

Perspectives of Chinese Language Teachers on Intercultural Communication Skills: Challenges and Pedagogical Strategies in the Pakistani Context

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Abstract

As global interconnectedness intensifies, the demand for learning Chinese as a foreign language continues to grow. In this context, Chinese language instruction must extend beyond linguistic competence to include the development of intercultural communication skills. This study explores three key areas: (1) Chinese language teachers' perceptions of intercultural communication skills within the classroom; (2) the challenges encountered in fostering these skills among students; and (3) strategies for enhancing intercultural communication in the context of Chinese language teaching in Pakistan. Employing a qualitative research design, six Chinese language teachers were selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected via classroom observations and in-depth interviews, and analyzed using content analysis. Findings indicate that participants generally held positive attitudes toward intercultural communication skills and acknowledged their critical role in facilitating effective cross-cultural interaction. Nonetheless, several challenges emerged, including limited training, cultural misunderstandings, and lack of teaching resources. The study underscores the importance of ongoing professional development

and institutional support to better equip teachers in integrating intercultural communication into their pedagogical practices.

Keywords: Chinese Language Teaching, Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), Teacher Perceptions, Classroom Practices, Enhancing Intercultural Competence

I- Introduction

In recent years, developing cross-cultural communication skills has become a key focus in language education. With the growing global influence of the Chinese language, there is an increasing demand for research on how Chinese language teachers can effectively integrate cross-cultural communication skills into their teaching practices.

As Chinese language education expands at an unprecedented rate worldwide, a large number of international learners are not only studying Chinese but are also preparing to teach it in their own countries. Teaching Chinese as a foreign language is closely tied to the understanding of Chinese cultural knowledge and values. For instance, incorporating traditional Chinese cultural elements into language teaching enables students to gain a deeper understanding of Chinese society and its rich historical traditions.

In the context of teaching Chinese in Pakistan, however, the cultural component has not received adequate attention, particularly in cultivating students' cross-cultural communication abilities. With the growing economic and diplomatic ties between China and Pakistan, there is an increasing need for universities to produce graduates who are proficient in both the Chinese language and its cultural context.

Although many Pakistani universities have established Chinese language programs, there is still a lack of clear guidelines for evaluating students' practical language skills, understanding of Chinese literature, and familiarity with Chinese culture. This gap poses a challenge to the comprehensive development of students' Chinese language competence.

Despite efforts to enhance Chinese language instruction, current teaching approaches largely remain focused on the four core skills: listening, speaking,

reading, and writing. As a result, many students lack the cultural awareness and cross-cultural communication skills necessary for real-world interaction. To address this, Chinese language education in Pakistan should move beyond the traditional skill-based approach and place greater emphasis on cultural immersion and intercultural communication. This can be achieved through the integration of Chinese cultural content in the curriculum, the development of culturally informed assessment standards, and the training of teachers in cross-cultural teaching methodologies.

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

I. Definition of Intercultural Communication Competence and Its Relationship with Language Teaching

The concept of **intercultural communication** was first introduced by Edward Hall in his seminal work *The Silent Language* (1959)¹. It refers to the process of communication between individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, encompassing the interaction between communication and culture. This concept aligns closely with the context of second language teaching, particularly in international Chinese language education. When teaching Chinese as a second language, educators are inherently engaged in intercultural communication. To ensure effective teaching and meaningful interaction, international Chinese language teachers must develop strong **intercultural communication competence (ICC)**.

Ting-Toomey (1999)² defines intercultural communication as a symbolic, interpretive, transactional, and contextual process between people from different cultures. Similarly, Samovar and Porter (2010)³ emphasize that intercultural communication involves exchanges between individuals whose cultural perceptions and symbolic systems differ significantly, thereby influencing the communication process. Among the many definitions, Hu Wenzhong (1999)⁴ offers one of the most concise: intercultural

¹Hall, E. T. (1959). Space speaks. *The Silent Language*. New York: Anchor, 162-185.

²Ting Toomey, S. 1999 *Communicating across Cultures* [M]. New York: Guilford Press, :4.

³Samovar, L.A. & Porter, R. E. & McDaniel, E. R. 2010 *Communication between Cultures* [M]. Boston: Wadsworth: 17

⁴胡文仲. 1999 *跨文化交际学概论* [M]. 北京: 外语教学与研究出版社: 1.

communication is the communication between people from different cultural backgrounds. Collectively, these definitions underscore that intercultural communication is essentially face-to-face communication characterized by cultural diversity.

The concept of **intercultural communication competence** has also evolved over time. Deardorff (2011)⁵ notes that ICC broadly refers to the ability of individuals to interact effectively and appropriately with those from different cultural backgrounds, regardless of their geographic location. Fantini (2009)⁶ conceptualizes ICC as encompassing both one's native communicative competence (CC1) and the development of communicative competence in a second language (CC2), along with the capacity to compare and mediate between the two.

