

From Policy to Practice: Evaluating the Implementation of Intercultural Competence in Vocational English Classrooms in China

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Abstract

As China's vocational education system becomes increasingly international, integrating intercultural communication competence (ICC) into English education has become a national priority. Policy documents such as China's Education Modernization 2035 and the English Curriculum Standards for Higher Vocational Education Institutions (2021) emphasize the cultivation of ICC to enhance global employability. However, questions remain about how these policy directives will be interpreted and implemented in the classroom. This study investigates the implementation of ICC in specialist English classrooms through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with teachers and students, and analysis of teaching materials documents. The study uses the Integrated Model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (IMICC) to identify how ICC is reflected in teaching practices, teachers' understanding, and students' experiences. The results show significant differences in the integration of ICC across institutions, including limited teacher training, superficial coverage of intercultural topics, and a focus on language over intercultural goals. The article concludes with contextual recommendations for improving ICC teaching and better aligning teaching practices with national policy goals.

Keywords: Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC), Vocational English, Curriculum Implementation, Classroom Practice, Teacher Perception, China, Policy-to-Practice Gap

Introduction

In an era of rapid globalization and cross-border mobility, the ability to communicate effectively across cultures, commonly referred to as intercultural communication competence (ICC), has become a core goal of education systems worldwide. Particularly in vocational education, which is closely linked to career opportunities, the promotion of ICC is increasingly recognized as a strategic necessity to prepare students for integration into international and multicultural work environments (Deardorff, 2006; Holmes and Peña Dix, 2022).

In China, the promotion of ICC is closely linked to the country's overall ambitions towards educational reform and internationalization. Policy documents such as Education

Modernization 2035 and the 2021 English Curriculum Standards for Higher Vocational Education Institutions emphasize the need to produce graduates who are not only fluent in English but also have intercultural sensitivity and international communication skills (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2019, 2021). In this regard, English serves not only as a language subject but also as a means to develop students' international perspectives and intercultural exchange (Holmes, Ganassin, and Lee, 2022).

However, translating these ambitious policy ideas into everyday educational practice remains a major challenge. Although some vocational schools have initiated reforms to integrate ICC into English teaching, implementation is often hampered by inadequate teacher training, limited access to local practical materials, and the absence of clear teaching models (Chui and Mohammed, 2024; Jiang, 2024). As Su (2023) notes, ICC integration often remains at the level of political rhetoric, with limited progress towards in-depth educational transformation.

This study investigates how ICC is conceptualized and operationalized in Chinese professional English programs. By analyzing national policy documents, curriculum development frameworks, and classroom practices, the authors aim to identify systemic and pedagogical barriers to implementation and explore how teachers in the field interpret and negotiate the goals of ICS within their local institutional contexts.

Literature Review

Intercultural Communication Competence in Education

Intercultural communication competence (ICC) is widely recognized as a multidimensional concept that encompasses cognitive, affective, and behavioral components that promote effective and appropriate interaction in diverse cultural contexts. Deardorff (2006) emphasizes that ICC requires not only knowledge of cultural systems and values, but also openness, curiosity, and adaptability in communication. Based on this principle, Arasaratnam (2009) proposed an empirical framework that integrates these elements into a coherent model, which is now widely used in intercultural education research. Holmes and Peña-Dix (2022) also argue that developing ICC requires coherent and reflective pedagogy and the integration of intercultural content into broader curriculum frameworks and teaching methods.

ICC and English Language Teaching in Vocational Colleges

In Chinese vocational colleges, English is not just a language subject, but also a tool for international participation and employment. National policy frameworks, including the English curriculum standards for higher education institutions, emphasize the importance of English language education in producing globally minded graduates. However, empirical studies show that its implementation is often test-oriented and linguistically simple, with little attention paid to intercultural interaction (Jiang, 2024; Zhao and Zhang, 2023). Despite the policy intention to support the integration of ICC, Su (2023) notes that most teachers do not receive formal training in intercultural pedagogy. Therefore, ICC is usually implemented superficially, for example by including cultural jokes or symbolic references in textbooks, rather than through integrated, practice-focused teaching.

