3
3) critical and logical thinking;	3.9
4) attitude toward cultural differences and intercultural communication;	4.18
5) skills of intercultural communication;	4.12
6) strategies for improving intercultural communication competence.	4.16

## 5. Discussion

The findings of this study generally demonstrate the status quo of intercultural communication competence for students at XJTLU. According to the findings, the great majority of kids are familiar with other cultures. The findings show that when there are no inequalities in values, the majority of students are willing to exert subjective effort. There are three key findings that worth discussion, as they may associate directly with the unique context of Sino-foreign institutions.

First, the data showed that the students in the test achieved higher scores in intercultural awareness and intercultural attitude, which may be related to the fact that XJTLU teaches in English. “Immersion” English teaching is conducive to improving students’ intercultural communication ability. This teaching method emphasizes the use of the second language that is not their mother tongue. In this language learning environment, students acquire foreign language ability in the process of learning professional courses, and simultaneously enhance students ‘professional knowledge and language skills. Moreover, in

terms of teaching tasks, XJ University has a high proportion of foreign teachers. Students often need to talk with foreign teachers and administrators in the learning process; The college also provides many opportunities for students to go abroad for exchange, so students in the International College have a broad international vision, and their intercultural awareness and intercultural attitude are reflected in the eight modules of intercultural communication competence. The cultivation of intercultural awareness and intercultural attitude is directly related to the use of foreign language teaching instead of mother tongue teaching. Immersion English teaching can better cultivate students’ intercultural awareness and intercultural attitude.

Besides, the students showed obvious shortcomings in intercultural knowledge, which may be related to the lack of courses aimed at cultivating students’ intercultural communication ability in the curriculum of the college. In terms of curriculum setting, the curriculum system of XJ university lacks relevant courses to cultivate students’ intercultural communication ability and knowledge of different

cultural backgrounds. The courses to cultivate students' English skills are mainly divided into special training for oral, reading, writing and other abilities, which mainly focus on the cultivation of students' English language ability and emphasize the ability of students to use English for their professional learning, but do not involve cross-cultural knowledge and culture-related learning, so students have obvious shortcomings in cross-cultural knowledge. In addition, due to the diversified cultural background of teachers in the international College, students need to deal with different cultural background knowledge in classroom learning and daily communication with different teachers, and lack of support of intercultural theoretical framework, students are generally not confident in their intercultural knowledge. The average value of students in the cross-cultural knowledge plate is the minimum value of the eight plates. The score was 2.78. The lack of special cultural courses makes students lack of necessary cultural knowledge in the process of intercultural communication, and lack of detailed understanding of the cultural background of the other party, which leads to the inability to choose reasonable topics and adjust communication strategies according to the cultural background of the other party in the process of communication.

Thirdly, the results of the questionnaire showed that the average score of students' language competence was 2.95, which was far lower than the average score of the overall intercultural communication competence, showing obvious disadvantages, mainly showing that students could not accurately and normatively use language in the process of intercultural communication. This is mainly related to the fact that the distribution of students' learning priorities focuses on professional learning and the evaluation feedback mechanism of professional teachers. In terms of English language skills learning, students' learning motivation emphasizes on the learning of professional knowledge. Students only learn English courses in the first and second academic years, and all the subsequent courses are professional courses. Professional teachers do not have the requirements and awareness of cultivating students' intercultural communication abilities in the teaching process. Moreover, in the process of professional learning, the feedback received by students focused on the accuracy of professional knowledge, rather than the accuracy or professionalism of language use. It can be seen that only two academic years of specialized English language courses cannot meet the needs of students to standardize and accurately use language in

intercultural communication activities. Although the specialized courses are taught in English, the feedback evaluation mechanism is not very helpful to improve students' English language accuracy.