Wang Xizhu and Peng Shuang (2016)⁷, from the perspective of intercultural communication literacy, distinguish between cultural difference awareness and multicultural awareness as essential competencies for international Chinese teachers. Wen Qiufang (1999)⁸ suggests that ICC is a comprehensive concept consisting of intercultural communicative knowledge and intercultural communicative performance. Chen Guoming (2009)⁹ defines ICC as the ability to perform communication behaviors effectively and appropriately in specific cultural contexts to achieve desired outcomes. Hu Wenzhong (2013)¹⁰ further emphasizes that ICC involves the qualities and skills necessary for successful intercultural interaction.

⁵ Deardorff, K. (2011). Assessing intercultural competence. *New Directions for Institutional Research*, 149, 65–79.

⁶ Fantini, E. A (2009). Assessing intercultural competence: issues and tools. In Deardorff, k. D. (Ed.), *the SAGE handbook of intercultural competence* (pp. 456-476). Thousand Oaks: SAGE publications, Inc.

⁷王希竹, 彭爽. 2016试论国际汉语教师应具备的跨文化交际素养 [J]. *当代教育与文化*, (6):27-31.

⁸文秋芳 1999 《英语口语测试与教学》，上海外语教育出版社。

⁹陈国明 2009 《跨文化交际学》，华东师范大学出版社。

¹⁰胡文仲 2013 《跨文化交际能力在外语教学中如何定位》，《外语界》第6期。

Peng Linxiang, and Chen Ying (2016)¹¹ divide the ICC of international Chinese language teachers into two dimensions: general intercultural communicative competence and pedagogical intercultural competence. Zu Xiaomei (2016)¹² argues that intercultural communication ability and intercultural competence are synonymous, and that ICC for international Chinese teachers should encompass three core components: intercultural awareness, intercultural skills, and intercultural attitudes.

In summary, while scholars may vary in their terminology and emphasis, they generally agree that **intercultural communication competence** refers to the ability to communicate effectively across cultural boundaries. This competence requires individuals to recognize cultural differences, overcome cultural barriers, and engage in smooth and respectful communication. In the context of language teaching, especially for international Chinese educators, ICC is not only a communicative skill but also a critical pedagogical tool for fostering mutual understanding and enhancing the teaching-learning process in multicultural settings.

2. Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) Frameworks

Numerous frameworks exist for Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), but two of the most widely cited and influential in the context of language teaching and learning are those developed by Byram et al. (2008)¹³ and Deardorff (2011). Both frameworks emphasize that the development of ICC is a long-term, continuous process.

This study adopts Byram's (1997)¹⁴ model of ICC, which outlines various types of competencies—referred to as “savoirs.” Byram explicitly stated that

¹¹彭林祥、陈颖 2016

《汉语国际教育专业跨文化交际能力培养的理念与策略》，《国际汉语学报》第2期。

¹²祖晓梅 2016

《国际汉语教师在跨文化交际能力教学中的角色和作用》，《国际汉语教育》(中英文)第1期。

¹³Byram, M. (2008). *From Foreign Language Education to Education for Intercultural Citizenship: Essays and Reflections*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

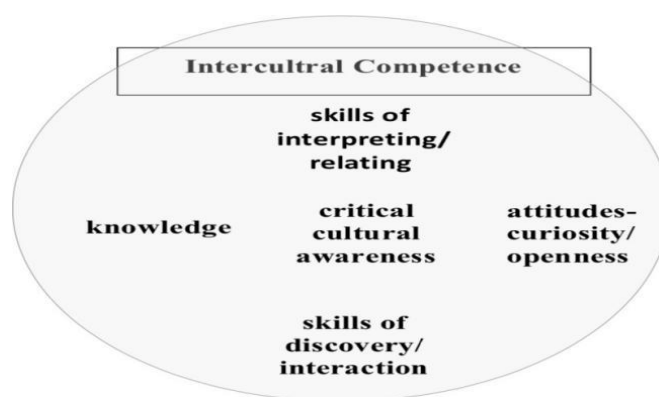
¹⁴Byram, M. (1997). *Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Competence*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.

his model was designed to help foreign language educators better understand and integrate the concept of ICC into their teaching (p. 31). His model offers a comprehensive summary of the key concepts and skills essential for language education aimed at fostering intercultural competence.

Byram (1997) proposed five core components—often referred to as the five "savoirs" or competencies—necessary for developing ICC:

1. **Attitudes:** A disposition of openness and curiosity, combined with a willingness to suspend disbelief and judgment about one's own and others' cultural norms and beliefs.
2. **Knowledge:** Understanding the social practices, cultural products, and underlying processes of social groups both within one's own culture and in the cultures of others.
3. **Skills of Interpretation and Relation:** The ability to interpret and explain cultural documents or behaviors to someone from another culture and to establish meaningful connections between cultural phenomena from different contexts.
4. **Skills of Discovery and Interaction:** The capacity to acquire new knowledge about cultural practices and phenomena—both one's own and others'—and to apply this understanding in real-time intercultural interactions.

5. **Critical Cultural Awareness:** The ability to critically evaluate and reflect on cultural practices, values, and beliefs—both within one's own culture and across other cultures.



