

**Developing the Intercultural Communication
Competence of Students in a Language Course at
a Chinese Higher Education College: A Critical
Incident Intervention**

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Abstract

Intercultural communication competence (ICC) has become an indispensable skill in this increasingly interconnected world. This dissertation proposes enhancements to English language teaching in China to meet the Chinese Ministry of Education's 2016 directive, which calls for the cultivation of talent with international perspectives and a comprehension of global norms. Drawing from my personal experience as an English teacher with international study experience, this research examines the necessity to expand beyond the traditional English teaching methodologies in China by integrating an intercultural dimension and contributes to the professional practice of education.

The central goal of this research is to equip Chinese college students with the competencies required for global success while also fostering the development of a distinctive cultural identity. Moreover, this research serves a dual purpose: to propose advancements in English language pedagogy in Chinese higher education and to facilitate my own professional development as an educator. Through continuous pedagogical reflection and course design evolution, I seek to elevate the quality of my instruction and ensure that the courses I offer are both dynamic and culturally responsive.

The dissertation focuses on exploring the development of ICC through Byram's (2006) framework from the standpoint of Holliday et al.'s (2004) non-essentialist view of culture. A key element of this exploration is the strategic

incorporation of Critical Incident Exercises (CIEs) into the English language curriculum. Derived from the authentic experiences of my students, these CIEs are designed to prompt critical reflection and dialogue aimed at enhancing ICC among students. The development of these CIEs is informed by a series of narrative interviews that provide a qualitative depth to the exercise content. These interviews demonstrate the students' intercultural encounters and provide a solid foundation upon which the CIEs are built. This process of transformation from narrative insight to educational application represents a significant contribution to language education by offering a replicable model for harnessing narrative accounts to improve intercultural pedagogy.

The dissertation is centred on three research questions: 1) How can CIEs advance the ICC of Chinese college students who learn English as a foreign language (EFL)? 2) How do CIEs influence students' perceived identity transformation? 3) What are the pedagogical implications of developing and employing CIEs within the Chinese EFL setting? To address these questions, this research adopts a qualitative Teacher Action Research (TAR) methodology to harness the narratives of students with overseas educational experiences to inform the development of CIEs. These CIEs are then applied within a larger student cohort across two TAR cycles. The second cycle integrates modifications derived from insights gathered during the initial cycle.

The findings emphasize the impact of CIEs on advancing ICC and fostering a transformative journey from being learners of English to becoming intercultural speakers and adept English users. The study's pedagogical insights recommend

adopting authentic resources, and a specialized ICC model for Chinese EFL learners, and highlight the importance of embedding national culture into EFL lessons. This research demonstrates the practicality of CIEs in fostering ICC in the Chinese EFL domain. It offers an example for educators seeking to incorporate intercultural perspectives into their teaching, empowering students to navigate and define their identities in the global context. This research also advocates for ICC frameworks and curricula tailored to China's higher education context.

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List of Abbreviations

Abbreviations	Full Terms
AR	Action Research
CC	Communicative Competence
CCA	Critical cultural awareness
CET-4	College English Test-4
CI	Critical Incidents
CIE	Critical Incident Exercise
EAP	English for Academic Purposes
EFL	English as a foreign language
ELT	English language teaching
ESP	English for Specific Purposes
GCET	General College English Teaching Curriculum
ICC	Intercultural Communicative Competence
L1	First language
L2	Second language
IELTS	International English Language Testing System
MOE	Ministry of Education
S1	Skills of interpreting and relating
S2	Skills of discovery and interaction
TAR	Teacher Action Research
TOFEL	Test of English as a Foreign Language
TSR	Teacher-Student relationship
VR	Virtual Reality

Chapter 1. Introduction

Globalisation refers to the economic integration process that creates a global marketplace (Jones, 1998) featuring enhanced mobility and communication among individuals worldwide (Watkins, 2006). This process reduces global distances through various means, including facilitating the spread of languages, particularly English (Crystal, 2000). For instance, English has become the principal language in over 80% of all official electronic retrieval systems (Crystal, 2003) and remains the most spoken language in the world (Eberhard et al., 2020). In 2023, approximately 1.5 billion people worldwide speak English either natively or as a second language, slightly exceeding the 1.1 billion Mandarin Chinese speakers (Gil, 2021). The pre-eminence of English in popular culture, emergency services, maritime and air transport, technology, science, and academia underscores its status as the dominant language in the contemporary world (Mamajanova & Yu, 2022).

The global appeal of English among non-native speakers has many drivers. These include its importance in relation to, for example, education, national and global economy and employability, mobility (including social mobility) and intercultural communication (Patel, et.al., 2023). This broader appeal of English is not merely the outcome of linguistic preference but reflects structural shifts in global and national economies, where English often operates as a gatekeeper language. In many contexts, including China, these dynamics are reinforced by national strategies aimed at global integration. For example, this linguistic shift is particularly evident in China, as traditional exclusivity in mindset has gradually given way to outward engagement.

As the country with the world's largest population of English learners, China has invested considerable time, effort, and resources in English education (Rose et al., 2020). Chinese national policies, including The Open Door Policy of 1978, catalysed this transformation, encouraging Chinese enterprises to internationalise and spurring a broader interest in learning English to facilitate global business dealings. The rising number of Chinese international students further reflects this trend, motivating learners to commit substantial effort to mastering English."Intercultural communication competency (ICC) has become indispensable for navigating the complexities of globalisation, especially in multilingual and multicultural environments. Scholars define ICC as the ability to interact effectively and appropriately with individuals from different cultural backgrounds, a skill set that has gained prominence with the rise of international collaboration and cultural exchanges (Byram, 2006; Holliday et al., 2004). Within the field of applied linguistics, ICC has become a pivotal area of research, addressing challenges posed by cultural diversity and linguistic barriers. Understanding ICC within the broader context of English as a global lingua franca enriches discussions on English language teaching (ELT), as it bridges linguistic proficiency with cultural awareness.

This chapter situates these discussions within the framework of globalisation and examines their implications for ELT, particularly in the Chinese context. Specifically, the chapter examines the concept of "World Englishes", a term that refers to localised or native varieties of English used by diverse cultural groups in various sociolinguistic

contexts. It explores the relationship between globalisation and English Language Teaching (ELT). It also introduces growing trend of dual-degree programmes in China. Additionally, the chapter analyses the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on this research, highlighting the dynamic interplay between global events and linguistic trends.

1.1 Whose English? World Englishes

The spread of English as a global language is an incontrovertible phenomenon. Kachru's seminal term "World Englishes" (1986), also known as international Englishes, encapsulates the varied use of English across different geographical and cultural landscapes (Nordquist & Nordquist, 2019). This term includes over 100 nations where English functions as a foreign, first, or official language, with examples including Chinese, Australian, and Singapore English. In nations where English is native, Standard English typically correlates with formal communication, media, and academia (Wiley & Lukes, 1996). Despite this, each English-speaking region has developed its standards, such as UK Standard English or General American, with the latter posited as particularly influential (Crystal, 2003). Therefore, researchers generally agree that English should not only stand for native varieties of Standard English (Kuteeva, 2020).

English's role as a world language emerges from its mother-tongue use in various nations and its historical proliferation through colonialism and migration (Kachru & Nelson, 2001). The British Empire's colonial expansion and the post-war economic ascent of the United States promoted the English language into a dominant

position. However, the initial role of English was primarily restricted to elite circles until it began to resonate with the masses through popular music and entertainment, further establishing its global influence (Jenkins, 2003).

Today, English serves as an official or second language in many countries, functioning in education, media, legal, and governmental sectors (Crystal, 2003). English language teaching (ELT) has become integral to educational curricula worldwide. English is now a mandatory school subject in 142 countries, signifying its academic primacy (Uwinnipeg, 2018). In China, for example, students study English as a mandatory course from primary school to higher education. Primary English education serves as the entry point and foundation for lifelong learning. According to the English Curriculum Standards (Wan, 2015), the primary goal of English teaching at this level is to cultivate students' comprehensive ability to use the language, integrating language skills, knowledge, affective attitude, learning strategies, and cultural awareness. Developing an interest in learning English is key at this early stage (Wan, 2015).

Another reason why English is taken as a mandatory school subject is the belief that starting younger leads to better phonological attainment (Abrahamsson, 2012). However, regardless of linguistic support for this theory, I personally believe that a native accent should not be used as a decisive criterion for language learning. Adult learners, such as non-English major college students (students who don't major in English), often study English for practical reasons related to daily life and value practical knowledge over academic knowledge (Sun et al., 2022). English major

learners in college, on the other hand, are motivated by self-improvement, affection for teachers, interest in the target culture, professional gains, and social needs driven by globalisation (Sun et al., 2022). However, I still have doubts on dividing the motivation of English learning according to their major. Thus, I am eager to understand the motivation of non-major students' motivation of English learning.

A significant academic discourse criticises the promotion of a monocentric Standard English, which often neglects local English norms in favour of American or British standards (Jenkins, 2003). Instead, scholars advocate a pluricentric approach that embraces Kachru's concept of "World Englishes," validating multiple English forms shaped by distinct cultural and linguistic contexts. The proliferation of English intertwines with the expansion of global markets and communication avenues, such as the Internet and media. While some speculate that Mandarin might overtake English in worldwide use (Jeffery, 2021), forecasts by Graddol (2001) suggest that English will retain its primacy for at least five decades.

Currently, native speakers acquire English naturally from childhood, while non-native speakers typically learn it later in life (Yeh, 2018). By 2024, the number of non-native speakers had reached approximately 740 million (Ethnologue, 2024). The study of World Englishes increasingly focuses on usage patterns and communicative efficacy in a globalised milieu.

Kachru's (1992) three-circle model of English usage (p.12) offers insights into its global dissemination. As shown in Figure 1, this model positions traditional Anglophone nations like the UK, USA, and Australia in the "inner circle." The "outer

circle” consists of about 75 countries, such as India, Nigeria, and the Philippines, where English functions as a second language, often used in formal contexts by speakers with local linguistic roots. The “expanding circle” includes countries like China, Japan, and Brazil, which, devoid of historical ties to English, still host populations ranging from 100 million to 1 billion English learners or speakers. This underscores the expansive reach of English in the global linguistic landscape.

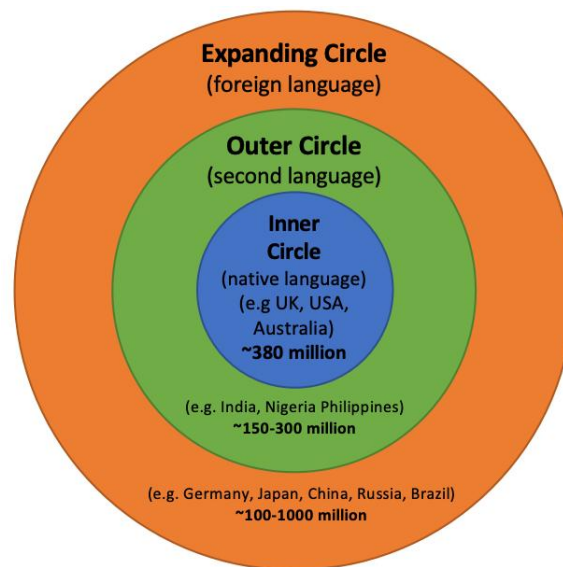


Figure 1. Three-circle model of English usage adapted from Kachru (1992,p.12)

The three-circle model generally represents the current global landscape of English usage. However, this geographic classification overlooks the nuanced relationships between English and its diverse user base (Jenkins, 2003). Jenkins (2003) contended that the dichotomy of native and non-native speakers in the inner and outer circles should not be the sole measure of English proficiency. Modiano (1999) criticises this model for perpetuating linguistic imperialism by positioning inner-circle countries as definitive authorities on the language and neglecting the

significant role of English in the outer and expanding circles where it functions as a second or official language.

Kachru's model establishes a hierarchical structure: the inner circle produces norms, the outer circle develops norms, and the expanding circle depends on these norms. This hierarchy implies that the inner circle sets the standards for the other circles to follow. However, Crystal (1995) disputed the practicality of differentiating between native and non-native speakers, citing dynamic changes in language use, shifts in attitudes, language attrition, and population movement. Widdowson (1998) echoed this sentiment, asserting that the global development of English is independent of its native speakers, who no longer have exclusive ownership over the language.

This perspective acknowledges the development of "world Englishes" and positions communication as the primary function of English, rather than strict conformity to Standard English. English has increasingly served as a lingua franca. A lingua franca is a common language used for communication between speakers who do not share the same native language (Jenkins, 2007). In the context of English as a lingua franca, English is used among speakers of different first languages, and it is often the preferred or only medium of communication (Seidlhofer, 2011). 'English as lingua franca is also a part of world Englishes paradigm, according to which the majority of English speakers are non-native, and all English varieties, whether native or non-native are accepted rather than judged based on a native speaker benchmark' (Jenkins, et al., 2011,p.284). Rather than functioning solely as a linguistic tool, it

serves as a dynamic form of intercultural interaction (Victoria et al., 2024) that enables mutual understanding across Kachru's inner, outer, and expanding circles.

The expanding circle comprises the largest population of English users, who often use the language primarily for intercultural communication (Jenkins & Leung, 2016). In China, this demographic is substantial. Drawing on national statistics from the "Survey of Language Situation in China"(approved at the No.134 Meeting of the Premier Office of the State Council on January 6,1997), Wei and Su (2012) report that there were more than 390 million English learners and users in China in the year of 2000. Patel et al (2023) predict that the number of English speakers (according to their definition, English speakers refer to native speakers and those who speak English as an additional language,) in China will remain stable or keep increasing (p.93) from 400 million (p.337) in the coming decade.

1.2 A Brief History of ELT in China

The trajectory of ELT in China has been subject to the nation's sociopolitical changes. Adamson (2004) suggested that the status of ELT mirrored China's interactions with Western powers. In the late 19th century, China was increasingly engaged with the West, which included the introduction of the English language and Western technological subjects known as "洋务 (Yang Wu)." At that time, only a few people were able to learn English. This period marked a critical moment for ELT, as the English language was integrated into the college examination systems and widely promoted by British and American missionaries (Hu, 2005). To cope with the

increasing demand for ELT, China's secondary school curriculum began to include English, Japanese, and German in 1902. This initiative aimed to cultivate interest in other languages and cultures and to enable students to use English as a tool for subjects like physics and architecture (Hu, 2005).

The establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 marked a tumultuous period for ELT, wherein China's political tensions with Western nations led to the prioritisation of Russian over English in educational institutions (Boyle, 2000). For instance, seven out of eight normal universities abolished ELT in 1953, while junior secondary schools closed their foreign language departments the following year, leaving Russian as the only foreign language taught in senior secondary schools (Hu, 2001). This change reflected the ideological stance that capitalist influences, particularly pedagogical ones from the UK and the US, were in opposition to China's proletarian educational objectives. However, as China and the Soviet Union departed their ways during the Cold War period due to ideological differences, China's educational institutions started to re-embrace English in 1964. This renewed focus, however, emphasised basic language skills and literary appreciation rather than practical application (Hu, 2005).

The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) saw another period of ELT prohibition. During this time, educational activities in schools ceased entirely from 1966 to 1968. Slogans such as "Make revolution rather than learn ABC!" and "Chinese people should not learn foreign languages!" appeared nationwide, decrying the learning of

English (Qun & Li, 1991). English was then relegated to a tool for political struggle against the West rather than a medium of communication (Hu, 2005).

When the Cultural Revolution ended in the late 1970s, the Chinese government reinstated the college entrance examination (i.e., 高考 Gaokao in Chinese) and implemented the Open Door Policy. This shift signalled a shift from self-sufficiency to active participation in the world market. This period marked the beginning of a huge transformation in ELT, with the English language gaining unprecedented importance in China's education system.

In 1979, English, like all other subjects, was scored out of 100, but its results were only used as a reference for college admissions, except for foreign language majors. After 1980, while the scores for Chinese and mathematics were increased to 120, English remained at 100 but began to be counted as 30% of the total Gaokao score. Starting from 1983, English was fully incorporated, scored 120 like other subjects, and contributed to the total score of Gaokao. The increased weight of English in the Gaokao exam triggered a widespread "English fever" across the country, with schools prioritising English over other foreign languages.

In the 1980s and 1990s, this fever permeated Chinese educational systems and underscored its significance in China's burgeoning international tourism and business sectors (Hui, 2001). The nation's ambition to achieve international stature further propelled this trend (Lam, 2002), as evidenced by China's joining the World Trade Organization in 2001 and hosting the Olympic Games in 2008.

To address the growing demand for English proficiency, the College English Teaching Syllabus for Science and Engineering Undergraduates was introduced between 1985-1986. This syllabus divided English teaching in Chinese higher education institutions into two distinct strands: (1) Liberal Arts and (2) Science and Technology. This division was intended to tailor English instruction to the specific needs of different academic disciplines, aligning the liberal arts track with English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and other fields with English for Specific Purposes (ESP).

In higher education, College English courses became synonymous with ESP language teaching. According to Hao and Yin (2015), this designation was meant to align the instruction of English as a foreign language with the practical requirements of non-English majors in higher education institutions in mainland China. The curriculum was designed to be learner-centric, ensuring relevance and efficacy in language application, from syntax to discourse practices in fields such as business English or English for tourism (Gaikwad, 2016).

However, Chinese college students showed a strong preference for General English, also known as everyday English, over ESP. This preference stems from the learners' principal objective in studying English: to harness the language as a pragmatic tool for gathering information within specific domains and expressing their thoughts in English (Hao & Yin, 2015). The major-job mismatch can explain the lack of motivation for learning ESP. Almost a quarter of recent college graduates in China work in jobs that are not related to their college major (Jiang & Guo, 2022). But it is a different story for adult learners, such as part-time college students or postgraduates.

Conversely, mature learners, such as part-time college students or postgraduates, express more interest in ESP if they see a practical use for what they are learning within a workplace, including technical terms (Sun et al., 2022).

The Chinese educational system values English proficiency as a conduit to numerous opportunities. These include access to higher education, enhanced prospects for graduation, opportunities to study abroad, the potential for securing high-paying employment, and the possibility of career advancement and attaining prestigious positions (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Li, 2020; Liu, 2007). English examinations also play an important role in social mobility (Hui, 2001). Notably, assessments such as the College English Test 4 (CET-4) are administered to gauge the English proficiency of undergraduates and postgraduates, thereby evaluating the efficacy of English education against established pedagogical objectives. The academic credit system reflects the importance of English, attributing approximately 16 credits—equivalent to 10% of the total credit requirement, or around 280 teaching hours per semester—to English coursework. This indicates the status of English as a key to academic and professional success within the Chinese educational paradigm.

The launch of the "One Belt, One Road" policy in 2015 ushered China's ELT into a new era emphasising intercultural communication competency alongside linguistic proficiency. The Chinese government introduced the "One Belt, One Road" policy to strengthen its ties to Oceania, Africa, and the two ends of Eurasia. Thus, the Chinese Ministry of Education released a college English teaching syllabus calling for more people who understand international rules and possess a global perspective to

succeed in international competition and affairs (Ministry of Education [MOE], 2016).

In response to these changes, the educational system in China adapted by integrating early English language instruction, which led to the extensive proliferation of English Language Teaching (ELT) throughout the country. Presently, China boasts the highest population of English language learners globally as mentioned above. English as a Foreign Language (EFL) has been institutionalised as a mandatory element of the curriculum for all students at all educational levels from primary school to university. Coastal cities, which play crucial roles in socioeconomic and political interactions among nations, pay special attention to English education (Han & Yan, 1999). For instance, in Shanghai, children begin learning English as early as kindergarten, resulting in Shanghai being ranked as the Chinese city with the highest English proficiency, according to a British Council survey (British Council, 2024).

Although assessments like the CET-4 measure English proficiency within China, these tests may not fully encapsulate an individual's language capabilities, as they align more with specific educational goals than real-world language use (Gu, 2018). This alignment often leads to test-oriented teaching strategies in English language instruction (Gaikwad, 2016). Discussions about these issues were already underway in the 2010s, highlighting the pressing need to overhaul English-language education in China. Scholars like Wang and Li (2014) raised alarms about the inefficiencies and intense focus on English in the academic curriculum that did not translate effectively into practical language skills.

Despite these early conversations, it took several years for the suggestions to catalyse actual policy changes. Significant changes to China's national examination system were implemented in 2020, including the removal of the mandatory English test from the Gaokao. Peng et.al (2014) suggested evaluating students multiple times throughout the year, with their highest scores being recorded. This shift intended to prioritise oral English proficiency and communicative ability over rote learning of grammatical structures. This general recommendation is now being implemented.

Concurrently, China is witnessing a rising trend in proficiency tests aimed at studying abroad, such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and International English Language Testing System (IELTS). These two tests are the most popular English proficiency tests for higher education and global migration and continue to gain popularity (Chinaielts-white-paper, 2017). In this white paper author quoted data from “Project Atlas 2020” shows that English-speaking countries — specifically the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom, and Canada — remain preferred destinations for Chinese students seeking international education. A TOEFL or IELTS score is a must for applying to the universities in those countries.

In 2020, more than 300,000 Chinese students were studying in the United States alone and over 100,000 in Australia, the UK, and Canada. The 2021 National Abroad Study Report (XDF, 2021) in the China International Summit on Education reveals several motives driving Chinese students to pursue overseas education. These include broadening perspectives, enhancing life experiences, acquiring advanced knowledge and technology, improving career opportunities, increasing English language

proficiency, aspiring to attend prestigious institutions, and an affinity for Western culture.

The evolution of English in China—from a symbol of foreign aggression to a language of status—illustrates a shift in the Chinese collective consciousness. Over the past decades, the English language has transitioned from being seen as a "barbarian tongue with low status" to a language of high prestige and utility (Adamson, 2002, p.240). This transformation is linked to the changing attitudes towards the West and the re-evaluation of cultural identity within a globalised context. Historically, the English language was associated with foreign invasion and oppression, and its learners were deemed as embracing the language of military aggressors (Adamson, 2002). However, the advent of globalisation and an openness to diverse cultures have precipitated a dramatic shift in this perception.

Since the 1980s, China has increasingly recognized English proficiency as a valuable asset in the global arena. This recognition necessitated a revision of the language curriculum to foster "a productive and harmonious relation with diverse cultures" (MOE, 2006, p. 66). Learning a second language, particularly English, has become more than an academic pursuit. It has evolved into a means of developing new cognitive frameworks and accessing global cultures. English language acquisition is no longer confined to the liberal arts; it is now acknowledged as a vital instrument for international and intercultural engagement, enabling Chinese individuals to connect with the broader global community.

1.3 Traditional EFL Pedagogy in Chinese Universities

Since the enactment of China's Open-Door policy, many pedagogical theories and methodologies have gained the attention of policymakers, educators, and learners within the Chinese EFL landscape. Yet, EFL in Chinese higher education has predominantly adhered to three key elements Zhao identified (2012): the teacher, the textbook, and the examination (P.1099). Zhao collectively termed these the "Three Old Centres," which have largely emphasised linguistic knowledge only.

The teacher-centred method, rooted in behaviourist philosophy, creates a passive learning environment where students are recipients of teaching rather than active participants (Pritchard, 2017). Despite the introduction of Western communicative approaches in some Chinese institutions, survey data from Du (2021) indicates that the grammar-translation method remains prevalent in most of the institution. This didactic strategy, characterised by an emphasis on reading, writing, rote memorisation, and grammatical dissection (Hu, 2002), is increasingly out of line with the communicative demands of learners. It inadequately develops listening and speaking skills (Du, 2021). Moreover, this method often disregards the influence of native culture on the language being acquired, leading to a disconnect between classroom instruction and authentic language use (Fotos, 2005; Hwang, 2005).

Chinese English learners are often termed "mute English speakers" due to their proficiency in testing scenarios but lack of real-world communication skills (Zhong, 2010 ; Wei & Su, 2008). Traditional pedagogical approaches in China do not meet the societal demands for communicative proficiency, particularly in listening and

speaking (Fan, 2010). The focus on linguistic accuracy hinders the improvement of communicative competence and the repetitive cycle of vocabulary memorisation and grammar exercises dampens student motivation, an element critical to language acquisition (Gardener, 2003). Additionally, grammar-translation classes dominated by teachers offer little room for learner autonomy and rarely incorporate authentic language use (Gaikwad, 2016).

The introduction of Communicative Language Teaching and other contemporary methods into China's EFL landscape has historically encountered limited enthusiasm and adoption. This trend has only recently started to reverse (Mcintosh, 2016). Rao (2002) identified several barriers to integrating communicative activities and intercultural skills into College English teaching. These barriers include 1) educators' perceptions of language teaching, 2) entrenched educational philosophies, and 3) the national examination system. One significant obstacle stems from the educational experiences of the current cohort of English instructors in college, predominantly aged between 40 and 50, who were educated during a period dominated by rote-learning approaches—often referred to as “mute English speakers.” This era left them with limited opportunities for active engagement in English conversation or substantial exposure to English-speaking environments during their training.

Azhen, a teacher documented in Li's narrative study in 2020, exemplified this challenge. Her account revealed the difficulties she faced as a non-native English teacher: struggling with self-perception that undermined her professional confidence and a persistent sense of inadequacy in her language abilities despite her years of

teaching experience. As such, non-native English teachers often express reservations about their capacity to address cultural nuances and spontaneous inquiries related to English-speaking societies (Rao, 2002). This reluctance is also evident among staff in my university, who hesitate to teach students in joint programmes with overseas components. This hesitance highlights the perceived inadequacy of non-native English teachers in cultural competence and oral English proficiency. Therefore, in my university, only native English teachers or those with extensive overseas experiences are preferred to teach these students in joint programmes.

Traditional educational norms, deeply rooted in Confucian philosophy, further impede the shift towards learner autonomy and communicative teaching methods. The Confucian-Socratic framework elucidated the cultural preference for a didactic, teacher-led approach, with student-driven learning often perceived as unserious, particularly in large class sizes (Liu & Ren, 2021). Furthermore, the incompatibility of existing textbooks with communicative activities and their outdated, form-focused content also hinders the student-centred teaching approach (Liu & Ren, 2021). Yet, the globalising world has prompted a growing recognition among students and educators of the need for communicative competence (Gong et al., 2020).

The national examination system in China presents another challenge in integrating intercultural communicative competence (ICC) into daily pedagogical practice. The General College English Teaching Curriculum (GCET, 2019) outlines the objectives of college-level English education, which include enhancing students' intercultural awareness and knowledge, boosting intercultural communicative

abilities, developing language usage capacity, expanding cultural literacy, and strengthening autonomous learning skills. These goals aim to ensure effective English utilisation in academic pursuits, daily interactions, social exchanges, and professional growth, tailored to individual, institutional, societal, and state needs. Furthermore, the curriculum also advocates for including intercultural communication at varying levels within college English curricula, addressing specific learner needs.

Despite governmental acknowledgment of the importance of ICC as evidenced by McIntosh (2016), the pass rate for CET-4 exams remains a critical metric for evaluating the quality of college English teaching due to its correlation with graduation certification. Failure to pass the CET-4 exams can delay or prevent graduation. Moreover, the current national examinations do not adequately assess intercultural communicative skills. Consequently, English instructional materials, particularly for non-English majors, tend to concentrate on developing listening, reading, grammar, writing, and speaking skills, rather than emphasising the cultural nuances underpinning the language. Additionally, educators are reluctant to adopt teaching materials not officially sanctioned for fear of potential criticism from superiors and colleagues (Liu, 2023). This situation underscores a clear disjunction between the educational goals set forth by the MOE and the actual evaluative practices employed within the Chinese higher education system.

In response to the call to enhance intercultural skills and promote social mobility, more and more universities in China now seek to cooperate with overseas universities to launch joint academic programmes. In the following section, I will discuss the rise

of transnational education initiatives, such as collaborative dual-degree programmes in China, as well as the factors driving to this trend.

1.4 Expansion of Internationalisation and the Rise of Dual-Degree Programmes in China : A Case of Shanghai Minban (Private) University

Globalisation and internationalisation are key terms used by politicians and academic leaders worldwide, including in China. However, it is important to understand that “globalisation is the context of economic and academic trends that are part of the reality of the 21st century. Internationalisation includes the policies and practices undertaken by academic systems and institutions- and even individuals- to cope with the global academic environment”(Altbach & Knight, 2007, p. 290). This trend of internationalisation has significantly influenced universities in Mainland Chinese.

The increasing valuing of Western education as a mechanism for accruing cultural capital has become particularly notable in recent decades in China (Collins, 2013; King et al., 2012). This trend reflects China's aspiration to capture advanced foreign education resources to enhance the academic capacity and global competitiveness of its higher education system (Mok, 2021). Various types of transnational programmes have emerged in response to this trend. Examples include collaborations between foreign universities and mainland institutions, Chinese-Foreign Cooperation in Running schools, and dual-degree programmes offered both domestically and abroad.

Dual-degree programmes were introduced in the mid-1980s, initially available only at prestigious institutions such as Nanjing University, Tianjin Institute of Finance and Economics, Fudan University in Shanghai, and People's University in Beijing (Gao, Feng & Henderson, 2012). These programs enroll students at two partner institutions and ultimately award them two degrees (Hou, 2020; Knight, 2011).

The growth of dual-degree programmes reflects a broader diversification in higher education aimed at meeting unprecedented global economic and social demands (UNESCO, 1998). As educational reforms progress, such collaborative international programmes are no longer exceptional but increasingly commonplace within Chinese higher education, with a growing number of universities pursuing partnerships beyond China. While the precise statistics on the prevalence of dual-degree programs are not easy to find, it is recognised that more than half of the dual programmes existing in the United States are implemented within mainland China (Birol & Yusuf, 2021).

The objectives of overseas dual-degree programmes are multifaceted. Goodman and Rulan (2013) emphasised the role of these programmes in fostering robust international partnerships, recruiting exceptional talent, and facilitating student mobility. These programmes are considered integral to the internationalisation strategies of higher education, allowing students to pursue distinct educational trajectories. Wang (2018) further elaborated on the popularity of dual-title programmes, noting that these programmes offer participants enhanced opportunities for overseas employment and the ability to gain comprehensive international

experience. Such cooperative international programmes are highly regarded among Chinese students and their parents, underscoring the value of these programmes in the Chinese educational and professional landscape.

When discussing the growth and development of transnational higher education, it is necessary to talk about the unique contexts of non-state-run higher education. The rise of MinBan (民办 private) colleges in mainland China addresses the pressing demands for university enrolment expansion when the state sector provision was not sufficient. This development allowed MinBan higher education institutions to create additional higher education learning opportunities. Unlike MinBan higher education, the rise of transnational higher education (as discussed above) is to support the strategic vision of the country to enhance its higher education capacity (Mok,2021). In short, the rise of MinBan and transnational higher education are responses to different policy environments, serving specific policy goals and strategic development needs of the country. Practice has proved that actively developing Sino-foreign cooperation in running schools is one of the effective ways to meet the demand for the internationalisation of higher education (Liu et al, 2013). Since then, a series of structural reforms such as curriculum design, financing, and promotion of Minban universities was launched.

My university offers a 2+2 programmes, where students spend the initial two years at a university in Shanghai, followed by two years at a partner university abroad. During their time in Shanghai, major courses are delivered in English, some instructed by foreign educators, either in residence or visiting. The programme is

offered both online and face-to-face. Foundational subjects in this programme, such as College English, mathematics, and physical education, are taught by the staff from the university in Shanghai. Participants who complete the programme receive dual degrees from both Shanghai and the associated partner university.

The collaboration with an Aeronautics and Technology college exemplifies this model. This partnership includes internship opportunities aimed at enhancing graduates' employability in the aerospace sector. Now in its second iteration, this programme limits enrolment to 60 students annually and commands a premium tuition fee—approximately three times that of standard programmes.

The advent of the global pandemic has significantly impacted the feasibility and operations of international dual-degree programmes. The subsequent section will explore the post-pandemic landscape, examining the prospects and challenges associated with studying abroad in the current era.

1.5 Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Studying Abroad

The rapid spread of COVID-19 since 2019 has significantly influenced Chinese students' decisions regarding overseas education. A survey conducted by Mok et al. (2021) during the pandemic with 1,267 mainland Chinese students in May 2020 revealed that 91% were disinclined to pursue international studies in the post-pandemic era. Concerns cited by these students included the unpredictability of visa application processes and safety issues (Yang, 2020).

Ha et al (2020) attributed the apprehension of Chinese students to fears of racial discrimination and infection risks, exacerbated by tensions in Sino-US relations,

which have led to the stigmatisation of Chinese individuals as carriers of the virus. This stigma, especially before the widespread outbreak in the United States, was evident in the societal perception of mask-wearing as abnormal. Consequently, some Chinese students skipped classes to avoid embarrassment or discrimination—actions that ultimately impacted their academic performance and well-being due to unaddressed anxiety (Ma, 2020).

Chinese families concerned for their children's safety abroad have undertaken extensive efforts to secure return flights amidst the pandemic, leveraging personal networks and paying escalated prices due to the aviation industry's operational constraints (Hu et al., 2022; The Business Times, 2022). As a result, many students opted to postpone or cancel their plans to study in Western countries. Instead, they are exploring other options, such as Japan, Hong Kong, and Korea for their postgraduate studies, driven by the expectation of encountering less discrimination due to cultural similarities presumed to be shared among these regions (Mok et al., 2021).

Despite these challenges, a survey encompassing 35 higher education institutions in China indicates that Western countries remain attractive destinations for Chinese students. This attraction stems from the perceived superior quality of education, the allure of a different lifestyle, the pursuit of unrestrained communication, and the anticipation of the effective pandemic management (Yang, 2020). In summary, while the COVID-19 pandemic has undeniably affected Chinese students' international study plans in the short term, there remains a resilient interest in pursuing education in Western countries post-pandemic. It is imperative, however, that students be prepared

to navigate potential challenges they may encounter abroad. Developing ICC could be instrumental in facilitating their adaptation and success in such environments.

1.6 Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

In my six-year employment as an English language instructor at a Minban university in Shanghai, I have observed a growing inclination among my peers to incorporate cultural content into their teaching practices. This trend aligns with the directives outlined in the College English Curriculum Requirements of 2004 and 2007, issued by the Ministry of Higher Education, and is fuelled by educators' ambitions to refine their pedagogical methods. Nonetheless, I have identified several challenges that English language teachers face when attempting to integrate cultural studies into their curricula: 1) determining the specific cultural concepts and intercultural communication skills that are pertinent in an internationalised setting; 2) discerning the appropriate cultural content for instruction; 3) identifying effective teaching activities to achieve educational goals (as discussed in Section 1.3); and 4) a lack of understanding of English, with many still taking native-speaker as the model of English learning and teaching just as Azhen described in Section 1.3.

The foreign language classroom is traditionally viewed as an optimal environment to foster cultural awareness within language acquisition processes (Byram, 1997). Over the past decades, the language curriculum has been a common indicator of learners' intercultural development (Sercu, 2010). However, current literature scarcely addresses the integration of cultural dimensions into foreign language education or its amalgamation with the language curriculum in China.

Despite the establishment of more than 20 intercultural communication centres at Chinese universities over the last decade, literature reviews by Kong and Luan (as cited in Steve & Wang, 2015) suggested that these centres have not substantially contributed to the reform of English curricula in alignment with global trends.

My research is influenced by my personal and professional experiences as an English teacher who returned from overseas. I have studied and lived in Edinburgh, New York, and London, and these experiences have shown me the importance of intercultural understanding and the need to become a skilled intercultural communicator rather than simply adopting the native culture. I have noticed gaps in cultural instruction for EFL, and, using my background, I advocate for an action-based approach. I believe that the dissatisfaction with current pedagogical frameworks requires innovation led by practitioners. I aim to offer practical solutions for my context and disseminate findings to aid fellow educators.

Simulation activities, particularly critical incident exercises (CIEs), which replicate real-world scenarios, are scarcely employed in Chinese EFL contexts (Gaikwad, 2016). Such activities provide learners with immersive experiences, exposing them to real-life challenges and complexities (Gerulaitiene, 2013). Despite their prevalence in Western intercultural education since its first usage by Black and Mendenhall in 1990, CIEs are underutilised in the Chinese EFL context (Wang, et al, 2021).

Furthermore, there is a dearth of experiential learning materials tailored for the development of ICC in China. It was not until 2020 that the first textbook, *新大学英*

语跨文化交际阅读教程 (*Intercultural Reading*), featuring lead-in scenarios was published and put into teaching practice. This marked significant progress in China's ICC instruction. However, this book is still a recommended supplementary material rather than a core textbook for most universities' English major students. This material covers intercultural communication knowledge areas, including language and culture, and uniquely emphasises Chinese culture in ICC learning. Nevertheless, the post-scenario activities, which often involve selecting predetermined answers, may neglect the complexity of cultural interactions and limit the exercise's potential to foster critical thinking (Snow, 2015).

This research investigates whether CIEs applied in an EFL classroom can improve learners' ICC and whether identity transformation occurs during the learning process, namely students' perceptions of themselves in terms of intercultural communication. The intended outcome of this research is to offer recommendations for ICC teaching approaches that are compatible with the Chinese Minban EFL context, focusing on ICC models, syllabus design, and teaching methods.

The research questions guiding this research are:

1. How can critical incident exercises (CIEs) advance the intercultural communicative competence (ICC) of Chinese college EFL learners?
2. How do CIEs influence students' perceived identity transformation?
3. What are the instructional implications of developing and employing CIEs within the Chinese EFL setting?

1.7 Organization of the Dissertation

The dissertation begins with this introductory chapter that establishes the foundational aspects of the study by outlining its origins and objectives. Chapter Two goes further by critically examining the existing scholarly literature in this area. This chapter explores key concepts such as the relationship between culture and language pedagogy, Byram's ICC model, the process of identity evolution in intercultural dialogue, and the connection between intercultural encounters and experiential learning.

In Chapter Three, I describe the methodological approach with a specific emphasis on the application of Teacher Action Research. In this chapter, I explain the advantages of using this methodology for examining pedagogical practices within my own classroom. I detail the approach to the research, including participant selection, my researcher position, environmental context, and the data collection approaches, such as interviews, questionnaires, learner worksheets, interventions, and reflective journals.

Chapter Four shifts focus to the empirical findings obtained from narrative interviews conducted with students who were studying overseas (Group A). The chapter aims to extract their authentic intercultural experiences by examining critical and memorable incidents based on the narrative interview data. The emerging themes from these narratives include values and academic challenges, language barriers and socialisation difficulties, discrimination and stereotyping, identity struggle, and cultural

shock in daily life. A total of six critical incidents were crafted based on these five themes.

Chapter Five marks the beginning of the intervention phase, where the pedagogical design and objectives are explained. The chapter details the critical incidents methodology and the steps involved in generating them. It also provides an overview of the learners' pre-course status, including their previous language learning experiences, course expectations, and self-assessed intercultural competencies.

Chapter Six tracks the development of learners' ICC during the first intervention cycle. Byram's ICC model is used to frame this progress, and supplementary themes that go beyond the model are also presented. The chapter also analyses post-intervention questionnaires and interviews to evaluate the intervention and provide a basis for the second cycle. Next, I illustrate the modifications for the intervention based on the result of Cycle 1, highlighting three main areas for revision: self-generated CIEs, the addition of film clips, and COVID related incidents.

The data and findings from the second intervention cycle are presented in Chapter Seven, emphasising the most important developments observed.. Chapter Eight synthesised the research findings to respond to the research questions. Additionally, it discusses the pedagogical implications drawn from the study. Finally, Chapter Nine addresses the limitations, recommendations, and contributions to the practice of education.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

This chapter aims to investigate the multifaceted nature of intercultural communication and examine CIE as a strategic pedagogy for enhancing learners' ICC. The theoretical underpinning of this research is built on Byram's ICC model (1997) and the non-essentialist approach proposed by Holliday et al. (2004). This chapter describes the relationship between culture and language, exploring the role of culture in the domain of English language teaching. Finally, this chapter discusses the emergence and prevalence of intercultural speaker identity from a non-essentialist perspective and explores the nuances of identity construction within this framework.

2.1 Culture and Language Teaching

Language provides insights into a “form of life” (Wittgenstein 1994, p.9), making the knowledge of culture indispensable in language acquisition. This dissertation emphasises that language education cannot be separated from cultural learning. Byram (2006a) argued that integrating language with cultural and social context greatly affects cognitive processes and the creation of meaning. Similarly, proficiency in a second language goes beyond grammatical accuracy (Canale & Swain, 1980). It also includes effective communication, where grammatical errors may not always hinder understanding (Richards & Rogers, 2014). Moreover, understanding a culture can enhance core language skills, such as speaking, listening, writing, and reading (Kramsch, 1993).

In the 21st century, pedagogical research and teaching practices have increasingly focused on the intercultural dimension, striving to enhance learners'

openness and adeptness in intercultural communication (Byram, 1997). This shift reflects a growing recognition of the need to equip learners with the skills for navigating diverse cultural contexts effectively. Numerous theoretical models have underscored the critical role of culture in language education. Notable among these are Byram's ICC model (1997), Bennett & Hammer (2017)'s developmental model of intercultural sensitivity, Deardorff's process model of intercultural competence, and Straffon's (2003) model of intercultural sensitivity. These models originated in European and American contexts and were often regarded as universally applicable (Song, 2019; Qin, 2015; Wang & Byram, 2011). They provide valuable frameworks for analysing EFL teaching across various cultural settings.

However, there is growing concern about the dominance of Western-centric models in intercultural competence research. Chong and Grzymała-Moszczyńska (2015) argued that the underrepresentation of non-Western scholars in this field may hinder the development of a more globally inclusive understanding of intercultural competence. Many of these models are based on Western communication theories and cultural values, which may not adequately reflect the dynamic nature of globalisation or the increasing influence of non-Western countries in intercultural dialogue. Additionally, while the Byram model remains highly influential, it is crucial to adapt and expand it to better accommodate non-Western perspectives (Deardorff & Kulich, 2017). For instance, incorporating insights from the Chinese context could offer a deeper understanding of intercultural interactions in today's interconnected world.

To deepen our understanding of these assertions, it is essential to have a more comprehensive discussion on culture and its intricate relationship with language.

2.1.1 Defining Culture

Culture is inherently complex, and its interpretations vary significantly between Eastern and Western contexts. In Chinese academic discourse, the concept of “WenHua” (文化, culture) encompasses social life dimensions, historical traditions, and moral values. Early scholars in China generally agreed that culture, morality, and societal development are interconnected. This belief extends to both tangible artifacts (e.g., architecture, cuisine, and literature) and intangible elements (e.g., values, etiquette, and social norms) (Yang & Zhuang, 2007). According to Hofstede and Hofstede (2005), Chinese culture particularly values balance, respect, and harmony in all aspects of life. As such, discussions often equate the collective nature of Chinese national culture with these broader cultural characteristics.

Western academia has adopted various theoretical frameworks to study culture, ranging from anthropological to sociological perspectives. Adaskou, Britten, and Fahsi (1990) defined culture through four interrelated dimensions: aesthetic (i.e., arts such as cinema, literature, and music), sociological (i.e., societal structures and relations), semantic (i.e., meanings in language and symbols), and pragmatic (i.e., practical communication and social skills). The most representative categorisation of culture is the “Big C” and “small c” cultures. Saeedi& Salehabadi (2019) described the “big C” culture as the most visible forms of culture include holidays, art, popular culture, literature and food. This conception of “big C” culture aligns with the concept

of culture recognised by early Chinese scholars. However, the “big C” culture framework has been critiqued for potentially essentialising cultures into monolithic entities, ignoring internal diversity, hybridity, and contestation within cultural groups (Appadurai, 1990). Thus, the notion of “big C” culture may suggest a static and unchanging view of cultural identities, which fails to reflect the fluid and dynamic nature of cultures that evolves due to historical, social, and political influences (Hall & Kirschbaum, 2017).

The concept of “small culture” contrasts with essentialist views that link culture to national or ethnic identity. Holliday (1999) proposed moving the focus away from cross-national comparisons and instead examining how culture forms in specific local settings, such as classrooms, companies, or hobby groups. This approach draws attention to the everyday interactions and conventions that shape communication within these groups. To clarify its distinctiveness, it is important to differentiate “small culture” from “subculture.” According to Holliday (1999, p. 238), while “subculture” suggests a smaller entity within a larger culture, it retains a dependent relationship with the dominant culture. Gelder (1997) also described subcultures as existing in “ideological tension” with the wider cultures they inhabit. In contrast, “small cultures” function as context-specific and independent, resisting classification under broader national or ethnic categories.

Holliday (1999) viewed culture as evolutionary and fluid, continuously shaped by past experiences that influence future interpretations and behaviours. This perspective aligns with the dynamic understanding of culture in pedagogical research

as discussed in this study. Furthermore, Holliday's concept of "small culture" resonates with the idea of world Englishes, which highlights the diversity of language use and cultural practices within the global English-speaking community.

Therefore, this study specifically builds upon Holliday et al.'s (2004) conceptualisation of culture. This study adopts their framework, which regards culture not as a static entity but as a complex and evolving set of practices influenced by various socio-linguistic factors. This definition of culture underscores the dynamic interplay between culture and language, recognising that both continuously shape and reshape each other. The following discussion will provide a structured examination of how culture interacts with language learning and teaching across diverse contexts.

2.1.2 Essentialist and Non-Essentialist Views of Culture Through Big and Small C Lenses

Essentialist views, as outlined by Holliday et al. (2004), state that cultures have an inherent "universal essence, homogeneity, and unity" (p.2). The essentialist lens sees culture through broad ethnic or national categories, attributing collective traits to groups based on nationality or ethnicity. This perspective reinforces a simplistic "skin-onion" model, where subcultures are seen simply as layers beneath a dominant national identity. This essentialist perspective of culture can lead to oversimplified cultural stereotypes, such as characterising Chinese individuals as uniformly obedient. Such a view paints a monolithic picture of diverse national populations and fails to recognise the internal diversity and dynamism present within any cultural group.

In contrast, non-essentialists like Crystal (2003) and Gee (2000) advocate a localised, more nuanced approach to understanding culture. They emphasise the diversity of identities that individuals navigate daily, challenging the traditional, homogenised views of culture. This perspective, often referred to as “small culture,” categorises culture into smaller groups defined by shared values, beliefs, and behaviours.

The complexity of identity is increasingly recognised by researchers, particularly in interdisciplinary studies involving sociology, psychology, education, and cultural studies. This is notably evident in research concerning Chinese international students, who must navigate and negotiate multiple identities in diverse cultural environments. These identities often include their Chinese national identity, student identity, professional identity, and transnational identity, illustrating their complex sense of self (Zhao, 2020). Understanding these multifaceted identities helps in developing more effective educational and intercultural strategies.

Consider the case of Li (a friend of mine), a Chinese international student pursuing a Master's degree in International Business in Canada. Li embodies multiple identities that reflect her complex cultural interactions. As a student, she actively engages in her academic community, contributing to discussions and collaborative projects that enhance her knowledge and skills in global trade. Simultaneously, Li maintains her national identity by participating in the Chinese Students Association, where she helps organise cultural events and support new students from China in adapting to life abroad.

Professionally, Li interned at a multinational corporation in Toronto, where she applied her academic learning to real-world business challenges and solidifying her professional identity in the international business arena. This experience also enriched her transnational identity, as she navigated and integrated the diverse cultural and professional practices of her Canadian and international colleagues. Moreover, Li leverages online platforms to engage in forums dedicated to global economic trends, further developing her professional and transnational identities by connecting with a worldwide network of business professionals.

This example demonstrates how Li manages and integrates her multiple identities, illustrating the dynamic nature of identity among Chinese international students living abroad. Each identity is actively maintained and developed through her interactions within different communities, a process showcasing the complexity of identity negotiation that goes beyond geographical and cultural boundaries (Sorokin, 2019).

Furthermore, non-essentialists assert that culture is not a static entity; it evolves in response to new circumstances and challenges, adapting fluidly to the changing environment (Liddicoat et al., 2003). In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, societies have witnessed the emergence of new norms and attitudes, both domestically and internationally (Evsyukova & Glukhova, 2020). It's not only significant global events like pandemics that catalyse cultural shifts. Transitions between life stages or engagement with thought-provoking news can also shift our perceptions and behaviours. Therefore, to navigate cultural interactions effectively, it

is important to recognise the complexities of an individual's identity rather than confining them to a fixed cultural stereotype (Gee, 2000).

Within English Language Teaching (ELT), essentialist views have predominated, which may contribute to cultural misunderstandings and the reinforcement of stereotypes about behavioural traits associated with cultural backgrounds. For instance, the stereotype persists that, under the influence of perceived Chinese Confucian culture, Chinese students are often typecast as engaging in rote learning and being passive. Conversely, Western students are often stereotypically described as inherently creative (Leung & Chiu, 2010; Maddux & Galinsky, 2009). However, these categorisations oversimplify complex individual realities and fail to capture the diverse capabilities or experiences of students. Supporting this, research by Kim (2011) indicated a decline in creativity among American students over recent decades.

Moreover, such essentialist views may promote the normalisation of one's own cultural practices while marginalising others (Holliday, 1999). This can lead to the underrepresentation or even invisibility of diverse cultures in educational resources. For example, the Chinese English textbook series *"New Progressive College English"* used at my university sharply dichotomises parenting styles by labelling American parents as "free-range" and Chinese parents as "helicopter" parents. This classification not only simplifies complex behaviours but also promotes a divisive cultural narrative. Consequently, adherence to essentialism in ELT can prevent educators and learners from recognising individuals as the complex entities they are, overlooking the nuanced and multifaceted nature of student identities and interactions. Therefore,

moving beyond essentialist narratives in educational contexts is crucial for fostering a more inclusive and accurate understanding of cultural diversity.

Moreover, despite the richness of "big C" cultural elements featured in many English textbooks, such as religious origins and literary analysis, there is a tendency to neglect "small c" cultural elements. These everyday practices and experiences are often more relevant to students' lives and can significantly enhance their motivation to learn. Focusing on more distant cultural aspects and neglecting these everyday experiences can disengage students by seeming disconnected from their daily interactions. This point I have discussed in the introduction (i.e., Section 1.2) regarding the lack of motivation in English for Specific Purposes.

Additionally, Bennett (2004) suggested that focusing disproportionately on one aspect of culture could impede the development of students' critical cultural consciousness. Hymes (1986) and Holliday et al. (2004) also critiqued this cultural dichotomy, suggesting it creates a separation that inhibits learners from engaging with culture dynamically and holistically. Therefore, integrating "small c" cultural elements into ELT materials can bridge this gap, making language learning more relatable and engaging.

To address this issue, educators should move beyond simply imparting cultural facts. They are encouraged to foster intercultural communicative competencies that enable students to navigate and understand diverse cultural contexts effectively (Liddicoat, 2002; Steele, 2000). In my opinion, ELT materials and pedagogy should integrate both "big C" and "small c" cultural elements to provide a comprehensive

cultural framework. “Big C” culture includes broad narratives, such as religious origins and literary traditions, while “small c” culture focuses on everyday practices, beliefs, and attitudes. This balanced approach can enhance students' engagement and motivation by reflecting the full spectrum of cultural experiences.