The Policy-to-Practice Gap in ICC Implementation

Although the 2021 curriculum guidelines set progressive national goals, gaps remain between policy goals and educational realities (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2021). A combination of systemic and institutional constraints, including rigid curricula, lack of resources for intercultural training, and inadequate professional development, prevent ICC from achieving its goals. Jiang (2024) reports that many institutions continue to view intercultural content as optional rather than required, making effective implementation difficult. As Holmes, Ganassin, & Li, (2022) argue, effective ICC integration requires more than policy coordination. It requires local strategies, active faculty engagement, and ongoing organizational commitment to internationalization practices.

Theoretical Framework

This study is informed by two complementary theoretical frameworks: the Integrated Model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (IMICC) and curriculum implementation theory. Together, they offer a conceptual lens for analyzing how ICC is articulated in policy discourse and enacted in vocational English classrooms.

Integrated Model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (IMICC)

The IMICC, developed by Arasaratnam (2009), conceptualizes intercultural competence as comprising three interconnected dimensions: cognitive, affective, and behavioral. The cognitive dimension involves awareness of cultural values, communication norms, and sociocultural context. The affective dimension includes attitudes such as openness, empathy, and curiosity toward cultural diversity. The behavioral dimension reflects one's capacity to adjust communication strategies and respond appropriately in intercultural interactions. As Holmes and Peña Dix (2022) argue, ICC is most effectively cultivated through experiential learning, reflection, and dialogic engagement, rather than through isolated linguistic input.

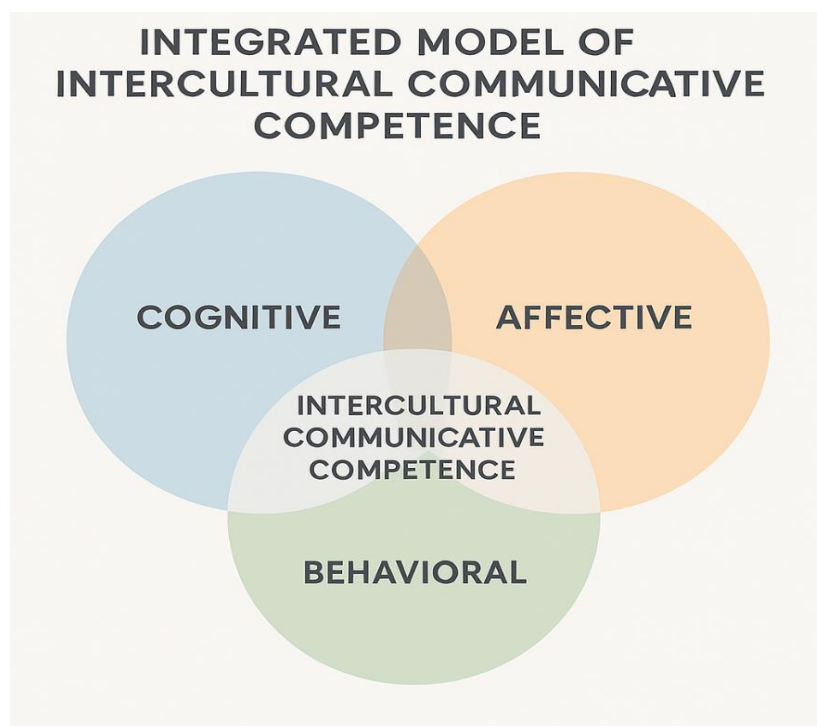


Figure 1. The Integrated Model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (IMICC) (Arasaratnam, 2009).

As illustrated in Figure 1, these three dimensions interact dynamically within educational settings. The figure presented in this study adapts Arasaratnam's (2009) model to highlight its relevance for vocational English education in China, and it serves as an analytic foundation for examining how ICC outcomes are aligned with teaching practice.