Byram's Model of ICC (Byram, 1997)

3. Research on Foreign Language Teachers' Perceptions of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)

In recent years, a growing body of research has focused on foreign language teachers' perceptions and understanding of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), with the aim of exploring how educators conceptualize ICC and their role in fostering students' intercultural skills. Teachers' beliefs and willingness to incorporate ICC into their teaching significantly influence the extent to which ICC is integrated into foreign language classrooms (Byram, 2008)¹⁵. As a result, numerous studies worldwide have examined teachers' perceptions and classroom practices related to ICC (e.g., Osman, 2015¹⁶; Al Hasnan, 2015¹⁷; Sercu et al., 2005¹⁸).

Despite differences in context and methodology, two recurring themes have emerged across these studies: (I) the marginalization of cultural content in

¹⁵Byram, M. (2008). *From Foreign Language Education to Education for Intercultural Citizenship: Essays and Reflections*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

¹⁶Osman, H., Popal, S., Capitelli, S., & Katz, S. (2015, January 1). *Investigating English Teachers' Perceptions of Intercultural Communicative Competence in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1766582096/>

¹⁷Al Hasnan, B., Savova, L., Bizzaro, P., & Williamson, M. (2015, January 1). *Teachers' Perceptions of the Importance of Intercultural Communicative Competence in Saudi EFL Education*. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1666397044/>

¹⁸Sercu, L., Bandura, E., Castro, P., Davcheva, L., Laskaridou, C. Lundgren, U., Garcia, M., & Ryan, P. (Eds.) (2005). *Foreign Language Teachers and Intercultural Competence: An International Investigation*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.

foreign language teaching (FLT), and (2) the predominance of traditional, teacher-centered approaches to language and culture instruction. For example, Sercu conducted a large-scale quantitative study of secondary school teachers across Europe. Their findings indicated that while teachers aimed to develop students' communicative competence and cultural awareness, they predominantly relied on teacher-centered methods.

Demircioğlu and Çakır (2015)¹⁹ investigated the attitudes of International Baccalaureate (IB) English teachers from Turkey, the United States, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Spain toward ICC instruction. A total of 60 EFL teachers (44 female, 16 male) completed a seven-question open-ended questionnaire. The study revealed that only 15% of participants had received formal ICC training during their teacher education. However, personal experiences with individuals from other cultures had a positive impact on their teaching approaches. Teachers were split in their views: some considered ICC instruction more important than grammar, vocabulary, and the four language skills, while others deemed it equally important. To enhance students' ICC, teachers commonly recommended using authentic materials, inviting international guests, and participating in global projects and competitions.

When it came to cultural content, teachers emphasized the importance of topics such as family life, community norms, customs, traditions, and societal values. Despite cultural differences among respondents, there was a shared recognition of the need to prioritize cultural education within FLT.

Zhou (2011)²⁰ examined Chinese university EFL teachers' readiness and willingness to teach ICC using a mixed-methods design embedded within a narrative framework. A total of 201 university teachers completed a custom-designed questionnaire, followed by in-depth interviews with eight participants. Although most teachers acknowledged the value of cultural

¹⁹Demircioğlu, Ş., & Çakır, C. (2015). Intercultural competence of English language teachers in International Baccalaureate World Schools in Turkey and abroad. *Journal of language and linguistic studies*, 11(1), 15-32.

²⁰Zhou, Y. (2011). A study of Chinese university EFL teachers and their intercultural competence teaching (doctoral dissertation). University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario, Canada.

instruction, ICC-related content remained infrequently addressed in their classrooms. Like previous findings, this study showed a reliance on traditional, teacher-centered teaching methods. Moreover, it highlighted how teachers' ICC levels and personal beliefs significantly shaped their instructional practices.

In summary, these studies offer valuable insights into foreign language teachers' perceptions of ICC and their pedagogical practices. They also underscore common challenges, including limited ICC training, reliance on traditional methods, and under representation of cultural content in curricula. The findings point to an urgent need for sustained professional development opportunities that equip language teachers with the knowledge, tools, and confidence to effectively incorporate ICC into their teaching.

4. Current Situation of Cultural Teaching in Chinese Classrooms in Pakistan

At the National University of Modern Languages (NUML) in Pakistan, the teaching of Chinese culture and customs is an essential component of the Chinese language curriculum. This cultural integration aims to familiarize students with traditional Chinese folk culture, enhance their understanding of cultural phenomena, and facilitate deeper linguistic immersion through contextual references in course materials. The curriculum not only introduces cultural customs and concepts but also incorporates hands-on experiences, such as learning to use chopsticks, creating paper cuttings, and preparing traditional dishes like dumplings.

Such an emphasis on cultural education is particularly beneficial for students who already possess a foundational knowledge of the Chinese language and are seeking to advance their proficiency. Through exploration of topics like the historical and musical background of the "Butterfly Lovers," students gain richer cultural insights, which contribute significantly to their overall language competence.