Achieving this balance is essential for enriching the learning experience. English language education should transcend the rote memorisation of linguistic and cultural facts. Instead, it should actively engage students with the cultural practices that shape languages, thereby facilitating the integration of language learning with cultural understanding. Furthermore, classroom English content should act as a bridge for developing intercultural competence and consciousness. Forsman (2006) argued that effectively designed ELT materials can transform how students perceive and interact with different cultures. By incorporating real-life cultural scenarios, educators can help students apply their language skills in culturally diverse contexts, thus enhancing both their linguistic abilities and cultural awareness.

Scholars such as Liddicoat (2002) and Steele (2000) emphasised the importance of moving beyond the presentation of cultural facts in ELT. They advocated for an approach that integrates cultural realities directly relevant to the students' experiences. Therefore, educators should consider creating their own tailored teaching materials that better reflect the cultural realities and needs of their students. This approach becomes particularly crucial given the challenges of modifying the essentialist perspectives that dominate many existing ELT textbooks in the short term.

2.1.3 The Intertwined Nature of Culture and Language

The interrelationship between culture and language has been well-established in academia. Kramsch (1995) stated that culture is deeply intertwined with society, with language serving as a marker of an individual's association with specific social groups. Recent advances in sociolinguistics have deepened our understanding of how cultural contexts shape both language use and acquisition. For instance, Dorais (2020) explored the sociocultural dynamics within the Inuit community, highlighting that the Inuit language has multiple words for different types of snow. This linguistic diversity reflects the important role of snow in their environment and lifestyle. The integral relationship between culture and language underscores the necessity of shifting our linguistic analysis from a structural to a contextual perspective. By embracing this approach, researchers and educators can better appreciate how language functions not just as a system of communication but as a reflection of cultural identity and social practices.

Within the ELT domain, pioneering scholars have shifted the traditional focus from the grammatical structures of language to its contextual usage. For instance, Ware and Kramsch (2005) examined language as a cultural practice, arguing that linguistic forms cannot be fully understood without considering the social and cultural contexts in which they are used. Similarly, Hymes (1986) introduced the concept of “communicative competence,” a transformative framework considering the ability to use language appropriately in various social situations as crucial for language proficiency. Canale and Swain (1980) expanded on this by categorising competencies

necessary for effective communication, including grammatical, sociolinguistic, strategic, and discourse competencies.

These frameworks have steered language education towards a more holistic approach that recognises the importance of context and the use of language in real-life situations. Simpson (1997) and Grenfell (2002) further highlighted the deeply contextual nature of both culture and language, proposing that language teaching should reflect the complex interplay of linguistic forms, functions, and meanings shaped by cultural and social dynamics. Their work emphasised that language cannot be separated from the cultural and situational contexts in which it is embedded.

Yet, Byram (1997) and Simpson (1997) provided a critical perspective on the limitations of purely contextualised language teaching methods. They suggested that these methods might not adequately provide students with the opportunity to reflect on their identities and interpersonal relationships. Nonetheless, the integration of culture into language instruction, as advocated by Masuhara and Tomlinson (2017), elevates the educational experience, offering learners a deeper understanding of discourse and facilitating language acquisition.

Kramsch (1993) emphasised the shared responsibility among language educators, curriculum designers, and textbook authors in cultivating cultural awareness. This task has grown more complex in the context of globalisation. Risager (2007) explored the concept of “languaculture”, a term that reveals the inextricable link between language and culture. Risager critiqued previous research for its lack of sociolinguistic depth and highlighted the need to embrace new cultural perspectives in

language analysis. In particular, she stressed the role of English as a cultural vehicle not only for its native speakers but for all its users, thereby reinforcing the inseparability of language and “*linguaculture*” across linguistic contexts.

In essence, language and culture are interdependent, each shaping the other in numerous ways. This interdependence necessitates an integrated approach to language education. The subsequent section will explore specific cultural elements that could be incorporated into language classrooms. These elements aim to ensure that learners become linguistically proficient, culturally competent, and responsive.

2.1.4 What to Include in Language Education: Target, Local, and World Cultures

Teaching material is essential to successful teaching, guiding educators on what and how to teach (Lee & Bathmaker, 2007). In English classes, materials are primarily designed for language learning. However, the relationship between language and culture is inseparable. Thus, English language materials are expected also to include cultural components. Cortazzi and Jin (1999) indicated that teaching materials can present three types of cultural information: *source culture* materials that draw on the learners’ own culture; *target culture* materials that refer to the culture of the country where a foreign language is spoken as a first language; and *international target culture* materials that employ various cultures where the target language is used as an international language. I contend that English teaching material should include all three types, especially the cultural information from international target cultures where English is used as a global language.

The ongoing debate about the inclusion of essential cultural content in language education continues to engage scholars and educators. This discussion centres on identifying which cultural elements can most effectively enhance language learning. Kramsch (1993) argued from a sociolinguistic perspective, advocating a shift away from the traditional dichotomy of global versus local culture towards a deeper understanding of the nuances within the target culture. This approach was reinforced by Majdzadeh (2002), who observed that Iranian English learners often seek private tuition to engage more fully with the target culture, which was frequently underrepresented in the local tradition-focused public school textbooks.

Including the target culture in language education offers undeniable benefits, such as expanded cultural knowledge and improved language proficiency. However, it faces criticism for its underlying essentialist assumptions. Contemporary educators advocate for a balanced integration of both local and target cultural elements, arguing that an overemphasis on either can skew learners' perspectives and motivations. For instance, Lamb (2009) challenged the traditional view that identification with native speakers and the target culture correlates with academic or professional success. In the era of English as a global language, learners' identities and motivations must be re-evaluated. Lamb (2009) suggested that the pursuit of a self-determined identity can be a more powerful motivator than the pursuit of achievement. He emphasised the significance of mobilising learners' cultural and social experiences in ELT to facilitate learning. Lamb concluded that self-positioning is influenced by one's own culture and language community, as well as the elements of the target culture.

Scholars have highlighted the importance of integrating local culture into language teaching materials (e.g., Melendez et al., 2009; Nelson, 1995). They argued that incorporating intercultural communication not only bolsters language proficiency but also cultivates cultural understanding, empathy, and effective communication skills. These qualities are indispensable in today's globalised world. This advocacy stems from a recognition that local cultural contexts are crucial for creating relatable and engaging learning environments.

McKay (2003) further advised textbook writers to incorporate local culture to enhance learners' extensive background knowledge, facilitating the development of ICC. Engaging learners' local cultural knowledge, or schemata, can significantly enhance comprehension and learning. Holliday et al. (2004) explained that learners' cognitive schemata—comprising linguistic, content, and formal schemata—are built upon their background knowledge, which is heavily influenced by their cultural experiences. Floyd & Carrell (1987) showed that cultural schemata have a more substantial impact on reading comprehension than formal schemata among two cohorts of English as second language learners. Consistent with this finding, Khan et al. (2021) advocated for the use of local cultural content in educational settings. He argued that starting with familiar cultural topics can greatly enhance learner engagement and facilitate the acquisition of new knowledge, particularly in ICC teaching. Therefore, educational materials that activate these schemata are recommended for effective learning.

While integrating local culture in ICC development proves beneficial, exclusively focusing on it poses challenges. Overemphasising local culture may risk fostering an essentialist mindset, which can hinder ICC development and cause misunderstandings. As Holliday et al. (2004) argued, reliance on cognitive schemata shaped by personal and mediated experiences can often mislead individuals. For example, daily routines like dressing or preparing breakfast, influenced by habitual experiences, often operate without explicit reflection. Similarly, over-relying on local culture in ELT might reinforce rigid cognitive schemata and foster essentialist biases that undermine ICC acquisition. Thus, exploring local culture in language education should act as a bridge to developing ICC, not an impediment.

A balanced integration of target and local cultures within language education mitigates the risks of stereotypes and facilitates ICC. Bredella (2003) argued that fostering flexible intercultural understanding allows learners to appreciate cultural diversity and make informed choices in intercultural interactions. Holliday's (2009) non-essentialist approach to culture complements this perspective by advocating for the inclusion of both local and target cultures in ELT. This strategy encourages learners to embrace their identities as intercultural speakers, recognising cultural complexities and promoting an adaptable, open-minded approach to cultural identities and experiences.

Although much of this discussion contrasts essentialism and non-essentialism, interculturalists often operate within nuanced, hybrid positions that defy such binaries (Byram,1997). Many interculturalists engage in a dynamic process of negotiation,

creating hybrid understandings of culture that reflect their diverse lived experiences. Such positions acknowledge that individuals may draw from multiple cultural influences, blending these into a unique and evolving identity. Recognising these complexities enriches the discourse on interculturality and moves beyond rigid binaries.

The emergence of a "third culture" or global culture exemplifies this fluidity, as individuals blend native and target cultural elements with broader influences to form a distinct "third place" of understanding (Crystal, 2003; Graddol, 2006). This dynamic redefinition of culture disrupts traditional binaries, such as local versus target culture or native versus non-native speakers. Theories by Kramsch (2009) and Holliday et al. (2004) reinforce this perspective, suggesting that culture remains dynamic and hybrid, reshaped continuously through intercultural encounters. These views call for language educators to adopt flexible approaches that transcend static cultural categorisations and nurture learners' capacity to engage across diverse cultural contexts.

In this blended cultural context, English extends beyond its ties to any singular national culture, establishing itself as a global lingua franca accessible to all its users (McKay, 2003). The English language serves not just local or national purposes but also acts as a conduit for global intercultural communication, facilitating exchanges across diverse cultural boundaries (Crystal, 2003; McKay, 2002). Despite this, a prevalent misconception within Chinese higher education still regards English as the exclusive domain of native-speaking communities. This belief is reflected in the ongoing preference among university students for native English-speaking teachers,

who are perceived to possess superior linguistic proficiency and cultural insights (Chen, 2017).

Tomlinson (2023) recently noted a shift in the content of some ELT coursebooks used outside China, with traditional depictions of Britishness evolving to more accurately reflect the multicultural reality of British life. However, he observed that the integration of such material into classrooms is often ineffective, where cultural content tends to serve merely as a decorative backdrop to language exercises. This observation aligns with experiences in Chinese classrooms, where discussions about culture rarely advance beyond superficial comparisons.

Despite the inclusion of diverse cultural information, the arbitrary selection of content in these materials frequently fails to resonate with students' real-life experiences or aid in building new cognitive and emotional frameworks. For example, a unit on the lifestyle of baby boomers in the "College English I" textbook, which I employ in my daily teaching, may not connect with the immediate realities faced by Chinese students. This gap underscores Jolly and Bolitho's (1998) argument that the effectiveness of educational materials often diminishes with the author's distance from the learners.

In conclusion, I propose that language education should promote the development of adaptable perspectives, enabling learners to form their own "third culture." Integrating globally relevant, authentic material that connects closely with students' lives in ELT could equip learners with essential skills for cross-cultural communication. This approach would facilitate sharing cultural insights, creating

personal meanings, and enhancing intercultural understanding. Adopting Byram's (1997) competencies model could further assist learners in embracing a non-essentialist view of culture, fostering a global culture, and developing as intercultural speakers.

2.2 Evolving Communicative Competence

The concept of communicative competence (CC) has traditionally played a pivotal role in language education, aiming to endow learners with skills comparable to native speakers. However, this objective may not fully address the needs of contemporary learners. Jaeger (2001) critiqued the essentialist perspectives often embedded within the CC framework, which tend to accentuate the distinctions between native and non-native speakers. Such perspectives risk reinforcing stereotypes and a sense of "otherness" (Kramsch, 2008). This conventional approach frequently neglects the necessity for critical cultural awareness, a component Byram (1997) viewed as indispensable for a comprehensive educational experience. Byram argued that CC without integrating intercultural skills, attitudes, and values would fail to foster the essential qualities like respect, acceptance, and openness towards diverse cultures.

In contrast, Intercultural communicative competence (ICC), as introduced by Byram (1997) and expanded upon by Hammer et al. (2003), includes more than language proficiency. It also involves the ability to engage with cultural nuances critically. ICC entails attitudes, understanding, and techniques for effective interaction

across cultures. Fleming (2009) proposed that ICC should foster readiness to embrace new perspectives, tolerate uncertainty, and exhibit openness and empathy.

In essence, ICC is a composite of behavioural skills, cognitive knowledge, and affective attitudes. Fantini (2000) identified three key domains of ICC: the ability to communicate clearly without distortion, the capacity to develop and maintain relationships, and the aptitude to cooperate and achieve compliance. Bennett and Bennett (2004) also defined ICC as the capability to interact appropriately and effectively in intercultural contexts, highlighting the ability of intercultural individuals to adeptly navigate cultural exchanges. Thus, ICC offers a comprehensive approach to cultural interaction, equipping learners with linguistic abilities and the interpersonal and cognitive skills necessary to thrive in diverse environments.

The dominant definitions of ICC often reflect a Western bias toward individualism (Deardorff, 2006). However, ICC may be interpreted differently from a non-European perspective. Bikowski (2011) suggested that a non-European perspective on ICC might emphasise the importance of interpersonal relationships within groups—a perspective echoed in Asian academic discourse (Miyahara, 1992; Yum & Bahk, 1994). This highlights the variance in cultural emphasis on individual versus collective identities. Miike (2003) presented an Asia-centric interpretation of ICC, which, while offering valuable insights, has been critiqued for its regional focus that may reinforce an overly centric stance that could lead to an essentialist view of cultural identities.

Therefore, a refined conceptualisation of ICC should integrate both Western and non-Western perspectives, fostering a balanced view that acknowledges the complexities of global intercultural interactions. In my study, I propose a universal framework that integrates the core principles of ICC with advanced language teaching methodologies. The goal is to create a framework applicable globally while recognising diverse cultural perspectives in perceiving and practising ICC. This framework seeks to equip learners with flexible verbal and non-verbal communication strategies and broaden their cultural knowledge base. By cultivating such a sophisticated skill set, learners can function competently in diverse international environments. This preparation is crucial in today's interconnected world, where effective communication across cultural boundaries is not just beneficial but essential.

2.2.1 Byram's ICC Model and Its Implications for Language Education

Byram's (1997) ICC model lies at the core of this dissertation. The model prioritises developing intercultural speakers over replicating native speaker proficiency. Renowned for its applicability and impact on language teaching methodologies, the model offers a structured approach through its five *savoirs*. These five *savoirs* are outlined as follows, with a particular emphasis on their application in this dissertation:

Knowledge: This involves understanding the mechanics of interpersonal and societal interaction, the function of identities, and the dynamics of community engagement.

Attitudes: Fundamental to ICC, this aspect fosters openness, curiosity, and a willingness to engage with and question personal beliefs as well as those of other cultures. It encourages learners to adopt an exploratory mindset crucial for intercultural dialogue.

Skills of Relating and Interpreting: Byram posits that learners should possess the ability to understand and interpret texts and events from both native and foreign cultural perspectives. By fostering such skills, educators can effectively prepare students to navigate and reconcile cultural differences.

Skills of Discovery and Interaction: These skills enable learners to acquire new cultural knowledge and apply intercultural skills, attitudes, and information effectively during real-time interactions and cultural exchanges.

Critical Cultural Awareness: This capacity involves the critical evaluation of both native and foreign cultural practices, products, and perspectives. It allows learners to conduct informed assessments of cultural phenomena.

In Byram's model, knowledge extends beyond the understanding of "big C" and "small c" cultural elements and includes the intricate processes of social interaction and the behaviours exhibited in specific contexts. The model advocates for the identity of an intercultural speaker over that of a native speaker, proposing the former as more adept for intercultural interactions. This knowledge equips individuals with the insights necessary to navigate relational dynamics effectively and resolve conflicts.

Byram's ICC model contributes significantly to foreign language education (Borghetti, 2013; Hoff, 2020). The model's five *savoirs* offer a blueprint for developing learners who thrive in intercultural exchanges. These learners are not just proficient in language but also adept at managing the nuances of cultural identities. The model challenges the traditional paradigms of language education, which have long equated fluency with the ability to emulate native speakers.

As discussed earlier, the traditional focus on fluency becomes outdated in a world where English increasingly acts as a global *lingua franca*, crossing geographical and cultural divides. By focusing on the *savoirs* of ICC, educators can go beyond linguistic objectives and address broader aspects of language learning. These aspects include attitudes, knowledge, behaviours, and skills crucial for intercultural understanding and collaboration.

Byram's approach emphasises the importance of interpreting, analysing, and engaging with diverse cultural elements effectively. Recognising that complete mastery of all cultural nuances is impossible, Byram suggests that intercultural mediators should focus on developing strong interpretative skills. In the context of English language education, this process requires students to critically assess both cultural and linguistic elements, integrating these observations into their learning experience (Byram et al., 2002).

The comparison of cultures in the classroom needs careful management to avoid reinforcing stereotypes while enhancing cultural awareness. Teachers play a crucial role in this educational dynamic. They help students navigate various cultural contexts

to develop a well-rounded perspective. Educators guide learners through a systematic exploration of different cultures, promoting respect, tolerance of ambiguity, and openness to varied cultural views.

Byram's model has been widely adopted in empirical studies on ICC. Liddicoat (2008) employed this framework to analyse linguistic practices and curriculum development, underlining the important role of ICC in language education. Meanwhile, Secru et al., (2005) examined foreign language teachers' perceptions of their roles as intercultural mediators. Their research, which included 424 teachers across seven countries, explored attitudes towards ICC instruction and the challenges faced in classroom implementation. The findings indicated a widespread commitment among teachers to promote ICC but also highlighted a gap between teachers' enthusiasm and the effectiveness of their instructional approaches.

Another critical application of Byram's model was conducted by Stephens (1997), who investigated the cultural assimilation of Chinese scholars within a British educational context. Her research underscored the importance of cultural sensitivity in effective communication, which is often overlooked in favour of language proficiency. Stephens argued that integrating a historical perspective into discussions about culture can significantly enhance intercultural understanding, particularly for countries with extensive histories like China. Lustig and Koester (2015) supported this view, suggesting that exploring historical events and their impact on cultural norms could allow learners to develop a more comprehensive understanding of both contemporary and traditional cultural behaviours.

Byram's model, while influential, has encountered critiques concerning its practical implementation in educational settings. Aguilar (2002) questioned the teachability of ICC, given the abstract nature of its core components, such as attitudes and values. This dissertation addresses such concerns by advocating for a syllabus design that clearly translates these abstract elements into concrete learning outcomes, making them more comprehensible and teachable for students.

Furthermore, Belz's (2007) critique reflected a deeper discussion on Byram's conceptualisation of culture. Belz suggested that Byram equated nation with culture, which some argued could unintentionally support an essentialist view of cultural identity. However, I argue that such critiques may arise from a misinterpretation of Byram's intent. Byram's model, while acknowledging the complexity of culture, aims to provide a practical framework for novice learners.

It focuses on pedagogical utility rather than conflating national and cultural identities.

In reinforcing Byram's model, this dissertation posits that ICC should be viewed as a dynamic process, an evolving journey rather than a static goal. Byram (1997) described ICC not just as an accumulation of knowledge and skills but as a capability that continually develops over time. Therefore, achieving ICC involves more than completing a course or mastering a set of protocols; it requires constant interaction with the diverse socio-cultural contexts.

Echoing this perspective, Crichton and Woods (2007) defined ICC as the ability to act and interact effectively and appropriately across various cultural settings. This

definition emphasises the creation, sharing, and interpretation of meanings that surpass cultural barriers. The process demands a commitment to continual learning and adaptation, acknowledging the rich diversity and dynamism of the cultural landscapes we navigate. Without this comprehensive approach, there is a risk of exacerbating feelings of “otherness” or provoking conflicts in cross-cultural interactions.

Therefore, ICC is increasingly recognised as an essential component within ELT, equipping learners with an in-depth understanding of both their own cultural contexts and those of others globally. This understanding is not simply about acquiring facts; it is about fostering the ability to navigate and negotiate diverse cultural identities and to cultivate the “third place”—a neutral, intercultural space free from the biases of culturalism and essentialism (Byram, 2006b; Gee, 2000; Holliday et al., 2004). In this “third place”, learners can construct their intercultural identities, reconcile differences, and engage in meaningful dialogues that reflect the interconnectedness of today’s global society. This third place facilitates not just communication but also genuine understanding and respect across cultural divides.

Building on the previously discussed significance of ICC, this dissertation endorses Byram's ICC model as a critical framework for developing individuals who are both linguistically and culturally adept. The model advocates for an educational approach that inspires learners to confront and navigate the complexities of global intercultural communication. This strategy prepares them to act as effective intercultural mediators that are essential in our interconnected global society.

2.2.2 Byram's Model in the Context of China

Most intercultural competence models were developed by Western Scholars and were based on Western theory and values, and they are not culturally specific models. Few of the Chinese scholars choose to study and contribute to the construction of intercultural competence from a Chinese-perspective, and even those who studied the Development of ICC models are a replica of the western models (Chong & Grzymała-Moszczyńska, 2015). A Chinese perspective of intercultural competence model is indeed in need to reinterpret concepts and theories that are coined in the West, which are then widely used and generalized without any concrete-solid bases of their universality. Chong & Grzymała-Moszczyńska (2015) visited eight ICC models formulated by Chinese between 1998 and 2013 and found that most Chinese scholars agree that cognitive ability and communication skills are two of the major components, which constitute the Chinese version of intercultural competence models. They also emphasize that emotional abilities such as emotional management, motivation, stress management, high Emotional Intelligence and desire for achievement are essential for Chinese expatriates to live and work abroad. However, these models have been developed specifically for a certain sample, such as the models of Yang (2008) for company F, and Li and Tang (2010) for a power plant equipment manufacture. A model for university age students, especially for private university is in scarcity.

Whether and to what extent Byram's model can apply to the context of China is not without debate. For instance, critics like Zhou et al. (2011) argued that

non-Western perspectives on ICC are often overlooked, and that models like Byram's may predominantly reflect Western-centric values and communication theories (Chong & Grzymała-Moszczyńska, 2015). In response, educators in China frequently adapt these Western models to better suit local needs and to enhance global interaction capabilities (Wang et al., 2016). This research supports such modifications and recognise the necessity of tailoring Byram's model to fit the Chinese educational framework.

First of all, Byram (1997) recognised a perceived hierarchy in language use, where foreign speakers were often viewed as inferior to native speakers. He challenged this view by promoting the capabilities of intercultural speakers who employ diverse communicative strategies to engage effectively across cultural boundaries (Ferri, 2016). This perspective highlighted the importance of viewing communicative competence through the lens of strategy rather than native fluency alone. In China, students often experience pressure to achieve native-like proficiency in English, which can reinforce feelings of inferiority and overlook the value of their own cultural identities. Byram's emphasis on intercultural strategies over native fluency can help mitigate these pressures, promoting a more balanced and respectful view of language learning.

However, Byram's initial model was critiqued for sometimes overlooking "conditional factors"—variables like a person's family background, education, and personality traits that can affect communication outcomes (Rathje, 2007). Responding to such criticisms, Byram (2009) revised his model to emphasise the equivalence of

foreign and native speakers in achieving ICC. He proposed that communication effectiveness should be judged by the appropriateness and efficacy of English usage, rather than the speaker's origin, thus advocating for a more inclusive and equitable approach to assessing communicative success.

Applying Byram's revised model to the Chinese context involves recognising and addressing these conditional factors within Chinese educational settings. Educators in China can tailor Byram's framework to incorporate these cultural values, ensuring that students develop linguistic proficiency and intercultural skills necessary to navigate diverse cultural landscapes effectively. For instance, in Chinese culture, communication often aims at achieving harmony, with mutual respect and honesty held as fundamental values (Chen, 2011). Byram's model highlights the role of intercultural speakers in mediating between differing worldviews, "fostering a harmonious fusion of opposing worldviews" (Hoff, 2014, p.511) aimed at mutual understanding and negotiation (Ferri, 2016). This approach aligns with traditional Chinese communication goals by emphasising the importance of balance and reciprocal respect in intercultural interactions.

Integrating Western theoretical models like Byram's into the Chinese context raises questions about their compatibility with non-Western traditions. This dissertation contends that such integration can enrich these models by incorporating diverse cultural perspectives, thereby transcending their original Euro-American focus. The potential for these models to adapt and incorporate Chinese cultural nuances could provide new insights into effective intercultural communication.

China currently faces a significant gap in establishing comprehensive nationwide models for ICC education (Wang et al., 2017). Concerns have been raised about the effectiveness of existing ICC frameworks within language education. Zhang (2012) highlighted the limitations of these models, such as their vague objectives and lack of structured content. Furthermore, Wang (2012) critiqued the adaptations of these models in China for failing to provide a coherent intercultural teaching strategy that spans from curriculum development through to evaluation. These criticisms underscore the need for a tailored ICC framework that is specifically designed to align with Chinese educational practices and cultural nuances.

While applying Western models offers some benefits, it is clear that a customised approach would better address the unique challenges and requirements of the Chinese context. Therefore, this dissertation advocates for the development of an ICC framework that suits the specific needs of Chinese learners while integrating global intercultural standards. By constructing a model that respects local cultural values when promoting effective intercultural communication, educators can more successfully prepare students for the complexities of global interaction.

2.3 Identity Formation in Intercultural Communication

Identity includes the inherent traits often overlooked by an individual, yet these traits uniquely differentiate one person from another (Salem, 2012). The formation of identity in intercultural communication is a critical objective for educational institutions, which are transitioning from purely fostering critical intercultural skills to developing well-rounded global citizens. Similar to culture, identity is also dynamic,

multifaceted, and continuously evolving (Lamb, 2009). In today's interconnected world, it is crucial to navigate the identity of an intercultural speaker and to establish a "third place" where intercultural interactions can thrive.

2.3.1 Identity of Intercultural Speakers

Byram (2006b) highlighted the need for an educational process that not only transmits linguistic knowledge but also equips learners to function as global communicators and intercultural speakers. He defined intercultural speakers as language learners who effectively use media for interaction and mediate between diverse worldviews while embracing various perspectives (Byram et al., 2001). The intercultural speaker identity embodies both communicative competence and the skill to navigate between diverse worldviews. Far from diminishing one's original identity, the emergent intercultural speaker identity enriches it, integrating the individuals' ethnic roots to form an augmented sense of self. This role extends beyond communicative ability, requiring the capacity to negotiate and bridge varying cultural viewpoints and practices (Byram, 2008).

ICC provides a more suitable framework for developing intercultural identities compared to traditional communicative competence (CC). Alptekin (2002) criticised the traditional focus on CC for failing to adequately prepare learners to operate as intercultural speakers. He argued that relying on native speaker models is often inappropriate for effective communication in a global context. Supporting this perspective, Jaeger (2001) also pointed out that the native speaker model, imbued

with essentialism, is increasingly inadequate in a globalised world where understanding diverse cultural contexts is crucial.

Instead, ICC offers a broader perspective that moves beyond traditional studies of cultural elements to involve learners in adopting new cultural paradigms. This approach facilitates the development of an intercultural speaker identity, allowing learners to navigate and negotiate cultural identities more effectively. ICC, therefore, is not just learning about different cultures but also learning how to live within them, which is essential for global communication. The acquisition of ICC is expected to boost learners' motivation and proficiency, fostering their ongoing linguistic development and enhancing their abilities as intercultural communicators (Svalberg, 2007). This process encourages learners not only to advance their language skills but also to navigate complex cultural interactions successfully.

Roberts (2001) introduced the concept of an "ethnographic identity," which refers to a sense of self that is shaped through one's involvement and connections with various social groups, cultures, and communities. Adopting this identity can significantly help intercultural speakers navigate cultural differences. It involves employing empathy and understanding to mediate effectively between cultures. This approach includes engaging critically with diverse texts and cultivating self-awareness in the use of foreign languages, enabling speakers to respond appropriately to varied cultural cues.

Developing an ethnographic identity suggests that effective communication across cultural divides requires more than just linguistic competence. It demands a

deep, reflexive understanding of both oneself and others within the context of global diversity. This holistic perspective prepares intercultural speakers to function as mediators who foster mutual understanding and respect among diverse cultures.

Following the insights of Kramsch (1993) and Alvarez (2007), this dissertation argues that the aim of ELT should be the cultivation of intercultural speakers who are adept at cultural mediation. The focus in Chinese ELT has predominantly been on the target culture, as evidenced by the content of locally produced language materials (Yan, 2008). Although this strategy supports learners in connecting with English-speaking cultures, it poses challenges when English is used as a lingua franca among diverse cultures.

To address these challenges, there is an urgent need for ELT programmes to foster both target-specific and global cultural competencies. This dissertation proposes a balanced integration of both target and global cultural elements within language education, which is crucial for preparing learners for the complexities of worldwide intercultural interactions.

A practical application of this integrated approach could involve a curriculum that incorporates case studies from various cultural contexts. These case studies would include discussions on communication styles, conflict resolution, and business etiquette across different countries. Pairing these studies with interactive role-playing activities that simulate real-life intercultural interactions, allows learners to apply theoretical knowledge in practical settings. This method would not only enhance linguistic skills but also deepen cultural awareness and sensitivity. By doing so, it

equips learners with the necessary tools to function effectively in an interconnected global environment.

2.3.2 Acculturation and Identity Formation of International Students

Building on the previous discussion regarding the integration of global cultural competencies into ELT, it is important to explore the impact of studying abroad, a life event that significantly influences identity transformation (Boynuegri & Sener, 2021). The challenges of adapting to life abroad can catalyse a complex adjustment process that affects one's level of acculturation. This is where intercultural speakers play a crucial role.

As defined by Byram (1997), intercultural speakers are language learners who not only use written and spoken language effectively but also mediate between different worldviews and embrace diverse perspectives. The goal of becoming intercultural speakers can help international students develop a nuanced identity that incorporates elements from both their native and target cultures. This enriched identity enables them to function effectively in diverse cultural settings, fostering mutual understanding and respect. By supporting international students through this process, educational institutions can enhance their acculturation and identity formation, preparing them for successful global interactions.

Berry (2006) identified four acculturation strategies related to identity transformation in intercultural communication: marginalisation, integration, separation, and assimilation. Assimilation involves a deep engagement with a foreign culture at the cost of one's original cultural identity. Separation entails clinging to

one's native culture and avoiding interaction with the dominant culture. Integration, which combines elements of one's native and foreign cultures, is generally considered the most beneficial. Ward (2008) corroborated that individuals who adopt an integration strategy typically face fewer conflicts related to ethnocultural identity. In contrast, when individuals are not interested in both their source and target cultures, they are prone to marginalisation.

Thus, the challenge for intercultural speakers and learners is significant. They must navigate these strategies effectively to harness the full potential of their international experiences. This dissertation argues that fostering a balanced approach to cultural integration can help learners avoid the extremes of assimilation and marginalisation, promoting a healthier, more productive acculturation process.

Various models illustrate cultural adaptation processes, among which Lysgaard's (1955) U-curve model is the most prominent. This model outlines a typical adjustment pattern beginning with an initial excitement phase (often referred to as the "honeymoon"), followed by a period of maladjustment, and concluding with complete adjustment. Similarly, Adler's (1975) model tracks an adjustment trajectory through stages that begin with encountering new cultures, followed by disintegration, reintegration, domination, and rejection, before arriving at cultural relativism. Mohamed (1997) suggested that as individuals gain deeper insights into the target culture, they tended to develop competence and maturity, thus ultimately embracing an integrated identity. This progression underscores that experiencing confusion and resistance to a foreign culture is a natural part of the adaptation process. Employing

effective coping strategies to manage stress is crucial for sojourners to develop an integrated identity and ease their transition into a balanced bicultural or multicultural stance.

2.3.3 Acculturative Stress for International Students

Residing in a foreign country often results in a sharp disconnection from their established social network, including peers, family, and familiar cultural norms (Hahn, 2010). International students must adapt not only to new social environments but also to significant alterations in their daily routines. The literature identified three types of challenges these students typically face: 1) universal challenges related to independent living; 2) issues stemming from extended separation from their home environment, such as homesickness or cultural shock; and 3) specific difficulties associated with the unique aspects of studying abroad, including discrimination, and notably different learning, teaching, and assessment methods (Misra & Castillo, 2004; Nguyen, 2012; Zhen, 2016; Zhou et al., 2008).

Research on acculturation concentrates on two primary areas: the determinants of acculturation and the stress associated with it. International students face unique stressors including financial constraints, social interaction barriers, academic demands, and language challenges (Jones & Kim, 2013; Wright & Schartner, 2013). Understanding and addressing these stressors is vital for supporting students during their educational journey abroad.

International students frequently face significant challenges related to academic performance and cultural integration, largely due to language barriers. Zhang and Mi

(2010) indicated that their limited English proficiency necessitates extra efforts to manage these challenges effectively. This language deficiency often results in underperformance during group discussions, even if the students possess adequate subject knowledge in their native languages (Zhang & Mi, 2010).

Moreover, the inability to communicate effectively can lead to social isolation (Jones & Kim, 2013), despite the eagerness to engage with native speakers (Zhang & Brunton, 2007). The experience of being linguistically isolated can exacerbate feelings of loneliness and disconnection from the community. For instance, studies by Sawir et al. (2008) and Erichsen and Bolliger (2011) revealed widespread feelings of isolation and loneliness among international students, particularly during the initial stages of their overseas education. Yu and Shen (2012) further linked linguistic confidence with successful academic and socio-cultural adaptation. Thus, the difficulties in adapting to a new cultural environment are frequently compounded by inadequate linguistic skills and increased anxiety related to language use.

On the other hand, international students often face academic challenges that stem from both language barriers and cultural differences impacting their learning styles. Research suggests that students from China may engage in problem-solving with a high degree of independence, exhibit caution in questioning, and show deference to authority figures, traits often attributed to their cultural backgrounds (Mathias et al., 2013). These behaviours, however, may clash with the academic expectations in Western environments, leading to cultural dissonance.

Furthermore, the perceived reluctance of these students to participate actively in class discussions is sometimes misinterpreted as a lack of critical thinking skills. In reality, this hesitation may arise from their unfamiliarity with educational approaches that prioritise analytical thinking over memorisation. Liberman (1994) emphasised this transition in his interviews with Asian students in America, highlighting the adaptation challenges they face.

Nonetheless, it is crucial to recognise that attributing these differences solely to cultural backgrounds risks stereotyping. Mathias et al. (2019) suggested that underlying learning approaches might not differ as significantly between East and West as commonly perceived. Therefore, Chinese international students need to understand that while they may encounter different learning and living styles abroad, these differences are not insurmountable barriers dictated by culture. They should rather view those differences as diverse educational practices from which they can learn and adapt. This perspective encourages students to embrace and overcome these challenges rather than confining themselves to cultural stereotypes.

Additionally, acculturation stress can be exacerbated by experiences of discrimination. Lee and Rice (2007) discovered that Asian students in an American university faced various forms of discrimination, from physical attacks to job-hunting biases and verbal abuse. Poyrazli and Grahame (2007) reported incidents of discrimination occurring outside academic settings as well. The stress associated with navigating these interpersonal challenges can lead to depression and reduced psychological well-being, which intensifies homesickness and hinders overall

adjustment (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007). These findings indicate the necessity to foster an inclusive and supportive environment beneficial for the well-being and successful acculturation of international students.

2.4 Culture Pedagogy and Intercultural Language Teaching

The relationship between culture and language is intrinsic, and how culture and language teaching intersect is a vital component of pedagogical development. Seelye (1976) emphasised that without a cultural context, words would lose their meaning, urging language educators to move beyond basic linguistic skills to enhance learners' communicative competence. Hymes (1972) described this broader competence as integrating sociolinguistic proficiency with socio-cultural competence. Sociolinguistic proficiency entails the ability to use language appropriately within social contexts, while socio-cultural competence involves an in-depth understanding of the target culture's evolution and global integration (Whitehouse, 2021).

Traditionally, language education relied on a native-speaker model, which provided a superficial understanding of the target culture by focusing on lifestyles and social practices (Brooks, 1975). However, Tomlinson and Masuhara (2004) criticised this approach for its static and stereotypical portrayal of culture, which relies heavily on the teacher's interpretation and can mislead students. In response to these limitations, modern teaching methods now aim to reveal the nuanced meanings within language (Crozet et al., 1999; Kramsch, 1993). This shift enhances the depth and accuracy of cultural education, moving away from fixed representations to a more comprehensive understanding.

Continuing from the shift towards dynamic cultural understanding, contemporary cultural pedagogy emphasises the importance of grasping both internal and external contexts in intercultural communication (Gudykunst, 2003). Internal context involves the meanings constructed during interaction, whereas external context pertains to the broader societal meanings attributed to these interactions (Paige et al., 2003). Misunderstandings often arise as individuals from different cultures interact, which highlights the significance of creating a “third space” or “in-betweenness” for intercultural dialogue (Bhabha, 1990; Kramsch, 1993). This concept of “third space” underscores the ongoing development of ICC, which involves acquiring attitudes, techniques, and knowledge essential for authentic cross-cultural engagement (Paige et al., 2003).

To achieve ICC, scholars have proposed frameworks to develop communicators adept at engaging across cultures. For example, Van Ek (1986) emphasised the role of language education in developing personal and social growth, while Byram (1997) delineated five *savoirs* of ICC, stressing the importance of critical cultural awareness and the ability to analyse and reflect upon one's own and other cultures. This comprehensive approach to ICC acknowledges the intertwining of cultural understanding with language learning, suggesting that cultural competence should permeate all facets of language education (Kramsch, 1993; Risager, 2007).

For effective ICC teaching, adopting experiential learning and promoting self-directed learning are crucial strategies. Subsequent sections will explore the integration of experiential learning into ICC education in more detail. However, it is

first essential to understand the current state of ICC teaching in Chinese Minban context. Examining the status quo provides a foundational understanding of existing practices and challenges. This insight is necessary to identify gaps and opportunities for improvement in ICC education within the Chinese context.

2.4.1 Intercultural Competence Teaching in China

In China, the Ministry of Education (2010) promotes the teaching of intercultural competence, focusing on culture, language, and cognitive skills essential for adapting to globalisation (Wang et al., 2017). Guangzhong Xu, a well-known teacher, made foundational contributions in 1982 by linking culture and language for the first time in China, which spurred extensive research into this relationship. Daokuan He, another prominent educator, advocated for adapting U.S. cultural programmes to train Chinese diplomatic and professional communicators (Steve & Wang, 2015). His efforts reflected China's growing scholarly interest in ICC teaching. Chen's (1990) exploration of sociolinguistic aspects further advanced this trend, sparking initiatives aimed at exposing Chinese individuals to c.

The significance of intercultural communication became evident with the proliferation of language and culture programmes in higher education. Wengzhong Hu, a leading researcher in intercultural communication at Beijing Foreign Studies University, contributed numerous articles and led seminars on the theme "Language and Culture" in the late 1980s to promote cultural awareness (Steve, 2015). At that time, language and culture teaching models were primarily borrowed from native English speakers. Western textbooks were directly imported and were accessible only

to a selected group of scholars (Steve, 2015). This reliance on Western resources highlights the need for more tailored approaches to intercultural communication that reflect the unique cultural contexts of Chinese learners.

China's need to develop ICC is reflected in various educational policies. These policies include the University English Curriculum Requirements (MOE,2004), the Syllabus for English Majors (NACFLT,2000), and their subsequent revisions in 2015 and 2017. These guidelines mandated the incorporation of ICC into EFL curricula at Chinese universities (Wang et al., 2017). Additionally, China's National Plan for Medium and Long-Term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020) emphasised developing globally-minded learners and fostering global citizenship. The 2017 revision of this plan further highlighted "intercultural" and ICC multiple times. These policies demonstrate the MOE's commitment to aligning educational practices with globalisation goals and preparing students for effective international engagement.

Despite these national efforts, scholars have identified persistent pedagogical and theoretical challenges hindering China's alignment with global trends in ICC development. One significant issue is that language learning often fails to go beyond transferring cultural knowledge. It relies on an information-loaded approach focused on cultural facts rather than deeper understanding or intercultural interaction skills (Cao, 1998; Han, 2013; Lange et al., 2003). Additionally, prevalent syllabus designs are based on a native-speaker model, which prioritises emulating native speakers rather than fostering the skills necessary for effective intercultural communication.

Such a model reflects an essentialist view that is increasingly at odds with global dynamics (Wang et al., 2017).

To conclude, the landscape of ICC teaching in China is one of evolving understanding and application. While the top-level Chinese educational governance recognises the importance of ICC in a globalised world, translating policies into practice remains challenging. The persistence of traditional models and the necessity for deeper integration of ICC into educational curricula underscore the complexity of this endeavour. Future research and practice should bridge the gap between policy intent and classroom reality, developing a more dynamic, reflective, and practical approach to ICC. This approach should prepare Chinese learners to operate effectively in a global context. It should move beyond essentialist models towards a more nuanced, participant-driven pedagogy that encourages critical engagement and personal growth.

To bridge the gap between policy and practice in ICC teaching, it is essential to explore innovative educational strategies. While traditional models emphasise the dissemination of cultural knowledge, contemporary approaches call for more dynamic and interactive methods. The next section will explore constructivist-based experiential learning, highlighting its potential to enhance ICC education. This pedagogical shift recognises the need for active engagement and real-world application, moving beyond passive learning to foster a deeper, more reflective understanding of intercultural dynamics.

2.4.2 Constructivist-Based Experiential Learning in Teaching

According to Passarelli and Kolb (2012), experiential learning involves the interplay of action and reflection, as well as experience and abstraction. This learning philosophy suggests that interculturality should be critical, reflexive, dialogic, and transformative, urging learners to engage authentically with others on various topics (Passarelli & Kolb, 2012). This approach requires a comprehensive understanding of both the intention and context behind each subject. Byram and colleagues (2002) suggested that experiential learning could help students critically compare and analyse materials, thereby enhancing their skills in deep analysis rather than simple fact accumulation.

Passarelli and Kolb (2012) outlined six guiding principles of experiential learning pertinent to the study of ICC: 1) learning is valued for its process rather than its outcomes; 2) the fundamental aim of all learning activities is the opportunity for re-learning; 3) learning involves resolving dialectically opposed adaptation modes; 4) learning is a continuous process of adaptation; 5) learning results from the synergy between humans and their environment; and 6) learning is the construction of knowledge through active engagement.

Since culture continuously evolves, ICC remains inherently fluid, shaped by participants, contexts, and sometimes factors beyond our control, such as mood or health. This variability implies that communication success can never be guaranteed. Familiarity with others can improve communication, but there is always a risk of reverting to an essentialist perspective due to its variability (Passarelli & Kolb, 2012).

This underscores the first principle that values the learning process over fixed outcomes, highlighting the dynamic and ongoing nature of intercultural learning.

Interculturality requires continuous examination, development, and re-learning, which aligns with the second principle of experiential learning. Conflict resolution, the third principle, is key to achieving interculturality. Anquetil (2006) argued that conflicts in intercultural encounters are often unreasonable, yet the experiential learning approach encourages learners to navigate and reflect upon such challenges, adjusting their behaviours and perceptions accordingly. The fourth principle integrates behaviours, perceptions, feelings, and thoughts into learning, incorporating creativity, decision-making, and problem-solving to enhance adaptability in intercultural interactions. The fifth principle emphasises the critical interplay between interlocutors and their environments, suggesting that knowledge and experience are mutually reinforcing. Finally, the sixth principle challenges the notion of pre-existing knowledge and advocates for a transactional view where knowledge is constantly constructed within specific socio-historical contexts (Dervin, 2022).

Experiential intercultural learning has been underutilised in language teaching in China despite its relevance (Gong et al., 2020). According to Fowler and Pusch (2010), intercultural simulations have been used in business for diversity training and foreign service since the 1970s. However, it was not until the past decade that researchers began exploring the impact of experiential learning on intercultural competence in language education.

As discussed in introduction chapter, more and more universities offer study-abroad programmes as a form of experiential learning (Yang et al., 2021). There is also a prevalent belief in China that a native speaker teacher is essential for effective experiential learning, a belief already been refuted in the introduction. However, this dissertation argues for the potential of non-native English teachers to create experiential learning opportunities even before students travel abroad.

The underutilisation of experiential learning in language teaching underscores the need for innovative approaches to ICC. By integrating experiential learning into language curricula, educators can promote deeper engagement and understanding among students. By leveraging experiential learning, my research seeks to develop more effective strategies for teaching ICC, thus ultimately preparing students for the complexities of global interactions.

Conclusion

This chapter explored the intricate relationship between culture and language, highlighting their intertwined and evolving nature. The chapter advocated for a non-essentialist, constructivist view of culture that recognises its dynamic, multifaceted essence. The discussion emphasised the importance of moving from communicative competence (CC) to ICC in English language teaching. This shift acknowledges that linguistic proficiency alone is insufficient for successful communication in diverse global contexts.

Byram's ICC model serves as an influential framework in this research, outlining key components like attitudes, knowledge, skills of discovery, skills of interaction,

and critical cultural awareness. This model challenges traditional teaching paradigms by prioritising the intercultural speaker over the native speaker as the goal. It advocates for a pedagogy that equips learners to navigate varied cultural perspectives and create new intercultural meanings.

The chapter also revealed China's recognition of the growing imperative for intercultural competence. However, persistent challenges remain regarding the effective translation of policies into classroom practices. The prevalence of outdated models indicates the need for more dynamic, localised, and reflective approaches to ICC teaching and curriculum design.

The acculturation experiences of international students were discussed, including identity negotiation and acculturative stress. This chapter proposed addressing these issues using pedagogical approaches featuring experiential, participant-driven methods and moving away from essentialist cultural representations. Experiential learning holds strong potential for ICC development, aligning with the view of culture and interculturality as fluid, constructed phenomena. Its participatory nature engages learners in cycles of action and reflection crucial for evolving intercultural attitudes and skills. This dissertation proposes exploring the use of critical incident exercises, grounded in experiential learning, as a pedagogical tool to enhance Chinese students' ICC.

Overall, this literature review has laid the theoretical foundation highlighting the integral role of cultural inclusion in English language education. It sets the stage for

examining the experiential learning intervention as a means to enhance learners' ICC and shape their identities as intercultural speakers.

Chapter 3. Methodology

This dissertation examines the intersection between English Language Teaching (ELT) and intercultural instruction within the context of a private higher education in China, specifically the effectiveness of critical incident exercises (CIEs) for developing ICC among Chinese English learners. The goal is to explore the potential of CIEs in enhancing ICC within the Chinese higher education system, using a Shanghai-based private university as the case study. The primary question guiding this research is: How can CIEs advance the intercultural communicative competence of EFL learners in China?

Building on the theoretical foundation set in Chapter 2, this chapter outlines the research paradigm, methodology, and my dual roles as the researcher and teacher. It provides a detailed account of the research design, including the development of the intervention, data collection, and analysis procedures. The documentation aims to offer a comprehensive guide for educators and researchers interested in implementing similar strategies, thus promoting the transferability of the findings to different educational contexts. Such transferability is crucial for advancing the practise of intercultural education globally, as it allows for adaptations tailored to specific local needs while maintaining the integrity and objectives of the original study. By doing so, this research shall contribute to the practice of education by providing practical, actionable strategies that can be employed in diverse educational settings to foster improvements in students' ICC.

3.1 Research Paradigm

A research paradigm establishes the philosophical and theoretical foundation that shapes a study, offering principles and beliefs underpinning the associated methodologies (Khatri, 2020). Saunders et al. (2007) defined it as an investigative lens that helps gain a particular understanding of social phenomena. This dissertation focuses on intercultural communication, a multidisciplinary field based primarily on linguistic research that studies communication and interaction between different cultural groups, the development of intercultural communicative abilities, and the dynamics of language in shaping identities (Cao et al, 2016). Given the multifaceted nature of this topic, research in this domain often aligns with various paradigms that guide the inquiry process.

In the literature review, I highlighted how culture, as a dynamic and evolving concept, is employed by various groups across different settings (Holliday, 2015). It emerges from ongoing negotiations of daily cultural realities, which foster the development of complex, multi-layered identities (Bennett, 2013). Given its fluidity, the traditional modernist, positivist approach that rigidly categorises cultures as homogeneous and geographically fixed is inadequate for this research. This view tends to oversimplify culture into static and unchanging categories that dismiss the subtleties and constant evolution of cultural identities (Holliday, 2022). Such an approach fails to recognise culture's dynamic and evolving qualities, where it exists not as a static relic but as a vibrant construct, continually reshaped by discourse and interaction.

This research builds on a constructivist paradigm, based on the belief that multiple realities exist, and that knowledge emerges from the interaction between the researcher and the participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The constructivist approach views culture as a shared construct that emerges from the articulation of ideas that gain acceptance and evolve within a community (Schein, 1990). This paradigm emphasises that culture is a living, collaborative construct, formed and reformed through ongoing interactions (Cao et al., 2016). This research's perspective on culture is consistent with the seminal constructivist theory raised by Berger and Luckmann (2016), who conceptualised culture as a dynamic entity. Culture continually evolves through absorbing cultural norms and expressing these internalised norms through social interactions. This view contrasts with the positivist paradigm, which depicts culture as a static construct. Such a portrayal does not accommodate the lived, fluid experiences of culture that are subject to change and development over time.

Recent research in interculturality has embraced this constructivist approach, focusing on how individuals draw from their experiences to shape their attitudes, awareness, identities, and behaviours (e.g., Brandt & Jenks, 2011; Higgins, 2007; Nishizaka, 1995; Young & Sercombe, 2010). These experiences, reflective of a broader social consciousness, challenge the notion of culture as a set of rigid, geographically bound entities (Holliday, 2022). Daudelin (1996) articulated this idea with the equation: $\text{experience} + \text{reflection} = \text{understanding}$. This formula highlights how the humanities approach knowledge generation differently from the sciences, where understanding typically arises from empirical research and experimental data.

Embracing a constructivist philosophy means acknowledging that knowledge is not transmitted but co-constructed through shared experiences and dialogues (Smith, 2001). This research, therefore, focuses on capturing the nuanced and evolving meanings within individuals' experiences. To achieve this, the research employs qualitative methods, which are particularly useful in investigating complex social phenomena. The qualitative approach is advantageous because it captures the depth and diversity of human experiences, offering a rich, detailed understanding that quantitative methods might overlook. Qualitative methods acknowledge that participants are not just subjects of study but active agents who construct meanings through their daily interactions (Pathak et al., 2013). This research aims to gain insights into how individuals engage with and shape their social environments using qualitative analysis.

The constructivist philosophy aligns with the methodology of action research, as both seek to construct knowledge through human agency (Berger & Luckmann, 2016; Sirca & Shapiro, 2007). Therefore, this research adopts an action research method as its methodological approach. The following sections will provide an overview of the study's participants, the educational context, and a rationale for using the methodology.