Curriculum Implementation Theory

To interpret the implementation of ICC-related goals in education, this study also draws on curriculum implementation theory. This framework positions teachers as active agents who mediate between political intentions and local educational realities. According to Fullan (2016), successful implementation depends not only on policy clarity but also on teacher autonomy, professional identity, organizational culture, and access to ongoing support. Priestley et al. (2021) emphasize that implementation depends on environmental factors such as the school context and teachers' interpretations of curriculum priorities.

In the context of ICC, this theoretical perspective helps explain why clearly stated policy goals do not always lead to significant changes in education. Specialist teachers often work under institutional constraints such as examination pressures, rigid schedules, and strict performance indicators that limit teaching flexibility (Jiang, 2024). These factors highlight the need to examine how teachers navigate these tensions as they attempt to integrate ICC into their daily work (Leask, 2015).

Methodology

Research Design

This study used a qualitative multi-method approach to explore the implementation of ICC in specialized English classrooms across different institutional settings. The case study approach was chosen because of its ability to capture the contextual complexity of educational practices, particularly when top-down policies intersect with local educational responses. Yin (2018) demonstrated that case studies are particularly useful when the boundaries between phenomena and their contexts are not clearly defined. A multifactorial approach allows for the identification of trends across sites, facilitating comparative analysis of how organizational and educational factors influence ICC implementation (Stake, 2006).

Participants

Eighteen participants were selected using purposeful sampling to ensure variation in roles and institutional settings. The sample included 3 English program administrators, 6 English language teachers, and 9 students currently enrolled in vocational English courses. Teachers had at least three years of teaching experience and had been engaged in international exchange programs or curriculum innovation initiatives. Student participants were selected based on their exposure to intercultural content through classroom instruction or mobility experiences. This sampling strategy follows Yin (2018) guidance on maximum variation sampling to capture diverse perspectives within a single study.

Data Collection

Three qualitative data collection methods were employed

Classroom Observation: Six English lessons were observed across three institutions. The observation protocol was guided by the IMICC framework (Arasaratnam, 2009), with attention to how cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of ICC were reflected in

teaching. A five-point frequency scale—Rarely, Occasionally, Sometimes, Often, consistently—was used to code the presence of ICC-related elements, following practices used in classroom discourse research (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

Semi-structured Interviews: Interviews were conducted with all participant groups to explore their conceptualizations of ICC, teaching strategies, institutional conditions, and interpretations of curriculum policy. The interview questions were informed by both the IMICC model and curriculum implementation theory. Transcripts were analyzed thematically using a combination of deductive and inductive strategies (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

Document Analysis: Institutional documents—including syllabi, lesson plans, and instructional materials—were collected to assess how ICC is represented at the curricular level. The analysis focused on identifying both explicit content and implicit assumptions about intercultural learning, and on evaluating alignment with national policy goals. According to Leask (2015), such alignment is a key indicator of meaningful curriculum internationalization.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to interpret all data sources, following Brown and Clarke's (2006) six-stage approach. Initial coding was structured deductively in line with the IMICC framework and curriculum implementation theory (Fullan, 2016; Priestley et al., 2021), after which inductive coding was used to identify perspectives emerging from local learning contexts. To enhance the reliability and validity of the study, triangulation was used between interviews, classroom observations, and program documentation, in line with the principles of naturalistic research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Ethical Considerations

This study received ethical approval from the institution where the researchers conducted the study. All participants were provided with written information explaining the purpose and procedures of the study and informed consent. Pseudonyms were used for all participants and institutional names were coded with letters (e.g., Institution A, B, C) to maintain confidentiality. This practice is in line with the ethical principles published by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018).

Findings

Teachers' Understandings of ICC and Policy Goals

Interview data revealed significant variation in how teachers conceptualized intercultural communication competence (ICC) within vocational English education. A small number of respondents described ICC as a multidimensional capacity that includes empathy, intercultural sensitivity, and adaptability in diverse communicative contexts. However, the majority of teachers equated ICC with surface-level cultural information—such as facts about festivals, etiquette, or cuisine in English-speaking countries. This tendency reflects what Su (2023) identified as a persistent reliance on factual content rather than the integration of intercultural dispositions and interactive skills.