Moreover, effective communication in Chinese extends beyond grammar and vocabulary; it necessitates a comprehensive understanding of cultural norms

and practices. Integrating cultural education into language instruction equips international students with the necessary intercultural communication competence (ICC) to interact appropriately in real-life situations. For instance, during the Chinese Spring Festival, students who are familiar with traditions such as eating dumplings and hanging Spring Festival couplets can participate more actively in celebrations. Conversely, a lack of cultural knowledge may hinder communication. A notable example is when international students, unaware of cultural taboos, gift a clock to a Chinese teacher on their birthday—unintentionally invoking associations with death due to linguistic similarities between "giving a clock" and "attending a funeral."

Although existing literature indicates a growing interest in Chinese language learning in Pakistan (Jia Chunyan, 2020)²¹, the majority of research has focused on linguistic aspects—grammar, language skills, and learning strategies (Zhang Lingyan; Zhao Xun, 2022²²; Liu Yao; Misbah Rashid, 2016²³). Studies on the teaching of Chinese culture, particularly in the Pakistani context, are limited. Most research on cultural teaching relates to English language education. This gap in the literature has motivated the present study, which explores the perceptions of Chinese language teachers in Pakistan regarding ICC and their approaches to teaching it.

The objectives of this study are to examine teachers' understanding of intercultural communication competence in the context of Chinese language education, identify the challenges in promoting ICC, and propose strategies for enhancing ICC in the classroom. Data were collected through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) teachers at NUML University.

Research Questions

²¹贾春燕. 巴基斯坦语言生态及语言政策研究[J]. 外国语言与文化. 2020(02)

²²张玲艳. 赵勋 (2022) 巴基斯坦中文教育发展的 SWOT 分析, 教育传播与思考, 今传媒 2022 年第 5 期。

²³刘飘, Misbah Rashid. 全巴基斯坦本土汉语教师的发展历程与展望[J]. 南亚研究季刊. 2016(01)

1. What is the overall perception of intercultural communication competence among Chinese language teachers in Pakistan?
2. What are the main challenges in promoting ICC in Chinese language teaching?
3. What strategies can be used to effectively promote ICC in Chinese language instruction?

3. Methodology

Participants

The study involved six Chinese language teachers from the Chinese Department at NUML Islamabad. Among them, three were full-time faculty members, and three were employed on a contractual basis. The participants included two males and four females. The selection criteria required participants to have taught Chinese language speaking and listening courses for over four years. This experience ensures familiarity with course objectives and content, contributing to more informed and credible responses.

The focus on speaking and listening courses stems from their status as core components of the certificate and diploma programs at NUML. These courses aim not only to develop linguistic proficiency but also to cultivate ICC among learners. Each class is conducted for one hour daily, four days a week, over a 16-week semester.

Instrument

The open-ended and semi-structured interview questions were developed in alignment with the research questions and theoretical framework, with a focus on how teachers understand and teach Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) in their Chinese language instruction. The interview was divided into two sections. The first section included demographic questions such as participants' teaching experience and their experiences abroad. The second section aimed to explore teachers' understanding of ICC, how they integrate ICC into their teaching practices, the challenges they face in promoting ICC, and the strategies they employ to enhance ICC in their Chinese language classrooms.

The interview questions were piloted with three Chinese language teachers, and revisions were made based on feedback from the pilot. Interviews were conducted in both Urdu and Chinese, accommodating the linguistic backgrounds of both Pakistani and Chinese participants. Using participants' native languages allowed them to express their thoughts more clearly. The interviews followed a free-form discussion format and lasted approximately 30 minutes each. All interviews were audio-recorded by the researcher. Prior to each interview, participants were provided with consent forms.

4. Data Analysis

The study employed a qualitative data analysis approach as described by McMillan and Schumacher (1993)²⁴, which involves “a systematic process of selecting, categorizing, comparing, synthesizing, and interpreting to provide explanations of a single phenomenon of interest”. After collecting data from the semi-structured interviews and classroom observations, all responses were transcribed and organized into three main thematic categories: (1) teachers' perceptions of ICC, (2) challenges in promoting ICC in Chinese language teaching, and (3) strategies used to foster ICC in the classroom.

I. Participants' Demographic Information

The study involved six participants, comprising four female and two male teachers, all affiliated with NUML and possessing extensive teaching experience in Chinese language education, each with over ten years of professional practice. Notably, all Pakistani participants have significant overseas experience in China, enhancing their intercultural understanding. For instance, Teacher 2 (T2) spent four years in China as an international student, while Teacher 1 (T1) completed both her bachelor's and master's degrees in Beijing over a six-year period.

²⁴McMillan, H. J., & Schumacher, S. (1993). *Research in Education- A Conceptual Introduction*. Harper Collins College Publishers, New York.

Participants were selected through purposeful sampling, following the guidelines of McMillan and Schumacher, to ensure inclusion of individuals with rich intercultural experience and deep insight into the research topic. The selection criteria mandated that participants: (a) have at least ten years of experience teaching Chinese language courses at the research institution, (b) possess relevant intercultural experience, (c) willingly participate in the interviews, (d) provide access to their teaching documents, and (e) allow class observations. The detailed demographic information of the participants is summarized in Table I.