3.2 Participants and Settings

This research was conducted at a private higher education institution in Shanghai, China's most prosperous coastal metropolis. The institution offers a dual-degree programme (or 2+2 programme as illustrated in introduction chapter),

where students undertake their first two years of study in Shanghai, followed by two years at a partner college in United States. However, the COVID-19 outbreak in 2019 disrupted this schedule, halting the overseas study component until July 2022. This interruption served as more than just a pause; it marked a pivotal shift in the focus of this research.

The divergent health policies between China and the United States heightened concerns about the safety of studying abroad. These concerns compelled me to reassess the research focus, leading to an expanded investigation of ICC applications. Initially, the research centred on acculturation challenges. The research's scope now encompasses a broader range of issues, including global interactivity, the professional goals of individuals in multinational enterprises, and the competencies needed for using English in a globalised context. This adjustment aligns the research more closely with the changing needs and aspirations of the participants.

The research involved two groups of students. Group A included eight students who, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, had lived and studied in New York for more than six months. These students were a part of the broader population of Chinese students in New York at the time of recruitment. They were chosen using a snowball sampling technique initiated by a student delegate who recommended potential participants from their networks. This strategy proved effective in identifying students who could contribute meaningfully to the research. All these eight students were fully informed of the research's objectives and voluntarily signed their consent form to participate.

Group B initially involved 35 students, who were enrolled in my college English course and had plans to study abroad. However, the ongoing pandemic disrupted their educational and research plans. Only two students were able to continue their studies as planned. Seventeen students changed their majors and exited the research, leaving a total of 18 students who participated in the first intervention cycle. Subsequently, 15 of these students continued to participate in the second intervention cycle.

The two groups of participants in this research, though at distinct stages of their educational journeys, exhibited several shared characteristics. Each group was enrolled in the dual-degree programme, which offers dual certification upon completion—an appealing prospect for those aiming for international careers (Wang et al, 2017). These students were all specialising in the same major. They had surpassed the College English Test-4 (CET-4) benchmark and scored above 6.5 in the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), which indicates competent English language use (IELTS, 2022).

However, the participants' performance in these standard tests showed a tendency to excel in reading and listening rather than in productive skills like writing and speaking. This linguistic profile aligns with the "mute English learner" paradigm, which characterises many Chinese EFL learners. Despite high accuracy in language mechanics, these learners often struggle with communicative fluency. This pattern suggests a persistent emphasis on grammatical precision at the expense of conversational skills in Chinese educational settings, a trend supported by the ongoing use of the grammar-translation method in many classrooms (Hu, 2005; Chang, 2011).

Additionally, most participants came from Shanghai, a metropolis known for its modernity and openness to global influences. This urban background may contribute to their predisposition towards intercultural interactions (Ou & Gu, 2021).

Group A had completed their two-year College English curriculum prior to their studies in New York. My teaching involvement began with Group B, operating within the framework of the Chinese higher education system as outlined by the Department of Higher Education in 2004. According to this framework, non-English majors are mandated to participate in College English classes, which typically involve two 90-minute sessions each week throughout an 18-week semester for the first two academic years (MOE,2017).

In my research, I structured two intervention cycles, each consisting of six classes spread over three weeks. The practise of distributing sessions throughout the semester rather than condensing them aligns with educational psychology principles advocated by Scott and Lewis (2011). This spaced learning approach is designed to enhance student retention and engagement with the material.

After providing an overview of the educational context and the participant groups, the subsequent section will elaborate on the methodology applied in this research.

3.3 Teacher Action Research

This research adopts Teacher Action Research (TAR) as the methodology. TAR is one of the specialised branches of Action Research (AR) that focuses on enhancing teaching practices through systematic inquiry. Other notable AR branches include

Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR), Rural Participatory Research (RPR), Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR), and Participatory Action Research (PAR), each distinguished by its focus and application areas (Klocker, 2015). The following sections will first introduce AR before delving into TAR and the specific TAR framework utilised for this research.

3.3.1 The Broader Category of Action Research

Action Research (AR) is a process that can be adopted by educators to actively engage in cycles of reflection, action, and evaluation to enhance their teaching practices and improve student learning outcomes (Efron & Ravid, 2019). This method emphasises the evolving nature of education, viewing teaching and learning as dynamic processes that benefit careful investigation and targeted intervention. In this process, educators function both as instructors and agents of change committed to improved educational practices and outcomes.

AR is particularly relevant in the field of ICC, an essential component of modern education that demands responsive and adaptive teaching strategies. My interest in AR stems from its capacity to challenge and expand the conventional teaching paradigms, particularly the essentialist views of culture prevalent in Chinese English education. By adopting AR, I aim to go beyond basic linguistic teaching and address the broader cultural and communicative needs of my students.

Another advantage of AR is its potential to directly address the specific needs identified within my teaching context. Kemmis (2009) advocates for AR as a means to transform teaching practices by immersing educators in the processes of their

pedagogical development. This methodological choice aligns with my goals to not only enhance the learning environment but also to foster a more inclusive and effective approach to teaching English in a multicultural setting.

Researchers in the field of AR have developed several models that differ subtly in their approaches. As summarised in Table 3-1, these models facilitate a systematic process of inquiry by highlighting different stages of the research cycle. For instance, Elliot’s model (1991) advocates for initiating the cycle with problem identification, which then leads to planning, implementing interventions, evaluating actions, and continuously re-planning in iterative cycles. On the other hand, Kemmis and McTaggart (2014) propose a model that includes planning, action, observation, and reflection. This model shares key features with Elliot's—both are recursive, dynamic, and emphasize continuous reflection, which fosters a deep, ongoing engagement with the educational environment.

The selection of Elliot’s model for my study stems from its alignment with my prior experiences as an international student. Having already observed and reflected upon the challenges faced in my surroundings, I found Elliot’s initial focus on problem identification to be a natural starting point. This approach allowed me to bypass some initial steps suggested by other models, such as the one proposed by O’Leary and colleagues (2004), which would not have matched the progression of my understanding as effectively.

Table 3-1. Summary of Action Research Stages

Stages	Kemmis & McTaggart (2014)	Elliot (1991)	O’Leary et al. (2004)
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1	Planning	Problem identification	Observation
2	Action	Intervention carry out	Reflection
3	Observation	Action evaluation	Planning
4	Reflection	Re-planning	Action

Another reason for me to adopt Elliot's model is its emphasis on problem-solving and iterative improvement. This approach is particularly suited to the classroom environment and the evolving nature of ICC. This model facilitates an ongoing process that starts with identifying specific challenges in fostering ICC, planning appropriate interventions, carrying out these actions, observing their impact, and reflecting on the outcomes to inform further action.

3.3.2 Teacher Action Research and its applications in ELT

Teacher Action Research (TAR) is most relevant to this research because it engages educators directly in classrooms and facilitates a continuous cycle of development and reflection aimed at improving both teaching methods and student outcomes (Manning, 1997). TAR requires educators to act as both researchers and practitioners. This process involves documenting observations, formulating questions, and analysing data to refine teaching strategies. This reflective cycle not only improves their immediate teaching environment but also generates insights beneficial in broader educational contexts (Bissex & Bullock, 1987). Both TAR and Elliot's model foster a dynamic and recursive process of learning and development, encouraging ongoing adaptation and refinement of practices based on continuous feedback and reflection. Thus, integrating Elliot's AR framework with TAR methodologies enhances the robustness and relevance of the research within the classroom setting.

The application of TAR has significant advantages. Firstly, TAR can foster a dynamic learning environment where students are more likely to excel. This is especially true when educators adopt flexible teaching methodologies and embrace calculated risks to enhance learning outcomes (Hoy et al., 2002). Moreover, TAR bridges teaching theories to practices. It facilitates the integration of novel pedagogical insights directly applicable to the learning context. This connection helps to reduce the gap between theoretical frameworks and practical applications (Johnson & Guzman, 2013).

Additionally, TAR serves as a tool for teachers' self-improvement, creating an environment of continuous learning and professional development (Osterman & Kottkamp, 1993). This process grants teachers the autonomy to explore new educational strategies and content that not only benefit their students but also expand their own pedagogical practice. According to Ulvik and Smith (2011), TAR encourages teachers to experiment and learn from new teaching approaches, even those they are initially unfamiliar with. Such opportunities are vital for teachers to develop a deeper understanding of effective teaching methods and to innovate within their practice.

In the EFL context, TAR has also been used to improve students' language development, critical thinking, and motivation (Puspitasari et al, 2021). The process generally starts with EFL teachers identifying gaps between current teaching practices and the educational outcomes they aim to improve. To bridge these gaps, teachers design and implement targeted interventions, such as storytelling, debates, role-play,

and problem-solving activities. These techniques aim to immerse students in a richer and more engaging language learning environment. In the next step, teachers gather data from tests, observations, student feedback, and other evaluative methods to assess the efficacy of these strategies and refine them in ongoing cycles (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2014).

For example, Siahaan (2012) investigated the effect of incorporating story reading into EFL sessions on enhancing vocabulary acquisition. This study confirmed that regular exposure to narrative contexts significantly boosted students' vocabulary. Similarly, Huang (2016) applied TAR to evaluate how formative assessments and systematic feedback could develop critical thinking skills in Chinese university students. His findings demonstrated notable improvements in students' analytical writing abilities. These examples illustrate how TAR facilitates the adaptation of teaching strategies to meet student learning needs and goals more effectively.

Empirical inquiries within TAR form a crucial part of an ongoing, cyclical process aimed at refining educational practices. Each TAR cycle involves adapting and reassessing interventions, thereby establishing TAR as an effective tool for sustained improvement in language education. Through each reflective cycle, EFL teachers can enhance their instructional techniques to cater to diverse learning styles and foster a more engaging and interactive language learning environment (Ulvik & Riese, 2015).

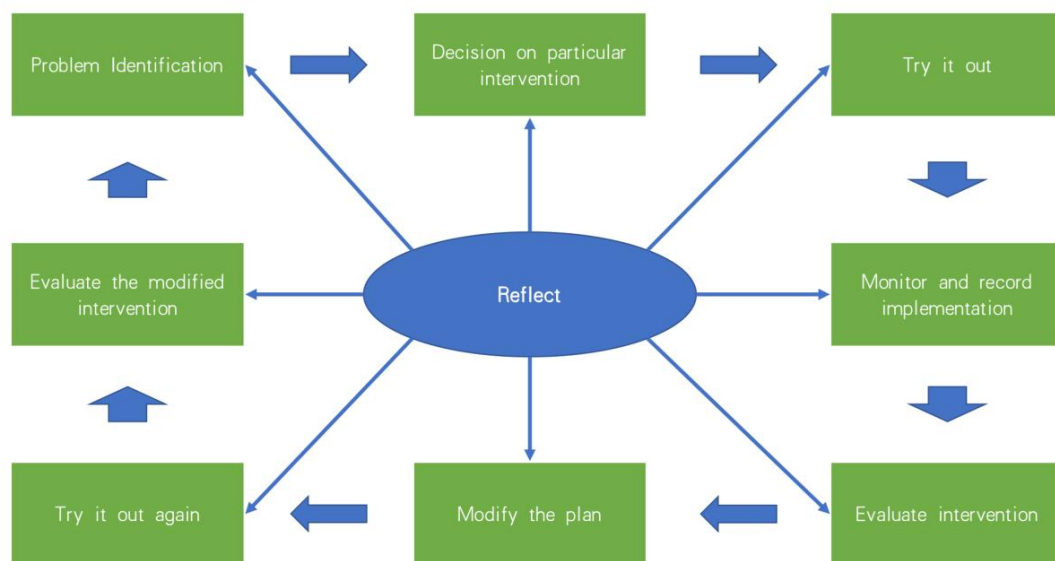
Teachers who use TAR act as both instructors and inquirers committed to educational quality and invested in students' academic growth and their own

professional development. Implementing TAR in my dissertation is particularly significant as it aligns with my objective to bridge theoretical knowledge with practical teaching strategies. This alignment not only enhances the learning outcomes for students but also contributes to my development as an educator, enabling me to effectively integrate research into everyday teaching practices. This integration is crucial in demonstrating the practical benefits of TAR and its effect on improving educational practices within the field of EFL.

3.3.3 The TAR Framework Used in This Research

The cyclical process depicted in Figure 2 represents my TAR framework based on Elliot's model. This iterative model places me in the dual role of teacher and researcher. As such, I navigated through a series of steps starting with identifying problems in my teaching practice. From there, I decided on specific interventions, which I then implemented and monitored. Next, I evaluated the impact of these interventions, reflecting on the outcomes, challenges, and potential areas for further adjustment. This reflection led to modifications in the initial plan, incorporating new insights and understanding gained through the process. The modified plan was then tested again, setting in motion another cycle of action and reflection.

Figure 2. The study's TAR Framework Based on Elliot's Model



The reflective practice integral to TAR plays a crucial role in refining instructional strategies and supporting my professional development. This process enables me to continuously adapt and enhance teaching methods based on insights gained from each TAR cycle. It also facilitates my growth as an educator by providing a structured approach to self-evaluation and adaptation.

In the upcoming sections, I will further discuss the advantages and challenges of my dual role as both researcher and educator. I will explore how this position affects my research outcomes and contributes to my personal and professional development. Additionally, I will discuss the ethical considerations linked to this dual role, addressing how it influences my interactions with students and impacts the integrity of the research. The recursive nature of TAR ensures that teaching methods are not static but dynamic, continuously evolving in response to new insights and adaptations required by each cycle of reflection and action.

3.4 Researcher Position

In TAR, the researcher's positionality is crucial, as it shapes the whole investigation process. Researcher in TAR often take on dual roles, functioning both as practitioners and investigators. I have chosen to be an involved practitioner-researcher instead of a detached observer, as I believe that authentic, lived experiences have a transformative impact on educational practice. This approach aligns with my educational philosophy and the frameworks established by Kemmis (2013), which suggest that practitioner-researchers are best positioned to evaluate interventions within their own teaching environments. This position allows for an internal evaluation deeply informed by direct experience and continuous engagement with the educational context.

My insider role as both a teacher and a researcher enables me to ask targeted questions and develop interventions that are closely aligned with both my insights and my students' specific needs (Merriam et al., 2001). I leverage my personal experiences to create content that is both practical and academically robust. This approach reflects the belief that authentic experiences, particularly critical incidents, are instrumental in developing ICC.

Furthermore, my role as the creator of the teaching materials provides me with a comprehensive understanding of the curriculum. This knowledge allows me to modify the teaching process in real time, ensuring it adapts effectively to the immediate demands of the classroom environment. My involvement in every phase of the

syllabus—from conception to its delivery and ongoing refinement—exemplifies the iterative and responsive nature of TAR.

Building a rapport with students over the semester has also provided me with valuable insights into their linguistic abilities and individual learning styles. This understanding is instrumental for me to customise teaching strategies and interventions to ensure that they are effective and supportive of student learning outcomes. This comprehensive engagement exemplifies the core of TAR, where continuous interaction and adaptation are crucial for educational excellence.

However, this insider perspective is not without its challenges. This dual role can sometimes blur the lines between strengths and potential weaknesses (Merriam et al., 2001). For instance, my close contact with students can give them a sense of security that is beneficial for conducting qualitative research involving personal experiences (Mason, 2002). However, this closeness may also give rise to preconceived notions about students' abilities and behaviours.

Such preconceptions may affect my interpretation of student performance and engagement. A relevant example is that I unintentionally labelled a back-row student as disengaged simply because he always sat at the back and his linguistic test scores were low. Yet, he surprised me by submitting an insightful reflection on his worksheet. It turned out that he was dating a foreign girl, which explained his newfound enthusiasm for topics related to ICC. This experience demonstrates the importance of remaining open to the diverse ways in which students express their engagement and interests.

The potential influence of my personal experiences is another challenge I need to keep in mind. The curriculum I designed is inevitably coloured by my own experiences abroad. While these experiences shape my teaching philosophy, there is a risk that these experiences may be outdated or too personal, hence not entirely applicable to the current context of my students.

To counter these challenges, I have integrated a reflective mechanism into the study's design. This involves critical self-evaluation and inviting students to critique and influence the course content. By doing so, I ensure that the teaching materials remain both relevant and effective. Throughout the intervention, I aimed to use personal experiences as a springboard for discussion, not as definitive guides. This approach encouraged students to engage critically with the material and contribute to its ongoing development.

During these interactions, I consistently reminded students that while I share personal experiences, their perspectives are invaluable and highly encouraged to enhance the learning experience. This approach democratises the classroom environment and mitigates potential power dynamics, ensuring that students feel comfortable expressing authentic responses. By acknowledging the importance of student contributions, the learning process becomes a collaborative journey that values and incorporates diverse viewpoints.

Herr and Anderson (2014) suggested the fluidity of a researcher's identity, a notion that resonates with my own experience as my role shifts along a continuum between insider and outsider throughout the research process. During classroom

observations, I acted as what Collins (1990) termed an "outsider-within" in her research on feminism in black women, observing the contradictions between my students' actions and their beliefs without directly influencing their discussions. This position allowed me to document their interactions authentically while remaining somewhat detached due to my adult status and educational level, which might set me apart in the eyes of the students. Conversely, my experiences abroad and my enthusiasm for exploring ICC aligned me more closely with my students, providing a unique insider perspective.

This insider-outsider dynamic is pivotal, especially in educational settings where the inherent power dynamics could influence student participation. Being both a researcher and their teacher introduces a potential power imbalance that might affect how students engage with the research. They might engage more deeply due to the trust built in our teacher-student relationship, or they might hold back, concerned about the potential implications for their academic evaluations. To mitigate these concerns, I ensured students understand that their involvement in my research would not influence their academic results. This clarification is essential for maintaining ethical standards and is detailed further in the ethical considerations section of my dissertation.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

The ethical review process is a cornerstone in ensuring the integrity and safety of research involving human participants. This research received a favourable opinion from the Ethics Committee (protocol number : acEduPGRUH042651). A critical

consideration in my study was the power dynamics between the students and myself, given my dual role as teacher and researcher. As Taber (2010) cautions, there is a risk that students may feel compelled to participate due to this dual role, which may potentially lead to discomfort. To mitigate these power imbalances, I implemented several strategies:

1. I assured students that their participation in the study would have no impact on their academic evaluations. This clear separation of research activities from their formal educational assessments aimed to reduce any undue pressure.

2. To maintain anonymity, I used unique codes for questionnaire responses. Students created these identifiers by combining their mother's first name with a chosen lucky number to ensure their responses remained confidential.

3. I informed students of their right to withhold their worksheet results from the study.

4. In the introductory session, I explained the potential personal and academic benefits of participating in the study, as understanding the benefits can reduce participants' reluctance and foster a more open engagement (Herr & Anderson, 2014).

During the interview process, recalling negative incidents could be distressing for the participants. Accordingly, information for psychological support was made available for those who might need it. Before each session, I reiterated the method and objectives to clarify the session's intent and maintain a transparent and ethical research environment.

3.6 Bilingual Research

In this bilingual research, I tailored language use to each phase of the study to facilitate effective communication and maintain the integrity of data collection and analysis. During narrative interviews and classroom instruction, I used English as the primary medium to maintain consistency and formality. During discussions, however, students were permitted to use any language or mix of languages, including body language, to encourage free expression and interaction. This flexibility emphasised communication efficacy over linguistic precision.

For written exercises, students were required to use English. This requirement aimed to improve their written expression abilities. Dictionaries were recommended when students struggled to express themselves, although some students occasionally reverted to Chinese. These Chinese responses were then translated into English to maintain coherence in data presentation. This bilingual approach was critical for maintaining the authenticity of student inputs while ensuring that the research outcomes were comprehensible and relatable to a broader academic audience.

In presenting the research data, I used brackets for necessary clarifications: angled brackets "< >" were used to clarify the researcher's input and provide necessary context in the data, while square brackets "[]" denoted English translations of any Chinese feedback.

Having outlined the research paradigm, participants, settings, and my dual positionality, I will now discuss how the TAR flow chart in Figure 2 informs the subsequent discussions of research methodologies and intervention strategies. This

methodological framework is essential for effectively managing the complex dynamics of being both an insider and an outsider within the research environment. It ensures that the research remains well-grounded, continuously reflective, and ethically sensitive to the specific nuances of the educational setting.

Applying the TAR process in Figure 2 allows for continuous adaptation and refinement of methods and interventions in response to emerging insights and shifts within the research context. This approach enhances the relevance and effectiveness of the research while addressing the ethical complexities inherent in navigating between the roles of insider and outsider. By doing so, the research aims to maintain a balance between objectivity and engagement, ensuring that the findings are both credible and contextually informed.

3.7 Intervention and Research Method

This section aligns with the TAR cycle outlined in Figure 2. In this section, I will detail the methods and activities employed at each intervention stage to ensure coherence and rigor in the research process.

Table 3-2. Summary of the Research Methods According to the TAR Cycle

TAR Step	Method/Tool/Activity	Participants (Number)	Time-frame	Degree of Completion
1. Problem Identification	Narrative Interview	Group A (8)	July-Sept 2019	8/8 (each around 1 hour)
2. Deciding on Interventions	Creating Critical Incident Exercises	Group B (18)	July-Sept 2019	6 Critical incidents
3. Trial implementation	Pre-questionnaire & Worksheet	Group B (18)	Oct-Dec 2020 (online)	18/18 103/108
4. Evaluating intervention	Focus group interview	Group B (18)	Dec 2020-Jan	1 (around two hours)

			2021 (online)	
5. Modify the plan	/	Group B (18)	Jan-Mar 2021	/
6. Second Trial	Critical Incident Exercises	Group B (15)	Apr 2021-Jun 2022 (online)	10 critical incidents + two video clips
7. Evaluating modified intervention	Evaluative interview Post-questionnaire	Group B (18)	July 2022 (off-line)	18 post-questionnaires (only 3 of them provided useful information)
8. Reflection	Reflective Journal	Me (1)	Throughout the study	/

3.7.1 Problem Identification Through Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry. Cultural immersion is an effective method for developing students' ICC (Shadiev et al., 2020). In this context, I intended to examine the intercultural experiences of Group A students during their time abroad to identify the challenges these students face, using a qualitative approach to gather detailed personal narratives. I chose narrative interviews as the primary method to facilitate this inquiry. This choice reflected my constructivist belief that knowledge is constructed through conversation and dialogue. Narrative interviews are popular qualitative research for their ability to provide deep insights into complex social phenomena, particularly within small groups. They are particularly adept at revealing the diverse and complex nature of human experiences, facilitating a richer understanding of cultural immersion (Mueller, 2019).

Educational researchers value narrative inquiry for its focus on lived experiences, a practice rooted in the sociological tradition of storytelling (Squire, 2008). This method excels in converting human experiences into narrative form, providing valuable insights into how individuals navigate and perceive their intercultural encounters (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Through this approach, my research aims to capture and analyse how students navigate and learn from their intercultural environments.

In my research, I needed a research method to gather authentic stories from Group A students, who had spent more than six months in New York. These narrative interviews provided valuable insights into the participants' experiences, allowing them to share the significance and meanings of their daily encounters abroad through storytelling (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2016; Elliott, 2005; Webster & Mertova, 2007). In this study, narrative inquiry functioned not only as a methodological approach but also as a focal point of the study, enabling the exploration and interpretation of personal and cultural experiences (Moola et al., 2020). Through the narratives collected from Group A students, I gained a deeper understanding of the interplay between culture and individual development. This approach allowed me to capture varied personal experiences, providing valuable insights into how cultural immersion impacts students' growth and learning.

Yet, I am also aware of the potential reluctance when it comes to intercultural discussions, particularly within Chinese contexts where social norms may discourage conversations on politically sensitive topics. While this reluctance is understandable,

it can limit the depth of exploration into one's intercultural experiences. To overcome this challenge, I need a research method that facilitates a gentle unveiling of personal stories.

Therefore, I selected in-depth individual interviews as my method of choice. This technique supports the joint creation of meaning, as both interviewer and interviewee collaboratively reconstruct perceptions and experiences (Benjamin, 2006). Through this method, participants can share and reflect upon their experiences more comfortably.

In conducting narrative inquiry, I strived to understand how individuals would narrate their worldviews and select specific experiences to construct stories reflecting their understanding of the world (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Individuals naturally organise their episodic memories into coherent narratives. The agency individuals exercise in shaping their stories is a key element of narrative inquiry (Mueller, 2019). Thus, narrative inquiry provides more than an objective recounting of events; it offers a subjective reinterpretation of lived experiences.

When conducting this research, I made conscious efforts to avoid influencing the narratives or making comparisons between the stories shared. This approach helps preserve the unique subjectivity that each narrative inherently possesses. By respecting these individual perspectives, the research maintained its integrity and provided genuine insights into the personal significance of the narratives.

Interviews with Group A. I conducted the interviews with Group A using an online chat application that allows real-time communication despite the distance

between me in China and the students in the United States. This method, while sometimes less detailed than in-person interactions, provided a necessary compromise given the distance constraints. Research suggests that while online formats lack physical proximity, which is crucial for easing participants during sensitive discussions, they can adequately replicate face-to-face interviews when geographical separation is insurmountable (Irani, 2019; Saarijarvi & Bratt, 2021). Additionally, these virtual interviews offer increased accessibility, cost-effectiveness, and flexibility in scheduling (Irani, 2019).

Participants conducted video interviews from their own rooms, wearing casual clothes to enhance comfort and facilitate a relaxed atmosphere. Research suggests that such settings are crucial for eliciting open and candid dialogue (Irani, 2019). With consent from participants, I recorded sessions to capture verbal responses and non-verbal cues such as body language, which were crucial for a comprehensive data analysis. All interviews began with informal small talks, followed by a brief overview of the research and an introduction to my background. This initial engagement was vital to build rapport, particularly since I had not previously met the students. It helped to establish a conversational environment that eased the participants into sharing personal experiences, which were later instrumental in developing intervention materials for my study.

In the interviews, I initially posed broad questions to help participants reflect on their experiences in New York, such as "How do you feel about life here?" and "How was your life and study here?" These open-ended questions engaged participants and

set the stage for deeper discussions. As the interviews progressed, I introduced more targeted prompts that focused on their interactions with people from diverse backgrounds. I employed sensorial prompting by asking, “Could you share a significant story from your time abroad? Try to visualise that moment and describe it without aiming for perfection.” This approach encouraged participants to share meaningful experiences from their stay in New York and helped them recall those events vividly without the pressure of crafting a flawless account. I avoided frequent probing questions to preserve the natural flow of conversation, only employing them when a participant hesitated or found it difficult to continue their story. In such cases, I allowed a brief pause, which usually lasted no longer than 10 seconds, to give participants time to gather their thoughts (Urquhart et al., 2003).

3.7.2 Decision on Particular Intervention--Design of Critical Incidents

Contrasting with Carr's (1986) portrayal of narrative as a broad, continuous sequence of events, Spencer and Harsch (2015) introduced the critical incident technique, which narrows the focus to distinct and memorable experiences. These incidents represent more than recollections; they are events impactful and enduring in participants' memories and often catalyse substantial personal growth (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). This technique, which emphasises the importance of such crucial experiences, is highly relevant to my research, which seeks to explore the notable events that Group A students encountered in New York. By focusing on these critical incidents, my study aims to document the key experiences that potentially shaped the students' intercultural perspectives.

To create critical incidents, I used Young and Schartner's (2014) structured research procedure, which was originally designed to examine how non-native postgraduate students adapt to academic and social life in the UK. This approach was particularly suitable for my research, as it closely aligns with my focus on non-native young adults adapting to English-speaking countries. The procedure involves three steps: 1) immersion in data, 2) coding and classification, and 3) the write-up of critical incidents.

Immersion in data. Effective data analysis demands systematic and deliberate reflection (Liamputtong, 2009). In my approach to uncovering and assessing the recurring themes noted by participants, I immersed myself in the data gathered from narrative interviews. This involved repeatedly listening to the audio recordings and thoroughly examining the transcripts to ensure a good understanding of the content. This deep engagement with the data prompted me to address critical questions about the main events, their timings, locations, and the individuals involved. The decision to fully transcribe the interviews proved crucial; by converting spoken words into text, I was able to revisit specific moments of the interviews and capture nuances that might have otherwise been overlooked. Despite its time-consuming nature, this analytical process enhanced the reliability of the subsequent data classification by providing a textual basis for detailed analysis.

Coding and classification. The coding process involves developing analytical codes to reveal underlying patterns in the narrative interviews. These codes served as markers, aiding the identification and analysis of recurrent themes across the data

(Mason, 2002). In my research, I adopted an inductive coding approach to analyse the narrative interview data. Inductive coding is a bottom-up method where codes are derived directly from the data without any preconceived frameworks (Chandra & Shang, 2019). This approach is particularly advantageous as it allows themes and theories to emerge naturally from the actual experiences and expressions of the participants without the constraints of preconceived ideas (Azungah, 2017).

The first step involved identifying initial codes in the narrative interview transcripts, which reflected Group A students' repeated or strongly expressed responses. These initial codes functioned as primary descriptors of the students' concerns and experiences. Next, I grouped similar initial codes into coherent topics, creating a more organised data structure. By doing so, I structured the data into manageable segments, which enabled me to uncover new connections between different groups of codes. From this categorisation, I progressed to the thematic analysis phase, where I collated topics that reflected similar social phenomena and placed them under a unified theme. Thus, I was able to streamline the narrative data into coherent thematic units.

Table 3-3 summarised the codes and the themes that emerged from the narrative interview data: 1) values and academic challenges, 2) language and socialisation difficulties, 3) discrimination and stereotypes, 4) identity struggles, and 5) cultural shock in daily life. To illustrate this coding and categorisation process, consider the example of dietary perceptions among students. From the transcripts, I identified key responses such as "unhealthy," "lacks freshness," "expensive ingredients," and "dining

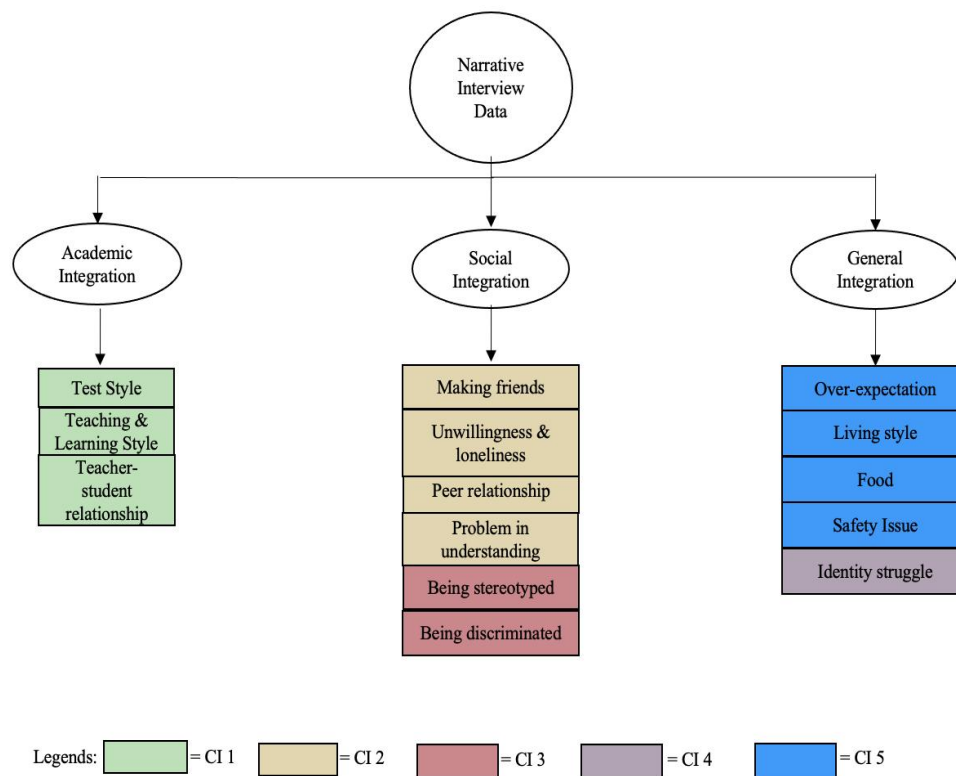
in upscale restaurants." These responses were grouped under the topic of “dietary perceptions”, which falls within the broader category of food experiences. The "food" category represents a significant element of the "cultural shock in daily life" theme, an overarching concept that emerged from the data. This thematic analysis, therefore, provides a structured way to interpret how perceptions about food contribute to the cultural shock experienced by Chinese international students.

Table 3-3. A Summary of Codes and Themes Emerged from Narrative Interviews

Participants responses	Codes	Themes
<i>My teacher even invited me to smoke with him</i>	Teacher-student relationship	Values and Academic Challenges
<i>Here< America> test is always in the form of a report presentation, unlike many paper-and-pencil tests in China</i>	Test style	
<i>They always interrupt teacher in the class, but teacher still seems happy to that</i>	Teaching style	
<i>In the party we Chinese gather together, and our conversations with them stay at greeting.</i>	Making friends	Language and Socialisation difficulties
<i>Their accent and speed of talking make me difficult in understanding</i>	Language barrier	
<i>I do not take bus but walk to school, because I do not want to communicate with the driver, I feel ashamed when talking to them.</i>	Language barrier	
<i>They smiled wierd at me, and I heard they talking about Asia and Chinese</i>	Being discriminated	Discrimination & Stereotypes
<i>All Chinese young man can play martial arts</i>	Being stereotyped	
<i>I do not realize I could be so patriotic</i>	Self-identity	Identity Struggle
<i>The American are so unhealthy</i>	food	

<i>There are a lot of graffitis and homeless people hanging around</i>	Safety issue	Cultural Shock in Daily Life
<i>What kind of family will let a young child prepare food everyday</i>	Living style	
<i>The cashier will be complained if she talk too much with the customer</i>	Living style	

Figure 3. Contents of Critical Incidents in Cycle 1 Intervention by Context



Write-up of critical incidents. After categorising the codes, I developed six distinct and concise “critical incidents” (CIs). Five represented unique themes that emerged from the data, while the sixth synthesised multiple themes to enhance learning applications. Each incident was carefully crafted to represent authentic

intercultural interactions, ensuring they were both relevant and applicable to the real-world experiences of Chinese international students.

As illustrated in Figure 3, the first CI involved cultural challenges in the academic context, highlighting key differences in teaching and learning styles between the U.S. and China. The second CI focused on socialisation difficulties in daily life, particularly with non-Chinese individuals. The third CI reflected the experiences of discrimination and stereotypes, while the fourth CI addressed identity struggles based on student narratives. The fifth CI touched on issues like over-expectation and dietary challenges.

These incidents shed light on significant events that Chinese international students are likely to encounter and later served as the core teaching content developed for Group B students. Creating these composite incidents involved merging elements from different stories. This approach was critical not only to preserve participant confidentiality but also to enhance the educational relevance of the materials. Each incident was carefully constructed to ensure authenticity and applicability to real-world intercultural interactions. The development of CIs is detailed in Chapter 4, where examples will be provided.

Designing intervention. I developed six structured sessions based on the six critical incidents in my research. Each session followed a consistent format designed to facilitate a deep understanding and engagement with ICC concepts among Group B participants. I began each session by introducing Group B participants to ICC concepts through a lead-in activity, which set the stage for the subsequent critical

incidents exercises (CIEs). These CIEs included group discussions that helped participants engage more deeply with the material. I will explain the development and structuring of these CIEs in the intervention section (6.2) of the dissertation.

After the group discussions, I transitioned the conversation to a whole-class level, where a selected student spokesperson facilitated further dialogue. This approach encouraged students to articulate their understanding and learn from their peers. To reinforce the concepts discussed in the sessions, I assigned home-based tasks. These tasks required students to refine their worksheets based on classroom discussions and their own independent research.

3.7.3 Trial Implementation—Pre-Questionnaire

The use of a pre-questionnaire is to establish a basic understanding of the Group B students' perspectives on intercultural communication, their expectations and motivations for the course, and their prior English learning experiences. The complete version of the pre-questionnaire is provided in Appendix 2. The pre-questionnaire comprises 12 questions across four key dimensions:

1. Demographic information
2. Self-assessment of intercultural communication knowledge
3. Course expectations and motivations
4. Prior English learning experiences

Lune and Berg (2012) highlights that while questionnaires offer a quick and efficient means to gather detailed participant responses, they present challenges, particularly when used within a qualitative framework. Questionnaires are often

labour-intensive, require well-defined objectives from the outset, and are not easily compatible with computer-aided analysis. Despite these challenges, I still chose the qualitative approach to design the pre-questionnaire due to its ability to provide depth and context to the collected data, which is essential for exploring complex phenomena like intercultural communication. This method allows an in-depth examination of nuances often missed by quantitative analyses. Developing a series of focused questions in the questionnaire can streamline the research process and enhance the clarity and relevance of the study's objectives. Moreover, the richness of the data obtained through open-ended responses can also help develop more effective teaching methods and curricula.

Analysis of Pre-questionnaire. I analysed the pre-questionnaire using thematic analysis, a method known for its robustness in organising qualitative data and identifying relevant information (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis followed the same procedural steps I previously used for narrative interview data, ensuring a consistent analytical approach across various datasets. The process began with a detailed review of the responses to deeply understand the participants' perspectives. I then developed a coding scheme that highlighted key points and identified primary themes based on the frequency and significance of the responses. These steps not only reinforced the reliability of the findings by maintaining methodological consistency but also enhanced the depth of data interpretation, providing valuable insights into the participants' experiences and perceptions. The table below provides examples of these codes, illustrating how they reflect recurring themes in the student responses.

Table 3-4. Examples Derived from the Thematic Analysis of Pre-Questionnaire.

Participants response	Codes	Themes
Western culture is very attractive	Attraction	Curiosity
I want to know if their life is the same as what presented in the movie	Want to know	
I desire to know their <foreigners’> concerns. (Li2)	Want to know	
To help me travel abroad	Travel (daily use)	Practical use
To help me study abroad	Study abroad	
To enhance oral English	English level	Language proficiency
To acquire Intercultural communication skills	Skills	Personal development
To learn Intercultural communication knowledge	Knowledge	
I like Miss Xu’s class	Like this teacher	Other
It is the compulsory course	Compulsory course	

3.7.4 Trial Implementation—Progress Worksheet

The student worksheet is an educational tool designed to provide clear and focused learning experiences (Permana & Nuraeni, 2021). Progress worksheets have been shown to enhance learning efficiency, boost learning interest, and increase the likelihood of improved educational outcomes, as well as enrich the student learning experience (Trewet & Fjortoft, 2013).

Students were asked to complete the learning process worksheets after each session. These worksheets served two purposes. First, they acted as a reflective tool for students to monitor their self-awareness and growth in critical cultural understanding, communication competence, cross-cultural attitudes, and intercultural knowledge. Self-documentation often captures the subtleties of learning more comprehensively than mere quantitative assessments (Jacobson et al., 2021). Through

self-evaluation facilitated by the worksheets, students actively engaged in their intercultural development, strategically identifying areas for enhancement. At the end of the intervention, the worksheets were expected to accurately reflect the students' ICC proficiency.

Secondly, the worksheets functioned as a feedback mechanism, allowing students to voice their perspectives on the curriculum and teaching methodologies. This practice aligned with Caprioara and Frunza's (2012) findings that such tools focused on individual learning experiences and provided tangible evidence for instructors to adapt learning activities. Therefore, worksheets not only empowered students with their ICC awareness, but also enabled teachers to monitor the dynamic learning process and intervene didactically if necessary.

Moreover, incorporating these worksheets into the teaching framework provided an interactive and dynamic tool to capture students' learning progression and reactions to different teaching approaches. This dual functionality made the worksheets invaluable for both the students' academic journeys and the research's investigative goals, serving as an academic and pedagogical cornerstone in the study.

The worksheet design followed the lesson procedure. In exploring their perception of ICC development, students completed a critical incident exercise, responding to prompts such as: What occurred? Why did it occur (how do you perceive it)? How could the issue be resolved? Have you had a similar experience before? If so, what was your reaction then? Could you now think of a better solution?

In each session, a worksheet was distributed to each student as an integral part of the classroom activity. Students were instructed to write their names on the worksheets instead of submitting them anonymously. This activity was not only a course requirement to be completed within the class period, but also allowed me to tailor my teaching approach to meet individual student needs. Additionally, linking students' names to their worksheets facilitated their enrolment in the evaluative interview at the end of the Cycle 1 intervention. This strategy was instrumental in enabling targeted follow-up interviews based on specific responses provided on the worksheets, thereby deepening the understanding of students' perspectives. It was explicitly stated in the ethics form that worksheet results would only be collected as data with students' consent.

Students were required to return the worksheets in the subsequent session so that they had enough time to reflect on both the classroom learnings and their personal experiences. Besides discussions with their group members, they were strongly encouraged to search the Internet or consult other references to learn about different cultures and social norms. Since cultural learning is a continuous process, it should extend beyond the classroom, with students encouraged to develop a habit of continuous learning.

Analysis of progress worksheet. I analysed the progress worksheets using a hybrid coding approach. This hybrid approach allows theoretical constructs to inform the deductive thematic analysis while inductive coding derives directly from the emerging data patterns (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Initially, I applied

deductive coding with Byram's model as a predefined framework to categorise the data systematically. This method effectively highlighted representative examples for each of Byram's *savoirs*. Guided by Byram's model, I defined the five *savoirs* as follows for coding purposes:

1. Attitudes: Students demonstrate respect and curiosity towards others and their cultures by stepping out of their comfort zones and communicating confidently in English.

2. Knowledge: Students exhibit an understanding of cultural differences and/or engage in self-reflection about their own native culture.

3. Interaction and Discovery Skills: Students acquire new cultural knowledge and apply intercultural skills, attitudes, and information in real-time interactions and exchanges.

4. Relating and Interpreting Skills: Students interpret situations from the perspectives of both their own and other cultures, empathise with others, and exhibit the ability to tolerate and resolve misunderstandings.

5. Critical Cultural Awareness: Students utilise explicit cultural products, practices, perspectives, and criteria to critically assess diverse cultures.

Beyond the structured analysis provided by Byram's framework, I engaged in inductive coding to uncover additional themes that emerged spontaneously from the students' responses. These emergent themes, which were distinct from the predefined *savoirs*, offered deeper insights into subconscious aspects of learning processes and were categorised into different themes for comprehensive analysis. This hybrid

approach not only adhered to the structured analysis of Byram's model but also embraced the flexibility of inductive coding to explore beyond the initial framework. This combination allowed for a robust examination of the worksheets to capture a fuller spectrum of student learning experiences.

3.7.5 Evaluate Intervention –Post-Questionnaire and Post-Interviews

Educational research assessment involves a systematic collection and critical analysis of evidence related to students' learning experiences (Banta & Palomba, 2014). In evaluating ICC, assessments are traditionally divided into direct or indirect categories. Prior to 1996, scholars often developed their own scales for indirect assessment (Sinicrope et al., 2007). Among these were the Intercultural Sensitivity Inventory (ISCI) by Bhawuk and Brislin (1992), the Behavioral Assessment Scale for Intercultural Competence (BASIC) by Koester and Olebe (1988), and the well-known commercial scales such as the Cross-Cultural Adaptability Inventory (CCAI) and the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI).

Recent research in ICC often integrates elements from existing models into new assessment scales. For instance, the Global Competence Aptitude Assessment (GCAA) developed by Hunter (2004) incorporates aspects of Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS). Similarly, Fantini (2006) built the Assessment of Intercultural Competence (AIC) around Byram's model of ICC. Indirect assessments, exemplified by the IDI and CCAI, typically utilise comprehensive self-report questionnaires, which generally feature around 50 items each.

While indirect assessments are favoured for their efficiency in data collection and the availability of established scales (Sinicrope et al., 2007), they are not without their limitations. These assessments often rely heavily on self-reporting mechanisms, which can be problematic not because participants deliberately provide inaccurate responses, but due to their unawareness of potential inaccuracies in their answers (Arasaratnam & Doerfel, 2005). This can lead to data that, while extensive, might not accurately represent participants' true intercultural competence.

In contrast, direct assessments, though less common and more resource-intensive in terms of data collection and analysis, provide significant advantages. They focus on the process rather than the outcomes, which offer a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of intercultural competence. This approach allows for more individualised insights, making it particularly suitable for this research where a deeper exploration of intercultural skills is crucial (Sinicrope et al., 2007).

In the current study, I chose the direct assessment methods, specifically post-questionnaires and post-interviews, during the evaluation stage. Direct assessments facilitate a deeper exploration of participants' intercultural skills through active interaction and reflection. This choice aimed to encourage participants to demonstrate their ICC in a dynamic setting, through dialogue in post-interviews and self-reflection in post-questionnaires. This approach aligns with the study's intent to capture the multifaceted, process-oriented nature of ICC development, providing a richer and more personalised assessment than indirect methods typically offer. Thus,

despite the intensive nature of direct assessments, their ability to yield insightful, data makes them particularly suitable for this research.

Post Questionnaire. The complete version of the post-questionnaire is enclosed in Appendix 3. The post-questionnaire was structured to evaluate students' achievements in their learning objectives while also assessing their awareness, conduct, attitudes, skills, knowledge, and other aspects of their evolved ICC. This assessment covered both self-development and course-specific evaluations.

In developing the post-questionnaire, I integrated questions adapted from Fantini (2009) and Straffon (2003) with the theoretical framework provided by Byram's model. This approach aimed to capture the multifaceted nature of ICC as perceived and experienced by the students. Byram's model offered a robust theoretical basis for ICC assessment, whereas questions from Fantini and Straffon provided practical perspectives that enabled students to reflect on their personal growth and course impacts. This hybrid approach was chosen to ensure a comprehensive evaluation covering the cognitive, affective, and behavioural dimensions of ICC.

Following the analysis of the questionnaire data, a follow-up interview was planned to further investigate the students' experiences and to address any details that the questionnaire might not have fully captured.

Analysis of post-questionnaire. The analysis of the post-questionnaire followed a similar approach to the pre-questionnaire, which was to adopt thematic analysis to distinguish patterns within the responses. While the pre-questionnaire analysis was conducted inductively, allowing themes to emerge from the data, the analysis of

Questions 3 and 4 in the post-questionnaire was deductive. In this deductive phase, Byram's five *savoirs*, which were previously outlined in the literature review, served as predetermined thematic categories to guide the analysis. This structured approach enabled a focused examination of the data concerning the established intercultural competence constructs and provided a means to compare the anticipated outcomes with the actual responses.

Post-interview. Interviews often serve as direct assessment tools in ICC research, offering insights into participants' authentic performance (Sinicrope, et al., 2007). Unlike questionnaires, which are effective for identifying broad patterns across large populations, interviews facilitate a deeper exploration of individual attitudes, thoughts, and insights.

In this study, focus group interviews were chosen over individual interviews for their ability to elicit a breadth of ideas. This method is particularly effective in contexts sensitive within Chinese culture, such as discussing practices like evaluating or criticising teachers—actions traditionally viewed as disrespectful under Confucian influences (Hodkinson & Poropat, 2014). In a group setting, openness from one participant often inspires others to share more freely, which helps foster an environment that encourages diverse perspectives and richer discussions (Krueger & Casey, 2015). This collaborative atmosphere enables participants to build on each other's responses, creating a more comprehensive understanding of their attitudes and experiences. Detailed procedure of the post-interview will be introduced in the intervention (Section 6.5).

3.7.6 Reflective Journal

The reflective journal helps record the reflective process at the core of TAR. Schön (1983) posited that reflection extends beyond simple contemplation, urging educators to prioritise reflection-in-action rather than just knowing-in-action. Thus, these journals are invaluable for gathering qualitative data and facilitating educators' self-study and professional development (Phelps, 2005).

Throughout my research, I recorded real-time insights from student discussions and reviewed audio recordings of these discussions and my teaching retrospectively. As Boud (2012) suggested, reflective journals can take various forms beyond written words, including drawings and photographs. My reflective journal, therefore, included sketches, the click of video records and written narratives. The content was not limited to descriptions but embraced reflexivity for a deeper self-dialogue about the relationship between pedagogical beliefs and actual classroom practices, while also considering improvements to teaching methods (Bassot, 2020; Bolton & Delderfield, 2018).

For instance, while reviewing my notes on a session where students struggled with a specific task, I noted how my instructions could be improved to increase clarity and engagement. Similarly, videos recorded taken during class activities helped identify body language patterns indicating confusion or disinterest. This visual evidence prompted adjustments in my delivery style. These realisations enabled immediate intervention modifications to address students' specific needs.

While the journal was not intended for an in-depth analysis, it supplemented my understanding of students' progress worksheets and provided immediate records for refining teaching interventions. Consequently, it became an essential adjunct for developing responsive teaching strategies throughout the study.

3.8 Conclusion

This research utilised a qualitative approach within a constructivist paradigm and employed Teacher Action Research (TAR) to explore integrating English language teaching with intercultural instruction in Chinese higher education. A variety of data collection methods were used, including narrative interviews, questionnaires, focus group interviews, student worksheets, and a reflective journal. The combination of these methods provided a robust foundation for analysing how ICC can be effectively developed through integrated teaching practices.

The research aimed to assess the potential of CIEs in developing ICC among EFL learners in Chinese universities. It involved two distinct groups of students at a university in Shanghai. Group A comprised 8 students with study abroad experience, while Group B included 18 students who participated in the CIE intervention.

The intervention followed Elliot's action research model in an iterative process. Initial narrative interviews with Group A students informed the design of CIE materials, while pre-questionnaires established baseline data before Group B started the intervention. Trial implementation of CIEs and progress worksheets over two cycles allowed for monitoring and adaptation of the CIE lessons. Post-questionnaires and focus group interviews evaluated the impact of the intervention on Group B

students. My ongoing reflection through a journal supported continuous pedagogical improvements.

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the qualitative data, utilising both inductive and deductive coding approaches. Inductive coding was applied to the pre-questionnaire responses, allowing themes to emerge naturally from the data. For the post-questionnaire, deductive coding was used based on Byram's model, providing a structured framework for analysis.

Ethical measures were implemented to ensure voluntary participation, mitigate power imbalances, and protect participant anonymity. These steps were crucial in maintaining the integrity of the research and safeguarding the welfare of the participants. Furthermore, the methods and approaches developed in this research have broad applicability and can be transferred to similar educational contexts. The use of CIEs, combined with rigorous qualitative analysis and ethical mindfulness, provides a robust framework for integrating ICC into language education in diverse cultural settings.

Chapter 4. Narrative Interviews and Designing Critical Incidents

This chapter presents findings and discussions from the narrative interviews conducted with Group A participants, which relates to the first two stages in this research (shown in red in Figure 4). These students, who spent over six months studying in New York, provided insights into their experiences of cultural adaptation and intercultural communication. The narrative interviews aimed to elicit critical incidents from the participants' time abroad, encouraging them to share their own cross-cultural encounters. Their stories offered authentic perspectives on Chinese international students' challenges while adjusting to life in a foreign environment.