Similarly, Holmes, Ganassin, and Li (2022) found that interculturality is often approached as a peripheral element in educational contexts, rather than being meaningfully embedded into curriculum and pedagogy.

Although many participants acknowledged the presence of ICC in policy documents—such as the 2021 English Curriculum Standards—they expressed uncertainty about how these objectives should be implemented in practice. Several noted that while “intercultural communication” is mentioned in syllabus and official guidelines, there is a lack of concrete teaching strategies or evaluation tools to support enactment. As Jiang (2024) observed, this disconnect between national-level policy discourse and classroom-level expectations contributes to hesitancy and inconsistency among practitioners. Su (2023) further emphasized that without sustained professional training and institutional support, teachers often struggle to confidently integrate intercultural objectives into their instructional routines.

Table 1

Teachers’ Understandings of ICC and Policy Goals

ICC Orientation Type	Main Characteristics	Typical Teacher Statement
Language-Centric	Focus on grammar, vocabulary, and cultural facts; ICC seen as extra content rather than integral goal.	<i>"I mention British holidays sometimes, but the main focus is still grammar and vocabulary."</i>
Surface Cultural Awareness	Acknowledges the value of ICC but limits it to factual knowledge about customs or etiquette.	<i>"I show some videos about Western festivals to make class interesting."</i>
Integrated ICC Perspective	Views ICC as essential to communication; seeks to build empathy, adaptability, and deeper cultural understanding.	<i>"I want students to learn how to communicate across cultures, not just memorize facts."</i>

The majority of teachers fell into the first two categories, indicating that ICC is frequently treated as an optional enrichment component rather than a core educational objective. This trend aligns with previous research that identifies a consistent disconnect between national curriculum policies and classroom-level conceptualizations of ICC in vocational education (Su, 2023). Jiang (2024) further notes that without a pedagogical framework to support teachers' understanding and practice, intercultural goals often remain abstract or underdeveloped in implementation.

The typology outlined in Table 1 highlights not only varying levels of conceptual clarity but also the pressing need for structured professional development and institutional guidance. Supporting teachers in advancing from surface-level cultural inclusion to a fully integrated model of intercultural competence is essential if ICC is to be realized as a meaningful and assessable learning outcome.

Classroom Practices and ICC Integration

Classroom observations revealed that while elements of intercultural communication competence (ICC) were present in several lessons, their inclusion was generally incidental and inconsistently applied. In most cases, intercultural references appeared embedded within textbook reading passages or listening exercises but were not accompanied by elaboration,

class discussion, or reflective follow-up. Teachers rarely capitalized on these opportunities to engage students in deeper intercultural inquiry.

The occurrence and pedagogical treatment of ICC-related content were evaluated using the three core dimensions of the Integrated Model of Intercultural Communication Competence (IMICC) proposed by Arasaratnam (2009):

- i . Cognitive elements—such as factual references to cultural practices or global issues—were observed occasionally but remained isolated from communicative or critical thinking tasks.
- ii . Affective dimensions—including expressions of openness, empathy, or cultural sensitivity—were largely absent from teacher-led interactions and student responses.
- iii . Behavioral strategies—such as simulations, role-plays, or intercultural dialogue exercises—were observed in only one classroom and remained notably absent in the others.

Only one teacher consistently embedded ICC across all three dimensions by designing comparative learning activities, facilitating critical questioning, and integrating realistic intercultural role-plays. This approach contrasts with the dominant instructional pattern observed in most classrooms, which emphasized vocabulary, grammar, and exam preparation with minimal attention to intercultural learning objectives.

As summarized in Table 2, ICC integration across classrooms was uneven, with the behavioral dimension being the least represented. These findings underscore a gap between policy-level aspirations and classroom realities—particularly in how ICC is framed and facilitated during instruction. As Leask (2015) points out, without explicit curriculum alignment and teacher training, internationalization goals often fail to translate into pedagogical transformation. Similarly, Jiang (2024) highlights that structural constraints and instructional habits frequently impede teachers' ability to implement ICC in practical and context-relevant ways.