Table I. Participants' demographic information

Code	Gender	Intercultural Experience	Highest Degree
Teacher 1 (T1)	Female	Yes	MPhil
Teacher 2 (T2)	Female	Yes	MPhil
Teacher 3 (T3)	Female	Yes	MPhil
Teacher 4 (T4)	Male	Yes	PhD
Teacher 5 (T5)	Male	Yes	Masters
Teacher 6 (T6)	Female	Yes	PhD

RQ1: What is the overall perception of intercultural communication competence among Chinese teachers in Pakistan?

I. How do you perceive intercultural communicative competence?

The results indicate that the majority of surveyed teachers demonstrate a strong awareness of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). All participants are familiar with the concept and acknowledge its importance as a crucial factor for effective communication across cultural boundaries.

Teacher 3 explained:

“I think it refers to the ability to understand various cultural contexts. It’s about recognizing social behaviors and values in different cultures and responding appropriately in diverse situations.”

Teacher I shared:

“There’s a clear distinction. ICC is necessary when communicating with individuals from different cultural backgrounds. However, when speaking with someone from your own culture, you generally rely on basic communication techniques.”

Teacher 4 stated:

“To me, they are quite similar. Whether you’re communicating with someone from your own country or abroad, the goal is effective communication. ICC simply adds a layer of cultural awareness when interacting with people from different countries.”

These responses suggest that participants view communication within the same cultural group as less demanding in terms of cultural sensitivity. In such interactions, shared background knowledge reduces the need to navigate cultural nuances. Overall, respondents believe that while fundamental communicative skills suffice for conveying messages within a single culture, ICC becomes essential in intercultural exchanges. In these contexts, understanding and adapting to cultural differences plays a pivotal role in ensuring effective communication. For example, Teacher 2 emphasized:

“When engaging in intercultural communication, it’s not just about language — it’s about conveying cultural values as well.” Similarly, Teacher 5 noted that: “Ordinary communication skills focus primarily on linguistic accuracy, whereas intercultural communicative competence (ICC) requires understanding cultural perspectives and adapting accordingly.” Additionally, Teacher 3 explained: “If our aim is general communicative competence, we are mostly concerned with helping students express themselves clearly. But when the goal is ICC, we must also raise students’ cultural awareness so they can communicate more appropriately and leave a positive impression.”

These responses indicate that the participants perceive ICC as communication that occurs across cultural boundaries, where sensitivity to cultural differences plays a critical role. While both ICC and communicative competence fall under the broader umbrella of communication skills, the key distinction lies in the cultural context and the nature of the communicative partner.

2. Do you consider yourself interculturally competent? Why?

Most respondents expressed confidence in their intercultural competence, attributing it to a variety of experiences such as watching Chinese films, reading Chinese literature, and living in China. However, many also noted that cultural components receive insufficient emphasis in classroom instruction, often due to limited guidance and minimal interaction with native speakers.

Teacher 2:

"Yes, I believe I possess a certain level of intercultural competence. Exposure to Chinese movies and literature, coupled with my time studying in China, has deepened my understanding of Chinese customs and communication styles. Nonetheless, I feel that more structured cultural training could further enhance my skills."

Teacher 3:

"To a great extent, yes. I have always been genuinely interested in other cultures, which fosters an open-minded and curious attitude. I consider myself an intercultural learner who enjoys exploring cultural values and identifying similarities and differences in everyday life."

Teacher 1: "Yes, I believe I have developed intercultural competence through interactions with Chinese colleagues and participation in cultural exchange programs, which have broadened my perspective. However, I think our curriculum would benefit from incorporating more focused intercultural communication training."

Teacher 5:

"I do consider myself interculturally competent, but I am still learning. Understanding a culture transcends language proficiency. Although I can communicate effectively in Chinese, I sometimes miss the deeper cultural meanings embedded in expressions or traditions. That is why real-life immersion remains essential."

Teacher 4:

"Yes, to some extent. Living in China for several years allowed me to experience the culture firsthand. However, without consistent interaction with

native speakers now, maintaining cultural sensitivity is challenging. We need more platforms for sustained intercultural engagement."

The responses from the five Chinese language teachers collectively demonstrate a general sense of confidence in their intercultural competence, largely developed through personal interest, cultural immersion, and exposure to Chinese media and life in China. However, they also highlight a clear gap in formal cultural instruction within the curriculum. The teachers emphasize the critical role of ongoing interaction with native speakers and structured intercultural training. These insights suggest the need for more deliberate and systematic integration of intercultural content within teacher development programs to ensure continuous growth and deeper cultural understanding.

3. How do you identify interculturally competent teachers?

Interculturally competent teachers are distinguished by their ability to seamlessly integrate cultural knowledge into language instruction in meaningful and contextually relevant ways. Key indicators of such competence include consistently incorporating cultural insights or "cultural capsules" into each lesson, possessing both broad cultural awareness and specific knowledge of the target culture, and demonstrating a keen sensitivity to how language use varies across different contexts—understanding what to say, when to say it, and how to say it appropriately.

Teacher 2 remarked:

"An interculturally competent teacher creates a classroom environment where students do more than just learn vocabulary; they grasp the cultural attitudes and behaviors underlying the language. These teachers often enrich lessons by sharing personal experiences from their time in China or interactions with Chinese communities, helping students appreciate the deep connection between language and culture."