Finally, less than half of the students, as shown in the survey results, can frequently communicate with their foreign professors, despite this phenomenon being almost widespread in many Chinese campuses. XJ is a Sino-foreign cooperative university, which gives it an edge over traditional institutions in that more than 50% of the faculty members are from outside. 6.7% of respondents to the study report never communicating with foreign teachers, according to the survey data. Even though 6.7% might seem like a small percentage, this issue is really critical when it comes to the background of XJ University. As many as 60% of the students considered intercultural communication with foreign teachers as "very pleasant", while 25% felt only "normal" from such communication. Most notably, the remaining 15 percent of the students answered that they "did not" feel pleasure from this kind of communication. According to the questionnaire responses, when students felt that they did not feel pleasure or relaxation, they were less likely to actively participate in the communication.

## 6. Conclusion

China's communist economic system, which is getting increasingly excellent, requires a huge number of extroverted and complicated professional talents. The target orientation of talent training lies in the market demand. Focus should be placed on developing skill based on market demand. SFJEIs have unique advantages in cultivating students' foreign language skills and communication skills, expanding their international vision and other comprehensive qualities. Intercultural communication is an inevitable requirement for international exchange and cooperation and a fundamental need for the development of global economic integration. To improve the training of students' intercultural communication competence, the following strategies should be adopted.

First, students should keep improving their language communication competence as it is a prerequisite for the successful development of cross-cultural communication. It is challenging for students to effectively express their ideas or comprehend the information being conveyed by the communication target if they lack adequate language skills (such as a sufficient vocabulary, a lack of understanding of the cultural connotation of words, grammatical errors, inadequate oral language ability, incorrect



pronunciation, ignoring the semantic differences between Chinese and the target language words, etc.). This can easily lead to communication barriers, preventing them from carrying out effective intercultural communication.

Second, students should maintain enthusiasm and sensitivity. It is an objective fact that there are differences between Chinese culture and the culture of the destination country. Different cultures are neither inherently good nor harmful. Their customs and behaviors differ since they are only impacted by history, religion, and society. Students should learn how to integrate Chinese culture and foreign culture, seek common ground while reserving differences, and better integrate into the study and life of the destination country. Students in Chinese-foreign cooperative school-running programs should actively compare Chinese culture with the culture of the destination country, strengthen the comparison of cultural differences, maintain the confidence of Chinese culture, conduct intercultural communication on the basis of respect and tolerance for different cultures, and improve their intercultural communication competence.

Third, as most of the students surveyed believe that lack of cultural knowledge is the biggest obstacle to their intercultural communication because it is difficult to communicate properly without understanding the culture and customs of the other party. In order to equip students with certain cultural knowledge, schools can set up relevant courses to introduce foreign geography, art and history, and other contents closely related to culture. Foreign teachers can help students understand the hometown and culture of foreign teachers by holding film exhibitions and art exhibitions. With the help of forums and other forms, Chinese and foreign students are organized to communicate and study. The similar age makes more topics of communication between Chinese and foreign students and makes cross-cultural communication smoother. On this basis, intercultural communication between students and foreign teachers is also easier to carry out.

Finally, it is necessary to integrate and optimize the teacher resources of both China and foreign countries for the construction of teachers in the relevant universities of SFJEIs. Before the teaching of Chinese-foreign cooperative school-running projects is carried out, it is necessary to formulate curriculum standards that meet international standards. Chinese teachers should have excellent foreign language skills and

professional knowledge, and receive certain hours of pre-job training before teaching, so as to have the corresponding international curriculum teaching ability and cross-cultural literacy. In addition, Chinese-foreign cooperative education programs should regularly send teachers to foreign cooperative universities to attend lectures and receive professional training, participate in international academic conferences and carry out international educational exchanges. In order to enable the students of Chinese-foreign cooperative education programs to integrate into the study and life of foreign schools smoothly in the future, an effective curriculum introduction mechanism should be formulated to show the bilingual characteristics, cross-cultural characteristics and even English teaching characteristics of Chinese-foreign cooperative education programs. The curriculum design of Chinese-foreign cooperative education projects should also present international characteristics, that is, cooperative learning and inquiry learning, rather than traditional individual learning and passive acceptance of learning.

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