Table 2

ICC Observation Frequencies by IMICC Dimension

IMICC Dimension	Observation Focus	Frequency Observed	Typical Classroom Example
Cognitive	Cultural knowledge, factual information, content familiarity	Occasionally	Reference to holiday traditions in English-speaking countries
Affective	Empathy, openness, curiosity, attitudes toward difference	Rarely	Brief mention of the need to respect cultural diversity, no follow-up
Behavioral	Adaptive strategies, role-plays, intercultural communication tasks	Rarely	No role-play or behavior modeling activities observed

Table 2 presents the observed frequencies of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) components across vocational English classrooms, categorized using the three dimensions defined in the Integrated Model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (IMICC)

(Arasaratnam, 2009). Cognitive elements—such as brief references to cultural practices or factual information—were observed occasionally, typically within textbook content. In contrast, affective components (e.g., promoting empathy or openness) and behavioral strategies (e.g., intercultural simulations, role-play tasks) were rarely incorporated into classroom practice.

This pattern indicates a strong emphasis on surface-level knowledge transmission, with limited attention to fostering intercultural attitudes or communicative adaptability. The observed imbalance reflects broader trends documented in existing literature, where ICC is often addressed superficially and disconnected from pedagogical outcomes (Su, 2023; Fullan, 2016). Despite curricular policies encouraging more integrated approaches, instructional practices continue to reflect a narrow, declarative model of intercultural competence that prioritizes factual content over meaningful engagement.

Student Perceptions and Learning Experiences

Interviews with student participants revealed a range of perceptions regarding how intercultural communication competence (ICC) was addressed in their English courses. Many students recalled encountering cultural references—such as foreign festivals, food customs, or etiquette—in classroom materials. However, they frequently described these as isolated or superficial, with limited connection to broader communicative or professional goals. Several students expressed a desire for more explicit instruction in intercultural interaction, particularly in relation to future careers in service sectors, tourism, or cross-border business.

Interestingly, students who had participated in international exchange programs or cross-regional internships reported stronger awareness of ICC and greater motivation to engage in intercultural learning. They attributed this growth not to classroom instruction but to direct, real-world experiences involving culturally diverse peers. These accounts support earlier research suggesting that experiential exposure is central to developing authentic and transferable intercultural competence (Chui & Mohammed, 2024). As Jiang (2024) argues, classroom-based ICC efforts are most effective when complemented by opportunities for active intercultural engagement beyond the textbook.

Institutional and Structural Constraints

Interviews with teachers and administrators revealed a number of institutional and structural challenges that constrained the integration of intercultural communication competence (ICC) in vocational English education. Across the three case institutions, rigid syllabus, exam-driven teaching culture, and limited classroom time were commonly cited as barriers to pedagogical innovation. Many teachers noted their reliance on standardized textbooks that contained outdated or minimal cultural content, and institutional policies offered little flexibility for incorporating authentic, updated, or localized intercultural materials. Similar concerns have been raised in prior studies of vocational ICC implementation in China (Chui & Mohammed, 2024).

Although administrators acknowledged the importance of ICC for enhancing student employability in international industries, they also emphasized practical limitations. Among these were competing institutional priorities, resource shortages, and the absence of ICC-related objectives in formal assessment frameworks. This disconnect between policy

directives and implementation support has also been documented in recent policy evaluations, which found that teachers are often expected to teach ICC without clear curricular benchmarks or accountability measures (Holmes, Ganassin, & Li, 2022).