Teacher 1 added:

"Such teachers move beyond textbook content by actively linking linguistic elements to real-life cultural contexts. For instance, when teaching a greeting or phrase, they explain how its usage differs in formal versus informal settings, or how native speakers perceive certain expressions."

Together, these insights emphasize that intercultural competence in teaching goes beyond possessing knowledge—it requires skillfully applying that knowledge to deepen students' understanding of the target language and its cultural nuances.

4. How can knowledge of other people's cultures develop learners' intercultural communicative competence as well as awareness of their own culture?

A strong understanding of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) has been shown to benefit both teachers and learners in multiple significant ways. It facilitates effective interaction across diverse cultures, enhances both intercultural and intracultural awareness, and encourages learners to critically and reflectively examine their own cultural norms—a process often referred to as the "denaturalization" of one's own culture.

Teacher 1 explained that

"Cultural knowledge plays a crucial role in helping learners interact and behave appropriately in diverse cultural contexts. Furthermore, it can have a denaturalizing effect, prompting learners to reconsider their assumptions about their own culture."

Teacher 4 emphasized that

"Understanding other cultures enables learners to move beyond stereotypes and appreciate cultural diversity. This openness fosters reflection on their own values and traditions from a broader, more informed perspective."

Teacher 2 added that

"Intercultural knowledge strengthens empathy and reduces cultural misunderstandings. This not only improves communication with people from different backgrounds but also deepens learners' self-awareness and their ability to articulate their own cultural identity to others."

Teacher 5 stated that

"Exposure to other cultures challenges learners' cultural assumptions and encourages critical thinking. Such awareness leads to more meaningful cross-

cultural dialogue and helps learners better understand the dynamic nature of culture—including their own."

These insights collectively highlight that teachers consistently observe how cultural knowledge plays a transformative role in developing learners' intercultural communicative competence. It empowers learners to engage more effectively in cross-cultural interactions while fostering a deeper, more reflective understanding of their own cultural identity.

5. How Can ICC Be Integrated into Chinese Language Teaching?

The interviews revealed that, from the students' perspective, integrating ICC into Chinese language courses is both feasible and beneficial. When asked about possible methods or activities for incorporating ICC, the respondents provided several insightful suggestions. Four teachers (T1, T2, T3, and T6) emphasized the importance of embedding more cultural content and ICC-related knowledge directly into their lessons. Teachers T4 and T5 proposed using films or documentaries that highlight international cultural differences as a way to deepen students' understanding of cultural diversity.

Additionally, T2 suggested encouraging students to watch Chinese movies or listen to Chinese songs, then compare and contrast these cultural elements with those from Pakistani culture, followed by group discussions to foster deeper intercultural awareness. T1 recommended assigning self-study projects on ICC topics, culminating in student presentations, to promote independent learning and reflection.

Extracurricular activities were also seen as valuable by T2 and T6, who proposed organizing opportunities such as short-term overseas travel, study tours, or training courses to immerse students in authentic cultural environments, thereby enhancing ICC development. Furthermore, T3 highlighted the importance of active learning by suggesting practical activities—such as practicing culturally specific gestures like handshakes—to help students internalize cultural norms beyond theoretical knowledge.

While most teachers are eager to integrate ICC into their teaching, some challenges remain. For instance, T1, T2, and T3 noted that time constraints during the semester limit their ability to fully incorporate ICC content.

Despite this, the overall consensus from the interviews is optimistic, with more than half of the respondents agreeing that enriching Chinese courses with cultural information and ICC components is a practical and effective approach to fostering intercultural competence in students.

RQ2: What are the challenges in promoting ICC in Chinese language teaching?

I. Teachers' Insufficient Cultural Knowledge and ICC Teaching Methods

The teachers in this study, all of whom studied Chinese language and culture as undergraduates in China, emphasized the importance of ICC teaching methods. As one teacher stated, "if teachers cannot impart cultural knowledge to students in an appropriate way, they will be stuck" (T5, Interview 5). Although they recognize ICC teaching as the integration of target culture knowledge into Chinese language teaching (CLT), they lack a systematic method to achieve this integration effectively. Consistent with the findings of Sercu et al.(2005), these teachers primarily see themselves as providers of cultural knowledge, aiming to help students understand cultural differences and foster positive attitudes toward intercultural communication. They also highlighted the critical role that teachers' subject knowledge plays in shaping their teaching practices. Echoing earlier research, the deficiency in ICC knowledge and instructional strategies constrains teachers' capacity to embed culture meaningfully within CLT.