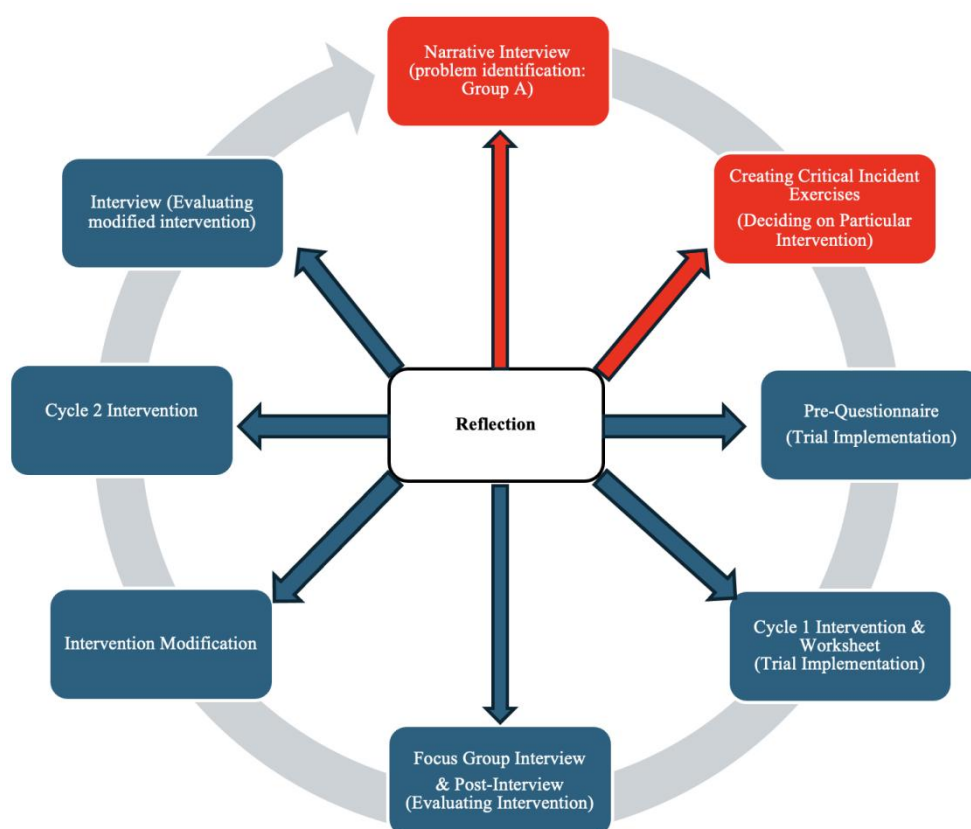


Figure 4. Iterative Cycle of CIE Intervention (Chapter 4)

Five overarching themes emerged from the qualitative analysis of participants' narratives: 1) values and academic challenges, 2) language and socialisation

difficulties, 3) discrimination and stereotypes, 4) cultural shock in daily life, and 5) identity struggles. Each theme includes findings from the interviews, followed by a discussion situating these results within existing literature. These discussions aim to derive broader insights from the participants' experiences that can inform the development of pedagogical strategies for ICC. Integrating these empirical findings is crucial to enhancing Chinese students' preparation for intercultural communication and exchange.

4.1 Values and Academic Challenges

International students often face numerous academic challenges that stem from differences in educational values and practices between their home countries and the host country. Understanding these challenges is crucial for comprehending the broader context of their academic experiences and integration. The following sections delve into specific aspects of these challenges, starting with the teacher-student relationship (TSR) and followed by an exploration of different learning styles. To maintain confidentiality, all student names mentioned below are pseudonyms.

4.1.1 Teacher-Student Relationship

The teacher-student relationship (TSR) is an important factor in the academic integration of international learners, particularly Chinese students studying at universities abroad (Liu et al., 2021). Participants highlighted the importance of these relationships, noting the cultural differences in teacher and student roles (Cameron & Rabinowitz, 1998). Despite these differences, they found communication with non-Chinese teachers unexpectedly successful. They observed that American teachers

often made time to interact with students after scheduled classes, indicating a high-quality teacher-student relationship that greatly impacted their educational experience abroad. Fred reflected on the differences between China and the U.S., expressing dissatisfaction with the limited student-teacher communication in China. He stated, *“In China if you don't complete an assignment, teachers won't listen to your reasons. They just assume that you're making excuses. But here, professors empathise with students' circumstances.”*

The empathy demonstrated by teachers is particularly valuable to international students (Brown & Brown, 2013), as it provides a supportive environment crucial for their adaptation. This understanding may stem from the teachers' own backgrounds. Henry, for instance, shared an experience with his programming teacher, a first-generation immigrant from India. The teacher, who had faced similar adjustment challenges, empathised with Henry's frustration and depression, making him feel understood and supported. This story illustrated that teachers in the U.S. can relate to their international students' struggles, offering a level of empathy and understanding often absent in their home countries.

The perceived hierarchy and large class sizes in China also contribute to the impression that Chinese teachers are less approachable. Henry appreciated the increased interaction opportunities with U.S. teachers and criticised the bureaucratic nature of Chinese universities. He remarked, *“We sometimes call our professors 'boss' in China, which pretty much like a boss-employee relationship.”* This dynamic can hinder open communication and rapport between students and teachers.

Moreover, Alex attributed the lack of teacher-student relationships in China to the large class sizes. He explained, *"In China, a class might have 50-60 students. Professors sometimes can't even remember names or recognize faces. But here, classes have up to 20 students."* Alex found the smaller class sizes in the US allowed for more personal interaction. He also expressed gratitude towards American teachers who, despite struggling to remember Chinese students' names or faces, made efforts to connect. *"We Chinese may look the same to them,"* he laughed. This tolerance suggests an understanding of the challenges faced in cross-cultural academic settings.

Furthermore, Group A students observed that the TSR in the U.S. appeared more informal compared to China. Gary shared an anecdote highlighting this contrast: *"In China, I'd feel anxious when called to a teacher's office, as it usually meant something was wrong. But in America, I was even invited to smoke with a professor after class. That was something I'd only expect among bros."* This anecdote underscores the relaxed nature of interactions between teachers and students in the U.S., which can foster a more approachable and supportive learning environment.

However, not all students viewed this informality positively. David, another participant in Group A, offered a different perspective on, focusing on the academic implications of this casual TSR. He commented, *"Personally, they're nice. But professionally, I'm not convinced they excel at their jobs. Classes here seem to be driven by students. Teachers often play a passive role during lessons instead."* David's observation suggests that while informal relationships may enhance personal connections, they may also lead to perceptions of reduced academic rigour.

The informal TSR observed in the U.S. opens a discussion on the different educational approaches and learning styles between the two cultures. This informality can create a more relaxed learning environment, fostering open dialogue and reducing the fear of authority figures. However, this informality may also lead to perceptions of less rigorous academic standards and a lack of authoritative guidance. In contrast, the more formal TSR in China enforces discipline and structure, which can be beneficial for maintaining academic standards and clear expectations. Yet, this formality might inhibit open communication and personal interaction between students and teachers, potentially limiting students' willingness to seek help or express difficulties.

Additionally, different TSRs reflect broader cultural values. In the U.S., the emphasis on individuality and egalitarianism fosters a more collegial relationship between teachers and students. This approach encourages students to develop independence and critical thinking skills. In China, the hierarchical nature of society is mirrored in educational settings, where respect for authority and conformity are highly valued. This structure can promote a strong work ethic and respect for knowledge but may also stifle creativity and personal expression. These differing approaches underscore the importance of cultural sensitivity and adaptability in international education. For Chinese students studying in the U.S., understanding and navigating these cultural differences in teacher-student relationships can enhance their academic integration and overall experience.

4.1.2 Learning Style

The participants observed significant differences in educational styles, particularly in the emphasis on independent learning in the U.S. versus the teacher-reliant approach in China. My interviews with Group A students indicated that Chinese students often struggle with the autonomy required in the American education system. They were surprised to find that class hours in the U.S. (approximately 12 hours per week) were considerably fewer than in China (about 30 hours per week), which required more self-study to complete assignments and prepare for exams. This discrepancy led to some dissatisfaction. Candy expressed her concern over the value of money, stating, *"The class is too brief here, and yet we paid so much for tuition."* David also noted the seemingly less demanding role of American teachers, saying, *"They merely check on us during class; most of the time, we're discussing with classmates or researching information ourselves."* These observations reflect the challenge of adjusting to a learning environment that demands greater independence and self-discipline.

The gap between expectations and reality posed challenges for students adjusting to the U.S. education system, sometimes even causing psychological resistance to the new learning style upon arrival. The concept of independence in learning was a recurring theme in the participants' reflections. Eddie, for instance, described self-study as a daunting task, stating, *"Managing my schedule and finding academic resources is overwhelming."* He also noted that he was used to relying on teachers for

guidance, and in his words, *“This responsibility <of self-study> is quite intimidating.”*

Similarly, Fred also found adapting to self-directed study challenging. He admitted, *“I have to manage my time, and without external pressure, I’ve become less diligent.”* Fred further expressed frustration with the American educational approach: *“Why can’t they just outline what we need to study? It would be simpler for everyone.”* These reflections highlight Chinese students' difficulties in transitioning to a learning environment that demands greater independence and self-discipline.

Fred did not perceive significant issues in his academic performance but lacked the drive to engage deeply with his studies, partly due to a lost sense of achievement and security. He explained, *“In China, the regular tests and clear scores were direct incentives for me. Here, the focus is on presentations, academic posts, and independent projects, followed by written feedback that includes both praise and suggestions. Since everyone receives similar feedback, I can’t gauge my actual standing or feel a sense of accomplishment.”* This reflects Fred's struggle to adapt to an educational system that values self-directed learning and qualitative feedback over quantitative assessment.

4.1.3 Discussion

Cultural values significantly shape the teacher-student relationship. In China, TSR is deeply rooted in the belief, expressed by the adage “一日为师，终生为父 (Yi Ri Wei Shi, Zhong Sheng Wei Fu)”, meaning "a teacher for a day, a father for life". This perspective emphasises the profound respect and almost filial duty students owe

to teachers, equating the TSR to a parent-child relationship. Historically, teachers in China were addressed as "师父 (Shi Fu)," denoting both a teacher and a paternal figure, fostering a perception of teachers as stern and less approachable. This dual responsibility requires teachers to nurture students' abilities while students show due reverence.

The traditional TSR in China features a distinct top-down dynamic, which contrasts sharply with Western educational philosophies influenced by thinkers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Dewey. These philosophers valued individualism, freedom, and democracy within the classroom and advocated for a more egalitarian and guiding role for teachers rather than a directive one (Hirsch, 2006; Martinez-Aleman, 2007). The structure of TSRs in China, however, often involves a clear boundary between teachers and students. Students usually stand during discussions as a sign of respect, and the teacher's authority is rarely questioned. This sharp distinction may shock Chinese students when they encounter the more casual American approach, such as a teacher inviting a student to smoke, which is more like interactions between peers.

Zhang and McGrath's (2009) research on TSR in an international school in China corroborated the perception of Chinese teachers' lack of empathy and their perceived inaccessibility. For example, teachers sometimes make unilateral decisions for students without their input, such as assigning projects or setting deadlines without consultation. This hierarchical model could inhibit Chinese students from openly

communicating with their teachers due to a fear of overstepping established boundaries.

As a university instructor, I felt disheartened to hear participants' perceptions about teacher-student relationships despite efforts to enhance such relationships since the curriculum reform initiated by China's MOE in 2001. Recent studies, such as those conducted by Lei et al. (2023), have shown that a positive teacher-student relationship could contribute to accelerated student development, increased satisfaction with instruction, and improved academic outcomes. While cultural factors may shape TSR across different educational contexts, focusing on a teacher's nationality as a primary determinant of such relationships is an essentialist view that is counterproductive in intercultural communication. Such a perspective may unfairly dismiss the efforts of Chinese teachers committed to building relationships of equality, care, and mutual understanding with their students.

Zhou et al. (2020) highlighted the significance of respecting teachers and valuing students' prior learning experiences as fundamental to teacher-student relationships. My findings also suggested that the perceived closer relationship with non-Chinese teachers involves more complex factors than just nationality. Despite struggles with teaching approaches, participants often form closer bonds with teachers who empathise with their challenges and provide support, regardless of the teachers' cultural or national background. This empathy plays a crucial role in shaping positive educational experiences.

The notable difference in Group A participants' interactions with teachers in China compared to those in the U.S. highlighted the divergence in teacher-student dynamics between the two countries. Participants were more tolerant towards non-Chinese teachers who may not remember their names. This tolerance demonstrated a key component of ICC as outlined by Byram—the attitude of understanding and acceptance vital to intercultural communication (Byram, 1997). This tolerance did not emerge solely from the hierarchical dynamics between students and teacher but also from a deeper sense of critical cultural awareness and a deliberate effort to engage positively.

For Chinese students in the United States, teacher – student relationships are shaped not only by broader societal and educational influences (Zhou et al., 2020) but also by individual agency and lived experience. While some students may express courtesy and deference in line with cultural expectations, such behaviours should not be seen as uniform or fixed. Instead, students navigate these interactions through dynamic and context-sensitive processes influenced by personal, intercultural, and situational factors. A critically aware approach enables students to engage reflectively with these relationships, fostering adaptability rather than conformity.

Nonetheless, despite their demonstrated tolerance and some degree of critical cultural awareness, participants did not achieve the same level of success in interactions with their non-Chinese peers. This gap suggests that while attitude and awareness are crucial, developing other elements of ICC remains necessary to facilitate more balanced and effective communication across cultural lines.

On the other hand, the challenge of effectively transferring skills and knowledge across cultural contexts may underlie the observed difficulties in the intercultural interactions of Group A participants. Improving critical communicative abilities and ICC requires reflective practices, which allow individuals to draw lessons and insights from their experiences (Ono, 2010). Reflective practice enhances the development of ICC by focusing on the analytical contemplation of scenes, events, or concepts to derive understanding (Nardon, 2019).

Remarkably, few participants in this research connected their teacher-student relationships with their peer relationships or engaged in reflective practices concerning these interactions. For example, Group A participants did not realise they could engage more effectively with teachers from other cultures in the U.S. compared to their instructors back in China. This indicates that they inherently possess the capacity to reach out across cultures (i.e., ICC), though such potential remained largely untapped. Yet, the participants failed to recognise their inherent ICC due to the lack of reflection.

The absence of reflective practice represents a gap in interpreting and relating experiences, as proposed in Byram's ICC model (1997). This gap also aligns with the principles of experiential learning, which assert that learning—in all its forms, including ICC—is an ongoing cycle of re-learning (Passarelli & Kolb, 2012). Therefore, it is crucial to recognise that one successful interaction does not predict success in another; rather, students must embrace a lifelong commitment to developing their ICC.

Moreover, teaching methods, particularly the student-centred system prevalent in Western education (Jordan et al., 2014), emerged as another focal point for international student adjustment during the interview. This theme is consistent with the broader experiences of Chinese international students documented in the literature (Richards-Bray, 2020; Jiang et al., 2020). Within this paradigm, students are encouraged to adopt a more autonomous learning style, which may foster personal development albeit under some pressure. However, participants resisted this pedagogical shift, which led to disappointment with their educational encounters in the U.S. and a longing for the more familiar teaching approaches of their home country. This resistance highlights the challenge of adapting to a student-centred system that demands greater independence and self-motivation.

However, pedagogical styles are inherently diverse, and prescribing a universal standard of pedagogical excellence is imprudent. Transitioning to a new academic environment requires more than assimilation; it necessitates embracing pedagogical diversity and actively adjusting one's learning approach. Kolb (1984) conceptualised learning preferences as flexible and context-dependent, rather than rigidly exclusive. Cao (2021) further suggested that integrating target academic cultures with one's educational background can expand one's academic potential. Therefore, the process of adapting to new academic cultures parallels the principles of intercultural communication. The acquisition of ICC is thus instrumental in navigating academic transitions. Brown (2008) questioned the perceived difficulty students may encounter upon re-entry to a teacher-centred system in their home countries. Wang (2022)

answered Brown's query by investigating the identity changes experienced by Chinese student returnees after graduation from universities in the UK, concluding that ICC equips students with the resilience and adaptability to transition seamlessly between academic systems.

4.2 Language and Socialisation Difficulties

The allure of studying abroad for many students lies not only in education but also in the opportunity to engage with people from various nations. Research shows that interacting with individuals from other countries significantly aids in adapting to a new culture (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015; Khawaja & Stallman, 2011). However, overseas students often struggle to engage meaningfully with people from different backgrounds. Despite the potential benefits of such interactions, which include mitigating homesickness and hastening cultural adaptation (Brown & Holloway, 2008; Khawaja & Smith, 2011), many students experience disappointment due to inadequate intercultural integration (Feng, 2018).

Group A participants in this study echoed this sentiment of disappointment regarding their limited cultural integration. All but two participants expressed a strong desire to engage with non-Chinese students but reported minimal in-depth interactions with people from different countries. They described their frustrations through statements such as: *"We Chinese always stick together studying, eating, and playing. Sometimes I feel as though I've never left China."* and *"We need more opportunities to communicate with people from other countries."*

The participants initially did not expect to face integration challenges in their new environment despite limited engagement with non-Chinese peers. For instance, Alex quite positive about assimilating into the local society during his first month in New York. He was pleasantly surprised by the friendliness of the local culture, which contrasted with his experience in China. Alex noted, *"Back home, we don't greet strangers, but here, people casually say hello even in the elevator."* This open friendliness fuelled his optimism. However, he soon realised that communication often remained superficial, highlighting a gap between initial impressions and deeper intercultural interactions.

The participants showed a keen interest in establishing closer ties with locals. Henry's narrative exemplifies this eagerness and the complexities involved. Before going abroad, he had never left China, and thus had no experience interacting with foreigners. Upon his arrival abroad, he confronted several barriers: struggling to form friendships with non-Chinese people, worrying about engaging with non-Chinese students, and fearing potential cultural misunderstandings that could lead to conflict or offense. These hurdles reflected the complex nature of intercultural interactions (Armes & Ward, 1989) and the idea that cultural differences could create barriers to effective interpersonal communication (Khawaja & Stallman, 2011).

Despite these concerns, Henry remained hopeful that these perceptions would not impede his efforts to connect with the local community. In the first three months, he enjoyed conversing with non-Chinese students during classes and aspired to cultivate friendships. However, he failed to form deeper connections, observing that

their conversations seldom moved beyond a superficial level. He had no personal ties outside of the classroom. He identified the core issue as a gap in cultural knowledge rather than a lack of language proficiency. Henry realised that enriching dialogues often stem from a deeper understanding of the other's cultural context. He noted, *"When I learn about their country's culture, like their religion, food habits, or current trends, our conversations flow more naturally. But I can't possibly research their background before every conversation."* Henry's experience highlighted a significant insight: the journey towards intercultural friendship often stumbles not on linguistic grounds but on the terrain of cultural familiarity and the depth of shared context.

Participants expressed that communication barriers significantly obstructed their interactions with non-Chinese individuals. This challenge was particularly pronounced in multicultural classrooms, where Chinese students struggled to engage in conversations due to different foundational knowledge. Understanding local humour and jokes often poses a particular challenge, leading to frustration and a sense of alienation. Participants observed that non-Asian students, who came from various backgrounds, conversed effortlessly among themselves. Gary, for instance, shared his dismay at his lack of progress in socialising, despite his earnest attempts. *"I don't think I can handle social life here at all... I tried joining various social events and pushed myself to mingle. But there were moments they didn't comprehend me... or we simply couldn't grasp each other's points, and it feels incredibly awkward"* he recounted, citing cultural differences as a likely reason for these awkward moments.

Many students struggle with this communication gap. Henry emphasised the necessity of having shared topics for initiating and sustaining conversations with both local and international students. He observed that conversations with non-Chinese students often defaulted to discussions about academics and staff members, which were the only commons ground they seemed to share. *“We still depend on Chinese social media platforms, and we’re more tuned in to what’s happening in China than here. We don’t even follow local news. Without shared topics, how can we keep our conversations going?”* Although Henry did not explain why, I speculated that this lack of interest in local news stemmed from their reliance on familiar information sources. This sentiment reflected the broader challenge of bridging the communication divide, which remained daunting despite genuine intent to socialise with non-Chinese individuals. This divide often led to participants retreating into their Chinese social networks rather than forging connections with local students.

Feelings of embarrassment and inferiority were also prevalent among participants, with frequent references to the Chinese term “尴尬” (embarrassment) during discussions about their interactions. Bob, for example, hesitated to interact with native English speakers, particularly those with blonde hair, fearing that his language skills would not measure up. This anxiety about losing face or appearing foolish if unable to find the right words or understand the conversation was a common concern. Bob expressed his discomfort, noting, *“Sometimes I feel too embarrassed to ask them to repeat themselves or speak more slowly. What if I still don’t understand?”*

This anxiety highlights a deeper issue of self-confidence in communication and the psychological barriers that accompany language learning and cultural integration.

4.3 Discrimination and Stereotyping

Stereotyping significantly affects social interactions, as evidenced by the experiences of Chinese students abroad. They find themselves subject to stereotypes by non-Chinese individuals, while they also hold their own unconscious preconceptions. Participants often recounted incidents where their non-Chinese acquaintances would ask about their dietary habits, focusing on controversial foods like insects and dogs. These acquaintances also frequently inquired about sensitive political topics, such as the Cultural Revolution. Bob shared an instance where he was asked if he eats dogs, and he felt compelled to correct this misperception not only about himself but broadly about Chinese people. He noted, *“People asked me if I eat dogs. Even after clarifying that I don't, and neither do most Chinese, they still believe we're all the same. It feels like prejudice.”* This type of questioning often left the participants feeling misunderstood and diminished their self-esteem. However, Bob recognised that these inquiries stemmed from curiosity rather than malice, despite the discomfort they caused. Alex admitted, *“Being in a foreign country made me unexpectedly patriotic.”* This sentiment reflects the broader impact of stereotyping on the students' self-perception and cultural identity.

The participants also cited a lack of Western knowledge about China as a factor contributing to their stereotyping. Henry recounted an instance where his peers assumed he was *“too poor to hang out with them.”* They even joked that purchasing

limited edition sneakers would cost him a month's worth of meals and then went to see the sneakers without inviting him. He remarked, *"I got several pairs of limited editions back in China."* Such assumptions were further compounded by experiences of discrimination. For instance, an older vendor in Chinatown belittled Henry, referring to him as “大陆仔” (Da Lu Zai), a derogatory term for mainland Chinese, and followed him closely as if suspecting him of theft.

Conversely, Chinese students also held stereotypes about locals. Many, except Candy who opted for a homestay, were initially placed in shared accommodations. Alex, unable to tolerate his Black American roommate's loud music, chose to move out without addressing the issue. His decision to avoid conflict is reflected in the Chinese idiom he cited, “惹不起我还躲不起吗” (Re Bu Qi Wo Hai Duo Bu Qi Ma), which means “If I can't confront the issue, can't I at least avoid it?” His comment reflects a tendency to choose the path of least resistance. Alex's decision was influenced by his self-doubt in English proficiency and fear of escalating the situation into a cultural conflict, humorously citing his roommate's potential gun ownership due to his stereotypical view of young Black American men. *"Maybe my roommate doesn't even know why I moved out,"* he joked, indicating a lack of ICC in addressing the dispute. *"I don't know how to handle it, so I just escape,"* he admitted.

Another stereotype held by Chinese students involved judging locals for their self-discipline. Fred, for example, associated being overweight with poor eating habits and a lack of self-control. These instances demonstrated how stereotypes can impact

social interactions, often leading to misunderstandings and causing students to retreat into one's cultural comfort zone rather than fostering understanding and integration.

4.3.1 Discussion

During the interviews, the participants often mentioned their connections within the Chinese community. They recognised that socialising with fellow Chinese in New York provided both comfort and limitations. Maintaining close ties with Chinese friends—many of whom were former classmates—offered solace and mitigated loneliness, except for Candy, who felt isolated while living in a homestay arrangement. This observation aligns with research by Cao et al. (2016) and Spencer-Oatey et al. (2017), which highlights the value of co-national friendships. The bonds among the Chinese students strengthened considerably during their time abroad, with two students even forming a romantic relationship.

Interestingly, this study revealed that the interviewed Chinese students prioritised social interaction over academic interaction, which contrasts with previous research (e.g., Spencer-Oatey et al., 2017). They expressed a genuine desire to socialise more effectively but felt generally dissatisfied with their efforts. Maintaining friendships within the Chinese community often became their default mode of socialising. However, stepping outside this comfort zone could potentially facilitate integration into the broader intercultural community. This finding aligns with Hendrickson et al. (2011) and Koydemir (2013), who found that students engaging with diverse cultures reported greater satisfaction and fewer social difficulties.

Discussing discrimination and stereotyping in intercultural interactions is essential for English teachers considering how to integrate ICC into their curriculum. Participants felt disappointed with their social integration in New York. They envisioned a broad intercultural network but primarily socialised with Chinese friends, falling short of their expectations of studying abroad. Despite their efforts, they formed few significant relationships with non-Chinese students. This pattern aligns with the findings by Williams (2015) in the UK and Lamberton and Ashton (2015) in Australia, who documented similar social separation among Chinese students. Merola et al. (2019) suggested that satisfaction often correlates with the degree of social integration, which in this case was hindered by various factors that challenged the students' abilities to form friendships with non-Chinese peers.

First of all, language proficiency is undeniably crucial, yet it is not the sole determinant of effective communication. My interviews with Group A students revealed an underlying asymmetric power dynamic in conversations with their non-Chinese peers. Terms like "a sense of inferiority," "embarrassed," and "losing face" were frequently mentioned, indicating their vulnerability as English speakers in an English-speaking environment (Sung, 2016). Faced with the dilemma of either distancing themselves from or actively engaging in English-led dialogues, the Group A students often, albeit reluctantly, chose the former.

Interviews with Group A students indicate that cultural differences often symbolise linguistic otherness and obscure underlying language inequities. Culture becomes a convenient divider for Chinese students between native and non-native

English speakers. Yet, they seldom question the socio-historically constructed language hierarchy that disadvantages them in international exchanges. This hierarchy refers to the entrenched societal norms and historical contexts that elevate native English speakers over non-native speakers, often granting the former more power and privilege in communication settings. This aligns with Piller's (2012) assertion that culture is sometimes an overused and oversimplified explanation that conceals inequalities in access to resources and social opportunities.

The intercultural experiences shared by the Group A students reveal subtle yet pervasive power dynamics. Non-native students must come to terms with the reality that they cannot become native speakers, as Piller and Takahashi (2011) noted, "without being reborn (p. 385)." Their journey as second language speakers is inherently different. Recognising this, it becomes unreasonable for non-native speakers to feel embarrassed for not speaking like natives, as achieving native fluency is unrealistic. Instead, they must challenge the notion that native speakers inherently hold more power in communication.

The perceived power imbalance can be detrimental to non-native speakers' development of intercultural competence, as it often prevents them from fully expressing their perspectives and beliefs in conversation (Sung, 2016). As non-native students grow more confident in their language abilities, they can begin to dismantle this power disparity. The key to enriching conversations lies in their willingness to immerse themselves in the cultural context of the language. By engaging with the same cultural materials—such as books, television shows, and music—that native

speakers enjoy, they can naturally find common ground for dialogue. Doing so creates a shared cultural context that facilitates easier conversation and a more level playing field in communication.

Secondly, my interviews suggest that students often perceive the communication gap between different cultural backgrounds as a barrier. The participants viewed foreigners as distinctly different, which created apprehension during initial interactions. However, culture constantly evolves (Holliday, 2009). Therefore, the notion of being different should not excuse failures in intercultural communication. Notably, the students had limited training in ICC, which likely contributed to their challenges in navigating these interactions.

Upon closer examination, are non-Chinese students truly that different from their Chinese counterparts? Henry pointed out that students from China and other countries found common ground in academic discussions because they shared the same educational environment, classes, and instructors. As Mathias et al. (2013) observed, although Eastern and Western teaching styles differ significantly, students' underlying learning approaches can be similar. According to Holliday (2001), they belonged to the same "minor culture"—a subculture defined by shared contexts such as school, class, and teachers. Therefore, the real issue lies in the participants' focus on differences over similarities, which led to their self-segregation.

As stated in the literature review, intercultural speakers bridge cultural divides rather than confine themselves to a single language or culture (Wilkinson, 2012). Intercultural competence, or being "at home in the world" as Jackson (1995) put it, is

increasingly viewed as global competence. Findings from the interviews suggest that “otherisation”, or viewing oneself as fundamentally different from others, is common among Group A students. However, proficient intercultural speakers should recognise and engage with similarities (Byram & Risager, 1999). Holliday (2016) emphasises that intercultural competence requires efforts to seek connections rather than fixating on differences. For Chinese students aiming to foster meaningful social relationships abroad, it is imperative to cultivate an awareness of their identity as intercultural speakers. By embracing this identity, they can better navigate and appreciate shared experiences that go beyond cultural boundaries and enhance their social integration while abroad.

Moreover, Group A participants reported experiencing stereotyping and discrimination. Stereotyping involves forming overly simplistic or standardised notions about others that often lead to misunderstandings (Suryandari, 2020). Stereotyping may prompt discrimination and trigger emotional side effects when individuals confront negative perceptions held by others (Fein et al, 1999). One participant described this as a “hurt of self-esteem,” highlighting the impact of stereotyping on personal dignity. Inzlicht and Schmader (2012) cautioned that stereotyping could worsen social divisions, causing immigrants to feel inferior to locals and potentially diminishing their effectiveness in intercultural communication. Negative stereotypes can also impair their ability to communicate effectively in multicultural contexts, as no one is at ease when facing prejudice. Byram’s model also emphasises the need for critical cultural awareness, which involves critically

assessing different cultural products, practices, perspectives, and explicit criteria, as well as maintaining an open attitude towards other cultures.

However, stereotyping is an inescapable part of communication (Peng, 2010). Individuals cannot control how others perceive or discriminate against them. In the face of such challenges, skilled communicators should strive to transform negative experiences into positive outcomes. Stereotyping can lead to uncomfortable emotions and misunderstandings, yet paradoxically, it can help navigate social interactions with diverse groups. The key lies in leveraging stereotypes constructively to foster rather than hinder cross-cultural exchanges (Suryandari, 2020).

Additionally, it is essential to recognise that Chinese students also bring their own stereotypes into communication with others. For example, Alex hesitated to confront his Black American roommate due to his stereotypical view of young Black men. Such preconceptions can create barriers to effective intercultural communication. Similarly, Fred's judgemental attitude towards overweight individuals as lacking self-discipline reflects his biases. Most research focuses on discrimination faced by Chinese students, but few studies examine their prejudices toward foreign societies. These preconceptions can hinder meaningful interactions and mutual understanding. Addressing these biases is crucial for fostering deeper intercultural exchanges and improving social integration.

Stereotypes, while often critiqued, can act as “cognitive shortcuts” and offer valuable insights for ICC training (Suryandari, 2020). In cross-cultural interactions, people often have limited information about those from different backgrounds

(Hepburn & Locksley, 1983). Recognising cultural differences and communication barriers typically leads to feelings of anxiety and discomfort (Spencer & McGovern, 2002). As individuals naturally seek guidance for communication, being aware of stereotypes beforehand or preparing for such encounters can significantly alleviate their apprehension (Friesen & Collins, 2017).

Therefore, ICC training sessions should provide students with insights into the realities of intercultural communication through the authentic experiences of their peers. For instance, Alex's and Fred's experiences highlight the impact of preconceived notions on communication. Understanding these dynamics can equip students with the necessary tools to navigate and understand these intercultural interactions more effectively.

4.4 Cultural Shock in Daily Life

Cultural shock encompasses various aspects of daily life that significantly impact the experiences of international students. Understanding these elements is crucial for comprehending the broader challenges faced by students adapting to a new environment. Among the many facets of daily life, food emerged as a significant theme during the interviews.

4.4.1 Food

The role of food in shaping cultural experiences and identities was a significant theme for Group A participants during their time in New York. The essence of food as a cultural cornerstone is captured by the Chinese proverb “民以食为天” (Min Yi Shi Wei Tian), which translates to “food is the first necessity of the people”. This notion

is supported by Pazzaglia and Williams (2012), who affirmed that food is deeply embedded in cultural identity. Locher et al. (2005) further illuminated the potent emotional associations tied to food, noting its capacity to evoke strong attachments to one's home. Participants in this research echoed this sentiment by expressing a deep yearning for authentic Chinese food, especially during festive occasions—a longing not just for the food but for the sense of home and connection to loved ones it embodies.

For example, Candy shared, *“I crave Chinese food, the kind steeped in tradition like dumplings, 八宝饭 (Ba Bao Fan, the Chinese rice pudding) we eat at family reunions in Shanghai. The store-bought frozen dumplings here just don't measure up to my grandmother's.”* Fred also reflected on his newfound appreciation for Chinese hotpot in New York, stating, *“I never realised how much I loved Chinese hotpot until I moved to New York. Back home, it wasn't my go-to meal, but this week alone, I've been to the hotpot place three times. It feels like home, with the steamed-up windows and the steam rising. And I am proud to see Americans and other internationals enjoying hotpot too.”*

Moreover, participants evaluated Western food through the lens of Chinese dietary principles. Fred shared his observations, *“Back home, we believe in eating heartily at lunch and sparingly at dinner. Yet here, lunch is often just a cold sandwich, while dinner is heavy with oily, creamy dishes. It seems so unhealthy; It's not surprising to me that obesity is an issue here.”* He began bringing home-cooked

meals to campus despite the difficulty of finding fresh vegetables and specific ingredients like whole fish or giblets, making home cooking a costly affair.

In contrast, those who embraced cultural diversity found it easier to adjust their diets. Candy stated, *"I just dine out, like I did back in Shanghai. New York, like Shanghai, is full of diverse restaurants."* Gary, a self-described food enthusiast, recounted his culinary adventures in Michelin-starred restaurants, indicating a more cosmopolitan approach to food. This adaptability demonstrates the participants' ICC, showing that openness to new experiences can ease the cultural transition.

4.4.2 Discussion

Group A participants' experiences with food adaptation in New York highlighted the intrinsic relationship between food and cultural identity. As Hauck-Lawson (1998) asserted, ethnic food can transcend verbal communication as a medium for emotional expression and identity articulation. Coveney and Bunton (2003) also posited that food is intrinsically linked to an individual's sense of well-being and can enhance personal and social identity through its cultural meanings.

Consistent with broader research findings, Group A participants experienced a strong sense of nostalgia for Chinese food. This yearning prompted them to prepare traditional dishes themselves, a practice observed among many Chinese international students. Previous studies (e.g., Bray, 2020; Zhang, 2021) suggested that this tendency was driven by a preference for familiar tastes and financial considerations. However, the latter appeared less pronounced for the participants in this study, likely

due to their relatively secure economic backgrounds as described in the context section above.

This observation marks a departure from traditional portrayals of Chinese international students. Historically, they were depicted as financially underprivileged compared to their non-Chinese counterparts, struggling with the economic pressures of overseas education (Choy & Alon, 2019). Although financial strain was once a significant concern, as identified by Church (1982) in his review of cultural adaptation challenges over three decades, the rise of China's economic elites and middle-class families has shifted this narrative. The changing socio-economic landscape in China has made overseas education increasingly accessible. Major urban centres like Shanghai now face rising living costs, comparable to cities like New York. As a result, financial concerns are less of a pressing issue for the current cohort of Chinese international students. This economic liberation has provided young Chinese individuals, particularly students, with a favourable position in navigating and adapting to new cultural environments (Berry, 1997). This generational shift in economic status represents a significant departure from the past, demonstrating a newfound financial empowerment that facilitates smoother cultural transitions for current Chinese international students.

The food preferences and perceptions of the participants in New York revealed multiple issues regarding health and cultural dietary preferences. Despite the absence of financial constraints, these participants expressed dissatisfaction with the local food, labelling it as unhealthy and not fresh enough. This discontent arises from the

different nutritional beliefs between Chinese and American cultures. Gu et al. (2022) identified a stark difference in the understanding of a healthy diet between Chinese and Americans. The latter favour carbohydrate-rich foods like cheese and meat, while Chinese dietary principles advocate for moderation in salt, fat, and red meat consumption.

Additionally, there is a cultural divergence in eating patterns. Americans typically favour frequent eating, while Chinese dietary customs advocate for dining at established times. Satia-Abouta et al. (2002) suggested that Chinese expatriates who adopt Western dietary patterns would increase their risk of obesity and related chronic diseases. Therefore, Chinese international students must reconcile their dietary practices with both cultures to strike a balance that honours their cultural heritage while accommodating their new environment. Dietitians in the U.S. increasingly face this challenge due to the growing population of Chinese students in American academic institutions.

However, the issue extends beyond individual dietary choices. While some students indulged themselves in fine dining experiences, many relied on local takeaways and university canteens. Brown (2008) found that this reliance contributed to international students' dissatisfaction. This dissatisfaction indicates a possible disconnect with the local culture's culinary practices—a gap that could be bridged through enhanced interaction with the local community. Ward and Masgoret (2004) suggested that deeper engagement with local residents could enrich international students' understanding of local eating habits. Miocevic and Zdravkovic (2020) also

identified a positive relationship between increased social interactions with local individuals and food adaptation outcomes.

4.5 Identity Struggle

The identity struggle among Chinese international students involves navigating complex cultural terrains and reconciling multiple aspects of self. This process often goes unnoticed by the students themselves, despite its significant impact on their personal growth. Their struggle becomes evident through various aspects, including their approaches to language barriers and responses to discrimination and stereotyping. Recognising and addressing this identity struggle is crucial for fostering ICC and developing a more resilient and adaptive cultural identity.

One significant aspect of identity struggle involves how students navigate language barriers. Students' self-perception often influences their approach to language barriers. Many Chinese students fear making mistakes in English because they view themselves as inferior to native speakers. For instance, one student (Eddie) expressed his reluctance to interact with the locals, stating, *"I do not take bus but walk to school, because I do not want to communicate with the driver, I feel ashamed when talking to them."* This fear of linguistic inadequacy stems from the internalised belief that their English proficiency must match that of native speakers. Such fear can hinder their willingness to engage in conversations, leading to a passive approach towards language learning.

However, a shift in mindset can lead to more positive outcomes. When students accept their non-native status without striving for native-like perfection, they often

engage more positively with language challenges. For instance, Cindy, a student who participated in a Korean idol fan club in New York, found a sense of belonging and unity that transcended her usual concerns about language proficiency. She expressed, *“It feels great that so many people of different colours are working together for the same goal. And I didn't realise that I was a foreigner in the process, and I didn't worry about how well I spoke English as I usually do in the classroom. We're united, like a family we've known for a long time.”* Cindy's immersion in Korean culture and her use of the Korean term “*oppa*” for older males demonstrate her fluid and interconnected cultural identity. By focusing on shared goals and community engagement, she temporarily shed her anxieties about her English proficiency and her foreign status. This shift shows how embracing one's unique linguistic identity rather than striving to become a native speaker greatly impacts an international student's sense of identity and belonging.

Moreover, students also navigate their identity struggles by confronting and challenging stereotypes. Alex, for instance, faced misconceptions about China from his American peers, which prompted him to assert his identity as a proud Chinese individual. He remarked, *“In other occasions, I can communicate with them very easygoing, but if it comes to the issue of <political> position, I will argue strongly.”* This statement reveals Alex's growing awareness that his identity is not fixed but rather shaped by his interactions and experiences in different cultural contexts. By actively engaging with and disputing these stereotypes, Alex reaffirms

his identity and promotes a more nuanced understanding of Chinese culture among his peers.

4.5.1 Discussion

The journey of identity exploration is often complex and multifaceted, particularly for Chinese international students immersed in a foreign cultural environment. This struggle with identity manifests through their attitudes towards language barriers, social interactions, and experiences of discrimination and stereotyping. These challenges highlight the critical need for structured interventions like CIEs to foster ICC and facilitate a deeper understanding of self and others.

Language barriers play a significant role in the identity struggle of Chinese students abroad. Many students internalise the belief that their value and competence are inherently tied to their proficiency in English, often measured against native speaker standards. This mindset can lead to a persistent fear of making mistakes, resulting in a reluctance to engage in conversations or participate fully in academic and social settings. For instance, students may avoid speaking up in class or engaging in group discussions, fearing that their perceived linguistic inadequacies will lead to embarrassment or exclusion.

CIEs may alter this perspective by providing scenarios that encourage students to practise and improve their communication skills in a safe environment. Through role-playing and reflective discussions, students can gain confidence in their ability to convey ideas effectively, regardless of their accent or minor grammatical errors. This

practice may help shift their perspective, encouraging them to see themselves as capable communicators who can learn and grow from each interaction.

Moreover, social strategies adopted by students also reflect their identity struggles. Those who feel inferior due to their language skills may adopt passive roles in multicultural settings, missing out on enriching intercultural interactions. Conversely, students who embrace their unique cultural identity and actively engage with peers from diverse backgrounds often experience more profound personal growth and a stronger sense of belonging. Cindy's participation in a Korean idol's fan club and organising a fan meeting in New York illustrates this dynamic. Through her engagement, Cindy navigated cultural differences and integrated Korean cultural practices into her identity. This experience highlights the fluidity of cultural identities and underscores the importance of active participation in multicultural communities (Kim & Abreu, 2001).

CIEs can facilitate this process by creating safe spaces where students can explore and express their cultural identities. These exercises encourage students to share their cultural backgrounds and learn from others, promoting a deeper understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity. These exercises encourage students to step out of their comfort zones and practice social strategies that promote active engagement and cultural integration.

Additionally, experiences of discrimination and stereotyping further complicate the identity struggle for Chinese international students. Negative encounters can reinforce feelings of inadequacy and alienation. However, these experiences also

provide critical opportunities for students to reaffirm and strengthen their cultural identity. For instance, Alex's confrontation with stereotypes about China led him to challenge these biases and reaffirm his Chinese identity. His patriotic response exemplifies how facing external pressures can fortify one's sense of self.

CIEs can be instrumental in helping students navigate and confront these negative experiences. By discussing and reflecting on incidents of discrimination within a guided framework, students can develop strategies to cope with and challenge stereotypes. These exercises foster a supportive community where students can share their experiences and learn from each other, reinforcing their cultural identities and building resilience.

4.6 Creating Critical Incidents Data Resource from Narrative Interview Data

4.6.1 What is Critical Incidents

Critical incidents employed in cross-cultural training are concise descriptions of significant events or interactions in intercultural contexts that provide deep insights into the cultural dimensions of communication (Spencer, & Harsch, 2015). These incidents, which are not limited to misunderstandings, include a broad range of experiences that may be confusing, revealing, or transformative (Engelking, 2018). Their primary function is to facilitate reflection and learning about cultural norms, values, and behaviours.

Psychologist John Flanagan formalised the concept of critical incidents in the 1950s. The use of critical incidents in intercultural training gained momentum in the 1960s when interculturalists began using them to enhance the cultural competencies

of Peace Corps volunteers (Flanagan, 1954). Critical incidents capture the essence of cultural interaction, providing rich data for exploring cultural dynamics. Educators and trainers use critical incidents extensively to foster ICC in various settings, including study abroad programmes, corporate training sessions, and educational workshops.

Critical incidents derive their effectiveness from real-life experiences and their adaptability to diverse formats, such as discussions, role-plays, mini case studies, and reflective essays (Engelking, 2018). This versatility allows them to address the specific needs of different learning environments. Many universities have incorporated critical incidents into their ICC training. For instance, the University della Svizzera in Italy catalogs 50 cases crafted by alumni from the Master of Advanced Studies in Intercultural Communication (Mic,2016). Shanghai International Studies University (a public university) has made available an online lesson on intercultural communication that incorporates CIs as a key tool (SISU,2019). However, where does the CIs come is undeclared.

Critical Incident Exercises (CIEs) draw on individuals' personal accounts in cross-cultural settings, offering a compelling and engaging approach to intercultural education. These narratives capture the complexities of cultural exchanges, providing more than just accounts of misunderstandings. By presenting real-life scenarios, CIEs facilitate deeper reflection and understanding of intercultural dynamics.

Despite the widespread use of critical incidents, there is a notable gap in the literature regarding the creation and authenticity of these incidents. Many existing CIs

lack detailed documentation of their development processes, making it challenging for educators to replicate and adapt them effectively. This gap highlights the need for further research and development, particularly incorporating the perspectives of Chinese students in generating critical incidents for ICC training in China. Moreover, the integration of CIEs into EFL curricula remains limited. This limitation can be attributed to a lack of tailored teaching resources and an overemphasis on linguistic skill development at the expense of cultural practice. The upcoming sections will delve into the significance of CIEs and advocate for their inclusion in EFL curricula to foster a well-rounded intercultural educational experience.

4.6.2 Why Critical Incidents in Intercultural Learning

Intercultural communication experiences, ranging from delightful to embarrassing, are common among those who engage with diverse cultures, whether domestically or internationally (Apedaile & Schill, 2008). Reflecting on these encounters through critical incidents in intercultural courses serves as an effective method for cultural learning. These exercises, known as CIEs, are designed as simple intercultural communication scenarios or dialogues that highlight cultural aspects learners may find challenging or unfamiliar (Hartmann & Schocker, 2017). By integrating elements that commonly cause misunderstandings into CIE scenarios, learners can form more reasonable expectations and become better prepared for real-world intercultural interactions, thus reducing the potential shock of cultural differences.

CIEs have long been used by intercultural trainers aiming to foster ICC. These exercises catalyse pedagogical processes and cultivate intercultural awareness by encouraging participants to engage in deep and analytical contemplation of nuanced scenarios. This educational strategy, rooted in the interactive examination of critical scenarios, has been central to ICC training for decades. However, despite their efficacy in ICC training, CIEs are not prevalent in EFL classrooms in China.

The limited use of CIEs in Chinese EFL settings likely stems from differing pedagogical objectives. EFL education in China traditionally prioritises linguistic proficiency, focusing heavily on lecture-based learning and grammar translation methods. These approaches often leave little room for activities that do not directly contribute to language acquisition. Curricular demands that emphasise grammar and rote learning constrain EFL classes, leading to a gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application as described in the literature review.

In contrast, ICC training focuses inherently on cultural dynamics and communication across cultural boundaries. Here, CIEs show their full potential by engaging students in scenarios that mimic real-life intercultural interactions. Therefore, the absence of CIEs in Chinese EFL settings may reflect a curriculum that undervalues the integral role of cultural understanding in language learning.

To address this gap, EFL curricula should embrace a more holistic approach that acknowledges the interplay between language mastery and cultural competence, thereby integrating CIEs into language education. By doing so, EFL courses can equip learners with sophisticated communicative skills required for global engagement.

The incorporation of CIEs into the language classroom represents a strategic pedagogical adaptation aimed at enhancing intercultural awareness (Hughes, 2012; Thomas, 2016). The CIE pedagogy animates the concept of culture by immersing learners in scenarios drawn from everyday life. These narrative-driven activities usually start with realistic, relatable stories and conclude with a deeper understanding of both the learners' personal perspectives and the diverse cultural elements within each scenario (Zoni Upton, 2021). Through this method, learners are not passive recipients of information. Instead, they actively construct knowledge by analysing and reconstructing the incidents presented, thereby developing critical thinking skills and acquiring multifaceted viewpoints.

This method aligns with the contemporary educational paradigm shift, which calls upon English language educators to reconceptualise the infusion of cultural elements into their curriculum (as discussed in Section 2.1.4). This shift reflects the views of Piątkowska (2015), who advocates for a pedagogical focus that elevates intercultural learning within English language instruction. In this approach, grammar and vocabulary acquisition are positioned as complementary yet secondary objectives to the primary goal of fostering ICC.

Beyond fostering cultural understanding, CIEs aim to inspire and engage students in self-exploration and critical thinking. The activities embedded within CIEs can cultivate curiosity, motivating learners to pursue intercultural skills outside the classroom (Hartmann & Schocker, 2017). This engagement outside the school is

crucial, as continuous interaction with diverse cultures enriches the life-learning process.

The storytelling format of CIEs offers another significant benefit. Since many cultures convey their heritage through tales, CIEs presented as stories can provide a natural medium for learners to absorb cultural experiences. In these narrative contexts, learners interpret situations through their cultural lenses, fostering an understanding of the dynamic nature of culture and complex social scenarios (Snow, 2015).

4.6.3 Choosing the Right Type of Critical Incidents

Researchers broadly categorise CIEs into close-ended tasks, known as cultural assimilators, and open-ended tasks, referred to as encounter exercises (Snow, 2015). Cushner and Brislin (1995) described cultural assimilators as professionally designed scenarios where the “correct” responses are predetermined by the majority within the target culture. In such tasks, learners are expected to infer the most selected response. Berry (1997) defined assimilation as the complete absorption of a minority culture into the majority, a process that can potentially erase personal cultural identities. This traditional view of assimilation is problematic as discussed in the literature review, considering the dynamic nature of cultural, societal, and individual identities, which are ever-evolving and shaped through continuous interaction. Lin and Zhang (2021) argued that the aim of intercultural learning should transcend factual conclusions. They advocated for transforming knowledge, attitudes, and cognition into comprehensive competence. This perspective challenges the efficacy of close-ended

tasks in intercultural learning, suggesting that seeking a singular “correct” answer neglects the complexities inherent in real intercultural contexts.

In contrast, encounter exercises encourage learners to actively explore and articulate a range of possible interpretations for a given situation (Snow, 2015). These tasks position students not just as recipients of information but as active participants in the discussion, guided by educators who facilitate rather than dictate the learning process. Compared to close-ended tasks, encounter exercises thrive on collaborative dialogues, encouraging learners to generate their own understandings through active participation and discussion. These exercises simulate real-life intercultural contexts, exposing students to cultural elements—ranging from underlying assumptions to overt expressions like clothing style, language, and gestures—that they can critically reflect upon. Fowler and Mumford (1995) noted that such engagement could afford learners the opportunity to self-reflect, adopt new attitudes, and try cultural norms, thereby paving the way for behavioural, affective, and cognitive development.

Moreover, repeatedly practising encounter exercises helps develop muscle memory through physical repetition and has been shown to positively influence the acquisition of ICC (Snow, 2015). Repetition in CIEs does not mean repeating the same exercise identically. Instead, it involves engaging with different cases using similar methods. This approach helps students develop a type of muscle memory for intercultural interactions. By examining various scenarios through a consistent analytical framework, learners can internalise intercultural skills more deeply and apply them flexibly in diverse contexts. In EFL classrooms, task repetition deepens

insights from prior practice, stimulating learners to engage more critically in subsequent encounters and to reflect on the knowledge formed from earlier experiences (Ahmadian, 2012).