Table 3

ICC Observation Frequencies by IMICC Dimension

Theme	Participant Group	Illustrative Quote
Lack of Training for ICC	Teacher	<i>"We know ICC is important, but no one has taught us how to include it in our lessons."</i>
Disconnect Between Policy and Practice	Administrator	<i>"The documents are clear, but there is no specific mechanism to implement ICC objectives."</i>
Superficial Exposure to Culture	Student	<i>"We learn about festivals, but I don't know how that helps in real communication."</i>
Desire for Practical Intercultural Skills	Student	<i>"I want to know how to work with foreigners in the future, not just about their food."</i>
Reliance on Textbooks	Teacher	<i>"If the textbook doesn't have ICC content, I probably won't teach it."</i>

Table 3 presents a thematic synthesis of interview responses from teachers, students, and administrators. Across groups, several key concerns emerged consistently. Teachers frequently cited a lack of professional training, unclear expectations, and insufficient pedagogical models for incorporating ICC in the classroom—findings that reflect earlier calls for improved institutional support in ICC pedagogy (Holmes et al., 2022). Administrators pointed to fragmented implementation efforts and vague curriculum guidelines as reasons for limited progress. Meanwhile, students expressed dissatisfaction with the superficial nature of cultural content in their courses and voiced a strong preference for practical, workplace-relevant intercultural preparation.

Further triangulation of data through document analysis reinforced these findings. Table 4 summarizes the frequency and distribution of ICC elements in official teaching materials—including textbooks, syllabus, and lesson plans—across the three institutions. Cognitive content, such as factual information about foreign countries, holiday references, or geographic data, was the most commonly found dimension. In contrast, affective components (e.g., encouraging openness or empathy) and behavioral strategies (e.g., task-based communication, intercultural role-play) were either marginal or entirely absent. These findings are consistent with classroom observation data, which similarly revealed limited attention to ICC beyond surface-level references.

As Leask (2015) argues, authentic curriculum internationalization requires more than the inclusion of global content; it demands a pedagogical shift toward integrating affective and behavioral dimensions of learning. However, the materials reviewed across case institutions continued to reflect a knowledge transmission model, reinforcing what Su (2023) terms “declarative internationalization”—where students learn about cultures without engaging with them critically or contextually.

Table 4

Frequency of ICC Elements in Teaching Materials Across Institutions

ICC Dimension	Institution A	Institution B	Institution C
Cognitive	6 instances	5 instances	4 instances
Affective	2 instances	1 instance	1 instance
Behavioral	0 instances	1 instance	0 instances

Table 4 summarizes the frequency and distribution of intercultural communication competence (ICC) elements identified in official teaching materials—including textbooks, syllabus, and lesson plans—across the three case institutions. Cognitive content was the most prevalent, typically appearing as cultural facts, holiday references, or geographical information. Affective and behavioral dimensions were rarely evident, suggesting limited emphasis on developing students' attitudes toward cultural diversity or their capacity to engage in intercultural interaction.

This distribution reflects a continued prioritization of knowledge transmission over skill-building or attitudinal development, reinforcing patterns already observed in classroom practices and teacher interviews. As Leask (2015) argues, authentic curriculum internationalization requires more than surface-level inclusion of global content—it demands a pedagogical shift toward engaging students in critical, affective, and performative dimensions of learning. Similar concerns have been raised in empirical studies highlighting the limited integration of behavioral and attitudinal ICC in vocational English instruction (Zhao & Zhang, 2023).