2. Students' Low Chinese Language Proficiency

This emerged as the foremost factor causing teachers to hesitate in implementing ICC teaching. During in-depth interviews, teachers reported that their students' limited proficiency in Chinese compelled them to prioritize grammar and vocabulary instruction. In many cases, they resorted to translating texts into English or Urdu to facilitate comprehension. For example, T3 noted that vocabulary, listening, and grammar consumed most of the class time, remarking, "Understanding culture is beyond the teacher's expectations" (Interview 3). Similarly, T4 expressed frustration about needing to review previous lessons and cover all four language skills plus grammar, leaving little room for cultural activities: "I have to review a lot, so I don't

have time for students to practice cultural contexts” (Interview 4). This aligns with Öztürk and Gürbüz’s (2017)²⁵ model, which emphasizes learner proficiency as a central factor influencing teachers’ instructional decisions. Likewise, studies by Sercu et al. (2005) identify students’ low language proficiency as a significant barrier to integrating cultural teaching in Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) classrooms.

3. Insufficient Time to Promote ICC in the Classroom

A common barrier to integrating Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) into language teaching is the lack of sufficient time. Many teachers reported that the pressure to cover extensive language content, combined with exam-oriented syllabi, leaves little opportunity to meaningfully address cultural aspects. Language instruction tends to be prioritized because assessments focus heavily on grammar, vocabulary, and language skills, rather than intercultural understanding. Consequently, teachers feel constrained and unable to incorporate cultural topics into their lessons, despite recognizing their importance. For instance, Teacher I noted, “I don’t have enough time to integrate ICC into my Chinese language teaching,” highlighting a widespread concern among instructors who wish to promote ICC but are limited by time and curriculum demands.

4. Lack of ICC Objectives in the Curriculum

Chinese language teachers in the department are required to distribute the course syllabus to students two weeks prior to the start of the course and strictly adhere to its contents. An analysis of the syllabus and teaching materials revealed that ICC objectives are either absent or only briefly mentioned. The syllabus content and assessments remain predominantly language-focused. In-depth interviews corroborated these findings, showing that teachers, pressured to prepare students for exams, follow the syllabus closely and avoid addressing students’ questions about the mismatch between teaching content and exam requirements. This suggests that the department’s syllabus and testing policies do not support the teaching of ICC. Consistent

²⁵Öztürk, G., & Gürbüz, N. (2017). Re-defining language teacher cognition through a data-driven model: The case of three EFL teachers. *Cogent Education*, 4(1), 1290333.

with previous research, ICC objectives are virtually nonexistent in the Chinese language syllabus, and assessments remain centered on language proficiency.

5. Inadequate Facilities

Classroom observations supported data gathered from in-depth interviews and document analysis regarding influencing factors. The traditional arrangement of tables and chairs for classes of 25-30 students made it difficult to organize effective teaching activities. All classrooms observed by the researcher shared the same physical environment: 25-30 students seated at 25-30 tables and benches arranged in four or five rows. Each classroom was equipped with an LED projector, a screen for the teacher to display materials from their laptop, a blackboard, and a teacher's desk. Laptops were often used to play audio recordings and lesson slides during listening activities. However, the Internet connection was very weak, preventing access to any websites. Listening activities dominated class time because teachers had to replay recordings multiple times. Additionally, there were very few Chinese teachers in each observed class. Similar studies in Iranian, Saudi, and Palestinian contexts have reported comparable challenges related to classroom environments, lack of facilities, and large class sizes.

Participants also complained about the poor quality of the Internet system, which made it difficult to download necessary cultural teaching materials during class.

6. Lack of After-Class Activities and Language Learning Environment

T1 highlighted the importance of after-class activities and supplementary teaching materials. She recognized the practical nature of Chinese language teaching and emphasized the crucial role of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) in communication. According to her, a major drawback for students is learning in an environment without exposure to native Chinese speakers. She suggested activities to cultivate students' ICC, such as "cultural food events" and "cultural fashion shows." Similarly, T2 expressed hesitation in teaching ICC due to the lack of experiential learning opportunities. She stated, "Hypothetical situations, rather than real ones, cannot effectively convey the intended lessons" (T2). Selkü et al. [18] pointed out that

experiential learning allows students to encounter real cross-cultural situations and challenges through authentic interactions with people from other cultures. However, both their international study and the current research indicate that students lack opportunities for real-life cross-cultural communication.

RQ3: What strategies can be used to promote ICC in Chinese language teaching?

I. Improving the Professional Ability of Teachers

One significant issue hindering the cultivation of students' intercultural communication skills is the lack of teachers' own competencies. To effectively enhance students' intercultural communicative competence, it is essential to improve teachers' professional abilities.

Firstly, teachers should utilize online resources to enhance their skills. Due to heavy workloads, most teachers have little time for offline study, so the Internet offers convenient channels for professional development. For example, teachers can learn about cross-cultural communication through online platforms like short video sites and public educational accounts.

Secondly, teachers should improve their abilities by combining teaching and learning. This includes learning from the successful teaching practices of peers and attending various training sessions during holidays. Only when teachers' own professional competence is strengthened can they effectively nurture students' intercultural communicative competence during Chinese language instruction.

2. Enhancing Chinese Teaching Methodologies

Firstly, it is essential for educators to optimize and adapt traditional teaching methods throughout the instructional process. For a prolonged period, college English education has primarily emphasized vocabulary and grammar acquisition, while insufficient attention has been paid to cultivating cross-cultural communication skills. To address this imbalance, teaching methodologies must be innovatively refined and diversified. Educators can employ a variety of instructional strategies to stimulate students' interest and thereby foster the development of cross-cultural communicative competence.