Given these considerations, this study chose open-ended tasks over the close-ended ones. The drawbacks of close-ended tasks, such as oversimplification and potential erosion of cultural identity, highlight the need for a more sophisticated, participant-driven approach to intercultural education. Specifically, incorporating encounter exercises into language courses is instrumental in developing ICC for several compelling reasons:

Firstly, encounter exercises shift cognitive processing from intuitive to deliberate. Kahneman (2012) categorised human thought processes into System 1—intuitive, automatic, and often unconscious—and System 2—deliberate and conscious. In unfamiliar environments, individuals often rely heavily on System 1 (Shaules, 2015), which may lead to quick judgments shaped by stereotypes, ethnocentrism, and prejudice that persistently hinder intercultural interactions (Hall et al., 2017). Encounter exercises train individuals to engage System 2 and adopt a more reflective approach that reduces ethnocentric judgments (Shaules, 2015). Particularly, open-ended exercises compel students to explore multiple perspectives, rather than selecting preformulated responses, thereby enhancing their ICC (Snow, 2015).

Secondly, open-ended tasks prompt students to explore multiple perspectives, even though this process may be challenging (Snow, 2015). Such tasks require learners to deeply analyse situations, articulate personal interpretations, and

contemplate potential actions. This necessitates a commitment to justify and stand by their proposed solutions, thus fostering a sense of personal accountability in their intercultural understanding. Finally, discussions are an essential component of open-ended exercises and are especially suited to the language classroom. These discussions can not only consolidate language skills but also cultivate a collaborative learning environment where multiple viewpoints can be shared and respected.

In the context of EFL teaching in China, encounter exercises can significantly enhance current educational practices by addressing the limitations of rote learning, which often neglects the development of intercultural sensitivity and critical thinking. The Chinese educational system frequently emphasises grammar and reading over communicative competence. This emphasis has led to a gap in students' intercultural communication skills, which encounter exercises can effectively bridge.

Encounter exercises offer a pragmatic approach to equipping students with the skills necessary for navigating complex intercultural communications. These exercises provide a valuable addition to the curriculum, allowing students to engage in immersive and practical experiences that reinforce their theoretical understanding of ICC. By integrating encounter exercises, educators can cater to students' expectations and motivations, as highlighted in the pre-questionnaire findings, which show a strong desire for improved speaking and listening skills and a curiosity about intercultural dynamics.

4.6.4 Designing Critical Incident Data Resource

The critical incidents were crafted based on narrative interviews conducted with students who had international educational experiences. These interviews provided qualitative depth, highlighting the intercultural encounters and challenges faced by the students. The incidents were then translated into educational exercises designed to prompt critical reflection and dialogue, facilitating the development of ICC. These incidents formed the basis of the learning objectives, which aimed to:

1. Develop intercultural awareness by teaching students to identify, analyse, and address conflicts or challenges through the lens of both cultural differences and similarities.
2. Cultivate an ICC attitude characterised by tolerance, respect, curiosity, and empathy towards diverse cultures.
3. Acquire cultural knowledge that includes both a general understanding and specific insights into one's own culture as well as other cultures.
4. Engage students in exploring and negotiating self-identity within the context of intercultural communication.

The primary aim of this intervention was to empower students to translate their awareness, attitudes, and knowledge of ICC into practical skills. The intervention sought to equip students with the flexibility and adaptability needed to excel as intercultural communicators. By focusing on real-life applications, the research encouraged students to develop a nuanced understanding of cultural dynamics and to apply this knowledge in diverse contexts.

I decided to initiate the course with a topic that resonated most with students – values and academic challenges. Starting with an engaging subject aimed to boost motivation and foster participation, especially given their inexperience with such exercises (Altun & Khdhir, 2022). The first critical incident aimed to prompt students to acknowledge cultural differences, explore their own cultural background, and understand how these differences impact intercultural communication.

In this incident, conflicts arose between students and the instructor. These conflicts involved a new student-centred classroom approach, differing perceptions of teacher dignity, and varying definitions of an effective teacher. This exploration was crucial, as Holiday (2007) noted, overemphasising cultural differences can lead to cultural bias, hindering the development of an intercultural perspective.

To address this, the exercise should encourage students to conceptualise the qualities of a good teacher from their perspective, moving beyond national boundaries. Through this activity, students were expected to transcend simplistic dichotomies like individualism versus collectivism. They learned to recognise both differences and similarities and to adopt a non-essentialist view of culture that acknowledges the complexity of self-identity. This approach helped them appreciate the nuanced interplay of cultural factors in educational settings and fostered a deeper understanding of intercultural communication.

Critical Incident 2 focused on language and socialisation difficulties. Here, I introduced an incident to examine one key issue affecting Group A students' peer interactions in the United States. This issue identified language as a significant barrier

to intercultural communication. To challenge this misconception, I presented a real scenario. A Chinese student, despite extensive preparation, felt isolated at a party due to concerns about his language proficiency and potential ridicule for his accent and imperfect English. This experience led him to leave the party early and decline future invitations. This incident aimed to prompt students to reflect on similar experiences by considering: 1) the reasons behind the student's discomfort, 2) whether similar situations occurred among their Chinese peers, and 3) their self-perception in language usage—whether as users or learners.

Session 3 focused on discrimination and stereotypes (Critical Incident3). This session included two incidents. In the first scenario, peers stereotyped Chinese students as dog eaters, mathematically adept, and economically disadvantaged. In another scenario, a character was derogatorily referred to as "大陆仔" (Da Lu Zai) by early Chinese immigrants.

This session aimed to help students recognise the danger of overgeneralisation in intercultural interactions. According to Byram (1997), the objective of EFL instruction is not to eradicate stereotypes and prejudices but to acknowledge, confront, and address them, thereby transforming negative experiences into positive ones. This session encouraged students to reflect on their own stereotypes and develop an ICC attitude characterised by tolerance, respect, curiosity, and empathy towards diverse cultures. Students also considered strategies to handle stereotypes and discrimination they might encounter in the future. By engaging with these scenarios, students were expected to learn how to navigate cultural differences more effectively

and to approach intercultural interactions with a more informed and empathetic perspective.

The fourth session introduced Critical Incident 4 that aimed to prompt students to negotiate their identities as intercultural speakers. This session contrasted experiences such as involvement in a Korean idol fan club with social interactions involving non-Chinese individuals. Students examined why fan club interactions appeared culturally homogeneous, while everyday communications highlighted cultural differences.

A case study illustrated these dynamics. In this case, the character organised a fan club activity with members from various cultural backgrounds and felt confused by the presence of non-Chinese participants and the absence of cultural barriers within the fan club context. This scenario encouraged students to explore how shared interests can bridge cultural gaps and to reflect on their own experiences in diverse social settings.

The fifth session explored the issue of cultural shock through the lens of food experiences (Critical Incident 5). The incident featured a character who initially felt excited about Western food but later became disappointed, finding American food unhealthy and unsatisfying, and Chinese food in America inauthentic. This session aimed to familiarise students with the U-curve model of cultural shock (Oberg, 1960), and normalise the spectrum of unexpected reactions following the honeymoon phase. Students were prompted to formulate strategies to mitigate cultural shock, reducing discomfort and shortening adjustment periods.

Critical Incident 6 in the final session synthesised the intercultural conflicts explored in Sessions 1-5. Here, students were prompted to propose solutions to a conflict encountered by a character with a hostess regarding appropriate food for a sick person. This scenario, unlike previous incidents, required students to offer solutions rather than just exploring the causes of the conflict. This challenge was designed to test the development of their ICC and their ability to apply it practically, which is the ultimate goal of ICC instruction. Table 4-1 below provides a summary of the critical incidents explored throughout the sessions.

Table 4-1. A Summary of Critical Incidents Involved in Cycle 1 Intervention

Session	Course Content	Critical Incidents
1	Values and academic challenges	different teaching styles + my tutor smokes!
2	Language and socialisation difficulties	Speechless in the party with non-Chinese
3	Two-way stereotype (aware of your own stereotype)	feel being discriminated + being called 大陆仔(Da Lu Zai)
4	Self-identity (intercultural speaker/third culture)	Fan Club
5,6	Cultural shock	Food

4.7 Conclusion

This chapter identified five central themes from the experiences of Group A students in New York: values and academic challenges, language and socialisation difficulties, discrimination and stereotypes, cultural shock in daily life, and identity struggles. The emphasis on independent learning and critical thinking in Western institutions contrasted sharply with the participants' previous experiences of teacher-centred instruction and rote memorisation. Moreover, their difficulties in

social integration often stemmed from a lack of common cultural ground and essentialist perceptions of "otherness." The absence of reflective practices also hindered their ability to transfer competencies across contexts. Their encounters with discrimination and stereotypes added another complexity to their adaptation, challenging their self-perception and resilience. Additionally, cultural shock in daily life was evident, particularly in their food experiences, which underscored differing health paradigms and the deep emotional significance of food. Finally, the struggle with identity emerged prominently, revealing an ongoing negotiation between their native cultural identity and their evolving identity as global citizens. Understanding these multifaceted challenges and opportunities can inform better support systems for Chinese international students, fostering more effective intercultural communication and integration.

These critical incidents inspired by the narrative interview data provided contextual insights into the realities of cultural adaptation and intercultural interactions. The findings revealed gaps, such as essentialist biases, lack of reflective practices, and food acculturation challenges. Tailored educational initiatives could address these gaps to enhance ICC. Effective pedagogical strategies should respond to students' specific needs and expectations, integrating both their prior language learning experiences and their anticipations for future academic and cultural engagement.

This tailored approach, as recommended by Hasanah and Wirza (2021), is essential for fostering a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between

students' backgrounds and developmental trajectories in intercultural settings. Overall, this diagnostic stage has set the foundation for designing appropriate interventions in the next cycle of the teacher action research process. By focusing on these areas, educators can better support students in navigating their cultural transitions and achieving greater academic and social integration.

Chapter 5. Findings of Pre-Questionnaire

This chapter presents the findings of the pre-questionnaire and discusses the implications for the intervention. Group B students were invited to complete a pre-questionnaire in English to gather data on their perspectives and attitudes before the course began. The pre-questionnaire aimed to establish a baseline understanding of Group B students' perspectives on ICC, their course expectations, motivations, and prior English learning experiences. It consisted of 12 questions across four key dimensions:

1. Demographic Information: Students provided their demographic details, offering context to their responses and facilitated a better understanding of their backgrounds.

2. Prior English Learning Experiences: Students shared their past experiences, providing context for their current proficiency and comfort with the language. This background helped identify their initial language skills, areas needing improvement, and their understanding towards this language.

3. Self-Assessment of Prior ICC Knowledge: Students assessed their ICC, offering an introspective view of their skills and awareness. This self-assessment highlighted their initial understanding and readiness to engage in intercultural interactions.

4. Course Expectations and Motivations: The questionnaire explored students' goals and motivations, including specific improvements they hoped to

achieve through the course. Understanding these expectations helped tailor the course content to better meet their needs and aspirations.

Figure 5 illustrates the current step of the research. The complete pre-questionnaire can be found in Appendix 2. Administering the pre-questionnaire was essential for creating a student-centric course design. It provided early insights into Group B students' initial ICC levels, motivations, and previous experiences with English learning. These insights were crucial in developing targeted interventions to address students' specific needs. The pre-questionnaire also identified areas where students felt insecure and challenged, enabling the course to offer focused support and resources. This tailored approach ensured that the course was not only relevant but also effective in enhancing students' linguistic and intercultural competencies.

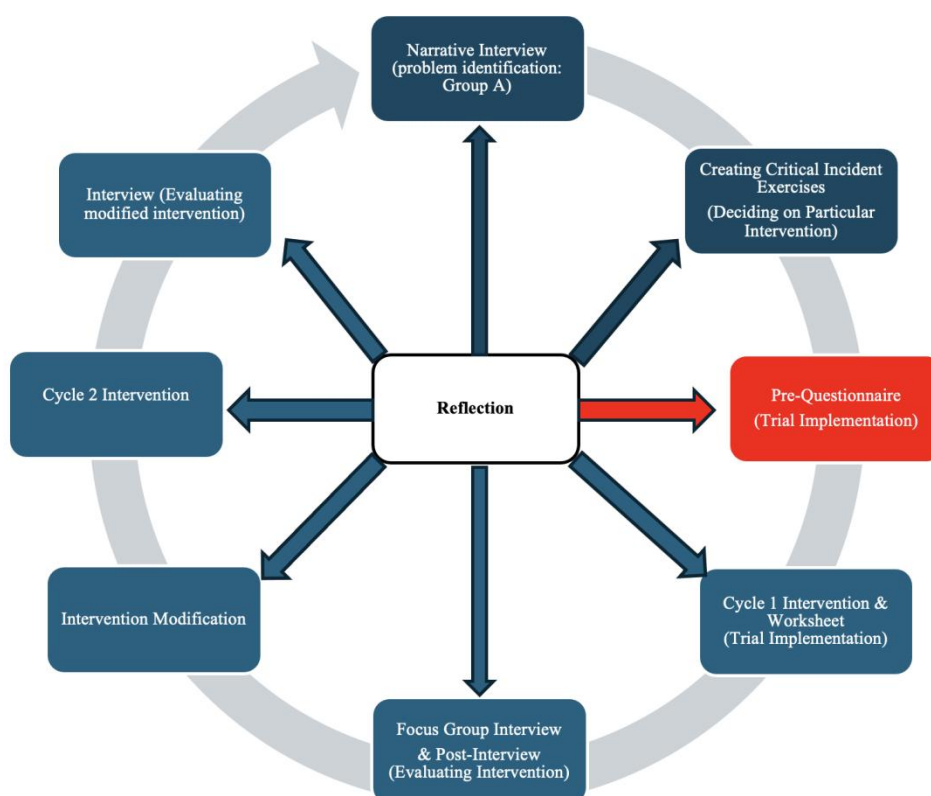


Figure 5. Iterative Cycle of CIE Intervention (Chapter 5)

5.1 Participant Demographics and Implications for the Intervention

Group B consisted of 18 students (three females and 15 males), all from Han Chinese ethnicity. Thirteen of the participants were from Shanghai, four from Zhejiang or Jiangsu provinces, and one from a northern region of China. All had passed the CET-4 with scores ranging from 428 to 510, with 427 being the passing score out of a total of 710. They had also achieved IELTS scores between 6 and 6.5. Their average scores in the IELTS components were higher in reading (7.5) and listening (7) but lower in writing (6) and speaking (5).

The participants' demographic composition highlights several crucial aspects for the subsequent intervention:

1. **Cultural Majority versus Minority Simulation:** The majority of participants came from Shanghai and its surrounding areas, and only one from the northern region. This regional concentration offers a unique opportunity to simulate cultural majority versus minority dynamics within the classroom. This setup mirrors the students' potential future experiences abroad, where they may transition from being part of a cultural majority in China to a minority in a foreign context. This simulation can help students anticipate and navigate the cultural adjustments they will need to make when studying overseas.

2. **Recognising Implicit Biases:** The demographic data can also be used to explore implicit biases that students may hold towards other cultures and within their own cultural context. The participants' predominance from Shanghai, a city known for its modernity and openness to global influences, may influence their intercultural

communication experiences. The single participant from the northern region adds a layer of diversity, potentially offering insights into regional cultural differences within China. This mix can help students recognise and reflect on their biases and assumptions, fostering a deeper understanding of intra-national cultural diversity.

3. Language Proficiency: The discrepancy in language proficiency, particularly the higher reading scores compared to speaking scores, suggests a typical pattern among Chinese EFL learners. This pattern is characterised by strong passive language skills (reading and listening) but weaker active language skills (speaking and writing). This discrepancy underscores the importance of focusing the intervention on improving communicative competence, particularly in speaking.

In summary, the demographic data of the participants contextualises their current linguistic abilities and informs the design of targeted interventions addressing both linguistic and intercultural competencies. This approach ensures that the intervention is not only educationally sound but also culturally relevant and personally meaningful for the participants.

5.2 Prior Experience of English Learning

Participants' prior experience with English learning was assessed through the first three questions of the pre-questionnaire. Specifically, Question 1 (Q1) explored whether students were familiar with cultural topics different from their own. Question 2 (Q2) aimed to identify their awareness levels regarding cultural differences. Question 3 (Q3) involved a self-assessment of their ICC prior to the course.

Responses from all 18 students revealed the cultural topics they were most frequently exposed to. Notably, five students mentioned history, 12 cited scenic spots, 15 highlighted food, and all 18 referenced festivals. Despite the absence of a prompt specifying English-speaking countries, students predominantly mentioned the United States and the United Kingdom in response to Q1. This observation suggested a predominant exposure to Anglo-centric cultural topics within the group's educational experiences.

Question 2 asked whether participants had previously engaged in discussions about cultural differences in their English classes. Fifteen out of 18 participants reported that their English classes had not addressed cultural topics. However, 16 participants acknowledged exposure to discussions on Western cultural norms such as festivals and social practices, including personal distance and privacy rules. Table 5-1 demonstrates examples of the cultural topics Group B participants were exposed to in their previous English classes.

Table 5-1. Examples of Cultural Topics Group B Students Had Been Exposed to Before Intervention

Participant	Pre-Question 2: Is there any discussion in your previous English classes on the differences between Western cultures and your own culture? If yes, please give me an example.
PrQs1	美国人 18 岁就独立了搬出家门父母不管了，中国人在结婚之前一直在家住，有些甚至在结婚后还是继续和父母同住 [Americans become independent and move out of the family at 18 years old. Chinese people always live at home with their parents before and even after marriage]
PrQs5	Americans advocate freedom while Chinese are more conservative
PrQs3	Foreigners are more open than Chinese.
PrQs16	Foreign countries are more democratic.

*PrQ= pre-questionnaire; s1= student 1, the order is set according to the sequence of the questionnaire retrieval.

Regarding Question 3, students were asked “Do you have any previous English classes that instruct you on cross-cultural interaction?” Two-thirds of the students (12 out of 18) indicated zero or little instruction on cross-cultural interaction in their previous English courses. Among the students who acknowledged receiving instruction, body language was a commonly cited topic. One participant (PrQs6) noted, “*Westerns often use a hug as a gesture to show friendliness.*” Additionally, a minority (3 out of 18) recalled learning about cultural taboos from their English instructors, such as the inappropriateness of inquiring about age and salary in Western societies.

The pre-questionnaire results suggested a significant deficiency in ICC instruction in the participants' prior English education. Where such instruction was provided, it often took an essentialist perspective, which emphasised the diversity of cultural beliefs and values but unintentionally perpetuated stereotypical notions. For instance, in some textbooks used by the participants at this university, cultural characteristics were oversimplified, creating distinct categories that do not accurately represent the complexities of cultural behaviours (e.g., free-range parents in the U.S. versus “helicopter” parents in China). Moreover, their prior educational experiences seemed to centre primarily on American and British cultural knowledge, without adequately preparing students to function as intercultural speakers capable of navigating diverse cultural terrains.

Establishing a framework for value systems in ICC instruction involves imparting culture-focused knowledge and understanding differences. This approach is crucial for achieving ICC. However, learners may face risks at this stage if socio-cultural elements are underemphasised. Such underemphasis can reinforce stereotypical notions about “others” or “foreigners.” Consequently, this may impair their understanding of interaction techniques and hinder their development into competent intercultural speakers. Without adequate emphasis on socio-cultural elements, students may struggle to comprehend accurately notions of "otherness" and "self" (Byram, 2008).

The students' responses indicate a gap between the students' current educational experiences and their expectations for engaging in diverse communications, whether for travel, further studies, or the job market. The findings from the pre-questionnaire suggest an urgent need to integrate ICC into the participants' English language courses. This integration can meet their expectations by broadening their cultural knowledge and better preparing them for global interactions.

In conclusion, the participants' previous English learning experiences revealed significant gaps in cross-cultural interaction instruction. Most students reported insufficient guidance on intercultural communication, with many recalling only limited discussions on body language and cultural taboos. This lack of comprehensive instruction often led to an essentialist understanding of culture, where stereotypes were unintentionally reinforced. Additionally, the focus on American and British cultures did not adequately prepare students for broader intercultural interactions.

These findings highlight the necessity of integrating a more inclusive and nuanced approach to teaching intercultural communication in English language courses. Such integration will better equip students with the skills needed to navigate diverse cultural contexts and engage effectively in global interactions.

5.3 Self-Assessment of Prior ICC Knowledge

In Question 5, students were asked “Do you have any experience of speaking to English speakers? When? With whom? How often?” All participants reported interactions with native English speakers. These engagements varied from weekly professional courses delivered in English by American instructors to personal relationships. For example, one student (PrQs16) shared interactions during international travels, while another student (PrQs17) mentioned conversations with an American online friend about the Chicago Bulls.

Despite these varied interactions, participants consistently identified communication difficulties. This was evident from their responses to Question 6, which inquired about the specific challenges faced during these interactions. The primary difficulties cited included the inability to use English appropriately to express thoughts, uncertainty about what to say, and fear of conflict. For instance, PrQs12 stated, *“I do not know what to say,”* while PrQs1 mentioned, *“I always murmur in my heart, ‘don’t talk with me in the foreign teacher’s class.’”*

Most participants attributed their communication difficulties to vocabulary limitations rather than cultural knowledge deficits. These responses indicate a limited awareness of how cultural understanding impacts effective communication.

Participants tended to overlook the impact of cultural differences on communication effectiveness, believing that improving vocabulary alone would resolve their issues.

The need for intervention becomes apparent when considering the limited cultural awareness among students. Although students reported interactions with native English speakers, they primarily focused on vocabulary acquisition rather than understanding cultural nuances. This indicates a fragmented view of communication, where linguistic proficiency alone is deemed sufficient. However, effective intercultural communication requires a holistic approach that integrates both language skills and cultural knowledge.

An intervention to address this gap should emphasise the importance of cultural awareness alongside linguistic training. By integrating CIEs into the curriculum, educators can help students recognise and bridge cultural gaps. These exercises, derived from students' authentic experiences, prompt reflection and dialogue about cultural differences. Reflection can deepen students' cultural understanding and empathy, fostering a more nuanced approach to intercultural communication. This goal can be achieved through guided discussions, journaling, or feedback sessions where students critically engage with their experiences and insights. Ultimately, the intervention should cultivate not only linguistic competence but also cultural empathy and adaptability, equipping students with the skills necessary for successful intercultural interactions.

5.4 Course Expectations and Motivations

Understanding students' course expectations and their motivations for learning ICC is crucial for designing effective language learning curricula. While course expectations often shape how students approach their studies, motivations can drive their engagement and long-term commitment to learning. By analysing these factors, educators can tailor their teaching strategies to better meet the needs and aspirations of their students, thereby enhancing overall learning outcomes and fostering a deeper appreciation for ICC.

5.4.1 Course Expectations

In Question 4, students were asked “What aspect of the language do you want to improve?”. Most students (15) prioritised “speaking and listening” as key skills to enhance in English classes. This finding aligns with the perception that Chinese students often focus on grammar over communicative language teaching. This historical emphasis has led to the characterisation of Chinese EFL learners as "mute" language learners, as discussed in the introduction of this dissertation. Additionally, four students noted vocabulary expansion as critical, while only one student identified writing as a skill needing improvement. Reading was not mentioned, possibly because it is extensively practised in prior English education.

None of the respondents referred to socio-cultural aspects of language learning, indicating a disconnect between years of language study and the development of ICC. This disconnect is likely due to the test-driven objectives of many Chinese EFL learners. All participants recently completed the CET-4 and are preparing for the

CET-6, an important language proficiency assessment in China. The examination-oriented environment, as suggested by Biggs and Watkins (1996), fosters a didactic approach that favours explicit instruction, memorisation, and rote learning.

Addressing these gaps necessitates integrating ICC into English courses to guide learners toward holistic linguistic and intercultural fluency. CIEs emerge as a particularly effective method for transforming rote learning into dynamic, interactive education. CIEs are designed to prompt students to reflect on and engage with cultural differences through structured scenarios that mimic real-life intercultural interactions. By encountering and resolving these scenarios, students can move beyond passive memorisation and develop a deeper understanding of cultural dynamics.

Incorporating CIEs into the curriculum not only addresses the need for improved linguistic proficiency but also promotes the development of essential intercultural skills. These exercises encourage students to actively participate in learning, fostering critical thinking and problem-solving abilities. Instead of memorising isolated facts, students in CIEs can engage in meaningful interactions that enhance their cultural awareness and communication skills. By simulating authentic intercultural experiences, CIEs can help students prepare for real-world communication challenges, making them more effective and empathetic communicators.

5.4.2. Motivations for Learning ICC

In Question 8, students were asked “Are you looking forward to taking this ICC course? And why?” This question aimed to uncover the diverse incentives driving

students' interest in learning ICC. Responses indicated a diverse array of incentives, as exemplified in below.

Table 5-2. Examples of Motivations Shared by Group B Participants for the ICC

Course

Categories	Examples
Curiosity	● Western culture is very attractive, I want to know (PrQs5) ● I want to know if their life is the same as what presented in the movie (PrQs17) ● I desire to know their <foreigners'> concerns and want to make foreign friends. (PrQs2)
Practical purpose	● To help me travel abroad (PrQs16) ● To improve my ability to use English in commercial negotiations (PrQs6) ● To help me study abroad (PrQs17)
Linguistic proficiency	● To enhance oral English (PrQs7)
Personal development	● To acquire Intercultural communication skills (PrQs15) ● To learn Intercultural communication knowledge (PrQs13)
Other	● I like Miss Xu's class (PrQs13) ● It is a compulsory course (PrQs17)

Responses to Question 8 indicated a general anticipation among students for the upcoming ICC course. Many students expressed a keen interest in acquiring ICC, viewing it as a vital skill for international travel, advanced studies, or professional environments. This eagerness underscores the belief that ICC can significantly enhance their experiences and capabilities in various intercultural contexts.

These findings from the pre-questionnaire suggest a reliance on linguistic skills over intercultural competence in the participants' English learning journey. Although some cultural differences have been identified through previous learning, there remains a strong desire among learners to develop ICC to facilitate interactions with

people from diverse cultural backgrounds. Thus, an English curriculum that integrates ICC components is essential and eagerly anticipated by the learners.

To further leverage students' motivations, the pre-questionnaire for Group B participants also included questions about cultural topics they found engaging. This approach aimed to determine if their responses would align with the topics summarised in the narrative interviews, thereby validating the critical incident data resource developed from Group A's narrative interviews. Many participants (10) expressed their intention to study abroad post-graduation or when pandemic conditions improve. Their curiosity about life in foreign countries focused on academic and social integration nuances. For instance, one student (PrQs14) raised concerns about rapid adjustment in an unfamiliar cultural and academic environment, asking, "How can one quickly and effectively adapt to academic life abroad?" Other identified topics of interest include eating habits, experiences of discrimination, teacher-student relationship dynamics, and communicative styles. Their collective enthusiasm for integrating such topics into the curriculum echoes findings from the narrative interviews, which serve as a valuable repository of CIEs.

Some gaps remain despite the overall alignment between the pre-questionnaire results and the narrative interviews. For instance, topics like love and marriage values, which some students expressed interest in the pre-questionnaire, are absent from the current critical incident data resource. This absence restricts the inclusion of these topics in the current research cycle and instructional design.

Despite these gaps, the significant overlap between the pre-questionnaire results and narrative interview findings underscores the validity of the critical incident data resource. When Group B participants' interests and concerns from the pre-questionnaire match the themes identified in Group A's narrative interviews, it demonstrates that the critical incidents developed are indeed reflective of authentic student experiences and needs. This consistency not only validates the research methodology but also enhances the reliability of the data collected.

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter explored the pre-questionnaire responses administered to Group B participants to assess their demographics, course expectations and motivations, prior experiences with English learning, and prior ICC. The pre-questionnaire results highlighted significant gaps in the students' prior exposure to intercultural communication topics within their English language education. Most participants had limited engagement with cultural discussions, which predominantly revolved around superficial aspects of Western norms. Despite some students recalling instructions on non-verbal communication and cultural taboos, the overall deficiency in comprehensive ICC instruction was evident. This approach inadequately prepared students to navigate diverse cultural terrains and develop into competent intercultural speakers.

These observations emphasise the necessity of integrating more robust ICC components into English language curricula. Enhancing students' awareness and skills in intercultural communication is imperative for their development as global citizens.

Interventions aimed at improving ICC should focus on practical applications, ensuring students are not only aware of cultural differences but also adept at navigating them in real-world contexts. This approach will foster a more inclusive and empathetic learning environment, preparing students for successful intercultural engagements. Building on the insights gained from the pre-questionnaire, the next chapter will describe the Cycle 1 intervention, detailing the procedure implemented, the specific CIEs conducted, and the initial outcomes observed during Cycle 1.

Chapter 6. Cycle 1 Intervention

Informed by the literature review and the narrative interview data, I designed an intervention for a real-life context involving both theoretical input and practical exercises. The first cycle of this intervention unfolded during the Autumn semester of 2019-2020 and featured six critical incidents derived from narrative interview findings. The process of developing these critical incidents is detailed in the methodology chapter (i.e., Section 3.7.2). Figure 6 illustrates the current position on the research journey.

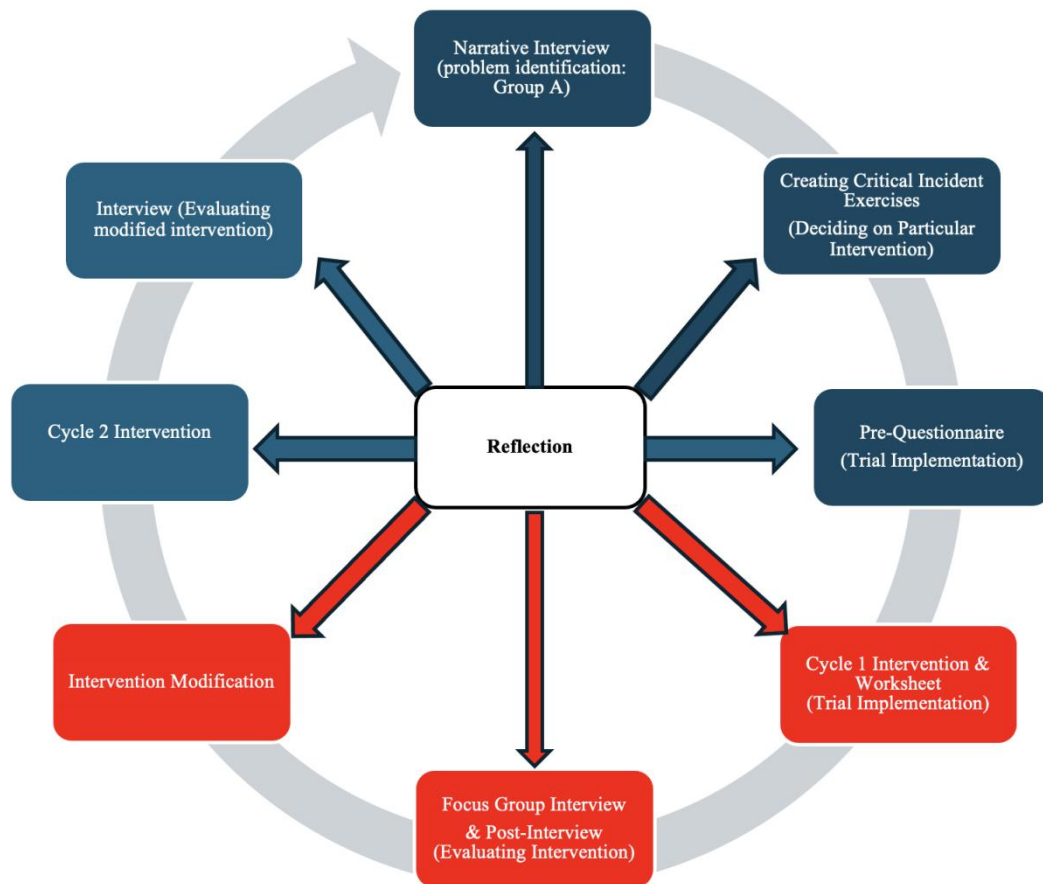


Figure 6. Iterative Cycle of CIE Intervention (Chapter 6)

The class structure included a lead-in phase, a lecture, Critical Incident Exercises (CIEs), group discussions, and a conclusion. The lead-in served as an essential step in

English language teaching and set the stage for student engagement (Thongsongsee, 2022). A topic-relevant lead-in has been shown to heighten student motivation, concentration, and interest in English classes (Akther, 2014). This phase lasted 10 minutes.

Following the lead-in, I delivered a 20-minute lecture on the basic concepts of ICC. This lecture aimed to support their subsequent discussions and help them complete their process worksheets. I would use the language topic as an example to show how the class proceeds. At the beginning of the session, I played audio recordings of individuals from various countries delivering the same greetings. Students were tasked with identifying the speakers' nationalities (American, British, South African, Japanese, Indian, and Chinese) and matching them to their accents. This activity aimed to normalise the presence of accents in language use, encouraging students to appreciate linguistic diversity.

Next, students engaged in CIEs and group discussions for 50 minutes. I introduced the CIE with tailored questions to prompt students to reflect on their attitudes toward English language and their interactions with both Chinese and non-Chinese students. Students first worked on the CIEs individually using handouts and then engaged in group discussions.

The class concluded with a 10-minute wrap-up session, where students reflected on their learning and discussed key takeaways. For homework, students revised their CIE handouts individually, either upholding their initial stance or incorporating group feedback. I encouraged them to use dictionaries and online resources for assistance.

Students had one week to finalise their worksheets and submit them in the next session.

6.1 Progress Worksheet

Upon concluding Cycle 1 intervention, I collected 108 progress worksheets from all of the 18 students. Of these, 90 worksheets were used for analysis. The rest were either blank or irrelevant to the topic. Each of the 18 students consistently documented their progress in each session, and they granted permission for their work to be used in my research. The students completed the worksheets in English, and some also admitted to using translation software when needed to help them express their thoughts more clearly. Introducing new ICC concepts in lectures facilitated clearer expression, as these concepts provided a framework for understanding and articulating phenomena such as cultural shock and the concepts of essentialism and non-essentialism.

6.1.1 Findings from Progress Worksheet

The progress worksheets submitted by students demonstrated their achievement of the ICC learning objectives. These worksheets evidenced the growth in their ICC across five key dimensions: knowledge, attitudes, skills of interpreting and relating (S1), skills of discovery and interaction (S2), and critical cultural awareness (CCA), along with other aspects of ICC. In this section, I will discuss and evaluate the worksheet outcomes from the Cycle 1 intervention. The results are organised in two axes: a horizontal analysis detailing the session-by-session progression and a vertical overview that demonstrates the holistic advancements of ICC following the

completion of cycle 1 as a measurement for the effectiveness of CIEs. For confidentiality and anonymity, pseudonyms were used when referencing data from the students, formatted as C1S1s5 (denoting Cycle 1, Session 1, student 5).

Session 1 – Teacher-Student Relationship. In the first session, students' progress worksheets revealed 16 knowledge-related responses, 12 reflecting attitudes, and 9 demonstrating skills of discovery and interactions (S2). This session focused on communication dynamics between Chinese students and non-Chinese educators. Students articulated their understanding of potential misunderstandings between interlocutors due to cultural differences (Byram, 1997) through their worksheet responses. Most students were able to identify cultural differences, stating in their worksheets: *"The relationship between teacher and student is more casual in the US than in China"* (C1S1s5); *"American classes are more student-oriented, so there are more discussions and presentations"* (C1S1s3); and *"Studying in a foreign country requires more self-awareness, unlike in China, where the teacher will be behind you to urge you"* (C1S1s7).

These observations allowed students to connect these cultural differences with broader concepts of individualism and collectivism. One student (C1S1s18) noted, *"I now understand I am inclined towards collectivism. I always consider the impact of my actions on the group, which might explain my cultural clashes with Westerners"*. Another student (C1S1s6) reflected on the cultural mismatch, stating, *"The teacher, being Western, is an individualist, and the student, being Chinese, is a collectivist. This cultural gap leads to misunderstandings between them"*. In a detailed account,

C1S1s16 described, *“The individualist teacher gave students freedom in class, but the collectivist students misunderstood the teacher as irresponsible because the class was student-centred. And collectivist Chinese student has a hierarchical view of teacher, so he is not used to be so close with the teacher.”*

This session allowed students to reflect on aspects of their own culture, a task some had never attempted before. This introspection appeared to enhance their skills in interpretation and connection. C1S1s15 shared, *“I hadn’t tried to connect my actions to my culture before; now, many things make more sense, and I understand myself better.”* Another student (C1S1s2) observed a shift in self-perception: *“I thought I was quite Westernized, enjoying Western movies and fashion. However, after reflecting, I see that my roots are still predominantly influenced by Chinese culture.”* These reflections demonstrated S2 development, as students began to “identify areas of misunderstanding and dysfunction in an interaction and explain them in terms of each of the cultural systems present” (Byram, 1997, p. 59).

While students recognised the distinction between individualism and collectivism and attempted to align this with their own cultural identities, they initially fell into essentialist thinking. They assumed homogeneity within a culture and did not fully appreciate identity diversity. This early misconception of intercultural communication presented an opportunity for growth, which I aimed to help them address in subsequent sessions.

In the first session, students displayed no significant ethnocentrism. They recognised their behaviours as different, not superior, and demonstrated a readiness to

embrace and adapt to these differences. This positive step aligned with the attitudinal aspect of Byram's model, which advocates for "a willingness to seek out or take up opportunities to engage with otherness in a relationship of equality, distinct from seeking out the exotic or the profitable" (Byram, 1997, p. 58). For instance, one student (C1S1s4) noted, *"Each culture has its own diversity and thought processes. It's essential to recognize and understand these differences to act appropriately and avoid cultural shock."* Similarly, another student (C1S1s8) noted, *"Each culture is featured with a unique mode of thinking and its own diversity. As mentioned before, there are many differences among human beings. Understanding the differences before we really get into the situation plays a significant role in preventing the occurrence of any cultural shock."*

When addressing cultural conflicts, most students (16 out of 18) adopted a pragmatic approach encapsulated by the phrase, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do" to manage cultural differences. For example, C1S1s14 wrote, *"I will try to imitate other's behavior first."* Additionally, four students emphasised the importance of apologising first in conflict situations and referred to this approach as a cultural norm prevalent in Chinese conflict resolution. Table 6-1 displays examples of students' ICC growth developed in Session 1. The complete evidence can be found in Appendix 4.

Table 6-1. ICC Domains Developed in Session 1 and Examples of Corresponding Evidence

ICC developed in session 1	√ Or	Evidence
Knowledge (n=16)		<i>"I now understood I am a collectivism. And I will always think what is the effect</i>

	√	<i>of my actions on the collective, so it is possible that why I have cultural differences with Westerners” (CISIs18)</i> <i>“The teacher is from western so he is a individualist and the student is from China so he is a collectivism. That’s is the reason why students will have a misunderstanding toward the teacher” (CISIs6)</i> <i>“The individualist teacher gave students freedom in class, but the collectivist students misunderstood the teacher as irresponsible because the class was student-centered. And collectivist Chinese student has a hierarchical view of teacher, so he is not used to be so close with the teacher”(CISIs16)</i> <i>“Each culture has its diversity and its special way of thinking. People are different.” (CISIs4)</i> <i>“Each culture is featured with a unique mode of thinking and its own diversity. There are many differences among human beings.” (CISIs8)</i>
Attitude (n=12)	√	<i>”In America, for example, they act and think differently. That’s why researching in advance is very important. So I can behave properly in order to avoid any culture shock.”(CISIs4)</i> <i>“Understanding the differences before we really get into the situation plays a significant role in preventing the occurrence of any cultural shock.” (CISIs8)</i>
Skills of interpreting and relating (n=9)	√	<i>“I never try to relate my behavior with my culture, now a lot of things can be understood, I understand more about myself.” (CISIs15)</i>

		<i>"I used to think I am very westernized. But in fact, I am not."</i> (C1S1s2)
<i>Skills of discovery and interaction</i>		
<i>Critical cultural awareness</i>		
<i>Other</i>		

Session 2—Peer communication. The second incident explored a Chinese student's discomfort at a party hosted by non-Chinese individuals and his negative impression of the experience. This "peer communication incident" aimed to enhance students' understanding of the interplay between language and global communication and encourage them to consider their identity as language users. Additionally, it was evident that students were developing an ICC attitude (n= 6), showing "interest in discovering other perspectives on the interpretation of familiar and unfamiliar phenomena both in one's own and in other cultures and cultural practices" (Byram, 1997, p. 58).

This discussion heightened students' recognition of English as a global language. When asked "why did it happen?", 16 out of 18 students attributed the incident to language proficiency, acknowledging English as the lingua franca that facilitates cross-cultural communication. They expressed that mastering English is crucial for success and for preventing conflicts in a globalised setting. In their worksheets, students recognised the role of English in facilitating intercultural exchange as "*the language that unites the world*" (C1S2s5), a "*universal medium of communication*" (C1S2s7), and "*a passport that opens doors worldwide*" (C1S2s3).

However, at the beginning of this session, students expressed a prevailing sentiment that “Chinese English” was inferior to native English. For instance, a student (C1S2s11) empathised with the character's reluctance to speak at the party, noting, *"I totally understand why he refuses to speak during the party, I also worried about my accent and spoken language. I even am not willing to speak English in the class <in China>. I am afraid that my classmate will mock at me."* Another student (C1S2s3) expressed concern that a non-native accent might convey an uneducated image among not just non-Chinese but also among Chinese peers, stating, *".....people do have stereotyped image to certain accent. Having strong Chinese accent makes me seem uneducated."* The discussion prompted by the first question did not significantly alter the students' conservative views held about English language use.

The second worksheet question, asking whether similar situations occurred among their Chinese peers, prompted students to reflect on their past interactions with Chinese peers, such as when invited to a party. In group discussions, students reached a consensus that communication difficulties were not solely due to language barriers. This realisation heightened their awareness of the importance of cultural knowledge and sparked curiosity about diverse cultures. Eleven of 18 students highlighted finding common ground as a solution, emphasising the need for cultural awareness.

One student (C1S2s5) remarked, *"Now I understood that I often use the language as an excuse, in fact, my language is not bad, We (I and non-Chinese) lack a common topic, it is important to have some knowledge about their culture."*

Similarly, another student (C1S2s7) noted, *"Once I met a group of people I didn't*

know for the first time. Even though they were all Chinese, it is possible I don't know what to say."

Some students believed that conversations would flow more easily in Chinese. Therefore, building language confidence emerged as an additional solution beyond cultural knowledge. One student noted that enhanced confidence in using language would boost his willingness to communicate. What he referred to as language confidence did not necessarily equate to language proficiency.

For example, another student (C1S2s6) recalled his father's successful interaction with a hotel doorman in the UK through mostly non-verbal cues. His father's confidence in his imperfect English highlighted that language should serve as a tool, not a barrier. Inspired by this story, his group agreed that effective communication in English was not about achieving native-like fluency. They understood that English is a global communicative tool, and 12 students acknowledged that English is not exclusive to native speakers. A student (C1S2s8) stated, *"we learn English to communicate, not to imitate native speakers."* Meanwhile, another student (C1S2s6) criticised the native-model approach to learning English, noting, *"it is probably because of the native-model English learning that we have had since we were young, made Chinese students too unconfident to speak English."* C1S2s7 expressed sympathy for the character in the incident, stating, *"it is pathetic that the character in the incident unwilling to speak because of his Chinese accent, I think one can just speak out confidently, and I bet actually no one would mock at you and native speaker*

do not have the right to do so. If they mock at you, it just means they are insufficient in intercultural communication and lack of tolerance.”

A group of students (10 out of 18) also highlighted the influence of China's rising national power and Chinese identity on language confidence. One student (C1S2s10) suggested, *“If China were strong, no one would dare laugh at our English accent.”* Another student (C1S2s4) even expressed a desire to retain his non-native English accent, stating, *“I desire to sound like non-native speakers when speaking English. When talking to foreigners in English, I don't want to hide my nationality... More importantly, I have no way to alter my accent. This is who I am.”* In contrast, C1S2s2 provided a more objective view. He acknowledged the deep-seated influence of his education, which favoured British English and discouraged other varieties. He admitted, *“I learned British English since Kindergarten till now. Our teachers generally prohibit our speaking of other English varieties. They spare a lot of efforts correct my pronunciation. Their belief in the inferiority of other English varieties has deeply affected me. I can only say I will try to change my attitude toward English but changing needs time.”*

Nevertheless, a subset of students (6 out of 18) still expressed a desire to eliminate their Chinese accent for various reasons. Some (e.g., C1S2s11) worried that the distinctiveness of Chinese English could lead to avoidable misunderstandings, while others (e.g., C1S2s17) had a personal preference for different English varieties. Despite these individual reasons, these six students reached a consensus. C1S2s17 summarised, *“being lack of confidence and reluctance to communicate due to such*

presuppositions <the native speaker will look down them or refuse to communicate with them> is really 因小失大 (yin xiao shi da) (penny wise and pound foolish).”

Session 2’s takeaway was clear: students recognised the critical role of English in intercultural exchanges and ceased viewing language as the only barrier to effective communication. Students' burgeoning curiosity about cultural knowledge signalled a shift from the traditional native speaker model prevalent in China's EFL education. This newfound understanding fostered their confidence and eagerness to engage with native speakers and individuals from different cultural backgrounds, marking a positive step in their journey as global communicators.

Table 6-2 displays examples of students’ ICC growth after Session 2. The complete evidence can be found in the Appendix 5.

Table 6-2. ICC Domains Developed in Session 2 and Examples of Corresponding Evidence

ICC developed in session 2	√ Or	Evidence
<i>Knowledge</i>		
<i>Attitude (n=6)</i>	√	<i>“being lack of confidence and reluctance to communicate due to such presuppositions <the native speaker will look down them or refuse to communicate with them> is really 因小失大 (yin xiao shi da) (penny wise and pound foolish)” (C1S2s17)</i> <i>“a foreigner, we should not be shy, (should) be confident to talk with him (them)”(C1S2s3)</i> <i>‘Talk confidently to them, if you want to</i>

		<i>make friends with them. No one will mock you.”(C1S2s10)</i>
<i>Skills of interpreting and relating</i>		
<i>Skills of discovery and interaction</i>		
<i>Critical cultural awareness</i>		
<i>Other (n=16)</i>	√	<i>“the language that bridges the world”(C1S2s5)</i> <i>“common communication tool”(C1S2s7)</i> <i>“a passport that permits you go everywhere” (C1S2s3)</i> <i>“English is used worldwide by every people” (C1S2s8)</i>

Session 3—Stereotype and Discrimination. During this session, students explored firsthand accounts of stereotyping and discrimination experienced by Group A students while studying abroad. These stereotypes included perceptions of Chinese students excelling in mathematics, consuming dog meat, and lacking wealth. This exercise, termed the “Stereotype and Discrimination Incident,” was designed to equip Group B students for potential encounters with such stereotypes and discrimination, ensuring they would not be taken by surprise in their interactions. The session also aimed to prompt students to recognise their own stereotypes, thus fostering ICC featuring tolerance, respect, curiosity, and empathy toward diverse cultures. In this session, a total of 17 stances reflecting such attitudes were identified. The complete list of these attitudes can be found in the Appendix 6.

First, students were asked to reflect on their emotions after witnessing stereotyping in the incident. Initially, they felt angry as they observed biases against

their fellow Chinese, who faced negative stereotypes. Yet, they had not considered the possibility of holding their own biases, regardless of whether these were directed at the target culture or within their local context. For instance, a student (C1S3s5) expressed, *"I will never assume other like this. It is totally insulting."* He attributed this to a backlash against China's rising power, asserting, *"American are against Chinese, because we are being stronger than before."* This student believed that provocative questions about eating dogs or being banned from Facebook or Twitter were driven by this animosity. Another student (C1S3s8) suggested that Americans' lack of familiarity with China's progress was to blame, pointing to the media as a significant contributor to spreading misconceptions about China.

Next, students were challenged to consider their perceptions of Americans. Their worksheets after the discussion revealed stereotypes such as obesity, gun usage, substance abuse, affluence, and arrogance. This exercise prompted students to introspect about their own stereotypes. A majority (17 out of 18) acknowledged their biases, with one student (C1S3s8) confessing, *"I cannot believe what I wrote in the last question."* Similarly, another student (C1S3s7) recognised, *"Now, I realised I have stereotype toward them <the American> as well."*

Ten students revisited insights from the first session, realising that they had previously oversimplified in labelling Westerners as individualistic and Chinese as collectivistic. One student (C1S3s4) reflected, *"Like in the incident, in our class we have Shanghai community and students group from other cities, I <a shanghainess> have certain stereotype towards certain areas other than Shanghai."* He discussed the

perceived superiority complex among Shanghainese, using metaphors like “Drinking Coffee (Shanghainese)” and “Eating Garlic (Northern people)” to describe his prior prejudices, with coffee drinking seen as sophisticated and garlic consumption as less cultured. For those with limited exposure to diverse cultures, reflecting on their interactions with classmates served as a valuable starting point for broader intercultural understanding.

During this session, students exhibited changes in attitudes such as avoiding prejudice, embracing tolerance, and fostering acceptance. For instance, C1S3s6 acknowledged in the worksheet, *"is probably showing their curiosity and I am being over defensive because the stereotype against the western."* Another student (C1S3s1) mentioned a Chinese proverb, “己所不欲 勿施于人 (*Ji Suo Bu Yu Wu Shi Yu Ren*)- *Do not do to others what you do not want*”, to emphasise his newfound understanding that quick judgments based on stereotypes are harmful and that he has recognised the pitfalls of generalisation. C1S3s2 found that the session made him realise that generalisations could hinder the openness required for intercultural understanding. It also provided him an opportunity to consider the target culture from a more objective and open-minded perspective.

Despite these positive changes, an "Us versus Them" mindset persisted, contradicting earlier suggestions of tolerance and open-mindedness. For instance, C1S3s7 shared, *"(before the class) I have no idea they <the western> may have those stereotypes about us <Chinese>, now I know I can prepare for myself to explain these <stereotype>, and I will frankly tell them <the western> my stereotype and let them*

explain as well.” This comment indicated that while students were starting to negotiate their identities, they were still in the early stages of this complex process. They started recognising the pitfalls of otherisation in intercultural interactions but defaulted to an intuitive mindset when directly involved in these scenarios. This suggests a need for further practice and exposure to fully internalise the principles of open-mindedness and tolerance.

Student responses in the worksheets revealed a lack of cultural confidence. Many students viewed the West as a model to follow. They openly acknowledged areas for growth within their own culture and expressed a desire to assimilate valuable aspects from Western cultures for improvement. One student (C1S3s3) reflected, *"They accuse us of being underdeveloped people. We might be, but we should criticize ourselves in order to correct our mistakes. (...) We should accept what we are in reality in order to improve."* Another student (C1S4s1) admired the West for its technological progress, while there was a notable lack of awareness or recognition of Chinese advancements in technology among the students.