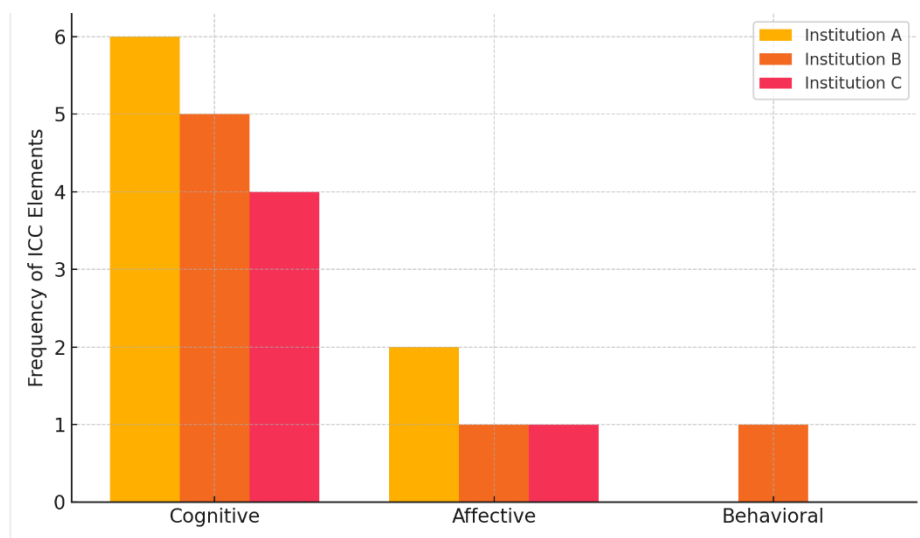


Figure 2: ICC Elements in Teaching Materials

Figure 2 offers a comparative visual summary of the frequency of ICC elements identified in teaching materials across Institutions A, B, and C. The chart clearly illustrates the dominance of cognitive content, while affective and behavioral components remain marginal or entirely absent. In particular, behavioral content—such as practical tasks, intercultural simulations, or communication strategies—was either missing or minimally present across all institutions.

These disparities highlight the uneven integration of ICC at the materials level and underscore the role of textbook and syllabus design in perpetuating the broader gap between policy goals and instructional reality. The limited presence of applied intercultural content reflects earlier

concerns raised in empirical studies on vocational English education, which note that teaching resources often reinforce a knowledge-heavy model of ICC while neglecting experiential and attitudinal components (Holmes et al., 2022)

Taken together, these findings suggest that despite national-level policy support, the implementation of ICC in vocational English programs remains inconsistent and underdeveloped. The following section discusses these findings in relation to the study's theoretical frameworks and the broader literature on curriculum internationalization and intercultural pedagogy.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide nuanced insight into the challenges of implementing intercultural communication competence (ICC) in vocational English classrooms in China. Interpreted through the Integrated Model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (IMICC) and curriculum implementation theory, the data underscore the disconnect between national aspirations and classroom realities.

Interpreting Findings Through IMICC

The IMICC framework conceptualizes ICC as comprising three interconnected dimensions: cognitive, affective, and behavioral (Arasaratnam, 2009). In the observed classrooms, instructional practices concentrated overwhelmingly on the cognitive dimension—typically through the transmission of cultural facts or global trivia. Affective elements such as openness and empathy, and behavioral strategies like intercultural simulations or communication exercises, were notably scarce.

This imbalance suggests a limited, knowledge-centric understanding of ICC. Although scholars emphasize that intercultural competence develops most effectively through attitudinal change and interactive experience (Deardorff, 2006; Holmes et al., 2022), these domains remain underrepresented in vocational English teaching. The findings align with prior observations that ICC in vocational contexts is often treated as decorative rather than transformative (Su, 2023; Fullan, 2016).

Teachers as Curriculum Mediators

Curriculum implementation theory views teachers as active interpreters of reform rather than passive transmitters (Fullan, 2016; Priestley et al., 2021). Most teachers in this study acknowledged ICC as a relevant goal but reported uncertainty about how to realize it in practice. In the absence of clear pedagogical models or institutional incentives, many defaulted to familiar test-oriented strategies. Intercultural elements, where present, were typically integrated in a sporadic and unsystematic manner.

These observations reaffirm the importance of teacher agency and professional capacity in enacting curriculum reform. As Leask (2015) notes, systemic change depends not only on curricular frameworks but also on supporting teachers with adequate training, autonomy, and resources to adopt new pedagogical priorities.

Institutional Constraints and Systemic Misalignments

Structural limitations further inhibited meaningful ICC implementation. Teachers cited time constraints, rigid syllabi, and a lack of curriculum flexibility as recurring obstacles. Administrators echoed these concerns, acknowledging that ICC was often sidelined due to limited funding, policy fragmentation, and the absence of concrete performance indicators.