For example, integrating situational teaching and inquiry-based approaches into conventional methods can encourage students to identify and analyze issues within teacher-designed scenarios, thus enhancing their engagement and motivation.

Secondly, classroom instruction can be effectively supplemented with online teaching modalities. Traditional classroom settings are often constrained by limitations of time and space, whereas online platforms transcend these barriers, offering greater flexibility. To enhance students' cross-cultural communication abilities, teachers can utilize online resources to compensate for the limited cross-cultural content in face-to-face instruction. By guiding students to actively communicate in English through digital platforms, educators can encourage greater classroom participation and practical application of learned skills, ultimately strengthening students' intercultural communication proficiency.

3. Integrating Cross-Cultural Communication into the Curriculum

Currently, most Chinese language programs include minimal content related to cross-cultural communication, which hinders the effective development of students' intercultural competence. Consequently, universities must incorporate comprehensive cross-cultural communication elements into their curricula. This requires a strategic decomposition of teaching objectives according to students' diverse needs and real-world contexts, with a thoughtful allocation of cross-cultural content across compulsory, advanced, and elective courses.

Compulsory courses should encompass foundational knowledge of the history, culture, and social etiquette of English-speaking countries, while also ensuring that students grasp the essential social norms prevailing in China. For students seeking enhanced proficiency, universities can offer advanced follow-up courses focused on further refining cross-cultural communication skills. Elective courses may be designed for those with less intensive requirements, providing an overview of Chinese cultural contexts. Through this layered curriculum design, educational institutions can effectively cater to varying student needs and foster well-rounded cross-cultural awareness.

4. Encouraging Student Participation in Extracurricular Activities

The acquisition of cross-cultural communication skills cannot be achieved solely through theoretical instruction; practical experience is indispensable. Classroom learning equips students with fundamental language abilities such as reading, listening, speaking, writing, and translation. However, extracurricular engagement offers invaluable opportunities for authentic communication and cultural immersion, such as participation in Chinese language activities or interaction with native Chinese speakers.

Such practical involvement enables students to identify personal areas for improvement and develop a deeper understanding of Chinese culture. Extracurricular practice serves as a vital complement to classroom teaching, providing experiential learning that cannot be fully replicated in formal settings. By engaging in these activities, students can significantly enhance their intercultural communication capabilities.

5. Building a Cross-Cultural Teaching Team and Resource Base

The development of comprehensive cross-cultural communication resources is critical for advancing students' intercultural competence. Therefore, universities must prioritize the establishment of dedicated cross-cultural teaching teams. A specialized faculty team can systematically elevate the quality and effectiveness of Chinese language instruction, as the cultivation of intercultural skills largely depends on teachers' own cultural literacy. Ongoing professional development and pedagogical training are crucial to continually refine teaching content and methods.

Universities should also encourage students to collect and engage with Chinese cultural materials through regular cultural exchange lectures, thereby reinforcing students' cultural understanding and retention. Additionally, teaching materials should be carefully selected to include China's history, culture, and social development alongside those of Pakistan, promoting mutual understanding and reducing potential intercultural misunderstandings. Moreover, institutions can establish professional video production teams to create engaging cross-cultural communication films, which students can access via school platforms for extracurricular study. To further enhance

accessibility and engagement, universities might leverage mobile technologies such as official public accounts and WeChat groups to disseminate videos, audios, and other relevant resources. This approach not only sustains student interest but also facilitates continuous, convenient learning of cross-cultural communication.

5. Conclusions

This qualitative case study involved six experienced Chinese language teachers from the Chinese department at NUML. Although the participant number was small, the study provides valuable confirmation of findings from previous research in Chinese language teaching and offers deeper insights into the challenges of developing intercultural communicative competence (ICC) among Chinese language learners in the Pakistani context.

Interculturalization in Chinese language education can be effectively achieved when there is strong alignment and consistency in policies from the macro to the micro level. This ensures that all stakeholders—teacher educators, policymakers, curriculum developers, teachers, and students—recognize intercultural communicative competence as a fundamental objective of Chinese language education.

In particular, teachers require targeted training and guidance on ICC pedagogy and assessment to successfully integrate these competencies into their teaching practices. Adequate resources and facilities must be provided to support ICC teaching and learning. Additionally, ICC-related learning outcomes should be explicitly embedded in Chinese language curricula with clear guidelines to facilitate implementation by teachers.

The findings of this study will be of interest to a wide range of stakeholders involved in foreign language education. Teachers—whether pre-service, novice, early-career, or experienced—as well as teacher trainers, course designers, materials developers, language centers, training academies, and policymakers will find valuable insights and practical examples to inform their work. Understanding teachers' perceptions of ICC and the reasons behind their support or resistance is crucial for teacher trainers designing national and global teacher education programs. Equipping both pre-service

and in-service teachers with the knowledge and tools to foster ICC will contribute significantly to the growth and enhancement of intercultural competence in language classrooms.

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