Table 6-3. ICC Domains Developed in Session 3 and Examples of Corresponding Evidence

ICC developed in session 3	√ Or	Evidence
<i>Knowledge</i>		
<i>Attitude (n=15)</i>		<i>"Now, I realized I have stereotype toward them <the American> as well."</i> (C1S3s7) <i>"Like in the incident, in our class we</i>

	√	<i>have Shanghai community and students group from other cities, I <a shanghainess> have certain stereotype towards certain areas other than Shanghai.”(CIS3s4)</i> <i>“Do not do to others what you do not want” (CIS3s1)</i> <i>“I stereotyped the teacher in session 1” (CIS3s9)</i> <i>“Not all the American are the same, so as we Chinese”(CIS3s10)</i>
<i>Skills of interpreting and relating</i>		
<i>Skills of discovery and interaction</i>		
<i>Critical cultural awareness</i>		
<i>Other (n=7)</i>	√	<i>“(before the class) I have no idea they <the western> may have those stereotypes about us <Chinese>, now I know I can prepare for myself to explain these <stereotype>, and I will frankly tell them <the western> my stereotype and let them explain as well.” (CIS3s7)</i>

Session 4—Fan club. In the “Fan Club Incident”, I aimed to utilise a real-life situation involving a girl’s experience in a Korean fan club and her collaboration with international peers to organise an event. This incident was designed to help students grasp the complexity of personal identity and encourage them to renegotiate their own identities in intercultural communication based on their evolving understanding of language. This session saw an enhancement in the Attitude savoir (n=7) and skills of interpreting and relating savoir (n=11) of ICC. The complete evidence list can be found in the Appendix 7.

The discussion focused on why the girl had successful intercultural interactions within the fan club. Most students (16 out of 18) referenced various forms of belonging, such as *"a sense of belonging"* (C1S4s11), *"found the organization"* (meaning "final found the club to my liking", C1S4s14), and *"They're the same kind of people"* (C1S4s4). These comments suggested that students began to understand that their identity should extend beyond the Chinese nationality to include a broader social identity.

One student (C1S4s6) shared, *"Yes, I have such kind of experience as well, I communicated well with non-Chinese when I was playing computer games with them. And at that time I never worry about my language, I just enjoyed the communication. We have our jargon as well."* Another student (C1S4s5) noted, *"beyond same hobbies or common topics, I think a lot of other factors would determine who I am (self-identity), for example, age, profession, education background. Nation is just one of them."*

This session provided students with an opportunity to reassess their identity formation. The responses revealed that students began to understand that everyone belongs to a unique fusion of social groups. Many realised that their identities are shaped by a blend of social, cultural, and personal elements. One student (C1S4s2) reflected, *" I did not feel myself split any more, I was struggling of being western or Chinese in session 1. Now I understand I am who I am. I can be both westernize and Chinese together. My western part come from the film, music and information I got, my Chinese part come from my family and education background. Both of them made*

who I am now." Another student ((C1S4s7) expressed a newfound global perspective:

"I now feel I belong to the world, my identity is bigger."

This session deepened the students' appreciation for finding common ground in intercultural interactions. One student (C1S4s6) noted in the worksheet, *"When I was playing football with my non-Chinese teammates, I will focus on similarity (for example the skills, our goal of winning the match) instead of differences. I think it is much easier for me to communicate in this way."* Another student (C1S4s9) concluded, *"This session extended my ability to critically understand intercultural conflict and to build intercultural community because it allowed me to recognize how different cultural groups have many commonalities and goals. Prior to the practice, I believed that intercultural conflict occurred mostly because cultural groups had different visions and very little similarities. However, this practice showed me that instead, many cultural groups share similarities with others and I belong to many groups as well, making it <easier> to transform intercultural conflict."* This student reinforced the notion that focusing on similarities or "commonalities" could help to minimise differences, leading to solutions without meaningfully engaging differences.

The students' attitudes towards identity also evolved. They began to realise that identity is dynamic and shaped by communication and shared experiences. One student (C1S4s10) observed, *"The more you experience, the better you know yourself."* Another student (C1S4s3) wrote, *"I wonder who would I be without certain experiences?"* These insights motivated students to venture beyond their comfort zones. As one student's (C1S4s1) stated, *"If one never tries to see the outside*

world but stays within the comfort zone, he is unlikely to either achieve success or understand who he is."

Students also developed a willingness to embrace the multifaceted nature of individual identities. One student (C1S4s11) expressed, *"Hearing about the diversity within each person helped me realize that two people can be different and similar to each other"* This session, therefore, nurtured a more open and adaptable attitude toward engaging with the unfamiliar.

Table 6-4. ICC Domains Developed in Session 4 and Examples of Corresponding Evidence

ICC developed in session 4	√ Or	Evidence
<i>Knowledge</i>		
<i>Attitude (n=7)</i>	√	<i>"The more you experience, the better you know yourself."</i> (S4s10) <i>"I wonder who would I be without certain experiences"</i> (S4s3) <i>"if one never tries to see the outside world but stays within the comfort zone, he is unlikely to either achieve success or understand who he is."</i> (S4s1) <i>"Hearing about the diversity within each person helped me realize that two people can be different and similar to each other."</i> (S4s10)
<i>Skills of interpreting and relating (n=11)</i>	√	<i>"..... However, this practice showed me that instead, many cultural groups share similarities with others and I belong to many groups as well, making it [easier] to transform intercultural conflict."</i> (S4s9)

		<i>“I will focus on similarity (for example the skills, our goal of winning the match) instead of differences.” (S4s6)</i>
<i>Skills of discovery and interaction</i>		
<i>Critical cultural awareness</i>		
<i>Other</i>	√	<i>“..... We have our jargon as well” (S4s6)</i> <i>“beyond same hobbies or common topics, I think a lot of other factors would determine who I am (self-identity), for example, age, profession, education background. Nation is just one of them.” (S4s5)</i> <i>“Now I understand I am who I am. I can be both westernize and Chinese together.”(S4s2)</i> <i>“I now feel I belong to the world, my identity is bigger.” (S4s7)</i>

Session 5 & 6—Cultural shock. In sessions 5 and 6, students explored the concept of culture shock through their experiences with food. The character in Incident 5 exhibited a swift and dramatic shift in attitude towards Western food within a few months. In Incident 6, the character navigated differing perspectives on care and hospitality while studying abroad. These sessions aimed to prepare students for the typical adjustments required when immersing oneself in a new cultural setting. The discussions enhanced their knowledge about culture shock (n=12), shaped their attitudes (n=7), and developed their skills of interpreting and relating (S1) (n=5).

The students all agreed that food was a clear indicator of culture shock. They empathised with the characters and identified additional contributing factors. These included different learning styles, homesickness, over-expectations of living abroad, safety issues including legal and medical concerns, and climate differences. They recognised that food served as a microcosm of culture shock, reflecting broader challenges faced in a new environment. They understood that cultural shock is a natural part of the adaptation process, and that preparation is key to managing it. To mitigate the effects of cultural shock, students suggested practical solutions like *"bring photos of friends"* (C1S5s10), *"learn to cook authentic Chinese food"* (C1S5s9), and *"remember to bring 老干妈 (Lao Gan Ma) <a favored Chinese chili sauce>"* (C1S5s5).

Students also recognised the value of acquiring cultural knowledge and maintaining an open mindset as essential tools for navigating cultural shock. One student (C1S5s6) commented, *"Some basic knowledge, such as how to see doctor, how to reach for help when in emergency, is needed to know in advance."* Another student (C1S5s10) emphasised the importance of being informed about the geography and climate of the destination to mitigate physical discomfort. In terms of attitude, there was a consensus on the need to be open to different and unexpected experiences, as expressed by a student (C1S5s18) who encouraged readiness to embrace the diversity of life's encounters.

Building on discussions from Sessions 1-5, students further explored the link between culture shock and personal identity transformation. This theme emerged

naturally rather than as a specific learning objective for my class. One student (C1S6s9) reflected in the worksheet, *"I will not fear of the culture shock period. I understand it is normal. I would worry if I do not have this period. Because my identity of formation is unique and I am certainly different from the rest. The difference will surely arose uncomfortable. Just be prepared for that."* Another student (C1S6s10) noted that the difference made him unique and expressed his intention to integrate into the new culture while preserving his uniqueness. Similar sentiments were echoed by other four students, with phrases like *"adjust identity according to different contexts"*, and *"finding a neutral perspective"*.

Table 6-5 displays examples of students' ICC growth in Sessions 5 and 6. The complete list can be found in the Appendix 8. The development of interpreting and relating skills became evident during these sessions. Students exhibited the ability to appraise cultural practices impartially. One student (C1S6s3) observed, *"they pay more attention to the independence of children, unlike Chinese parents who do everything for children. But their way of education also have disadvantages as well, the suicide rate is high in their country. So we need to discard the dross and select the essence."* This reflection showed a maturing view of Western culture, which has moved past the stage of idealisation to a more balanced perspective.

Table 6-5. ICC Domains Developed in Sessions 5 & 6 and Examples of Corresponding Evidence

ICC Developed in Session 5 & 6	√ Or	Evidence
		<i>"cultural shock is a natural and unavoidable experience"</i> (C1S5s6)

Knowledge (n=12)	√	<i>"I'd be concerned if I didn't experience it < cultural shock > " (C1S5s9)</i> <i>"Several factors would contribute to culture shock..." (C1S5s7)</i> <i>"I'm no longer worried about the culture shock phase. It's a natural process, and frankly, I'd be concerned if I didn't experience it. My identity is distinct, and the discomfort from recognizing differences is inevitable. The key is to be ready for it." (C1S5s9)</i>
Attitude (n=7)	√	<i>"be ready to encounter difference" (C1S5s11)</i> <i>"welcome surprising experiences...." (C1S5s18)</i> <i>"Don't be so cautious, try to say yes to everything, as long as it is safe." (C1S5s1)</i> <i>"I understand that I will encounter a lot of differences" (C1S5s8)</i>
Skills of interpreting and relating (n=5)	√	<i>"adjust identity according to different contexts, and if you stand on other's point it will be easier to understand"(C1S5s7)</i> <i>"finding a neutral perspective...." (C1S5s10)</i> <i>"Just apologize at the very beginning" (C1S5s9)</i> <i>"Be as polite as possible" (C1S5s4)</i>
Skills of discovery and interaction		
Critical cultural awareness		
		<i>"bringing photos of friends" (C1S5s10)</i> <i>"learning to cook authentic Chinese</i>

Other (n=9)	√	<i>food" (CIS5s9)</i> <i>"remember to bring 老干妈 (Lao Gan Ma) - a favored Chinese chili sauce" (CIS5s5)</i>
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6.1.2 Overall ICC Development After Cycle 1 Intervention

Development within Byram’s model. Table 6-6 displays the ICC domains in which Group B students progressed after all 6 sessions of Cycle 1 intervention. This table indicates that the most pronounced development among students across all sessions (1-6) occurred in the “attitude savoir.” Such development reflected a growing openness to differences and an increased willingness to engage with unfamiliar conventions. This evolution in attitude was sparked by encounters with contrasting perspectives during CIEs, a deeper understanding of language, and reflections on past experiences. However, skills of discovery and interaction were less developed, indicating areas that require further focus.

Table 6-6. ICC Domains Developed After Cycle 1 Intervention based on Byram’s Model

	Knowledge	Attitude	Skills of interpreting and relating (S1)	Skills of discovery and interaction (S2)	Critical cultural awareness	Other
Session 1	√	√	√			
Session2		√				√
Session 3		√				√

Session 4		√	√			√
Sessions 5&6	√	√	√			√

Meanwhile, students also started to navigate the complex process of self-identity negotiation throughout the sessions. Specifically, in Session 1, they felt the need to conform to others to avoid conflict. This perspective shifted in Session 2 when they recognised that embracing differences is a natural part of intercultural communication. They started to advocate for mutual acceptance and proactively sought strategies to bridge disparities, such as retaining their Chinese accents during conversations as a mark of identity. Ultimately, by Session 6, students embraced a neutral stance as the starting point for mediating conflicts. This shift indicated a transformation from assimilation to the celebration of diversity.

Furthermore, students demonstrated growing proficiency in S1 ((Skills of interpreting and relating) over these six sessions. They showed an increased capacity to act as mediators between their own perspectives and those of others when faced with conflicting interpretations of events. They also began to reassess cultural conflicts through the lens of their national identity. In the first session, students tended to maintain peace and avoid confrontation in communication. They used strategies like conforming to local customs and offering immediate apologies to avert disputes. They saw their efforts to adapt to others as an expression of tolerance within intercultural communication. They assumed their withdrawal in the face of conflict aligned with the Chinese concept of “harmony”. However, the correct interpretation

of “harmony” in Chinese conflict resolution emphasises confronting and managing conflict harmoniously, not just complying or avoiding it (Yu, 2009).

In Session 2, students transitioned from imitation to positioning themselves as equals with their non-Chinese counterparts. They evolved from pure conformity to a state of being harmonious without sacrificing their uniqueness. This shift aligned with the Confucian idea of “harmony without uniformity” (“君子和而不同”, Jun Zi He Er Bu Tong). This evolution in attitude led students to reconsider cultural conflicts not just as differences to navigate (as noted in Session 1) but as opportunities to identify common ground that could help bridge the gap between disparate interpretations. With a growing awareness of identity's complexity, students began to acknowledge their unique self-identity while also recognising commonalities with others, irrespective of nationality.

Another notable evolution occurred in the development of S1 (i.e., skills of interpreting and relating). Students shifted from an idealised view of Western culture to a more introspective and objective exploration of their own national culture. They began questioning what had previously been taken for granted. This introspective and analytical approach marked a mature step toward a deeper understanding of their cultural identity in a global context.

As the sessions progressed, students’ intercultural knowledge deepened significantly. They began to foster a deeper understanding of various potential causes of misunderstandings between individuals from different cultural backgrounds (e.g., individualism versus collectivism, and culture shock). Notably in Session 2, they

demonstrated an ability to perceive culture beyond binary oppositions and made efforts to understand their own. It is crucial to acknowledge these elements of cultural knowledge as possible explanations for conflicts rather than sole determinants. Recognising this complexity is essential, as cultural conflicts are multifaceted and cannot be simply ascribed to a few factors.

Conversely, the Cycle 1 intervention did not address all aspects of ICC development, particularly the skills of discovery and interaction (S2) and critical cultural awareness (CCA). These aspects of ICC development will be examined in greater detail later.

Development beyond Byram's model. The most significant transformation observed in the students was their growing capacity to see themselves within a broader global spectrum. They began adopting the perspective of global citizens to reassess cultural concepts. They also started to embrace the notion of a global culture and aspired to forge a new identity in intercultural communication that preserved their national identity and distinctiveness.

In Session 1, students realised that a good teacher should transcend nationality. They identified essential traits in a good teacher, such as responsibility, empathy, character, and teaching ability. Building upon this, students in Session 2 noted shared interests and topics with non-Chinese individuals, such as football or online gaming. One student (C1S3s11) expressed, *"It's more important to find similarity rather than difference when interacting. And knowing how to express it out, English is certainly the most convenient tool."* By Session 4, they had come to understand the complexity

of their identity. As another student (C1S4s5) put it, *"Foreigners are not monsters; they are human beings just like us. To differentiate them only makes interaction harder."*

Students acknowledged that, while everyone is unique, local culture inevitably leaves its mark on their identities. They viewed essentialist culture not as a defining force but as a significant shaper of their identities. With a global perspective in mind, many students attempted to forge a new identity situated in the "in-between" or "third space" by selectively blending aspects of their local culture with those of other cultures (MacDonald, 2019).

One student (C1S2s6) reflected in the progress worksheet after Session 2, *"I have a new understanding of who I am. I realized that I have so many identities. I can be a student, a big fan of an idol, a Chinese who studies in the US, or a member of a hobby group. I choose to present the aspect of my identity that best fits with the scenario."* This adaptive approach to identity in various contexts is one outcome of engaging in intercultural communication, where the interplay across cultures fosters multifaceted identities.

On the other hand, Cycle 1 sessions also helped students realign their expectations and adopt a more objective outlook for future experiences. Before the sessions began, students expressed in the pre-questionnaire a keen interest in engaging with native speakers, viewing the opportunity to study abroad as an important experience in their lives. However, having unrealistic expectations could exacerbate feelings of maladjustment. As one student (C1S2s2) shared in the worksheet, *"Like*

the character in the incident <peer interaction incident>, I want to make friends with native and international students. But now I realized I am not going to make lots of international friends immediately."

By session 6, students recognised the likelihood of encountering culture shock at the beginning of their study abroad. Most importantly, they understood that seeking comfort in their own cultural group is a common coping mechanism. *"It's common to seek comfort,"* one student (C1S4s1) noted, acknowledging the support system within the Chinese community as "a survival tactic." Students had initially believed that forming friendships with non-Chinese peers in a foreign country would come naturally. However, they have since learned that socialisation requires deliberate skills and effort. Another student (C1S4s11) commented, *"... I never thought about what kind of effort I should make. Your life does not magically change because you put yourself in another country. Your life changes because you make it change."*

In the upcoming section, I will present an overview of the post-questionnaire, a tool designed to evaluate the CIE design and the overall course structure. However, it is important to note that the post-questionnaire did not function as effectively as I had anticipated.

6.2 Post-Questionnaire

6.2.1 Structure

The purpose of the post-questionnaire was to gather students' feedback on the effectiveness of the Cycle 1 intervention. Drawing from recommended practices for course evaluation questionnaires, the survey included the following key aspects:

overall course assessment, alignment with participant expectations, course design assessment, activity assessment, student/tutor engagement and tutor support, as well as the impact of learning (Anderson et al., 2005). The questionnaire intentionally excluded direct questions about the student/tutor relationship and the support provided by me, as their tutor. This decision was based on the extensive coverage of these topics during Section 6.2, which aimed to prevent any confusion about the questionnaire's objective. The complete questionnaire is provided in the Appendix 3.

6.2.2 Findings

All participants (n=18) completed the questionnaire. The evaluation of each question from the post-questionnaire revealed multiple insights. The teaching material emerged as a highlight, with 10 out of 18 students identifying it as the most interesting aspect because of its diverse lead-in methods and authentic, practical experiences within the CIE component. One student (C1Q1s2) commented, *“ICC is interesting in its own right and I find it fascinating in any form, you know.”* Yet, paradoxically, teaching material was also mentioned as an area needing improvement, with some students marking it as both the most and least interesting element. This dual feedback indicates the complexity of addressing diverse student preferences and suggests the need for a deeper exploration of how to enhance the materials' engagement and relevance. Further investigation should involve detailed follow-up interviews to understand the specific aspects students found both engaging and lacking.

Concerns about time were brought up by six students who felt the sessions were too short to master the required intercultural competence. Additionally, four students noted the excessive written workload as a downside. Comments included *"questionnaire, worksheet.... too much to write,"* (C1Q1s6), and *"it is too much work, especially I need to write in English,"* (C1Q1s3). Despite these issues, 16 out of 18 students responded positively regarding the alignment of ICC with their expectations, though they provided few concrete examples.

Two students admitted that they initially equated linguistic skills with communicative competence and had expected the course to focus more on linguistic skills. Additionally, responses to questions about course arrangement and CIE improvements were limited. This reticence may stem from cultural influences, particularly the impact of Confucianism on Chinese learners, who tend not to initiate or openly critique, especially in educational settings where teachers are revered (Biggs, 1996). Despite discussions on the variance in teacher-student relationships across cultures, my students remained reserved in their feedback. As a culturally diverse teacher, I must honour their traditional communication styles and explore more effective engagement methods.

6.2.3 Challenges with the Post-Questionnaire and Follow-Up Methods

The data collected from post-Questionnaire was less comprehensive than anticipated. Although all students submitted in the open-question questionnaire, their responses lacked depth, with some providing only brief answers consisting of a few words or did not elaborate on the open questions. This could be due to

student fatigue after the intense sessions, as well as their preference for verbal communication, which they may have perceived as less formal and allowing more room for errors. Later interviews confirmed these speculations.

Given the limited insights gathered from the post-questionnaire, I decided that a follow-up was essential, particularly in the form of group interview. This method, supported by Raibee (2004), can lessen participant anxiety and make the interview process more pleasant (Twinn, 2000). This approach also aligns with students' familiarity with discussing ideas within a group setting. Loriz and Foster (2001) and Fife (2007) asserted that students in focus groups would feel their opinions are valued, making them more open to sharing.

Several issues identified from the post-questionnaire required further exploration. Firstly, the mixed reactions to the teaching materials - being simultaneously seen as the most and least engaging - merited closer examination. Understanding these contradictions would help refine future course materials. Secondly, the students' expressed desire for more time indicated a misalignment between the session length and the complexity of mastering ICC. Furthermore, the preference for verbal feedback suggested a cultural aspect of communication that future interventions should take into account.

Another significant aspect requiring attention is the Confucian influence on students' willingness to critique, as well as potential power dynamics related to my position as a teacher. These factors likely impacted students' openness in providing

feedback. Therefore, evaluating the potential of focus groups as a more conducive environment for student expression is essential to ensure all voices are heard. This should allow for better refinement of the evaluation methods used in the course, ultimately improving teaching strategies.

6.3 Focus Group Interview

I selected eight students from Group B for the focus group interview. Femdal and Solbjør (2018) recommended a focus group of around eight people for optimal management, as larger groups can be difficult to handle. The uniqueness of a focus group lies in its ability to generate data from group interactions. Group members should, therefore, feel comfortable with each other and engage in discussions. Rabiee (2004) argued that the best focus group consist of the pre-existing groups, as there is already a level of trust among the group members, which encourages the expression of views. However, Kitzinger (1994) refuted the need for homogeneity, suggesting that participants unfamiliar with each other may provide more honest and varied responses.

To balance these views, I strategically selected participants based on their diverse responses to the initial two questionnaire questions. Their attitudes towards the sessions varied—some left question one blank, others expressed a neutral "ok" feeling, and some described the sessions as "useful". This selection ensured a mix of perspectives while maintaining a comfortable group dynamic. All invited students accepted the invitation, possibly influenced by my role as their teacher.

Despite their varied responses, all participants shared the commonality of undergoing the same ICC learning experience and intervention procedure, which ensured a baseline homogeneity within the group. This shared experience provided a foundation for discussion, while their diverse questionnaire responses introduced the necessary heterogeneity to circumvent single-mindedness (Femdal & Solbjør, 2018). This balance offered a comprehensive understanding of the situation.

Due to the anonymous nature of the questionnaire, I provided the students with aliases during class. However, I could match each questionnaire to the respective student since they had written their alias names on their worksheets. This allowed me to invite selected students to participate in the follow-up interview at a designated time in my office. I clarified that their agreement to the interview also implied a willingness to reveal their questionnaire responses. All eight selected participants agreed to this condition and attended the interview.

A well-prepared moderator's guide is essential for conducting a focus group interview (Vaughn, et al., 1996). The richness of the guide's content is often reflective of the moderator's experience and level of confidence in leading discussions. Essential components of this guide include: a) Initiating the focus group interview, which sets the tone for the interaction; b) Posing warm-up questions to encourage participant engagement; c) Formulating key questions designed to elicit substantial and powerful information; d) Providing concluding questions that wrap up the main discussion points, and; e) Making closing statements that signal the end of the focus group

session and summarise the discourse (Vaughn et al., 1996). The full script of my moderator guide is provided in Appendix 9.

6.3.1 Findings of Focus Group Interview

In post-interview reflections, students responded positively to the intervention, describing the course with terms such as “realistic”, “helpful”, “useful”, “important”, and “necessary”. Their feedback could be categorised into three main parts:

First, students appraised the course for its distinction from traditional language courses, with comments from learners highlighting its unique attributes and effectiveness. Secondly, reflections on the role of CIE in fostering ICC showed that students recognised CIE's significance in their learning journey. Lastly, discussions on identity negotiation revealed how students perceived the course's impact on their personal growth and cultural understanding.

Non-traditional language course. One major factor for the students' appreciation of the intervention was its departure from traditional, structural models of language instruction currently prevalent in China. This approach, detailed in the context chapter, contrasted sharply with their past and current language learning experiences. During focus group interviews, most students expressed that the concept of ICC was novel to them. One student in focus group interview (C1Is7) succinctly stated, *"No, we haven't been taught ICC."* This sentiment aligned with the literature review's discussion on the separation of language and culture in China's EFL instruction, where the classes often focus solely on testing only rather than for practical application.

Students expressed dissatisfaction with the traditional method of language instruction they had experienced in college, which prioritised linguistic outcomes aimed primarily at passing standardised tests like the CET-4. Despite MOE's explicit requirement for ICC since 2002, students felt ICC was never genuinely integrated into their EFL education. One student (C1I1s3) reflected, "*We used to only study these topics as subjects to be tested on later but we never considered understanding them and incorporating them in our activities.*" These remarks indicated a disconnection between learning content and its application.

Students reflected on the traditional neglect of cultural instruction in their previous English language education. This neglect manifested in the exclusive focus on grammar and reading, with minimal attention to cultural aspects. One student (C1I1s3) expressed this gap by noting, "*There's a big difference. The English course used to be very classical. It was all about grammar and reading.*" This gap, which the CIE intervention sought to address, often left out the cultural dimension crucial for comprehensive language learning.

The CIE intervention, however, introduced valuable intercultural knowledge, including values, attitudes, and beliefs. As C1I1s3 further highlighted the benefits, stating, "*But when we took this course and learned about cultures, we improved indirectly; we learned many things other than language; we've learned many new things.*" These reflections underscore the shift from traditional methods to a more holistic approach, enriching students' learning experiences and better preparing them for intercultural interactions.

The CIEs' integration of intercultural knowledge, encompassing values, attitudes, and beliefs, enriched students' experiences compared to the traditional curriculum. Students recognised the necessity of cultural understanding to navigate different social contexts successfully, particularly when considering extended periods abroad for study or work. One student (C111s6) emphasised the practical benefits of cultural learning, stating, *“I learned English and wanted to study in the United States, and if I didn't learn the culture of this country too I wouldn't adapt to their way of living. I learned how to speak their language, but I didn't learn how to deal with them. For example, their attitude in living and entertainment. Their life differs from our Chinese culture, as they are more open.”* This recognition of the inseparability of language and culture within the learning process echoes the findings of the literature review, which emphasised the importance of integrating cultural elements into language education.

Moreover, interviewees criticised the previous English language teaching for its reliance on textbook-based instruction. One student (C111s1) mentioned, *“Yes, this is because the <CIE> approach was different from just using textbooks. The things we learnt from the textbooks aren't applicable in real life, so we tend to forget them. However, we do remember the information about cultures because that's useful to us in the future. We've encountered many examples <during the intervention>—examples that illustrate different perspectives, including what others think and what we think about other cultures.”* This reflection highlights the lack of practical value in textbook-based learning.

In contrast, students favoured the CIE's teaching activities for effectively highlighting cultural conflicts and providing relatable experiences. Most students reported a high degree of satisfaction with the cultural components of the course, appreciating the shift from traditional methods to engaging with a variety of socio-cultural themes. One student (C1I1s5) remarked, *"The class topics were directly related to our college life and far more attractive than the textbook material."* By bringing cultural conflicts to the forefront of teaching, the CIEs resonated deeply with students. Another student (C1I1s2) expressed, *"I find me much closer to those realistic experiences. The troubles students met are cited as example for the teaching of intercultural skills. I am always curious to learn more. Teacher also uses interesting and creative ways to expose the students to a series of cultural themes."*

Additionally, group discussions emerged as a powerful tool for deeper engagement and understanding. Traditional EFL classrooms, which are teacher-centred with lectures as the norm, contrast sharply with this approach. One interviewee (C1I1s3) pointed out the absence of such group discussions in their past courses, saying, *"Group discussion was missing in the previous courses."* However, the recent sessions facilitated discussion among classmates, allowing students to compare, contrast, and understand various cultural perspectives. One student (C1I1s2) mentioned, *"The dynamic discussions encouraged me to dig deeper and think critically."* He admitted that he had limited ideas about some topics, and *"group discussion allowed for self-reflection and the opportunity for peers to both facilitate and challenge each other."* This shift towards a socio-cultural approach, which

emphasises student-centred learning, was recognised as a significant benefit of the CIE intervention.

Furthermore, these group discussions also cultivated critical interpersonal skills. For instance, one student (C1I1s7) touched upon the skill development aspect of the intervention: *“How we think, how we discuss, how we show respect to different opinions, how we seek ideas from each other, how we respect each other, how we make a decision and how we research information, particularly in the process of having debates in our group discussion. In sum, it was not a traditional English class.”* For students like C1I1s1, the expansion beyond linguistic learning to include interaction and reflection was particularly appealing. He admitted, *“I’ve never taken language classes seriously before,”* he admitted, *“But this course’s focus on peer discussions and reflections on real-world topics made it invaluable and relevant.”*

In essence, the intervention’s success lay in its challenge to the conventional teaching paradigm, introducing students to a more engaging, practical, and discursive method of language learning. This approach emphasised the value of intercultural skills for real-world application, as highlighted in the literature review (Holliday et al., 2004). Critiquing traditional methodologies and embracing more interactive, student-centred learning model reflects a larger trend in language education that advocates for the integration of cultural elements as a key component of ICC (Salih& Omar,2021).

The power of authentic experiences. The intervention’s impact on student perceptions highlights the power of authentic experiences. Students valued the

teaching materials used during the sessions. Initially, their excitement about studying abroad often overshadowed the potential adversities of such an endeavour. However, this perspective shifted notably following the intervention. They began to recognise the complexities of intercultural experiences and the necessity of preparedness.

The use of critical incidents as teaching materials effectively depicted the study abroad experience. One student (C1I1s8) expressed, “*Unlike the traditional text I have learned in the past, the incidents are more attractive and lifelike.*” These sessions, particularly Session 4, equipped students with foresight to manage unexpected situations and reassess the importance of making non-Chinese friends. Additionally, the sessions also helped students acknowledge the natural struggles of loneliness and homesickness that accompany a move away from a familiar environment, which could lead to mental health challenges (Stewart & Leggart, 1998). Another student (C1I1s6) highlighted the importance of prior knowledge and preparation, stating, “*Talking and discussing these challenges gives us a buffer, so we’re ready for what’s to come.*”

A particularly memorable incident involved the discrimination faced by early Chinese immigrants, which provoked a strong emotional response from the students. One student (C1I1s3) shared, “*It was very immersive, and I initially felt anger during the discussion.*” Although aware of discrimination, especially during the COVID-19 epidemic, the CIEs enabled students to empathise deeply and understand that anger is not a solution. They learned the importance of understanding the root causes of

discrimination and the necessity of skilled negotiation, which is a key component of ICC.

The conclusion drawn from the students' reflections is that the intervention successfully fostered a more sophisticated understanding of the challenges and complexities of living and studying abroad. Students moved beyond a superficial anticipation of these experiences to a deeper engagement with the cultural realities they might face. This shift from theoretical knowledge to the practical application of intercultural skills developed through the intervention demonstrates the effectiveness of the CIE approach in preparing students for the global stage. The students' journey from initial excitement to a deeper understanding and readiness to negotiate cultural differences indicates the transformative power of utilising authentic experiences as teaching materials in language education.

The importance of CIE in ICC development. It was obvious that CIE facilitated the students' growth in the knowledge domain of ICC. Responses from both worksheets and focus group interviews consistently highlighted how the CIE fostered various intercultural competencies. Students acknowledged their exposure to diverse knowledge types and thinking patterns through the intervention. Although they did not mention any specific examples, they reported a deeper understanding of cultural differences nurtured by the CIE intervention. For instance, one student (C1I1s4) remarked, *"It <the CIE course> introduces us to new cultures, traditions, and ways of thinking. It illustrates their reasoning compared to ours."* This statement,

however, also reflected a lapse into an “Us versus Them” viewpoint, which was inconsistent with the goal of intervention.

The intervention highlighted the crucial role knowledge plays in reducing misinterpretations and managing uncertainties in cross-cultural interactions. Students recognized that preparatory research on cultural differences could enhance awareness of behavioural and cognitive differences, thus aiding in the appropriate adaptation of actions. One student (C1I1s8) highlighted, *"Each culture has its diversity and its special way of thinking. People are different as we mentioned before. In China, for example, we act and think differently. That's why researching is very important in order to avoid any culture shock."* This response indicated a belief that knowledge discovery is fundamental for increasing intercultural awareness and understanding diverse worldviews, religious beliefs, and behaviours. Additionally, students also acknowledged that learning about ICC is an ongoing process that should not be confined to classroom sessions.

Students mentioned that concrete examples in CIE sessions made abstract concepts more accessible. One interviewee (C1I1s8) reflected on collectivism and individualism, stating that definitions alone were insufficient for comprehension. It was through contextual examples that he reflected on past experiences and achieved a deeper comprehension. As another student (C1I1s6) put it, *"these incidents full of vivid details, made the dull terminology true to life."*

Attitude development emerged as a central theme in students' responses, alongside the enhancement of knowledge. During interviews, students highlighted the

importance of cultivating respect, empathy, and behavioural adaptability to prevent misunderstandings. Specifically, Sessions 3 (“Stereotypes and Discrimination”) and Sessions 5 & 6 (“Cultural Shock”) were frequently cited by students for their role in fostering respect for diverse viewpoints and comprehending varied behaviours. One student (C1I1s5) insightfully remarked, *“Also, we got to know that each country has its traditions that might seem disrespectful or not understandable to strangers, like in the example of the food habit <session 5> in America is may be because of the fast pace of life and different value of lunch with Chinese.”*

Most notably, students recognised the necessity of showing respect and empathy to address misunderstandings. Reflections on attitudes towards diversity, particularly in Sessions 3, 5, and 6, emphasised the importance of empathy. One student (C1I1s5) elaborated, *“We shouldn’t behave spontaneously. We should put ourselves in their place and understand how they think and accordingly behave properly.”* This observation underscored the efficacy of CIEs in enhancing students' ICC.

As discussed in the literature review, the application of CIEs aims to transition students from intuitive, System 1 thinking to a more deliberative, System 2 mode of thinking (Snow, 2015). System 1 thinking is automatic and often biased, leading to reflexive judgments. By employing System 2 thinking when abroad, students can reduce the likelihood of ethnocentric and premature conclusions. The goal is for students to engage in thoughtful, reflective processing of cultural experiences, enhancing their intercultural communicative competence.

Students also acknowledged that such discussions heightened their cultural awareness and fostered acceptance of others. Initially, conversations during the intervention were impassioned, but gradually they evolved into more reasoned and composed dialogues. Discussions about openness, tolerance, and idea exchange were credited with teaching students to avoid stereotypes. One student (C1I1s5) admitted, *“helped us be more open to others and to learn about other cultures and to accept others.”*

Some students observed that familiarising themselves with concepts like openness and tolerance facilitated their practical application in daily life, which indicated a shift from theory to practice. As one student (C1I1s2) pointed out, *“We learn about stereotypes in order to be tolerant. We should apply everything we have learned.”* This statement reflected the students' recognition that ICC is not just a theoretical construct but a practical skill to be actively implemented.

Lastly, regarding the development of the skills of interpreting and relating (S1) savoir, CIEs provided students with an opportunity to reflect on their own cultural contexts. It is evident from the interviews that the activities conducted in Sessions 1, 3, and 5 & 6 were critical for the S1 development, as these sessions prompted students to reconsider their own culture and fostered a positive re-evaluation of their cultural attitudes. This introspection was particularly evident in interviews where several students concurred that the sessions had facilitated a deeper reflection upon their own culture, and effectively heightened their cultural awareness.

Two students initially viewed their national culture as irrelevant to studying a foreign language. However, their perspectives shifted dramatically as the course progressed. They began to recognise the significance of their cultural heritage in shaping their identities and expressed a desire to delve deeper into its details. As one student (C1I1s1) stated, the national culture is important in his identity formation, and with a profound understanding of it, one can understand their uniqueness. This sentiment was echoed by another student (C1I1s5) who, with renewed curiosity, expressed, *"Now I'm very interested in knowing more about the differences in each region in my country; and the culture and history about our country."*

The shift in students' perspectives underscores the significant role of CIEs in enhancing the development of skills of interpreting and relating (S1). These activities are designed to bridge cultural divides with others and deepen the understanding of one's own cultural identity (Byram, 1997). By engaging in CIEs, students are encouraged to apply critical thinking and self-reflection, key components of ICC that promote a deeper understanding of both self and others (Deardorff, 2006). This reflective practice aligns with the development of the *savoirs* necessary for intercultural dialogue and highlights the intrinsic value of one's cultural heritage in the broader context of intercultural communication.

6.4 Limitations of Cycle 1 Intervention

While the Cycle 1 intervention showed promising results, it also revealed several limitations. Addressing these issues is crucial for improving the effectiveness of

future interventions. This section discusses the limitations from both the students' and the teacher's perspectives.

6.4.1 From Students' Perspectives

Despite favourable evaluations, students identified areas for improvement during the focus group interview. First, a common request from six interviewees was for additional time dedicated to ICC components within the curriculum. They expressed a desire for extended discussions on topics that resonate with them, such as discrimination and peer communication, which align with the ICC skills they deem necessary. Integrating these elements into the regular College English course, which focuses on linguistic skills for exams like CET-4, poses a challenge. Given the constraints, only six sessions were allocated to ICC components. One student (C1I1s1) commented, *“you can perceive insufficiency of the time for this course from the comparison with its importance.”*

Furthermore, participants recognised the practicality and importance of ICC across various contexts. They proposed transforming the sessions into a mandatory standalone course taught in English at the university level. This approach would allow for a broader educational scope beyond language learning. One student (C1I1s1) suggested, *“we can learn more than the English language,”* while another (C1I1s7) added, *“All students, even if not required to learn English, need to seek knowledge of more cultures.”* Another participant (C1I1s6) advocated for introducing ICC courses earlier in the educational journey, as its substantial benefits tend to be life-long. This

suggestion implies the need for continued engagement in ICC sessions throughout their studies.

Additionally, the interviewees recommended incorporating socio-cultural themes more tailored to their personal interests. One student (C1I1s1) expressed curiosity about how different cultures navigate topics such as marriage and love. They showed keen interest in understanding global perspectives on international events, particularly within the context of the pandemic. Another student (C1I1s7) was particularly eager to explore the preferred news sources of people from other cultures. They also proposed integrating media, such as films or video clips, as tools to facilitate ICC learning. Watching videos presents real-life experiences and enhances listening skills and linguistic proficiency. C1I1s2 concurred, stating “*We can see them < cultural conflicts/misunderstanding > at the same time through videos.*”

6.4.2 From Teacher's Perspectives

I observed a tendency among students to default to 'otherising' behaviours, creating a repetitive “Us” versus “Them” dichotomy, which runs counter to the goals of the intervention. Moreover, the anticipated display of S2 skills (discovery and interaction) and critical cultural awareness were not evident in students' responses. Additionally, there was a notable absence of local culture within the incidents examined. This absence resulted from the CIEs being developed from students' experiences overseas.

Firstly, the intervention did not effectively counteract the tendency toward otherisation and stereotyping. Despite students' acknowledgments that they should

refrain from generalisations and stereotypes, and their expressed change in attitude towards otherness, the 'us' versus 'them' dichotomy remained present in their discussions. In session 1, I introduced the concepts of individualism and collectivism to help students recognise, confront, and ultimately transcend these stereotypes (Byram, 2004). In hindsight, dedicating additional time to topics like “self-identity” and “cultural similarity” might have fostered students’ better understanding of identity's multifaceted nature and the shared human experience in intercultural communication. Decentring is essential for developing ICC, as it involves the capacity to view reality from diverse perspectives and empathise with others (Byram, 2006; ICOPROMO, cited in Glaser et al., 2007).

Secondly, skills of discovery and interaction (i.e., S2 skills), which build upon the attitude domain and skills of interpreting and relating (i.e., S1 skills), were scarcely evident in students' development. S2 skills include “the ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction” (Byram, 1997, p.57). Feedback suggested that students theorised about potential interactions yet lacked genuine “real-time interaction” with non-Chinese individuals, a gap that likely contributed to the lack of demonstrable skills. The essence of S2 skills is the application of knowledge, skills, and attitudes for effective communication mediation, which is challenging to achieve without actual interaction. Therefore, role-playing critical incidents could serve as a supplement for this missing real-time element in future interventions.

Moreover, students' feedback did not showcase instances of critical cultural awareness (CCA). Byram (1997) defines CCA as “an ability to evaluate, critically and on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices and products in one’s own and other cultures and countries” (p. 63). CCA is deemed the most important skill in the ICC Model, which requires a deeper analysis and reflection of intercultural communication. Achieving this within a brief course duration is challenging. This reinforces the idea that learning ICC is a lifelong endeavour that cannot be confined to session-based learning.

Finally, the critical incidents lacked depth in the local and national cultural context. While students expressed a desire to explore their own local and national culture, such content was scant in the presented materials. A deeper understanding of local culture is vital for grasping one's identity and potentially offering a stable “third place” or intercultural speaker identity (Bredella, 2003; Jin & Cortazzy, 1988; Kramsch, 1993). Thus, in the future cycle, incorporating more about students' local culture could be beneficial. Understanding cultural differences is a prerequisite for addressing and transcending them, rather than reinforcing stereotypes and otherisation.

6.5 Modifications for the Intervention

To improve the intervention, it is essential to address these identified gaps. Post-evaluation of the action research raised four key areas for further development. Firstly, refining strategies to diminish otherisation through the application of CIEs is necessary. Secondly, the incidents should include more extensive information on

national and local cultural nuances. Thirdly, addressing the lack of real-time interaction and communication is crucial. Lastly, students suggested using a more diverse approach to presenting CIEs, such as using films or videos.

6.5.1 Self-Generated Incidents

Cultural differences should not be ignored; rather, they must be addressed directly to lessen otherisation. Ignoring these differences may lead to misunderstandings and reinforce stereotypes. However, comparing incidents can risk “oversimplification, polarisation of cultural attributes and cultural reductivism” (Guest, 2002, pp. 154-155). To counter this, I guided students in creating their own critical incidents in the next cycle. Discussing these narratives with their peers can helped them recognise the inherent otherisation in their storytelling.

The CIE writings aimed to provide multiple understandings of intercultural dynamics, prompt self-awareness, and promote transformative learning of interculturality (Apedaile & Schill, 2008; Lazarevic, 2017). Thus, these writings were not just assignments but outcomes of classroom activities, where students identified, discussed, interpreted, and generated meaning around their narratives. This process created a dynamic, analytical, and reflective focus in intercultural learning. By creating their own teaching materials, students engage deeply with the subject matter, thus enhancing their cognitive abilities (Ribosa & Duran, 2022). The process of creating, presenting, and explaining content to an audience significantly boosted their learning potential (Hoogerheide et al., 2016). This method equipped students with the analytical skills necessary to critique their interactions with others (Holliday et al.,

2004). Such self-generated narratives prompted students to introspect and reassess their self-perception, which was vital for developing self-identity.

The CIEs were fundamentally rooted in experiential learning, which involved learning through action. As students engaged in active tasks to produce outcomes, they became increasingly involved in the learning process. Lee (2011) pointed out that using student-generated content could not only boost students' investment in their work but also give them insight into their peers' perspectives. Such engagement should enhance class involvement and, more crucially, heighten students' sensitivity to interculturality by examining and discussing real-life intercultural misunderstandings.

My decision to use self-generated incidents in the intervention was also supported by Bovill (2020), who highlighted the benefits of a whole-class approach to co-creation in learning and teaching. Co-creation involved all students actively collaborating and negotiating with the teacher and each other, thus enhancing the learning process through shared decision-making. This inclusive approach built positive relationships and empowers students, fostering a deeper commitment to their educational journey. When students co-created their learning experiences, they gained a sense of ownership and responsibility, which enhanced their motivation and engagement. This approach aligned well with the objectives of CIEs, as it encouraged active student participation and shared decision-making, leading to greater investment and motivation in the learning process.

6.5.2 Video Clips

I decided to incorporate video clips into the next cycle of intervention for several reasons. On the one hand, most students considered film clips and videos as effective tools for developing ICC. They believed that such media could engage them more by providing a visual experience alongside reading. This visual engagement helps to illustrate cultural nuances vividly, making learning more immersive and impactful. On the other hand, I concur with the students' opinion that cultural teaching should reflect the dynamic nature of culture itself. Culture is constantly evolving (Maijala, 2020), and films can effectively communicate this dynamic, presenting the target language in an integrated fashion (Tognozzi, 2010).

Research shows that films and videos can serve as a dynamic medium for learning English and understanding intercultural nuances and have proved beneficial in intercultural training (Ismail, 2017; Roell, 2021). Unlike the staged dialogues typically found in language learning resources, films incorporate colloquial English in realistic contexts, thereby greatly enriching educational materials (Ismail, 2017). These visual media can also complement written and auditory materials with visual cues that substantially aid comprehension (Yang, 2011). Teacher-guided film-watching sessions can effectively convey diverse cultures, making EFL classes more flexible, authentic, and with more variety (Stoller, 1988). The visual context provided by films and videos can also simplify cultural learning, especially for those who find traditional reading or listening challenging (Ismail, 2017).

Films not only encourage a reflective mindset and connect learning with real-life experiences but also complement CIEs with powerful visual elements. Research by Liu (2020) with Chinese undergraduates has shown that films or videos outperform online newspapers and chats in increasing students' abilities to comprehend, evaluate, synthesise, analyse, interpret, and elucidate cultural narratives. Therefore, incorporating films into the curriculum is a strategic way to enhance students' intercultural understanding and engagement.

In EFL contexts, films and videos serve as invaluable teaching resources. They provide students with opportunities to listen to diverse dialects, accents, slang, and voices of native speakers, thus enhancing their auditory exposure and have a better understanding of English usage. Furthermore, films expose students to different varieties of world English, reinforcing a key thread from the literature review. Through characters' actions, students can observe and learn non-verbal communication, an aspect not widely addressed in the initial cycle of my intervention. This visual medium also demonstrates the practical use of a foreign language in real-life settings (Gebhard & Oprandy, 1999). By including films, educators can offer students a comprehensive auditory and visual learning experience that traditional materials might lack.

The film “刮痧” (Gua Sha Treatment) was selected because it offers a clear portrayal and comparison of Chinese and Western cultures. This choice aligns with the students' cultural learning needs and aims to advance their ICC. The detailed integration plan will be discussed later.

6.5.3 COVID-19 Related Incidents

Since COVID-19 broke out in China and rapidly escalated into a global pandemic, Chinese individuals have faced increased prejudice and racial stereotyping abroad. For instance, in the UK alone, anti-Chinese incidents surged to more than 260 from January to March 2020, marking an increase of nearly 200% from the previous year (Li et al., 2021). Despite the significance of these issues, research on navigating the anti-Chinese sentiment in Western countries remains sparse.

The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a shift to online learning, which made role-play activities difficult in the second cycle of intervention. Yet, during post-interviews (in Cycle 1), students expressed their keen interest in topics related to current events and their own lives. This feedback underscored the importance of integrating contemporary issues into the curriculum. Considering the rise in nationalism and cultural pride among my students in this era of globalisation, and the self-relational skills they have developed in our sessions, it becomes vital to assist them in negotiating their complex identities before they engage in real-world intercultural communication.

This preparation can be crucial for managing the mounting pressure they may encounter in intercultural settings. Therefore, COVID-19 is a pertinent subject for inclusion in the next cycle of intervention. This approach not only addresses current challenges but also prepares students for future intercultural interactions.

In summary, the next cycle of the intervention was designed to incorporate several new elements to further enhance students' ICC development. Self-generated

critical incident narratives will allow students to recognise othering tendencies in their own storytelling and prompt self-reflection on their cultural perspectives. Incorporating video clips and films, such as the selected film "Gua Sha Treatment," will provide dynamic visual representations of cultural interactions to complement the written critical incidents.

Additionally, addressing current events like the rise in anti-Chinese sentiment during the COVID-19 pandemic connected the learning material to students' lived experiences. This approach prepared them to navigate complex cultural identities in real-world intercultural settings and helped them respond to challenging and unexpected events. By integrating student-generated narratives, multimedia resources, and relevant sociocultural topics, the next intervention cycle advanced students' cognitive skills, engagement, and sensitivity toward the dynamic and multifaceted nature of intercultural interactions.

Chapter 7 Cycle 2 Intervention

7.1 Teaching Procedure

The Cycle 2 intervention was conducted in the second semester of 2021. In response to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, all in-person classes shifted to online courses during this period. Moreover, as previously discussed in the context section, the delay in the abroad programme and the disruptive impact of the pandemic resulted in only 15 students (out of the original 18 students) continuing with Cycle 2 intervention. This intervention was integrated into their mandatory college English course. Figure 7 demonstrates the current position in the research.

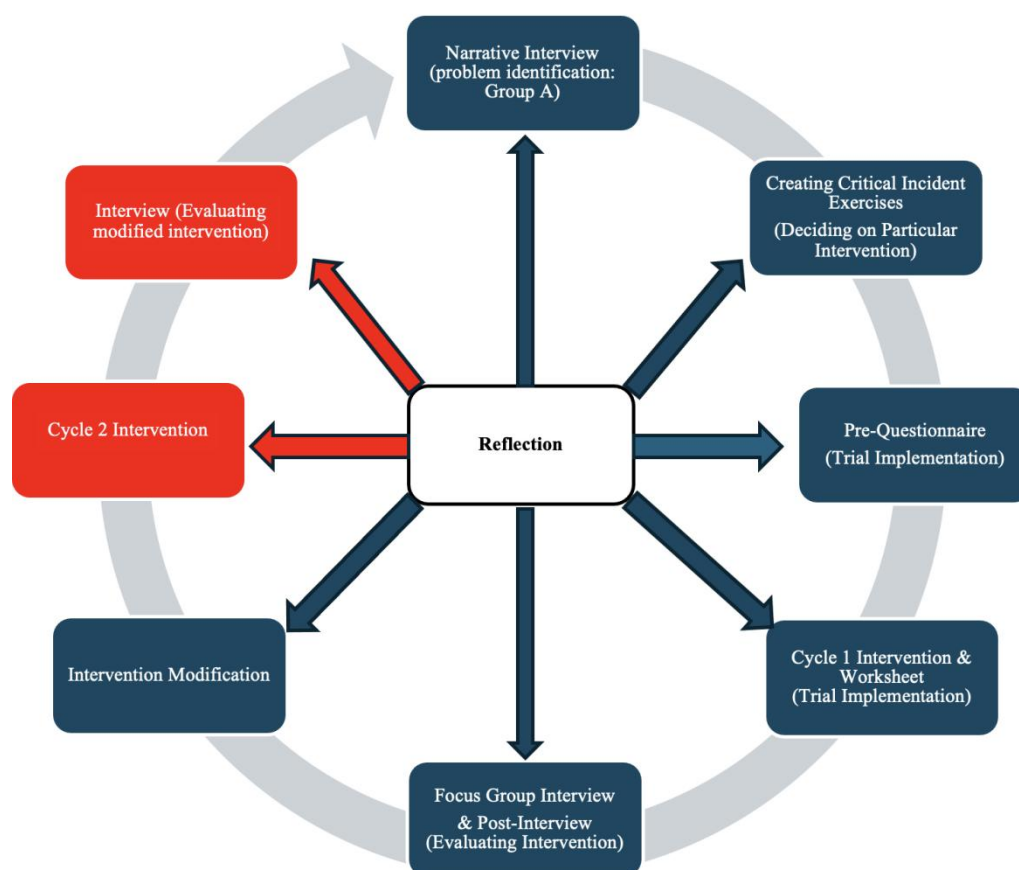


Figure 7. Iterative Cycle of CIE Intervention (Chapter 7)

The Cycle 2 courses maintained the structure of the initial cycle, with each session beginning with a lead-in, followed by a lecture, CIEs, group discussions, and a concluding segment (see Section 6.2 for details). In response to student feedback, I incorporated video clips featuring intercultural conflicts, incidents related to the pandemic, and student-generated incidents as additional forms of CIEs (outlined in Section 6.7.1). While the progress worksheet and post-interview remained integral for data collection, I removed the post-questionnaire due to its ineffectiveness in the previous cycle (see Section 6.4).