These constraints expose a gap between national-level policy rhetoric and institutional practice. Although frameworks such as Education Modernization 2035 and the 2021 English Curriculum Standards promote global competence and curriculum internationalization (Ministry of Education, 2019, 2021), they lack detailed operational guidance. As Chui, R., & Mohammed, L. A. (2024) suggest, top-down mandates without local-level adaptation mechanisms often fail to produce pedagogical transformation.

Reimagining ICC Pedagogy in Vocational Contexts

The findings point to the need for a reimagined model of ICC instruction in vocational education—one that aligns with students' professional goals and everyday communicative realities. Students expressed a desire for instruction that prepares them to interact confidently with international clients and navigate culturally diverse workplaces. However, current curricula fall short of these expectations.

Jiang (2024) argues that embedding ICC into vocational teaching requires not only new content but also structural reform—namely, sustained teacher development, contextualized instructional strategies, and institutional commitment. These may include scenario-based simulations, collaborative problem-solving tasks, or localized case studies that foreground intercultural skills in workplace-specific settings.

In summary, this discussion reinforces the study's core conclusion: while ICC is embedded in national education policy, its classroom-level realization remains underdeveloped. Bridging the policy-practice divide will require aligned action across multiple levels—policy articulation, teacher training, curriculum design, and institutional support. Only through such coordinated efforts can ICC evolve from an aspirational discourse to a lived, integral component of vocational English education in China.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how intercultural communication competence (ICC) is implemented in vocational English classrooms in China, despite robust national policy endorsements. Guided by the Integrated Model of Intercultural Communicative Competence (IMICC) (Arasaratnam, 2009) and curriculum implementation theory (Fullan, 2016; Priestley et al., 2021), the findings reveal a significant disjunction between policy discourse and pedagogical practice. Although both educators and administrators acknowledge the importance of ICC for global employability, its classroom integration remains fragmented, largely superficial, and driven more by compliance than meaningful engagement.

Several persistent problems were identified. Teachers reported limited experience with intercultural education and a lack of confidence in their ability to translate abstract intercultural communication goals into concrete teaching strategies. A lack of detailed curricula, assessment criteria, and institutional incentives also hindered implementation.

Structural factors such as test-focused instruction, rigid schedules, and limited resources also led to the neglect of emotional and behavioral aspects of ICC. These results are consistent with previous studies that show that professional English teaching in China still emphasizes linguistic accuracy and proficiency at the expense of attitude development and intercultural exchange (Su, 2023; Zhao & Zhang, 2023).

To address these challenges, this study suggests three areas of systemic improvement. First, ongoing professional development initiatives must equip teachers with the tools and models to provide culturally relevant instruction. Second, ICC-related skills need to be explicitly integrated into national English curriculum standards and assessment frameworks. Third, instructional materials need to be adapted to include specific situations and domain-specific contexts to promote experiential and contextual learning. Organizational management must also support changes in organizational culture so that ICC is no longer viewed as peripheral but becomes an integral dimension of professional English teaching and learning (Leask, 2015).

In addition to the immediate conclusions, this study also has theoretical and contextual significance. It contributes to existing research by extending the application of the IMICC framework to vocational education, an area that has been largely under-addressed in research on intercultural competence. While the development of ICC has been well documented in the context of higher education and more generally (Deardorff, 2006; Leask, 2015), this research demonstrates how ICC is interpreted, constrained, and re-contextualized within test-driven, skill-oriented teaching environments in western China. It confirms the utility of the IMICC model in understanding the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of ICC and reveals the systemic conditions necessary for its implementation.

Contextually, the study illuminates the practical challenges of translating China's Education Modernization 2035 (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2019) into meaningful classroom practices, particularly in less-developed regions such as Guangxi. The paper highlights how resource gaps, assessment systems, and institutional priorities have hindered reform. These insights enrich the global discourse on curriculum internationalization by illustrating how national education policies must be mediated through localized, culturally adaptive strategies (Holmes, Ganassin, & Li, 2022). As China continues to strengthen its role in the global economy, ensuring that vocational education graduates are equipped with cross-cultural skills will remain a strategic and educational imperative.

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