I also modified the approach to completing progress worksheets. Instead of individual submissions, I asked students to collaboratively present their progress following group discussions. This change emerged not solely from student preferences but also from educational considerations. Group submission of the progress worksheet requires effective communication among group members to achieve a shared perspective. This practice serves as a practical exercise in engaging with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds.

To accommodate individual perspectives, I clarified that students who differed from the group's majority view were welcome to submit individual worksheets. Additionally, for those wishing to indicate their specific contributions to the group's worksheet, I allowed the option to append their names in brackets next to the relevant content. This ensured recognition of individual inputs while maintaining the collective nature of the task.

Table 7-1. The Content Covered in the Cycle 2 Intervention.

Session 1	Self-generated incidents writing
Sessions 2-3	Self-generated incidents discussions
Sessions 4-5	Video Clip incidents
Session 6	COVID-19 related incidents

Table 7-1 outlines the content covered in the sessions of the Cycle 2 intervention. Specifically, in the first session, I engaged students in examining their own cultural preconceptions to sharpen their intercultural awareness. I began with a thought-provoking statement often cited in intercultural courses: "We don't know who discovered water, but it wasn't a fish." This quote served as a reminder of our previous semester's discussions about how individuals embedded in a particular culture could become blind to their own culture nuances in intercultural communication.

I informed the students that their worksheets might be shared with the class. To initiate the activity, I instructed, "Please recount an incident where cultural differences led to confusion or misunderstanding. Ideally, this should be a personal experience, but feel free to recount stories from friends or family if none come to mind." After the session, students emailed their writings to me. I reviewed and edited these for clarity, ensuring anonymity by omitting names and personal details. These edited incidents were then incorporated into future sessions (detailed in Section 6.2.1), labelled simply as "Incident 1, Incident 2," etc., without disclosing their authors' identities.

In subsequent sessions, a group representative would select two incidents for detailed group analysis. If a student recognised their own story, they had the option to either disclose their authorship or remain anonymous. This method encouraged open discussion while respecting individual privacy, thus fostering a deeper understanding of intercultural dynamics.

In Sessions 4 and 5, I presented two clips from the 2001 film “*Gua Sha Treatment*”, which was based on a true story about a Chinese family's cultural clashes in the United States. I chose this film specifically to highlight how cultural practices can be misinterpreted in different cultural contexts and anticipated that it would spark critical discussions among students. Despite being an older film, its portrayal of cultural misunderstandings remains highly relevant. The enduring themes of cultural conflict and integration continue to resonate with contemporary audiences.

The first clip showed how Dennis, the grandson, was taken by child protection services after they misinterpreted the marks from a traditional Chinese healing practice (i.e., Gua Sha Treatment), performed by his grandfather Xu, as signs of child abuse. Gua Sha involves using special equipment and techniques to repeatedly scrape and rub the body surface, leaving marks that help regulate physiological functions based on traditional Chinese medicine theories of meridians and points. This practice, though beneficial within its cultural context, can be misunderstood outside of it.

The second clip showed Datong Xu, the father and a game designer, facing accusations of promoting violence through the inclusion of 孙悟空(Sun Wukong) in his video game design. Sun Wukong, also known as the Monkey King, is a legendary

figure from Chinese folklore known for fighting demons and symbolising resourcefulness and bravery. Understanding Sun Wukong's cultural significance helps to contextualise the father's challenges in conveying traditional values through modern media.

I instructed the students to engage in discussions about the cultural misunderstandings showcased in the film clips. I asked them to articulate the events of the film, explored the causes of these cultural conflicts, and proposed solutions as if they were the characters involved. This exercise aimed to deepen their understanding of intercultural communication and develop their ability to navigate and resolve cultural conflicts.

For the final session, we focused on a critical incident related to the COVID-19 pandemic. After a brief recap of the outbreak's developments, we turned our attention to the discrimination and misunderstandings experienced by Chinese students in America during the pandemic. I drew from a newspaper interview that detailed these experiences and used it as a case study for discussion. I asked the students to articulate their understanding of the causes behind these discriminatory experiences. They analysed various factors, including cultural misunderstandings, media portrayals, and existing prejudices, to develop a comprehensive view of the issue. This exercise aimed to deepen their critical thinking and intercultural analysis skills.

7.2 Findings and Discussions on Progress Worksheet

I used progress worksheets to track students' growth in ICC and analysed them in the same way as I did in Cycle 1. In this section, I will present and discuss the

findings of the Cycle 2 intervention based on the collected data. I gathered 21 progress worksheets from four groups—five were self-generated incident worksheets, and 16 related to other sessions.

7.2.1 Self-Generated Incidents Writing in Session 1

During the first session, students generated 15 critical incidents in total, three of which focused on intracultural communication, while the remaining 12 related to intercultural conflicts. Among these, two incidents described different cultural elements, such as festivals and appearances, without presenting clear conflicts. These critical incidents touched upon various topics, including stereotypes, cultural values and behaviours, language and culture, and prejudice and discrimination.

Several incidents shared similar themes. For instance, both S-IC3 (self-generated incident 3) and S-IC4 involved stereotypes. Since I planned to address stereotypes in the COVID-19-related session, I excluded stereotype-related topics from the discussions in Sessions 2 and 3. S-IC5 and S-IC12 both concerned cultural shock; however, since S-IC5 resembled an incident from the previous cycle (incidents 5 & 6 in Cycle 1), I only retained S-IC12. Thus, I selected five critical incidents to expand the critical incident data resource. Table 7-2 lists these five incidents below.

Table 7-2. Student-Generated Incidents Included in Cycle 2 Intervention

	Incident Name	Incident (Main Content)
1.	<i>Environmental dimension of culture shock</i>	Student responded negatively to the level of how dirty the streets are in America and compared to the cleanliness of her/his own rural town in China.
2.	Intracultural communication	Students from China's northern and

		southern regions displayed divergent views on water usage and the frequency of showering
3.	Do as the Roman do? (acculturation or assimilation)	A Chinese student was proud of himself of voicing his opinion in the class and even disagree with the teacher (very different from the cultural norms he is accustomed to in China). But the teacher did not think that the Chinese student's approach was something to be proud of, and the teacher expects a higher level of assertiveness
4.	Different "tipping culture" (language, status and identity)	A student's father tipped a waiter in Singapore, and the waiter switched to speak English to his father rather than Mandarin
5.	Different interpretation of the word "maybe"	A student recalled an experience of giving directions to a foreign person. He ended his directions with the word "maybe," which perplexed the foreigner. As a result, the foreigner asked the student's companion to confirm the directions.

7.2.2 Self-Generated Incidents Discussions in Sessions 2 & 3

Feedback from the five progress worksheets indicated that students had developed their ICC in domains of knowledge, attitudes, skills of interpreting and relating (S1 skills), and critical cultural awareness (CCA). Notably, CCA was observed for the first time during this intervention. This development might be attributed to the collaborative group work, which encouraged diverse perspectives and deeper engagement with cultural issues.

In the upcoming sections, I will present the ICC development observed in each incident. To ensure student anonymity, I will maintain the use of specific codes like

C2I1g3s4, which stands for Cycle 2, Incident 1, Group 3, Student 4. This coding system helps in tracking progress while protecting student identities.

Incident 1. Table 7-3 lists the evidence of students' ICC development during the Cycle 2 intervention. Incident 1 in Cycle 2 intervention involved examining cultural perceptions of cleanliness in American cities. Group 3 refrained from hastily concluding that all Americans are unclean or that every street in the U.S. is dirty. Instead, they explored the reasons behind the uncleanliness observed in many American cities, despite the country's wealth. They identified factors such as *“population density,” “the huge gap between rich and poor,”* and *“not all individuals adhere to proper disposal practices.”*

Through comparison, students began to recognise the similar challenges faced by China, another vast nation. This reflection fostered a positive attitude towards their own culture and contributed to the development of their skills of interpreting and relating (S1 skills). They shared in their worksheets, *“Before taking incident, we never thought about our culture, our own country. We did not give any importance to Chinese culture and always thought Chinese culture are so old and inflexible. But because of the chance to reflect and compare, we understand that how great our country is and how difficult the development it. We want to tell you more about our culture, it is more important for me now to talk about it” (C2I1g3).*

Individual efforts alone cannot resolve such cultural shocks. However, students acknowledged that these experiences reminded them to prepare for many differences

they might encounter in intercultural interactions. They realised the importance of being aware of everyday details often taken for granted.

Table 7-3. Student ICC Development in Incident 1 of Cycle 2 and Corresponding Evidence

ICC developed in C2S2&3I1	✓ Or	Evidence
<i>Knowledge</i>		
<i>Attitude</i>		
<i>Skills of interpreting and relating (S1) (n=1)</i>	✓	<i>“Before taking incident, I never thought about my culture, my country. I did not give any importance to Chinese culture and I always thought Chinese culture are so old and inflexible. But because of the chance to reflex and compare, I understand that how great our country is and how difficult the development it. I want to tell you more about my culture, it is more important for me now to talk about it.”(C2I1g3s4)</i>
<i>Skills of discovery and interaction (S2)</i>		
<i>Critical cultural awareness</i>		
<i>Other</i>	✓	<i>“we need to be prepared for any kinds of culture shock” (C2I1g3s2)</i>

*Note: C2 = Cycle 2; I1,2,3...= Critical Incident 1,2,3; G1,2,3... = Group1,2,3...; s1,2,3 = student 1,2,3.

Incident 2. Intracultural communication, a topic we previously explored in the third session of the last cycle, was revisited in this incident, which offered students a deeper understanding of this subject. Group 1 recognised that regional biases, known as 地域歧视 (Di Yu Qi Shi) in Chinese, existed among them—an issue they had not previously acknowledged, though it was not particularly severe within our classroom

environment. It became clear from this student-generated incident that intracultural differences often align with geographical lines, indicating that students from southern and northern China are perceived to have distinct values and behaviours.

The worksheets revealed a transition from ethnocentrism towards ethnorelativism. Ethnocentrism views one's own culture as superior (Orwell, 1989), while ethnorelativism represents an understanding and acceptance that cultural differences are relative to different cultural contexts (Bennett, 1993). This mindset involves seeing cultural traits and practices as valid expressions of a particular culture's history, values, and context. Based on my understanding, achieving ethnorelativism signifies a stage of intercultural sensitivity where individuals not only tolerate but also respect cultural differences and adapt their behaviour in intercultural interactions accordingly.

One student (C2I2g1s4) reported, *“Once I think what I do is normal, and I never see the reason why I do so and others do not. Like in the incident, the northern girl grow up in a water-scarce area, it is normal that she was not used to wash as frequent as us, it has nothing to do with one’s hygienic habit.”* Another student (C2I2g1s1) added, *“the African do not wash head as frequent as us as well, so they will have dreadlocks or shave their hair, it is the origin of their culture, we should respect and not discriminate.”*

This shift from an ethnocentric viewpoint to an ethnorelative perspective represents a progression from recognising that one culture is not the universal norm to fully appreciating and valuing diverse cultures on their own terms. This mindset

transformation involves changing one's skills and attitudes, among other aspects, which Bennett (2004) describes as “manifestations of changes in one's underlying worldview” (p. 75).

Students had come to recognise not only their ethnocentric biases within their own culture but also their xenocentric tendencies when engaging with other cultures. Xenocentrism (which was often used within commercial context) refers to the preference for other cultures over one's own, often accompanied by a desire to assimilate (Cleveland& Balakrishnan, 2018). As one student (C2I2g1s1) wrote, “*It is funny that, <previously> I viewed a lot of intercultural conflict incidents involved Chinese and western, I always find fault in the Chinese character first, and always feel like the Chinese must have done something wrong and offended someone then he/she should change their behavior so as to cater others, over time I lost myself. Actually they are just different, nobody had done anything wrong. But, in intracultural communication, when there is a difference or conflict, I will easily blame the problem on others and even make discrimination...*” This insight reflected a growing awareness of the risk of losing one's identity through assimilation. By reflecting on their experiences, students became conscious of their lack of objectivity in both intercultural and intracultural communications, marking a significant increase in their CCA.

This incident also increased the students' desire to engage more openly in everyday intracultural communication. One student (C2I2g1s1) shared that, while he faced no discrimination in person, he was aware of intense regional bias online, such

as the stereotype, “People from X province love to steal.” He expressed concerns about potential discrimination from his classmates, which had hindered him from forming close bonds with them over the year. His revelation surprised his group mates, who regretted any unintended offense and wished for open communication to discover common ground and understand differences in the future. Another student (C2I2g1s3) wrote, “*When we discuss ideas, we can learn to tolerate the others (...) and get into discussions that might solve certain problems. Although both might be wrong, we might reach consensus and solve differences.*” C2I2g1s1 also stated that after this session, he intended to be braver and more willing to initiate friendships with his classmates.

Table 7-4 displays student ICC developed during Incident 2 and examples of corresponding evidence. The complete version is provided in Appendix 11.

Table 7-4. Student ICC Development in Incident 2 of Cycle 2 and Examples of Corresponding Evidence

ICC developed in C2S3I2	✓ Or	Evidence
<i>Knowledge</i>		
<i>Attitude (n=2)</i>	✓	<i>“I would not be so conservative as before and willing to take the first step of making friend with my classmate. ‘ (C2I2g1s1)</i> <i>‘next time, you can frankly tell us, we truly want to make friend with you and know more about you” (C2I2g1s3)</i> <i>“when we discuss ideas, we can learn to tolerate the others (...) and get into discussions that might solve certain</i>

		<i>problems. Although both might be wrong, we might reach consensus and solve differences”(C2I2g1s3)</i>
<i>Skills of interpreting and relating (n=2)</i>	√	<i>“once I think what I do is normal, and I never see the reason why I do so and others do not. Like in the incident, the northern girl grow up in a water-scarce area, it is normal that she was not used to wash as frequent as us, it has nothing to do with one’s hygienic habit.”(C2I2g1s4)</i> <i>“the African do not wash head as frequent as us as well, so they will have dreadlocks or shave their hair, it is the origin of their culture, we should respect and not discriminate.” (C2I2g1s4)</i>
<i>Skills of discovery and interaction</i>		
<i>Critical cultural awareness (n=1)</i>	√	<i>“It is funny that, <previously> I viewed a lot of intercultural conflict incidents involved Chinese and western, I always find fault in myself first, and always feel like I’ve done something wrong and offended someone then I automatically changed my behavior so as to cater others, over time I lost myself. Actually there are just different, I have done nothing wrong. But, in intracultural communication, when there is a difference or conflict, I will easily blame the problem on others and even make discrimination...”(C2I2g1s1)</i>
<i>Other</i>		

Incident 3. Incident 3 explored the decision between assimilation and acculturation through a student-teacher disagreement. A Chinese student voiced his opinion and disagreed with the teacher in class, an approach that contrasts with Chinese cultural norms. The teacher, however, did not view this as positive and expected more assertiveness.

Students reflected on the incident by revisiting and reinterpreting the adage, “When in Rome, do as the Romans do.” One student (C2I3g2s1) reported, *“I think that the adage really means you copy or mimic the behaviours of the other culture without necessarily understanding why are you doing it or how to do it. To me, adaptation means that you really deeply understand the nuances of the other culture and are able to appropriately shift your behavior in different cultural context.”* Another student (C2I3g2s2) pointed out that the pitfall in the incident was the Chinese character's loss of personal identity amid intercultural interactions. He shared his own experience of adopting the “bro handshake-hug” from Western television shows as a greeting with friends. He now questioned whether his past use of this gesture was culturally appropriate. He also expressed a keen interest in researching the origins of this gesture rather than blindly imitating it.

Reflecting on this incident, students realised that cultural study transcends basic etiquette like whether to kiss, shake hands, or bow. One student (C2I3g2s2) reported, *“... We should learn the history, the origin of the culture. However, adaptation does not mean that you give up your own culture and identity. It means that you have a higher-degree of cultural self-awareness and a high level of understanding of other cultures and you are able to maintain who you are while at the same time adjusting appropriately for other cultures.”* The students concluded in their worksheets that the Chinese student portrayed in this incident may not display the stereotypical traits often attributed to Chinese people. They pointed out that it was the teacher in the incident who lacked ICC and held a biased perception of Chinese students.

Table 7-5. Student ICC Development in Incident 3 of Cycle 2 and Corresponding

Evidence

ICC developed in C2S3I3	✓ Or	Evidence
Knowledge	✓	<i>“study the culture do not just learn the basics, for example, do I kiss, shake or bow. We should learn the history, the origin of the culture.” (C2I3g2s2)</i>
Attitude		
Skills of interpreting and relating	✓	<i>“It means that you have a higher-degree of cultural self-awareness and a high level of understanding of other cultures and you are able to maintain who you are while at the same time adjusting appropriately for other cultures.” (C2I3g2s2)</i> <i>“To me, adaptation means that you really deeply understand the nuances of the other culture and are able to appropriately shift your behavior in different cultural context.” (C2I3g2s1)</i>
Skills of discovery and interaction		
Critical cultural awareness		
Other		

Incident 4. This incident involved a situation where a student's father tipped a waiter in Singapore, prompting the waiter to switch from speaking Mandarin to English. This scenario led students to analyse various cultural practices concerning tipping. They found that while tipping is customary in the United States at around 15% of the bill, it is voluntary in Singapore and not expected in China.

Students observed that some waiters might alter their behaviours toward the customers based on whether a tip was given. They noted that this shift in attitude

might stem from the perception that English proficiency correlates with wealth and could be seen as a marker of social status. This perception became evident when the Singaporean waiter in the incident switched from Mandarin to English after being tipped by a customer who was not a native English speaker.

Group 2 students suggested several reasons for the waiter's behaviour: "*One of the main reasons is that English is widely spoken as a global language and it is often used as the primary language of business, and international communication. Additionally, many countries have historically been colonized or influenced by countries where English is spoken, which has led to the promotion and use of English in those countries.*" These insights indicate that students recognise the importance of English in communication. One student (C2I4g2s1) commented, "*Maybe the waiter is showing his respect for he thought the character was well-educated.*" However, another student (C2I4g2s2) challenged this view, asserting that respect should be based on one's conduct and personal traits rather than language proficiency. He contended that fluency in a language should not be the measurement of a person's value or merit.

This incident prompted students to ponder the dynamics between native and non-native English speakers. They reflected critically and concluded that viewing English as a superior language constitutes linguistic imperialism, which perpetuates inequality and discrimination. One student (C2I4g2s1) stated, "*It is important to value and respect all languages and cultures.*" In response to the incident, they suggested that the character should have continued to communicate in Mandarin and requested

the same from the waiter as a mutual sign of respect since the waiter was capable of speaking Mandarin. The students argued that doing so would uphold the dignity of the character's own language and challenge the assumption that English is inherently superior.

Table 7-6. Student ICC Development in Incident 4 of Cycle 2 and Corresponding

Evidence

ICC developed in C2S3I4	✓ Or	Evidence
Knowledge	✓	<i>“There are different social norms in tipping in different countries” (C2I4g2s2)</i>
Attitude		
Skills of interpreting and relating		
Skills of discovery and interaction		
Critical cultural awareness	✓	<i>“It is important to value and respect all languages and cultures.” (C2I4g2s1)</i>
Other	✓	<i>“One of the main reasons is that English is widely spoken as a global language and it is often used as the primary language of business, and international communication. Additionally, many countries have historically been colonized or influenced by countries where English is spoken’ (C2I4g2s1) ‘ respect is earned by good behavior and personal characteristics and not by learning or speaking a kind of language.”(C2I4g2s1)</i>

Incident 5. In this incident, a student recalled an experience where he gave directions to a foreigner and ended his instructions with the word "maybe." This confused the foreigner, who then asked the student's companion to confirm the directions. The writer of this incident nicely presented two interpretations of the word “maybe,”— one from a foreign visitor's perspective and another aligned with his own intent. He highlighted that the word "maybe" in Chinese sometimes carries an

affirmative connotation that may lead to misunderstanding if directly translated into other cultures.

Students explored how national culture influences language use. They noted that Chinese and many other Asians often employ ambiguity to avoid offending, which leads to the frequent use of “maybe” at the end of statements. For instance, phrases like “事情大致是这样的 (Shi Qing Da Zhi Shi Zhe Yang De) –this may be about it,” are commonly used as a summary of statements even in formal contexts. Through discussion, students understood the complex link between language and culture. They recognised that language acquisition should extend beyond mastering vocabulary, semantics, and grammar. One student (C2I4g3s1) wrote, “*There was no grammar mistake in the Chinese’s saying, but there still was misunderstanding and was not a successful communication.*” Another student reported, “*Language cannot be separated from culture because if you learn the language and you don’t know the culture it means you don’t know the language even if you speak and write it.*” This enhanced linguistic awareness should aid students in embracing an intercultural speaker's role (Lamb, 2009), helping them avoid otherisation and stereotyping.

Similarly, C2I4g3s1 shared the confusion regarding Chinese greetings like “Where are you going?” or “Have you eaten?”, which are equivalent to “What’s up?” in English as polite inquiries with no expectation of a detailed response. But when he used these Chinese greetings with non-Chinese friends, they felt intruded and mistook him for prying into personal matters.

In light of these insights, students suggested that cultural context should be explicitly and systematically integrated into language education. They advocate careful observation of language in daily life and in the media to reveal the cultural principles behind expressions. This approach would promote successful cross-cultural communication by helping learners understand the cultural nuances that shape language use.

Table 7-7. Student ICC Development in Incident 5 of Cycle 2 and Corresponding

Evidence

ICC developed in C2S3I5	✓ Or	Evidence
<i>Knowledge</i>		
<i>Attitude</i>		
<i>Skills of interpreting and relating</i>	✓	<i>“Chinese or most Asians tend to couch their remarks very carefully so as not to hurt the feelings of the other person. This results in rather heavy use of ambiguity. So Chinese tend to add maybe at the end of their expression.” (C2I4g3s1)</i>
<i>Skills of discovery and interaction</i>		
<i>Critical cultural awareness</i>		
<i>Other</i>	✓	<i>“Language cannot be separated from culture because if you learn the language and you don’t know the culture it means you don’t know the language even if you speak and write it.” (C2I4g3s2)</i>

7.2.3 Video Clips in Sessions 4 and 5

Students watched and analysed video clips from the film *"Gua Sha Treatment"* in Sessions 4 and 5. They identified three key cultural aspects: 1) different cultural conceptualisation of "face" (面子, Mian Zi); 2) the significance of nonverbal communication; and 3) the phenomenon of Chinese culture aphasia.

First, students examined the concept of "face", which includes cultural notions of respect, honour, and social standing. They noted the contrasting views on "face" between Western and Chinese cultures. For instance, one student (C2S4g3s1) wrote, *"Westerns tend to be individualistic in their pursuit of face, emphasizing freedom and equality. While Chinese people's pursuit of face is more with collectivist and hierarchical."* On the other hand, the student also acknowledged the potential oversimplification in the film's portrayal of Chinese society. This student pointed out that modern Chinese parents often respect their children's autonomy, and subordinates do not always follow leaders blindly. He further critiqued racial stereotyping in Hollywood, including films directed by Chinese filmmakers that cater to market preferences. He argued that such films perpetuated clichéd images of Chinese culture. He commented that *"Gua Sha Treatment"* exemplified cultural conflict while reinforcing stereotypes about Chinese culture.

These reflections indicated substantial development in the students' skills of interpreting and relating, as well as their CCA. They have learned to interpret and relate cultural documents or events to their own experiences. Additionally, they now evaluate such events against explicit perspectives and Byram's criteria (1997). This

progression marks a significant enhancement of their intercultural competencies that moves beyond comprehension to critical analysis.

Second, students briefly discussed non-verbal communication in the fourth session of the Cycle 1 intervention and again probed deeper into its significance in the Cycle 2 intervention with the help of visual media. The inclusion of films and videos in the intervention provided students with vivid examples of non-verbal cues, such as facial expressions and gestures. One student (C2S4g2s1) observed that this allowed them “*to have a concrete image of facial expression, the gesture*”, highlighting those non-verbal cues as distinct cultural expressions.

Non-verbal communication involves various forms, including gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice, body language, posture, eye contact, and other language-independent modes of interaction (Phutela, 2015). Through video clips, the students identified numerous differences between Chinese and American non-verbal communication styles. For instance, they observed that Americans prefer using hand gestures in face-to-face conversations, which some Chinese viewers interpreted as “*excessive, dramatic, aggressive, impudent*” (C2S4g2s2), especially when directed at individuals of higher social status, such as superiors, teachers, and seniors.

Additionally, students observed distinct contrasts in facial expressions between the two cultures. Americans typically favour a “megawatt smile,” whereas in China, particularly among women, a more restrained smile that does not reveal the teeth is considered proper etiquette. Reflecting on this, a student (C2S4g2s2) noted, “*...it is totally different, I know a lot of young girl(s) around me who prefer to reveal teeth*”

rather than palatals. In this way, they need only to open the mouth in a small range, so that they can look more feminine when speaking and reduce lip movement.” This student highlighted the common practice among Chinese women to conceal their teeth and cover their mouths when laughing, as open laughter is often viewed as inelegant. However, they also noted from the films that covering the mouth while laughing might be interpreted as mocking in other cultures. Hence the student (C2S4g2s2) concluded, “*We need to pay attention to their facial expressions during intercultural communication*” to avoid misinterpretation and cultural shock.

Despite recognising these cultural differences, several students admired the confidence and brightness symbolised by the American-style smile observed in the films. They expressed a desire to adopt this type of smile themselves, which indicates a reluctance to associate such expressions strictly with national identity. This discussion of non-verbal communication illustrates students' ability to recognise and appreciate cultural differences. It also signals a tendency toward a more fluid, non-essentialist view of culture that transcends geographical boundaries.

Moreover, as students navigated intercultural conflicts, they encountered what they termed “Chinese culture aphasia.” This phrase captures their struggle to convey the nuances of China's rich cultural heritage and extensive history in English conversations with non-Chinese individuals (Li, 2024). Despite their proficiency in English, students realised their limitations in explaining traditional practices such as “Gua Sha” treatment and other aspects of Chinese medicine. They also found it

challenging to articulate the symbolism and significance of iconic literary figures like 孙悟空 (Sun Wukong, or Monkey Sun) in English.

One student (C2S4g1s3) candidly expressed, "I know there are misunderstanding about the Monkey Sun, and the Guasha treatment. But I am not able to explain them, because I understand a little of them and I lack of related vocabulary." Another student (C2S4g2s1) reported the absence of this cultural component in their English education and emphasised the importance of integrating Chinese cultural education into English language instruction to better equip students for such intercultural exchanges.

Table 7-8. Student ICC Development in Incident 6 of Cycle 2 and Corresponding Evidence (Complete version provided in Appendix 15)

ICC developed in C2S3I6	✓ Or	Evidence
<i>Knowledge</i>		
<i>Attitude</i>		
<i>Skills of interpreting and relating</i>	✓	<i>"westerns tend to be individualistic in their pursuit of face, emphasizing freedom and equality. While Chinese people's pursuit of face is more with collectivist and hierarchial."</i>(C2S4g3s1) <i>"...it is totally different, I know a lot of young girl around me who prefer to reveal teethes rather than palatals. In this way, they need only to open the mouth in a small range, so that they can look more feminine when speaking and reduce lip movement"</i> (C2S4g2s2)

<i>Skills of discovery and interaction</i>		
<i>Critical cultural awareness</i>	√	<i>“a lot of stereotypes Asian image in the western movie” (C2S4g2s1)</i> <i>“this movie also present stereotyped image of Chinese, we are not like this anymore and not all Chinese are like this” (C2S4g2s1)</i>
<i>Other</i>	√	<i>“we need to pay attention to their facial expressions during the intercultural communication” (C2S4g2s2)</i> <i>“we have never been taught that thing <ICC> before, and I think it is important...” (C2S4g2s1)</i>

7.2.4 Covid related Incident 6

The COVID-19 pandemic incidents primarily involved discrimination against Chinese international students during the pandemic period. These experiences incited more anger than previous stereotypical prejudices, such as being labelled proficient in mathematics or accused of consuming dogs. Rather than viewing such discrimination through an essentialist perspective that pits cultures against one another, the students recognised COVID-19 as a global challenge requiring collective action. One student (C2S6g1s1) commented, *“Calling COVID-19 the ‘Wuhan Virus’ or ‘China Virus’ is inaccurate and not respect for the truth. We can better prevent the spread of COVID-19 and protect those who may have it when we speak about it with accuracy, empathy and care.”*

Most students advocated for tolerance in intercultural interactions. They expressed a willingness to clarify cultural differences and address stereotypes, yet they all agreed that deliberate discrimination should not be tolerated. The students

emphasised the level of tolerance and openness, both locally and globally. One student (C2S6g3s2) reported, *“We should be tolerant but not let them offend our culture. They should accept our culture the same way as we accept theirs.”* This discussion highlighted the students' desire for mutual respect and understanding across cultural boundaries as well as their call for respectful and empathetic dialogue about global issues like COVID-19.

Students also reported their prior unawareness of such discrimination, noting that neither their English lessons nor any other classes had covered discriminatory language or gestures. One student (C2S6g1s1) shared, *“I have no idea that these words have the connotation of discrimination against Chinese people, I have not heard these words at all, it is impossible to learn it in previous English classes. There is a good chance that I have been discriminated against, and I say 'pardon' with a smile or have the courtesy to ask the person to explain.”* This student also wrote, *“I'm glad I took the class. At least I can tell if I'm being discriminated against.”* These statements underscored the sessions' critical role in equipping students with the necessary skills for authentic intercultural communication encounters.

Table 7-9. Student ICC Development in Incident 7 of Cycle 2 and Corresponding Evidence (Complete Version Provided in Appendix 16)

ICC developed in C2S3I7	✓ Or	Evidence
<i>Knowledge</i>		
<i>Attitude</i>		<i>“tolerance and being open is mutual whether on the local or global level”</i> (C2S6g2s1)

	√	<i>“we should be tolerant but not let them offend our culture. They should accept out culture the same way as we accept theirs.” (C2S6g3s2)</i> <i>“we should be tolerant during intercultural communication, and we are willing to explain the different culture and eliminate their stereotype, but no tolerance for deliberate discrimination.” (C2S6g3s1)</i>
<i>Skills of interpreting and relating</i>		
<i>Skills of discovery and interaction</i>		
<i>Critical cultural awareness</i>		
<i>Other</i>	√	<i>“I have no idea that these words have the connotation of discrimination against Chinese people, I have not heard these words at all, it is impossible to learn it in previous English classes. There is a good chance that I have been discriminated against, and I say 'pardon' with a smile or have the courtesy to ask the person to explain.” (C2S6g1s1)</i>

7.2.5 Overall ICC Development Within Byram’s Model After Cycle 2 Intervention

The data presented in Tables 7-3 through 7-9 indicate enhanced ICC across various dimensions, highlighting a newfound recognition of critical cultural awareness (CCA) within this cycle. Regarding knowledge, students have grasped the importance of understanding “the national memory of one’s interlocutor’s country and the perspective on them from one’s own country” (Byram, 1997, p.58). In this cycle, students displayed curiosity about cultural origins, such as the reasons behind

dreadlocks being favoured by some Africans or why the bro-shake is considered a trendy greeting. Yet, their responses seldom reflected an understanding of the prevailing culture in their own country. They realised a gap in their knowledge, describing it as "Chinese culture aphasia," and they advocated for the inclusion of Chinese cultural elements in English instruction to enhance their ICC knowledge.

Improvements in the attitudinal savoir were less pronounced since students had already recognised the importance of tolerance and openness in the previous cycle. Nevertheless, this cycle led to the realisation that ICC attitudes should be reciprocal. While tolerance is essential, it does not extend to tolerating the intolerant or those intent on causing harm.

Furthermore, students have built upon their initial skills of interpreting and relating gained from Cycle 1 and further enhanced their abilities to discern and explain cultural differences. They can now easily discern inherent cultural differences and offer explanations for them. For example, they explained why smiles differ between Chinese and American cultures and interpreted a scene where a father slaps his son before a boss in the film as his way of showing respect for his boss. These exercises revealed that students are re-evaluating their culture, identifying ethnocentric perspectives within various contexts, and investigating their origins.

Additionally, Cycle 2 intervention has highlighted the emergence of CCA, as students began to demonstrate the ability "to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria, perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries" (Byram, 1997, p.63). They have embarked on a path toward

non-essentialist perspectives, which allows for an objective critique of cultural phenomena.

Students acknowledged their previous lack of objectivity, recognising their tendency to undervalue their own cultural identity in conflicts with non-Chinese individuals, and overemphasise it when dealing with regional differences within China. This duality in perception has been a focal point of introspection. They realised the need to maintain a balanced view of their cultural identity, fostering an environment where they can appreciate both their national and regional identities without bias.

Students now also view global issues, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, through a lens that transcends national boundaries. They no longer associate a radiant smile with a particular nationality, or confine obedience and silence to Chinese characters alone. This depth of reflection indicates a matured understanding what CCA entails, a depth that requires thorough analysis and reflection in intercultural communication. Indeed, valuing one's own culture does not necessitate imposing its principles onto others. Similarly, recognising the merits of a different culture does not preclude critical analysis and study.

7.2.6 Overall ICC Development Beyond Byram's Model After Cycle 2 Intervention

Culture and language. In the current cycle of intervention, students have gained a deeper understanding of the interplay between culture and language, particularly regarding English as a global language. Moreover, this cycle also brought non-verbal communication to the forefront (a concept only briefly touched upon in cycle 1).

Students all recognised non-verbal cues, particularly body language and facial expressions, as crucial in cross-cultural interactions. Some students argued that understanding the roots of non-verbal behaviours in other cultures is vital, more so than simply mimicking these physical expressions without comprehension. They believed that true intercultural communication entails grasping the underlying reasons behind non-verbal behaviours, not just their superficial replication. This approach promotes meaningful cultural integration rather than mere assimilation. Given the integral role of non-verbal communication in human interaction, students suggested that English language learners should have opportunities to learn about these non-verbal aspects within the EFL classroom environment.

Students recognised that English proficiency often correlates with social status in many societies—a revelation that emerged from self-generated incident 4. In regions like Singapore (an “outer circle” country) and China (an “expanding circle” country), fluency in English is frequently associated with both economic advantage and elevated social standing (Choi, 2016). This societal view suggests that those who are fluent in English enjoy higher social standing and better economic opportunities. This perception was recognised by students themselves and was exemplified when a waiter responded in English to a generous tip, which revealed a motivation to learn English as a way to climb the social ladders. This motivation also surfaced in the students' responses to the pre-questionnaire, where they indicated that achieving English proficiency was a means to enhance their social standing and access better

opportunities. Thus, recognising English proficiency as a tool for social mobility significantly drives their language learning efforts.

However, it is important to realise that individual goals for learning English may vary greatly among students. For some, mastering English might not directly correlate with social ascension but arise from the pure joy of learning, the desire to engage with global cultures, or the need to excel academically. Despite these varied individual motivations, all learners of English share the goal of effective cross-cultural communication. Therefore, educators must cater to this diversity by offering an English language education that goes beyond grammatical excellence to foster a nuanced understanding of diverse cultures and the complex dynamics of intercultural communication.

Chinese culture aphasia. Students have encountered what they describe as "Chinese culture aphasia," a term reflecting their struggle to articulate aspects of traditional Chinese culture in English. They found themselves unable to explain topics such as GuaSha therapy, the character of Monkey Sun, or the origins of COVID-19 and China's response to the pandemic. In contexts requiring intercultural communication, Chinese language learners often act as cultural "ambassadors" (Song & Bai, 2018). Chinese college students, in particular, are expected to use English to share their culture with non-Chinese speakers.

Yet, students found themselves at a disadvantage due to two critical factors: insufficient knowledge about their own culture and the difficulty of expressing this

knowledge in English. This gap becomes particularly pronounced when foreigners show curiosity about the nuances of the students' cultural heritage and everyday life.

Students suggested integrating more aspects of Chinese culture into English language instruction. They believed that articulating Chinese cultural elements in English would enhance their language skills and foster a broader appreciation of Chinese culture. This integration could reduce cultural stereotypes and misunderstandings during intercultural exchanges. Moreover, being able to clearly present and share Chinese culture also enhances the country's soft power and overall image on the international stage. This approach positions students as cultural ambassadors, promoting mutual understanding and respect in global interactions.

An ICC model with Chinese perspective In the literature review (2.2.2), I noted the absence of an ICC model from a Chinese perspective. Students have highlighted several key concepts crucial for Chinese intercultural communication, such as “face” (面子, Mian Zi) and “harmony” (和谐, He Xie). While it is recognized that students embody diverse identities across contexts, it is undeniable that Chinese culture forms a significant part of their identity, regardless of its proportion. Cognitive abilities play a vital role in shaping a Chinese version of the ICC model. However, societal development and evolving interpretations across generations necessitate a continuous adaptation of the ICC model with a Chinese perspective, tailored to specific samples.

7.3 Findings of Focus Group Interview

In this cycle, I conducted a focus group interview using the same process as in Cycle 1. This time, the focus group included students who had not previously been interviewed. Due to some students (including those who had not been interviewed before) changing their majors, the focus group interview consisted of only six students. Interviewing students who had not previously participated allowed for a broader range of perspectives and enriched the data collected.

The interview focused on four key areas: 1) students' perspectives on various CIEs resources; 2) their proposals for enhancing intercultural education; 3) their contemplations on the limitations of CIEs, and 4) their critical reflections on the ICC course itself. In the sections below, the participants are labeled as C2I2S2 (denoting cycle2, Interview 2, and Student 2).

7.3.1 Student Feedback on Different CIEs Resources

During their studies, students recognised the importance of self-reflection in generating incidents as an essential means of deepening their identity and enhancing their ICC, particularly in the domains of attitudes and skills of discovery and interpretation. One student (C2I2s8) highlighted the value of introspection, stating, "*I think self-reflection is very important to ICC learning, when I was reexamining the incident happened on myself I would notice that I may have bias or I lacked of ICC at that time.*" This process of self-examination allows students to adopt a more objective and unbiased perspective when considering past events. Another student (C2I2s1) corroborated this view by reflecting, "*When I was thinking back, I actually have a*

different opinion toward the incident. I'm calmer than I was when it happened. So I think reflection is very important.” These insights testify to the students' progress in developing their skills of interpreting and relating, which illustrates the significant role that reflection plays in fostering ICC growth.

In the current study, students reflected on the contrast between teacher-generated incidents based on narrative interviews and those they produced themselves. They found self-generated incidents more engaging and challenging and commended the depth and interest these personal stories provided. One student (C2I2s1) reported, *“I am interested to read other’s experience, I had little intercultural encounter experiences, reading others’ especially the one who very close to me (my classmate’s experience) is very interesting.”*

The majority of students recognised the value of creating their own incidents as a means of learning ICC and responded positively, despite some finding the articulation of their thoughts in writing daunting. The diverse personal narratives prompted deeper reflections and encouraged students to view situations from various cultural perspectives. This approach enhanced their cultural awareness and initiated a process of self-discovery. While some literature discusses the use of self-generated critical incidents in EFL classes recently (Engelking, 2018; Liao,2023), these studies often lack detailed descriptions of the procedure and follow-up feedback from students. This gap highlights the need for further exploration and documentation of the benefits and challenges associated with this approach.

When comparing the impact of self-generated incidents to other forms, such as those from cycle 1 or the COVID-related incident, students noted no difference in the discussion process since the experiences were equally authentic. However, they acknowledged substantial benefits during the composition of their incidents. One student shared, *“This assignment gave me an opportunity to carefully rethink what happened and write down my opinions. In fact, at the time I was writing down I am able to see my own experience in a different angle. My classmates are interested in my story. I heard them discussed in the class. I never thought that my story could be discussed this way and we could use what we learned in this class to explain it.”* Another student (C2I2s5) expressed a similar sentiment, *“I found that I see what happened differently.”* A third student (C2I2s7) thought the course to be very informative, stating that before taking the class, she had to consult friends and relatives due to a lack of her own intercultural experiences. She found it invaluable to view the world through others' perspectives.

Overall, students expressed positive reviews and appreciation for the activity of generating their own incidents. They acknowledged the foundational role that incidents from Cycle 1 intervention played in enabling them to conceive their own incidents, suggesting that such activity would have been challenging without this prior experience. Hence, they advised against tasking beginners with create incidents from scratch or doing so without preparation. Instead, they recommended engaging with pre-existing materials initially, which would be more beneficial for developing the necessary skills and understanding.

Moreover, students provided valuable feedback regarding future revisions. One student (C2I2s2) expressed the difficulty they faced due to limited English proficiency: " *My English is not so good, so writing English is bit difficult for me. Sometimes I can't really write well about what I want to explain. I really wanted to share my interesting experience with my classmates. So next time I would like to offer the chance of explaining my own incident, I am willing to clarify myself clearer perhaps with the help of Chinese in the discussion.*" In response to this feedback, I will invite students to volunteer their incidents for sharing in future sessions rather than selecting participants randomly. This approach will honour their preference to relay personal stories within group discussions and provide them with an avenue to articulate their experiences more effectively and authentically.

Student reactions to video-clip incidents were divided. Some students found the depiction of cultural conflict in films and actors' expressions more vivid and engaging. One student (C2I2s2) commented, "*In the film and the expression of the actors, it is more vivid.*" Another student (C2I2s6) expanded on this, noting, "*Yes, in written worksheet, sometimes I just used or see the word 'shock', 'surprised', 'confused' to express the emotion, however, in the film I can know the extent. It helped me better understand the situation.*"

In contrast, some other students, like C2I2s1, indicated a potential for emotional bias induced by actors' performances compared to the written narratives, which tend to be less emotionally charged and thus allow for more objective analysis. He recounted his emotional response to a tearful grandfather in the film, which led him to

automatically sympathise with the grandfather's perspective, compromising his impartiality during the incident's analysis. This feedback indicates the need for careful consideration in using multimedia in intercultural training to ensure that it enhances, rather than biases, the learning experience. It also underlines the importance of developing students' abilities to critically assess emotional content and remain objective in their interpretations of cultural incidents.

Additionally, students expressed diverse viewpoints regarding the film selection used to explore cultural differences. One student (C2I2s3) appreciated the film as a classic portrayal of cultural conflicts. Conversely, another student (C2I2s2) critiqued the film as outdated, noting it was produced 20 years ago, and argued that some of the ideas have changed over times and that the film perpetuated a stereotyped image of the Chinese. I concurred with this perspective, as it aligns with my decision to construct critical incidents grounded in contemporary student experiences.

This student also proposed updating the material to include more recent films that address intercultural conflicts, such as *The Rich Crazy Asian*, and also recommended following social media bloggers known for intercultural content. These recommendations indicate the students' growing interest in intercultural topics and demonstrate the sessions' success in cultivating their attention in this field. The diverse feedback also serves as evidence of student engagement with the intervention and highlights the advantages of involving students in contributing to the course content.

In my investigation into student responses to the COVID-19 pandemic incident, I was intrigued by why students reacted with anger. Previously in Cycle 1, students addressed discrimination with composed analysis and proposed solutions. However, they exhibited heightened emotions regarding this specific issue. According to C2I2s2 and C2I2s3, media amplification likely intensified their reactions, making terms like "Chinese virus" feel deeply insulting. These students also recognised the potential influence of misinformation, admitting, "*I let the anger get the best of me and is not able to distinguish.*" I agree with C2I2s2's assertion that the pandemic's direct impact on their lives heightened their emotional responses. The pervasiveness of the pandemic deeply affected their daily experiences, contributing to their heightened emotional responses.

During the focus group interview, students reflected on their discussions and recognised that not all Americans hold discriminatory attitudes toward Chinese people. They admitted that they may have unintentionally resorted to "otherisation" in their impassioned discussions. While they affirmed that while there is no justification for tolerating deliberate offense, they also recognised the need for self-defense against such transgressions.

On the other hand, some student, such as C2I2s7, expressed regret about feeling powerless to defend themselves in English, a condition he described as "Chinese culture aphasia." This frustration highlights the complex interplay of language proficiency and cultural identity in shaping students' responses to global events. It

highlights the need for language education to empower students with the ability to articulate their perspectives in such challenging contexts.

Students commented that the incident provided an invaluable opportunity for them to acknowledge their considerable distance from achieving the status of intercultural speakers. They recognised that learning ICC is an ongoing spiral journey, emphasising that ICC development extends far beyond the confines of the sessions experienced. The students' interest in such incidents suggests that they perceive them as crucial elements in their journey toward ICC. This perspective highlights the importance of continuous learning and reflection in developing the skills needed for effective intercultural communication.

From their responses, I understood the importance of incorporating contemporary events into CIEs to ensure relevance and timeliness in students' learning experiences. Employing teacher-generated incidents derived from authentic experiences proved to be exceptionally effective in the early stages of CIEs aimed at cultivating ICC. Although the task of creating incidents presented challenges for the students, they found it to be a rewarding endeavour. Additionally, incorporating video clips that capture non-verbal communication also proved beneficial. However, the selection of materials, such as films or resources, should be updated to ensure contemporaneity. Engaging with people's emotions when interacting is equally important. This approach validates the significance of incorporating current affairs, like COVID-19-related incidents, to maintain student interest and relevance to their learning journey.

7.3.2 Suggestions for Better Intercultural Education

Students' feedback revealed three critical areas for improvement. Firstly, they advocated for integrating Chinese cultural elements into the ICC framework. Secondly, they preferred increased real-time interaction within the learning process. Lastly, they suggested shifting towards more oral activities instead of written exercises to better develop communication skills.

Students expressed their growing awareness of the significance of self and cultural understanding within the context of ICC. One student (C212s6) emphasised the significance of self-exploration, stating, "*I can say I am more interested in myself, I want to know and negotiate my self-identity during different context, but first of all, I need to know these things and then to see how these things worked in my identity.*" This comment highlights the need for self-knowledge as a foundation for understanding one's place in a broader cultural matrix.

Furthermore, students emphasised that understanding Chinese culture involves recognising how cultural features influence individual identity rather than embodying it as a monolithic representation. They noted, "*Understanding Chinese culture and being able to talk about Chinese culture is a good way to avoid misunderstanding and defend ourselves when encountering with discrimination or being stereotypes.*" This demonstrates their eagerness to see Chinese culture integrated into ICC interventions. It also signifies a desire for a curriculum that is not only global in perspective but also affirms their cultural heritage.

The students' second suggestion aligns with my earlier suggestions from Cycle 1, which means that the students themselves have recognised a gap in their development of ICC, specifically a shortfall in their experiential learning. They voiced concern about "learning not practising" (C2I2s4). This highlights the merit of role play as a beneficial practice method when circumstances allow.

The final suggestion aligns closely with the second one. The writing load was notably reduced from Cycle 1, as per students' preferences. Yet, the students still expressed a desire for more engagement in oral activities rather than written exercises. One student (C2I2s1) captured this view by stating his enjoyment of the discussion process with his group mates. He reported a newfound willingness to converse in English but associated writing with stress and advocated for diversifying the follow-up CIEs. He suggested that worksheets could remain part of the repertoire but should be supplemented by more interactive forms such as oral debates and role-plays.

After two cycles of intervention, students not only improved their ICC but also gained a deeper understanding of themselves. In the forthcoming chapter, I will synthesise the insights from both intervention cycles and attempt to address my research questions comprehensively.

Chapter 8 Insights from Intervention Cycles 1 and 2

Globalisation has transformed education, compelling educators to reassess traditional language teaching methods. This shift is particularly relevant in contexts where English is taught as a foreign language. As the emphasis on developing ICC among learners is now more critical than ever, educators face the challenge of integrating cultural awareness and sensitivity into their curricula. This dissertation focuses on the role of CIEs as a strategic pedagogical tool to enhance the ICC of Chinese college students learning English.

Byram's (1997) model of ICC provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the multifaceted nature of intercultural competence. This model includes five key domains: knowledge and attitudes toward intercultural communication, understanding of self and others, discovery and interaction capacities, interpretation and relation skills, and critical cultural awareness. These domains offer a structured approach to assess and improve students' intercultural abilities. This research examines the effectiveness of CIEs in fostering these competencies, using a case study approach at a university in Shanghai.

8.1 Advancing ICC through CIEs

Research Question 1: How can CIEs advance the ICC of Chinese college students who learn English as a foreign language?

The findings, analysed using Byram's ICC model, revealed several key outcomes. The first domain of Byram's model emphasises the importance of developing positive attitudes toward intercultural communication. The study found

that after participating in two cycles of CIE intervention, students exhibited a heightened awareness of their cultural identities and an increased willingness to engage with diverse cultures. This shift in attitude is critical for effective intercultural communication and reflects the success of the CIEs in fostering openness and curiosity about other cultures.

Intercultural competence also requires a deep understanding of one's own cultural identity as well as the ability to empathise with others. The findings revealed that after the CIE intervention, students gained a clearer understanding of their interactions within multicultural contexts and enhanced their ability to navigate cultural differences with empathy and clarity. This improvement aligns with the second domain of Byram's model and underscores the importance of self-awareness in intercultural communication.

The intervention's success also extended to Byram's third domain as students displayed greater abilities to initiate and sustain intercultural dialogues, bridging cultural divides with newly developed competence. Skills for interpretation and relation, which constitute Byram's fourth domain, also witnessed marked improvement as participants began employing cultural frameworks to decode and contextualise international events, which signals improved intercultural literacy. Moreover, the findings indicated that students developed a more nuanced understanding of cultural narratives and exhibited a willingness to question their assumptions. This growth in critical awareness aligns with the fifth domain of

Byram's model and demonstrates the transformative potential of CIEs in cultivating reflective and critical thinkers.

Byram's ICC model served as a crucial framework in this research, enabling an in-depth examination of the effects of CIEs on students' development in ICC. This model was instrumental not only in understanding how students' ICC evolved but also in structuring the intervention. Empirical evidence from this research suggests that Byram's model is not just a theoretical construct but reflects a promising practical avenue for integrating ICC development into language learning contexts. Data from the participants validated the significance of each of Byram's domains in ICC development and illustrated their interdependent nature. The effectiveness of the CIE intervention, as evidenced by participants' improved cultural literacy and cross-cultural empathy, affirms the models' relevance in guiding educational initiatives that seek to nurture linguistically adept and culturally aware communicators. However, the research indicates that Byram's model should be modified to better suit the context and needs of contemporary Chinese students for cross-cultural communication. The subsequent sections will expand upon the effects of CIEs on each of these five domains to better answer the first research question.

8.1.1 Development of Knowledge

Byram (2006) suggests that ICC courses generally help learners acquire cultural knowledge. Unlike other ICC-related studies (e.g., Qin, 2015; Salem, 2012), this research did not focus on identifying specific cultural knowledge or the "big C culture" as a learning outcome of the CIE intervention. Instead, participants gained a

broader understanding of culture rather than culture-specific facts. My data suggests that this general knowledge gained from the CIE intervention aids students in discerning and appreciating cultural diversity.

Through self-generated incidents, students recognised variations in intercultural communication and moved beyond a monolithic “Chinese” identity or homogeneous “northern people” perspective. This aligns with Mok (2022), who suggests that broad cultural learning can be more effective than narrow, culture-specific education. Mok (2022) emphasises that a wide-ranging cultural education fosters a comprehensive understanding of one’s own identity and the identities of others. By establishing a broader understanding of culture, the CIE intervention also steers students away from stereotypical interpretations of culture-specific competencies. Instead, it guides them toward a nuanced awareness of cultural diversity (Stadler, 2011). This approach enables students to recognise that they are not solely defined by their nationality and that others are not just "Americans" or "Chinese," but individuals with diverse cultural backgrounds.

Furthermore, students effectively used non-verbal language, such as gestures and smiles, in their intercultural interactions. They gained insights into various intercultural communication terms, including cultural shock, stereotypes, and the concepts of essentialism versus non-essentialism. Additionally, They also learned about different conversational styles, which equipped them with tools for effective intercultural interaction. These skills and understandings have enhanced their ability

to navigate and engage in diverse cultural settings, fostering more meaningful and empathetic communication.

8.1.2 Fostering Intercultural Attitudes

The CIE intervention focused on the development of attitudes conducive to intercultural communication. Nearly all participants expressed a willingness to step outside their comfort zones and initiate interactions with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. This behaviour demonstrated not only an openness to intercultural dialogue but also indicated readiness to adapt to cultural differences.

In the Cycle 2 intervention, student curiosity became more pronounced. This increased curiosity likely resulted from the cumulative effect of earlier interactions. Astleitner and Wiesner (2004) suggest that iterative learning processes significantly sustain learners' intrinsic motivation and effectively stimulate their curiosity. In this research, students engaged deeply with diverse cultures through various culturally related incidents. These initial experiences served as a springboard, encouraging them to further explore and inquire into unfamiliar cultural practices. This iterative learning process, enriched by reflective practices and facilitated encounters within the course structure, likely propelled students towards more active and self-directed cultural investigations.

Moreover, participants in this research tended to delve into deeper intercultural analysis, particularly during shared examinations of their own cultural norms. Such engagements encouraged them to reflect more deeply on their own cultural beliefs and articulate their cultural understanding. They discussed these reflections with peers

from diverse regions of China, thus enhancing their ICC. However, this reflective process may sometimes give rise to a phenomenon known as cultural aphasia, where expressing cultural concepts becomes challenging. Despite this, the tendency to reflect and articulate remains integral to ICC development. It spurs individuals to learn, observe and interpret various cultural narratives (Qin, 2015).

Additionally, cultivating an intercultural attitude also involves fostering cultural confidence and understanding deep-rooted cultural beliefs. For instance, the Chinese notion of “harmony” often guides the Chinese towards a mediating stance when confronted with cultural misunderstandings or conflicts. This research encouraged participants to recognise and reflect on such cultural tenets, aiding them in resolving misunderstandings and interpreting behaviours in intercultural interactions.

However, it is essential to balance cultural appreciation with an awareness of personal classification based on cultural generalisations. Acknowledging cultural influences does not necessitate reducing individuals to stereotypes. Instead, it allows for a deeper understanding that respects individual variations within a shared cultural framework. This research promoted a non-essentialist view, which avoids homogenising cultural identities and instead fosters a dynamic conception of culture. My teaching and student data showed that this balanced perspective enhanced their intercultural communication competence.

The 12-session intervention has started to shape students’ attitudes toward cultural neutrality, yet the data suggest that they are still at an early stage of this developmental process. This finding aligns with the idea that learning about culture is

an ongoing endeavour that extends beyond the classroom confines and requires continuous efforts. In this view, ICC needs to be addressed from a holistic perspective that recognises individuals as integral components of a broader relational system, not as isolated entities. This approach underscores the necessity to continually update skills to address the challenges presented by an increasingly internationalised society (Onorati & Bednarz, 2010).

To foster this ongoing development, I recommend providing EFL learners with sustained encouragement and support. Educators should motivate students to pursue their learning actively, urge them to find common ground, and provide forums to explore and discuss cultural differences. More opportunities should be provided to improve students' ability to navigate diverse cultural backgrounds. These educational challenges highlight the necessity for iterative refinement in EFL class design. Such pedagogical enhancements are crucial for cultivating a sophisticated and enduring intercultural outlook among students. Additionally, these improvements equip students with the skills to mediate and resolve cultural conflicts effectively.

8.1.3 The Development of Discovery and Interaction Skills

Participants reported improved skills in discerning cultural similarities and differences in interactional styles and responding appropriately. They attributed this improvement largely to the video appreciation activity, which empowered them to independently identify cultural misunderstandings and diversities through observation. Such activities enabled participants to enhance their intercultural understanding by actively engaging in cultural analysis. In the absence of real

intercultural experiences, video clips served as an alternative that offered visual contexts for students to perceive and interpret critical verbal and non-verbal cues, including facial expressions and body language.

The COVID-19 pandemic presented unique challenges, making face-to-face communication unfeasible during the intervention (cycle-2), thus limiting the opportunities for real-time linguistic and cultural exchanges. Despite this, the primary aim of this intervention remained: to nurture the students' ability to recognise different cultures through alternative means. The participants reported that viewing culturally relevant videos and examining others' authentic experiences served as effective methods for understating the differences in cultures. However, they critiqued the choice of films, suggesting that the selection was not optimal. Despite this, they learned to actively seek information and stay informed about different cultural practices. Thus, the intervention achieved some success in enhancing students' discovery and interaction abilities, even without direct interlocutors.

8.1.4 The Acquisition of Skills for Interpretation and Relation

The CIE intervention facilitated the development of participants' skills essential for interpreting and connecting cultural contexts. Students recognised their biases and the presence of ethnocentrism. They gained a deeper appreciation of their cultural heritage, which has led to the joyful observation in everyday life and a critical reassessment of their perspectives towards their peers. Such skills contributed to their heightened cultural awareness and enabled them to challenge preconceived notions.

This was particularly true in Cycle 2, where students' enhanced abilities to interpret and connect cultural contexts became more pronounced.

The enhanced outcomes observed in Cycle 2 may be attributed to two key factors: the cumulative effect of the learning process and adjustments made in response to student feedback. First, the iterative nature of the learning process allowed earlier experiences to inform and enrich subsequent sessions, thereby facilitating deeper student engagement and reflections in Cycle 2. Additionally, modifications to the intervention based on student feedback from the first cycle ensured the intervention remained dynamic and responsive to participants' needs. Burns (2011) suggests that the concept of “learners” in AR involves both students and teachers/researchers. Reflecting on this perspective, I refined my approach in Cycle 2 to encourage the participants to create their own critical intercultural incidents based on their authentic experiences. This strategy aimed to deter participants' essentialist thinking and stereotyping that they might otherwise overlook. By actively involving students in generating research-based analyses, the Cycle 2 intervention not only avoided reinforcing essentialist viewpoints but also promoted a more inclusive, analytical exploration of cultural interactions.

8.1.5 The Promotion of Critical Cultural Awareness

After the CIE intervention, participants showed initial improvement in critical cultural awareness, notably in their use of intercultural criteria to evaluate and interpret diverse cultural values. For instance, they demonstrated an awareness post-intervention that intercultural learning extends beyond the mere mimicry of

behaviours. They started to recognise the value of identifying and bridging cultural gaps to make informed decisions. This shift from blind imitation to investigative learning is exemplified by one participant's curiosity about the cultural roots of the "bro handshake-hug" and his desire to research its origins, rather than simply replicating the gesture without understanding.

The ultimate goal of fostering critical cultural awareness involves equipping students with the ability to critically evaluate cultural patterns and perspectives (Byram, 1997). Achieving this objective is demanding, as students must gather extensive cultural information and improve their ability to respond to such information. This skill is particularly crucial for identifying and mediating cultural similarities and differences. When faced with intercultural misunderstandings, students must cultivate critical thinking, which in turn enhances their proficiency across the other four ICC domains.

Mastering ICC demands an extended period for students to practise their skills and deepen their understanding. However, language programme designers and educators face great challenges due to resource constraints and time limits. Establishing a high level of critical cultural awareness within a brief intervention is demanding (Qin, 2015). Nevertheless, the skills acquired and the shifted attitudes and curiosity developed during this intervention should provide a solid foundation for students to further their exploration after the intervention. The findings of this research demonstrate that an effective CIE intervention should recognise the need for constant innovation based on feedback. This approach facilitates student ICC

development, with a particular emphasis on critical cultural awareness for greater efficacy.

8.1.6 Conclusions

This research demonstrated that CIEs could affect the ICC growth across all five domains. Through CIEs, students showcased marked improvements in understanding cultural nuances, and in their skills in interpreting, relating, and evaluating diverse cultural values. This approach fostered a deeper cultural awareness among students and motivated them to apply these insights critically in real-world scenarios. The cumulative effect of the intervention was evident in the students' increased curiosity and proactive attitude toward learning and reflecting on cultural differences. Moreover, CIEs facilitated the development of critical cultural awareness, thus laying a solid foundation for students to continuously explore intercultural dynamics. Overall, CIEs proved critical in advancing students' proficiency across all five ICC domains, which underlined its efficacy in cultivating well-rounded intercultural communicators.

8.2 Examining Students' Identity Transformation Through CIEs

Research Question 2: How do CIEs influence students' perceived identity transformation?

As students developed their ICC through the CIE intervention, they began to redefine themselves. They implicitly explored their evolving self-perceptions, reflecting on "Who I desire to be," "Who I could be," and "Who I am" within the context of intercultural communication (Ghosh & Wang, 2003). They transitioned

from identifying primarily as English learners to viewing themselves as intercultural speakers. This section examines how students perceive changes in their identity after the CIE intervention.

8.2.1 Transition from English Learners to English Users

Language facilitates personal subjectivity and plays an important role in social practices, enabling individuals to express themselves and construct their identities (Norton & Costa, 2018). Viewing English as part of a global linguistic system has facilitated an identity shift among those engaged in intercultural communication. Evidence from student feedback and reflections showed that they began to envision themselves not just as learners but as intercultural speakers, crafting an “imagined identity” within imagined communities. Anderson (1983) described imagined communities as groups formed in the minds of individuals who see themselves as part of a collective identity, even without direct interaction. This concept helps explain how students perceive their evolving roles in a global context.

Identity formation is an ongoing journey of self-discovery (Atay & Ece, 2009). One's attitude towards language plays a crucial role in this journey, where language transcends its communicative utility to become a medium for individuals to present and position themselves (Jenkins, 2007). Previous research suggests that identity, much like culture, is complicated, unstable, and fluid (Edwards, 2009; Norton & Costa, 2018). This complexity is further evidenced by the challenges EFL learners face in maintaining their cultural identity amidst traditional pressures to conform to native speaker norms.

Kirkpatrick (2012) advocated for expressing one's mother language (L1) identity while using English as a second language (L2). This expression can include maintaining one's accent or unique expressions, which Moyer (2014) identified as significant indicators of identity. Jenkins (2009) contended that striving for native-speaker pronunciation should not be the goal for L2 learners; rather, they should feel entitled to speak English with their L1 accents. Jenkins (2003) observed a desire among L2 learners to retain elements of their L1 accents to emphasise their unique identity. Jenkins (2006) further noted the importance of self-identification within English-speaking contexts through accents. This gradual shift in perception from learners to users of English demonstrates a broader understanding of language learning as a deeply personal and identity-affirming process.

The current research reveals that prior to the CIE intervention, participants displayed a strong preference for native English varieties, specifically British and American English. They often associated these varieties with concepts of “ownership” and “standards”, which aligns with Kachru's “Inner Circle” countries that are perceived as benchmarks for linguistic norms. This perspective rendered Chinese English less intelligible in intercultural exchanges. However after the intervention, participants began to use more positive descriptors for their own version of English.

The extensive spread of English, coupled with globalisation, has deeply integrated Western cultures and values into Chinese life, transforming and challenging the identities and self-esteem of individuals in Mainland China (Lamberton & Ashton, 2015). Since China's policy of “opening up” in 90s, Chinese

youth have experienced a noticeable shift in values. Some feel a sense of humiliation or timidity in speaking English due to perceived national inferiority and the “superiority” of the Western world (Liu & Jackson, 2008). This has led some Chinese individuals to assimilate into Western culture at their own expense (Zhang & Defoe, 2009).

Before the sessions, my students felt “inferiority” and “shame” when unable to speak like native English speakers. The dominance of native English discourse fostered a belief among students that they must not only speak English competently but also assimilate native cultural norms to project a positive self-image (Sung, 2016). Such perceptions challenged their national pride and emotional connection to their culture.

The CIE intervention sparked a re-evaluation of these perspectives. Post-session, students demonstrated a renewed sense of national pride and expressed their hope for mutual cultural understanding. They wanted that their English and cultural expressions recognised and respected by their international counterparts. This shift indicates that the participants have moved towards embracing a more global, yet distinctly Chinese, perspective on English usage in intercultural contexts.

8.2.2 Enhanced Self-Awareness

Understanding oneself is the first step in navigating intercultural communication (Gudykunst & Kim, 1992). In the current research, the CIE intervention helped the participants explore and articulate their identities within the context of intercultural exchanges to address the introspective question of “Who am I?” This was a key

teaching objective, as understanding one's identity is crucial for effective intercultural communication.

Traditional ICC training emphasises knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Byram, 1997; Spitzberg, 2010). In China, however, critical cultural awareness often remains neglected in classroom settings. For instance, Qin (2015) focused on the application of intercultural approaches in Chinese college language teaching and revealed minimal enhancement in students' critical cultural awareness. This knowledge gap is even more pronounced in studies focusing on Chinese private universities. This oversight represents a broader misunderstanding in the field: while much emphasis is placed on understanding “the other”, self-awareness forms a crucial, often overlooked, component of cultural awareness (Khanukaeva, 2020). Echoing the findings of the literature review, cognitive factors play a significant role in the Chinese version of the ICC model. However, there is a noticeable scarcity of models specifically tailored to Chinese samples, particularly focusing on students in Chinese private universities. This research confirms that for these students, Chinese forms of Intercultural Competence (ICC), such as notions of face and harmony, hold considerable value. It suggests a renewed understanding of these traditional Chinese principles within the context of contemporary intercultural communication, emphasizing a non-essentialist perspective suited to a globalized world.

Recognising self-awareness as integral to cultural understanding aligns with the broader discourse on ICC. As discussed in the literature review, ICC construction is not a linear process but rather an interplay among various components: knowledge,

attitudes, skills, and critical cultural awareness. These elements dynamically interact, and enhancing one component, such as self-awareness, can significantly bolster the others, leading to a more profound and comprehensive ICC (Fantini, 2009).

The CIEs in this research effectively fostered self-awareness among students. These exercises particularly addressed teacher-student relationships and COVID-related incidents. Under my guidance, students re-evaluated their educational and cultural values. Spencer-Oatey and Stadler (2009) highlighted the necessity for individuals to understand how their actions might be perceived by others as unfamiliar or difficult to accept. This sensitivity and openness to other cultures are essential for navigating intercultural interactions successfully.

After the intervention, participants began recognising the fluid nature of identity within intercultural interactions. They understood culture and self as dynamic entities that evolve through interactions with diverse cultural contexts. This evolution requires adopting new strategies and perceptions to navigate changing situations effectively. Therefore, the participants began to perceive their identities as adaptable. They recognised that identities could change according to the context rather than remaining static. This dynamic identity extends beyond national labels, with participants acknowledging their Chinese heritage while also identifying with broader, more complex self-conceptions.

For example, Chinese international students might select the most suitable facet of their multifaceted identity when faced with specific contextual cues. This selection enables them to adapt to their surroundings while preserving core aspects of their

identity (Gardner et al., 1997). Such reflections indicate that participants recognised themselves not just as Chinese but as individuals embodying diverse cultural characteristics and experiences. This shift towards viewing identity as multifaceted rather than monolithic reflects the participants' deeper engagement with the complexities of intercultural interactions.

8.2.3 Renewed Cultural Identity

Cultural identity significantly influences an individual's identity and worldview. Ashforth and Schinoff (2016) suggest that this identity evolves as one interprets, adopts, or rejects new norms, behaviours, values, and beliefs. Engaging with CIEs, students subconsciously integrated new cultural elements into their identities. This integration involved switching between System 1 (automatic) and System 2 (deliberate) thinking processes, as outlined in the CIE introduction. Continuous training in these exercises fostered muscle memory, making this a subconscious process. This process marks the beginning of the formation of a renewed cultural identity.

This renewal of cultural identity manifests in three main aspects: 1) an enhanced ICC integrated with a deeper understanding of Chinese culture—a phenomenon I term as “ICC with Chinese wisdom”, 2) an increase in cultural confidence, and 3) a redefined role of Chinese identity in a global context. Through this renewal process, students started to view Chinese culture through a new lens and began to appreciate its depth and relevance in international interactions.

ICC with Chinese wisdom. Students often interpret events through their own cultural lens, which significantly affects their ICC development and strategies in intercultural exchanges. Despite the important role of cultural underpinnings, research on intercultural communication that captures distinct Chinese characteristics remains relatively rare (Chen, 2011). This research shed light on intercultural cognition and behaviours as perceived by Chinese students.

One salient theme that emerged from student reports is the significance of “harmony” in shaping Chinese cultural identity. Chen (2011) suggests that personal interactions within Chinese society aim to forge interpersonal and social relationships devoid of conflict. Therefore, the ability to cultivate and maintain harmonious relations amidst an ever-changing environment of mutual dependence is regarded as a hallmark of effective Chinese communication practices.

In addressing COVID-related discrimination, most participants preferred to inform others about China's epidemic prevention measures. They contextualised these measures within China's national conditions, historical background, and cultural values, rather than engaging in confrontation. This approach demonstrates a preference for understanding and dialogue over confrontation, which aligns with the broader Chinese cultural emphasis on harmony and conflict avoidance.

Prior to the CIE intervention, participants often equated harmony with uniformity. This perspective was evident in several ways. First, participants would promptly apologise during conflicts, which demonstrated a preference for immediate reconciliation. Second, they would mimic native speakers’ behaviours, including

gestures and lifestyle choices, aiming for assimilation over acculturation. Third, they regarded native English as the gold linguistic standard and aspired to emulate it closely.

However, following the completion of the CIE intervention, students' conception of harmony evolved significantly. They began to appreciate harmony not as uniformity but as a synthesis of diverse perspectives. This new conceptualisation of harmony reflects a deeper comprehension of cultural dynamics. Students no longer sought to replicate or erase differences. Instead, they aimed to engage with diverse cultures in a manner that respects both their heritage and the global context. This shift showcases the value of educational interventions in enriching students' intercultural perspectives and competencies.

The Chinese government has always actively pursued the creation of a harmonious world and society (Zheng & Tok, 2007). At the core of intercultural communication lies the management of differences that stem from distinct communicative norms and cultural backgrounds. It is crucial, therefore, that intercultural communication embraces and respects these differences.

Initially, my students equated harmony with uniformity, often seeking to avoid conflict by conforming to others. However, through the course, they have come to appreciate this diversity, demonstrating tolerance by engaging with, reflecting upon, and integrating these differences into their understanding of their own culture. This process has led them to a new conceptualisation of harmony, recognising it as the synthesis of diverse perspectives rather than uniformity.

Fung (2007) eloquently distinguishes between uniformity and harmony, stating:

Harmony is the reconciling of differences into a harmonious unity....Harmony, may be illustrated by cooking. Water, vinegar, pickles, salt, and plums are used to cook fish. From these ingredients there results a new taste which is neither that of the vinegar nor of the pickles. Uniformity or identity, on the other hand, may be likened to attempt to flavor with water, or to confine a piece to one note. In both cases there is nothing new. Herein lies the distinction between the Chinese words t'ung <同> and ho <和>. Tung means uniformity or identity, which is incompatible with difference. Ho means harmony, which is not incompatible with difference; on the contrary, it results when differences are brought together to form a unity (p.284).

Reflecting on the non-essentialist view of culture, this understanding of harmony aligns with the idea that individuals can belong to multiple groups and embrace varied identities. This perspective of harmony indicates that differences do not diminish one's cultural identity but enrich it. Confucius captured this notion by saying “君子和而不同” (Jun Zi He Er Bu Tong), suggesting that a gentleman can maintain harmony without necessarily agreeing with others. Thus, after the CIE intervention, participants deepened their understanding of harmony, recognising it as an embrace of diversity rather than uniformity. This evolution in their understanding demonstrates a broader, more inclusive view of cultural identity, where differences are not just acknowledged but celebrated as part of a cohesive whole.

Cultural confidence. Cultural confidence plays an increasingly critical role in the context of global interdependence and interconnectedness. This factor

significantly contributes to expanding China's international influence today, alongside its economic growth and military strengthening (You, 2018). My students have come to realise their pivotal roles as disseminators of “soft culture,” which encompasses cultural values, traditions, and ideologies. Their actions were driven by a keen desire to understand and articulate their national culture in English, the global language. They also exhibited a strong patriotic response when facing discrimination and stereotypes, which demonstrated their commitment to promoting a positive image of China abroad.

Students’ perceptions of Chinese identity, history, and values shape their interactions on the global stage. According to Wang (2023), students with a strong sense of cultural identity are more likely to engage in cultural exchange programmes, advocate for Chinese values, and promote Chinese soft power abroad. This cultural confidence equips Chinese EFL students to handle intercultural encounters with resilience and adaptability. By upholding their cultural identity while respecting and appreciating cultural differences, these students can navigate complex intercultural settings effectively (Guan et.al., 2022).

Intercultural speaker identity. As stated in the literature review, the concept of an “intercultural speaker” differentiates from a “native speaker” by emphasising intercultural rather than cultural competence. After the CIE intervention, students began to embrace this identity, recognising the importance of ICC in resolving conflicts across diverse cultural interactions.

According to Byram (1997), intercultural speakers adeptly resolve conflicts across various contexts, including interactions with native speakers and within their own social groups. This capability was evident in activities focused on self-generated incidents and CIEs addressing cultural and linguistic aspects. Students concentrated on their relationships with classmates, actively seeking resolutions to conflicts and applying these solutions in everyday communication. This process not only facilitated a deeper understanding of intercultural dynamics but also marked a transition from seeing themselves only as English learners to active English users.

Therefore, the evidence from these activities highlights an important transformation in student identities. Participants have transitioned from learning English to actively using it in various contexts. This evolution marks a leap in their journey towards becoming competent intercultural communicators who can engage effectively across diverse cultural contexts.

CIEs derived from the authentic experiences of the students emerge as a better method for developing intercultural speakers compared to traditional ICC teaching approaches. Traditional teaching materials generally prioritise theoretical knowledge and follow a systematic progression through predefined content (Brown, 2008). In contrast, using authentic experiences as teaching materials emphasises experiential learning. This approach allows students to explore topics in meaningful contexts and develop practical skills through firsthand experiences. As outlined in the literature review, CIEs are designed as simple intercultural communication scenarios or dialogues that highlight cultural aspects that may pose challenges or appear unfamiliar

in realistic situations (Hartmann & Schocker, 2017). During two cycles of intervention, participants engaged in various scenarios illustrating cultural misunderstandings, ranging from dietary differences and teacher-student relationships to peer interactions and COVID-19-related incidents.

The effectiveness of CIEs lies in their relevance to the learners' daily lives, as students may gain more from scenarios closely related to their real-life experiences (Risager, 2004). In this research, the developed incidents, except for the use of video clips, spanned various authentic situations derived from the experiences of students overseas. These situations served as rich sources for cultural learning. Abid (2012) argues that a lack of knowledge can prevent students from analysing issues from multiple perspectives and may skew their understanding of a culture or a group. Therefore, exposure to diverse perspectives through CIEs enables individuals to acknowledge the existence of differing viewpoints and engage in comparative analysis.

8.3 Implications for ICC Instruction

The findings of this study have significant implications for the application of Byram's ICC model across its various domains, as well as for educators, curriculum developers, teaching methodologies, and future research. The results underscore the importance of integrating practical, real-life experiences into ICC instruction. The following sections will discuss these implications in detail within the context of Chinese private universities.

Research Question 3: What are the pedagogical implications of developing and

employing CIEs within the Chinese Private University EFL setting?

8.3.1 Implications for Cultivating Intercultural Knowledge

Cultural knowledge involves a broad range of social and culture-specific aspects, including beliefs, values, lifestyles, social conventions, interpersonal relations, and modes of non-verbal communication (LaFrance, 1978). This breadth of knowledge plays a crucial role in shaping other areas of ICC learning. Therefore, language learners should actively engage in acquiring cultural knowledge. The goal here is to amass a comprehensive understanding of various cultures, including academic, non-Chinese, and teacher-student cultures, and understand the nuances of intercultural interaction.

This research has moved beyond the prevalent practice in Chinese English language education, which traditionally focuses on the target culture alone. Traditional practices often prioritise the culture of native speakers (Kramsch, 2014), thereby overlooking the dynamic and transitional nature of intercultural communication (Baker, 2011). While the specific cultural knowledge of native speakers offers undeniable advantages, such as being readily accessible through language-rich resources like films, videos, and magazines, it also risks promoting cultural dominance (Stadler, 2017). This research attempted to address this imbalance by incorporating diverse cultural perspectives and recognising the fluid nature of intercultural communication.

Nevertheless, possessing some level of culture-specific information can be beneficial. Learners can leverage language-rich resources such as films, videos, and

magazines to develop culture-generic skills, provided they have already established a foundation in culture-specific competence. Mastering intercultural competencies such as mindfulness, flexibility, and openness enables learners to navigate and apply culture-specific information adeptly.

Therefore, the synergy of these competencies facilitates the evolution of a learner into a proficient intercultural speaker. This approach marks a departure from the common practices in Chinese English education, which often focus narrowly on native-speaker cultures. Instead, it promotes a more inclusive and dynamic understanding of cultural education for my students.

Achieving a balanced approach to teaching both local and foreign cultures is crucial to avoid the pitfalls of ethnocentrism, stereotyping, or assimilation. In my classroom, I purposefully reduced the emphasis on the target culture, encouraging students to engage with their local or national culture to enhance their ICC. This adjustment stems from observing students' prior experiences with cultural education, where an excessive focus on the culture of native speakers often led to stereotyping. Feedback from the participants indicates that this strategy of reducing the focus on the target culture helps mitigate stereotypes and fosters a non-essentialist perspective on culture.

Byram (1997) defined the concept of the intercultural speaker as someone who integrates their own culture into the interpretation and analysis of information about other cultures. Developing such intercultural competence is challenging in real-life situations because such a process requires learners to engage in critical thinking and

self-reflection. Duffy (2002) observed similar outcomes among secondary French learners, suggesting that recognising the socio-cultural dynamics between local and target cultures would significantly enhance language learning for undergraduates and learners who have attained a certain level of linguistic proficiency.

The current CIE intervention has succeeded by placing equal emphasis on the acquisition of both local and target cultural knowledge. As a result, students actively integrated their own cultural perspectives into the analysis of cultural issues during the intervention. I attribute the success of the intervention to the following aspects that may also be beneficial for related research.

First, the curriculum introduced scenarios that resonated with the students. The CIEs were developed from interviews with participants' peers and presented relatable topics like teacher-student and peer relationships, which helped students reflect and establish personal connections. Moreover, group discussions have proven effective in facilitating deeper cultural connections. Qin (2016) noted the power of personal experience as a basis for discussion, allowing students to explore cultural topics and share viewpoints. Lastly, the introduction of self-generated incidents received positive feedback, with students finding this method beneficial for reflection.

Students must first become deeply aware of their own culture before they can interpret other cultures effectively. This awareness, cultivated through cultural self-reflection, encourages them to consider different values and to discard ethnocentric judgments. Therefore, it is essential to encourage students to develop a greater awareness of their culture, particularly in the EFL courses in Chinese higher

education institutions. These courses may include innovative activities designed to enhance students' understanding of local cultural expressions.

Most research on ICC aims to increase an individual's ability to utilise their cultural knowledge flexibly and foster appropriate behaviours, rather than create a rigid understanding of cultural differences (Samovar, et al., 2015). However, given that culture is fluid (Holliday, 2001), no one can grasp all the information about a culture, nor should that be the aim. Instead, the ultimate goal of ICC teaching should be to develop individuals' capacity to adjust to unfamiliar scenarios beyond their current knowledge base.

Intercultural communication inherently involves misunderstandings, errors, and mistakes (Stadler, 2017). Thus, it is fraught with challenges and complexities. While culture-specific competence is valuable, culture-general knowledge can prevent or at least mitigate the impact of such communication mishaps. On the other hand, incorporating general cultural knowledge into education does not mean neglecting culture-specific information. Instead, it means integrating both in meaningful ways to allow for the development of broader cultural understanding (Stadler, 2017).

Acquiring general cultural knowledge is not as straightforward as learning specific cultural information (Stadler, 2017). Therefore, when planning cultural knowledge instruction, it is crucial to consider various factors such as programme duration and participants' ICC levels. Additionally, student feedback is also a great source based on which educators can modify their teaching approach promptly, thus turning pitfalls into valuable learning opportunities.

8.3.2 Implications for Cultivating Intercultural Attitude

Understanding and appreciating other cultures greatly depends on one's attitude, which is crucial for successful interactions between individuals from different cultural backgrounds. In EFL classes, cultivating a positive intercultural attitude that aligns with the non-essentialist view of culture is important for students to broaden their experiences, identify similarities, and navigate differences (Byram, 2003). Incorporating strategies for attitudinal development into their teaching methods and content can greatly enhance the cultivation of ICC among students and contribute to improved educational outcomes (Qin, 2016).

Additionally, opportunities for culture-specific experiential learning are not always accessible to all learners and are sometimes absent in language acquisition efforts. Therefore, it becomes necessary to implement experiential learning strategies, such as integrating simulated scenarios, within higher education institutions in China. While some disciplines, like business, law, and nursing, may already employ experiential learning, EFL courses, particularly as general university courses, often lack such approaches and the English classes are always considered boring by students (Li, 2021).

Based on this research, CIEs have proven to be a successful approach, particularly in developing attitudinal competence among students. Participants in this study demonstrated increased openness, flexibility, and greater empathy towards cultural differences after engaging with CIEs. These positive outcomes suggest a potential need for reform within the Chinese higher education system to provide more

experiential learning opportunities in EFL courses to prepare students for real-world intercultural interactions.

Furthermore, educators in China should also consider the Chinese philosophical concepts that may affect ICC development when cultivating Chinese students' attitudes. Many Chinese scholars concur that attitude is a major component of ICC development in the Chinese context (Deardorff & Kulich, 2017). A Chinese version of ICC extends beyond the Western ICC models to include distinct Chinese philosophies such as "harmony" and "中庸" (Zhong Yong), which translates to "the golden mean" in English. While both harmony and Zhong Yong emphasise balance, they differ in their applications. "Harmony" focuses on maintaining positive interpersonal relationships by resolving conflicts and ensuring that interactions remain smooth and respectful. "Zhong Yong" extends to personal conduct, suggesting that individuals should avoid extremes and strive for a balanced approach in their actions and decisions. Together, these philosophies promote a holistic approach to understanding and interacting with others, which is crucial in intercultural communication, particularly for Chinese students.

Yet, the existing research on ICC tends to adapt foreign concepts, especially for language acquisition purposes, to prepare Chinese students for global interactions (Deardorff & Kulich, 2017). Most Chinese literature on ICC-related topics focuses on interpersonal communication, as discussed in the literature review. Therefore, I recommend developing an ICC model specifically designed for Chinese students in an international context. This model should integrate both global intercultural

frameworks and unique Chinese cultural philosophies to create a better approach to ICC particularly for Chinese students.

8.3.3 Implications for Developing Skills of Interpreting and Relating

In the context of Chinese EFL, mastering the ICC skills of interpreting and relating poses challenges due to the traditional emphasise on language acquisition over cultural understanding. To address this, teachers must create situations as authentic as possible within EFL classes through activities like discussions and reflective writing. These “imagined” interactions, facilitated by well-crafted scenarios, may allow learners to practise their skills thoroughly (Qin, 2016).

However, there is a notable gap in empirical research on creating high-quality scenarios. This research proposes a new approach by drawing upon the authentic experiences shared by students with similar backgrounds through narrative interviews. By using narrative interviews to gather these experiences, educators can develop scenarios that reflect authentic intercultural challenges. This method enables students to engage more deeply with the material, thus fostering a better understanding of both their own and other cultures.

For Chinese students, the skill of interpreting and relating is particularly challenging due to their limited awareness of their own cultural identity (Qin, 2016). To address this, it is crucial to find effective ways for students to adopt intercultural stances that enable them to identify, analyse, and articulate cultural perspectives, thereby reducing the risk of cultural aphasia. As this research indicates, while college students are starting to engage with Chinese culture, they often struggle to articulate it

in English. Consequently, there is a pressing need for further research to develop strategies that enhance students' abilities to communicate Chinese cultural concepts in English.

8.3.4 Implications for Developing Skills of Discovering and Interacting

The skills of discovering and interacting require extensive face-to-face interaction, as it thrives on the ability to respond in real-time scenarios. Although the current research has utilised authentic experiences of the participants, these experiences cannot fully substitute for personal interaction. Given the scarcity of face-to-face communication in the Chinese EFL context, educators may employ innovative teaching methods to complement CIEs. Case studies and role-play, for instance, can make CIEs more relevant and reflective of the Chinese context. These methods provide students with practical scenarios that require them to apply their intercultural skills actively. By simulating real-life interactions, students can practise responding to various cultural situations, thus enhancing their ability to discover and interact effectively.

Modern technologies may offer viable solutions to address the lack of real-world interactions in the Chinese EFL context. In this research, I directed participants to engage with foreign cultures by using immersive technological resources to update their cultural knowledge. For instance, DeWitt et al.,(2022) suggests employing Virtual Reality (VR) to enhance ICC. VR has the potential to immerse learners in Chinese culture-related environments, both cognitively and affectively. His quasi-experimental study indicates that VR can indeed improve ICC levels. Although

DeWitt's study involved university students who were not in private universities, the findings are relevant and suggest the potential of VR for similar contexts.

In addition to VR, virtual exchanges and online language partnerships provide valuable methods for cultural engagement. These methods facilitate direct interaction with native speakers, providing practical experience in intercultural communication. By incorporating these technologies, educators can bridge the gap in face-to-face communication opportunities, making EFL learning more dynamic and effective.

8.3.5 Implications for Fostering Critical Cultural Awareness

The literature review indicates that ICC fundamentally relies on critical cultural awareness. Thus, this awareness is often considered both an essential element and the ultimate goal of language learning. Allocating appropriate class time, implementing creative teaching methods, and utilising well-structured classroom activities are vital for developing skills necessary for critical cultural awareness (Gudykunst & Kim, 2017). Given the strong connection between critical thinking and critical cultural awareness (Holliday, 2020), the ability to think critically is believed to be a significant indicator of proficiency in critical cultural awareness.

In China, where critical cultural awareness is a relatively new concept, learners must receive appropriate instruction to develop related skills. Thus, designing language education programmes that incorporate critical thinking modules is advisable. This approach would enable teachers to assess students' ICC progress across various levels using critical thinking goals as benchmarks. Such a strategy

allows teachers to evaluate learning outcomes more effectively across various contexts with clearer and more purposeful educational objectives.

Byram's ICC model outlines structured elements that effectively assess ICC. These elements offer a solid foundation for developing Chinese EFL programmes that effectively incorporate intercultural dimensions. However, this research indicates the need for modifications, particularly in adapting the theoretical model to the Chinese educational context. Yet, limited research exists on adapting Byram's model within China's higher education system. Therefore, there is a pressing need for more comprehensive studies to explore how these models can be effectively adapted and implemented in this context.

First, creating realistic communication opportunities is essential for developing linguistic skills and ICC. However, constraints such as the COVID-19 pandemic, travel costs, visa regulations, and personal responsibilities often limit face-to-face interactions. To address these challenges, educators can use technology-supported immersive learning activities. These can include virtual reality environments and online cultural exchanges that simulate real-life interactions.

Moreover, achieving Byram's ICC goals within a limited timeframe presents another challenge. Effective language programmes can help learners become intercultural speakers. Yet, it is vital to acknowledge that the acquisition of ICC extends beyond classroom learning and is a continuous process influenced by various external constraints, including the availability of resources and time. Additionally, integrating specific ICC domains into the curriculum can be challenging, especially

when courses also aim to achieve other linguistic outcomes, such as preparing students for exams like the CET-4. Curriculum designers and teachers need to be aware of these challenges when developing teaching strategies and setting clear, purposeful objectives for new language programmes. Recognising the constraints and drivers affecting ICC acquisition helps in creating more realistic and achievable goals.

8.3.6 Suggestions for Teachers

Although many studies on experiential learning focus on improvements in ICC during overseas experiences, this research underscores that intercultural learning does not automatically occur when students are abroad, and that ICC enhancement can occur domestically. Indeed, Deardorff (2009) emphasised the need for educators to deliberately focus on developing students' intercultural skills, as exposure to intercultural experiences alone does not inherently cultivate ICC. Developing ICC at home prepares students for future international experiences and can facilitate their growth in any intercultural setting. This perspective aligns with the argument that ICC can develop through structured, intentional activities regardless of geographical location.

However, ICC development is often sidelined in China's EFL teaching due to a stronger emphasis on linguistic achievements and examination preparations. Consequently, many Chinese learners struggle to master intercultural techniques, such as interacting, referring, and identifying, within EFL classes. To address this gap, teachers may integrate intercultural skills into their language instruction, regardless of whether students study abroad. ICC can improve within domestic settings and

enhance students' ability to navigate international contexts when they eventually travel. Recognising that ICC can develop anywhere is vital for facilitating students' growth both at home and abroad.

This research indicates a pressing need to prioritise the creation of cultural scenarios within language classes in China. Such an approach can encourage students to engage in deeper critical reflection on their cross-cultural experiences, thereby enriching their understanding and application of ICC in real-world contexts. To facilitate ICC development, teachers can first clearly define their teaching objectives for each classroom activity. Incorporating one or several of the ICC domains outlined in Byram's model can be part of this process. By aligning activities with these domains, teachers can ensure that students develop a comprehensive set of intercultural skills.

Furthermore, implementing structured training programmes may help teachers better integrate critical thinking into the curriculum. These programmes can provide educators with the tools and strategies needed to create more opportunities for students to establish authentic relationships and engage in meaningful intercultural interactions (Deardorff, 2009; Wang & Kulich, 2015). Such training can also enhance teachers' own intercultural competence, enabling them to model effective intercultural communication for their students.

Additionally, teachers are also encouraged to be innovative and adaptable in their pedagogical approaches, which may include the integration of cutting-edge technology into their lessons. It is important to note that being an ICC educator does

not reply one to be an ICC expert. Concerns may arise among teachers regarding their perceived inadequacy in guiding students through intercultural encounters, especially if they lack personal overseas experience. However, complete knowledge of other cultures is not a prerequisite for teaching ICC. It is also impractical to expect any educator to possess exhaustive cultural knowledge, given the dynamic and expansive nature of ICC. Instead, teachers can contribute by sharing culturally relevant facts and, more crucially, fostering an environment where students actively engage in intercultural analysis and comparison.

8.3.7 Suggestions for Teaching Content

First, my research findings highlight that authentic experiences serve as rich sources for intercultural education content, despite the challenges teachers may face in aligning these experiences with educational goals. Creating critical incidents with input from both myself and students may offer a practical solution for future curriculum development. Encouraging students to share their interests and experiences can lead to more meaningful and engaging discussions. This participatory approach not only enhances learning but also empowers students to take an active role in their intercultural education.

Secondly, this research emphasises the importance of developing CCA in educational programmes, particularly when faced with time and resource constraints. To achieve this objective, educators may design a curriculum covering a diverse array of socio-cultural values. This approach ensures students encounter various socio-cultural issues, which not only piques their interest but also cultivates critical

thinking. Moreover, it encourages them to compare these cultural issues with their own experiences.

Moreover, the research findings also suggest that imparting culture-general knowledge alone is insufficient for preparing students to thrive in intercultural contexts. A comprehensive approach that blends general cultural knowledge with culture-specific insights is necessary. While CIEs foster students' culture-general knowledge according to my research, teachers need to strike a balance between general and specific cultural knowledge when selecting teaching content. This balanced approach ensures that students gain a broad understanding of cultural concepts while also acquiring the detailed knowledge and skills necessary to navigate diverse intercultural encounters effectively.

Meanwhile, it is also crucial to actively encourage students to reflect on their identity transformation and the challenges they face while adapting to a new culture and learning a new language. Thus, teaching content that stimulates students' reflection on their own identities and challenges within EFL classrooms is recommended. Integrating intercultural teaching within EFL classrooms through open-ended tasks and critical incidents may foster this reflective process.

Additionally, teaching materials should align with students' interests and linguistic abilities. Introducing content at an appropriate linguistic level, such as the standard set by the CET-4 examination, can facilitate students' interactions in intercultural settings. This approach boosts their confidence and prepares them for exams. Including CET-4 vocabulary when detailing incidents is also recommended to

meet institutional requirements of language outcomes. This consideration ensures that teaching materials not only match the linguistic level of the students but also adhere to educational benchmarks, thereby promoting the dual goals of language proficiency and ICC enhancement.

8.3.8 Suggestions for Teaching Techniques

The EFL classroom is an essential resource for Chinese learners to acquire ICC, especially given their limited opportunities for intercultural encounters. Apart from delivering content, the choice of instructional techniques plays a critical role in facilitating ICC development. This research finds that employing critical incidents in tandem with other pedagogical strategies yields positive outcomes in teaching.

Group discussions and video clips proved effective in this study. Through group discussions, students actively explored cultural narratives, discovered meanings, and formed personal viewpoints, thereby fostering their ICC skills. Video clips complemented these discussions by highlighting subtle aspects of intercultural communication and offering concrete examples for students to emulate. Additionally, allocating additional time for students to conduct independent research on selected topics further promotes heuristic learning. This approach motivates students to gather culture-related data, engage in analysis, and draw insightful conclusions, thereby ultimately cultivating a reflective and inquisitive learning attitude. Combining these methods supports a learner-centred approach, where student presentations and discussions play a pivotal role in creating a rich learning environment for ICC development (Qin, 2016).

Incorporating co-creation into the ICC curriculum presents several benefits. Co-creation encourages students to actively participate in their learning process. This involvement fosters a deeper connection to the material and promotes a reflective learning attitude. By engaging in co-creation, students develop a stronger sense of ownership and pride in their work, which can boost their motivation and overall academic performance. While the current study has explored co-creation as a preliminary approach, further empirical research is needed to examine its integration and efficacy within the syllabus and curriculum more comprehensively.

8.3.9 Implications for Future Research

This research identified an obvious gap in the integration of ICC within the Chinese educational framework, specifically in the field of English language teaching. The findings indicate the necessity of embedding ICC more systematically in university curricula to equip students with the necessary skills needed for effective intercultural communication. Future research should therefore delve deeper into the methodologies of embedding ICC in language education, evaluating their efficacy and sustainability in the Chinese context and beyond.

An immediate area for further investigation involves the systemic incorporation of ICC education within national curricula. Despite the current limited research base supporting this integration, the potential of ICC for enhancing students' global communicative competencies justifies further exploration. This line of research may catalyse curriculum reforms by advocating for a more holistic approach to language

education that goes beyond linguistic proficiency to embrace cultural understanding and intercultural empathy.

Moreover, the role of advanced technologies, such as VR, in facilitating immersive intercultural learning experiences presents another intriguing prospect. Future studies could explore how these technologies can overcome geographical and cultural barriers to simulate authentic intercultural encounters and offer students immersive and interactive learning experiences. This line of inquiry would not only expand the methodological toolkit for teaching ICC but also provide insights into the effectiveness of technology-enhanced learning environments in fostering ICC.

Additionally, the professional development of educators in delivering ICC education also warrants further attention. Given the evolving nature of intercultural dynamics, teachers require continuous learning and adaptation to incorporate effective ICC strategies into their teaching. It is also crucial that teachers adopt the perspective of English users rather than viewing themselves simply as learners of the language. This shift in attitude can enhance their teaching effectiveness and model successful language use for their students.

Future research may also investigate teachers' understanding of intercultural concepts and the pedagogical strategies they use to integrate these into language teaching. Identifying effective training programmes that equip educators with the necessary skills and knowledge to foster ICC development is crucial. Such studies may help identify best practices for developing educators' competencies in fostering

ICC, and ensure that they can navigate and teach the complexities of intercultural communication effectively.

Finally, future studies may also explore the specific requirements and outcomes of ICC education for non-English-major students, particularly those enrolled in vocational courses with international components. This demographic represents a unique intersection of language learning and professional development, which highlights the need for tailored ICC strategies that cater to their specific educational and career trajectories.

By addressing these critical areas, future research can significantly contribute to the advancement of ICC education, ensuring that it is grounded in practical, effective, and contextually relevant pedagogical strategies. This endeavour will not only enrich the academic discourse on ICC in China but also prepare Chinese students and educators for the complexities of global communication and interaction.

Chapter 9 Conclusions

This dissertation examined the role of CIEs in developing ICC among EFL learners in a private university in China. Grounded in the integration of language pedagogy and intercultural education, this research drew from Byram's ICC model and non-essentialist approaches to interculturality. The research employed CIEs based on the authentic experiences of senior students from narrative interviews. These interviews provided qualitative depth to the understanding of students' intercultural encounters, serving as a foundation for developing teaching activities aimed at cultivating students' ICC and constructing their identity as intercultural speakers.

The teacher action research (TAR) methodology was chosen to facilitate a close examination of how ICC could be effectively integrated into language teaching. This method also allowed for an in-depth exploration of how CIEs from the narrative interviews transformed students' perspectives and strategies for engaging in intercultural communication. The iterative cycle of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting not only benefitted the students but also enhanced my understanding of the pedagogical needs specific to my teaching context. Additionally, this approach contributed to my development as a teacher and a researcher, deepening my insights into effective teaching practices and intercultural education strategies.

9.1 Research Objectives

The research addressed three research questions: the effects of CIEs on ICC development, the role of ICC in shaping student identities, and the implications of implementing CIEs within Chinese EFL curricula. The first research question

investigated the effectiveness of CIEs as a pedagogical tool for fostering ICC among EFL students. This inquiry was driven by the belief that CIEs, which were derived from the authentic experiences of students who studied abroad, could be used to challenge stereotypes, avoid otherisation, and promote a nuanced understanding of intercultural dynamics. Findings indicated that students who engaged with CIEs demonstrated a notable increase in their ability to navigate complex intercultural scenarios and improved their overall communicative competence.

The second objective aimed to determine the extent to which CIEs, integrated into a tailored EFL curriculum, contribute to the development of students' intercultural identities. Through CIEs, students encountered and reflected upon diverse cultural perspectives, which not only improved their communicative skills but also prompted a re-evaluation and reconstruction of their cultural identities. The findings of the research demonstrated that ICC development, facilitated through CIEs, could empower students to construct and negotiate their identities as intercultural speakers. The research also emphasised the role of CCA in shaping student perceptions and interactions within a multicultural setting. This line of inquiry acknowledged the effects of ICC on learners' self-concept and highlighted the evolution of students' identities as they navigate and negotiate cultural complexities.

Furthermore, the research explored the broader pedagogical implications of implementing CIEs in the Chinese EFL teaching environment. It highlighted the importance of learners' own cultural understandings in ICC development. The

findings demonstrated that integrating CIEs in Chinese EFL curricula prompted a shift from target-culture-oriented teaching to a more balanced approach.

The research's findings also emphasised the need for iterative refinement in EFL class design, especially in creating opportunities for students to explore cultural diversity beyond the classroom. In particular, the findings of this study indicate that participants are still in the nascent stages of developing cultural neutrality, suggesting that learning about culture is an ongoing process that demands continuous effort. To support this developmental path, it is essential to maintain student motivation and provide ample opportunities for active intercultural learning. Additionally, this research urged educators to establish common ground and forums for cultural exploration and dialogue. These enhancements are critical for fostering a sophisticated and enduring intercultural outlook among students and equipping them with skills to mediate cultural conflicts effectively.

9.2 Limitations

The research faced several limitations that must be acknowledged. First, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted the study. Traditional face-to-face activities, such as role-plays, became unfeasible due to health and safety concerns. Recognising the crucial role of authentic intercultural communication in developing ICC, the research adapted by using technological solutions to simulate these authentic encounters. However, the reliance on virtual platforms, while innovative, may not fully replicate the nuances of in-person intercultural exchanges, thus potentially affecting the depth of intercultural understanding that can be achieved.

The reliance on self-reported data, such as questionnaires and interviews, introduces limitations due to its subjective nature. These methods, although insightful, often invite responses shaped by social expectations rather than authentic self-reflection (Steenkamp et al., 2010). For instance, participants might adjust their answers to align with perceived norms of appropriateness or moral conduct. Steenkamp et al. (2010) observed that in some contexts, including China, individuals may demonstrate a preference for socially desirable responses—particularly when discussing traits like honesty or interpersonal responsibility. Rather than attributing such tendencies to a fixed cultural trait, it is more constructive to consider how institutional pressures, social norms, and situational factors shape self-presentation. These dynamics may influence how individuals manifest ICC, especially in settings where maintaining group harmony or projecting a favourable social image carries weight. Acknowledging these influences enables researchers and practitioners to remain committed to non-essentialist perspectives while still accounting for the contextual realities that inform communicative behaviour.”

Additionally, my dual identity of being both a teacher and a researcher may also cause social desirability bias, particularly in a cultural context like China where the teacher holds a position of respect and authority. Participants might view their participation in the research as an extension of their classroom performance, leading them to provide answers they believe will earn them favour or good grades, rather than honest reflections. This conflation of roles can compromise the validity of the data collected.

To reduce social desirability bias in this ICC research, I took measures to minimise participants' pressure to provide conforming responses. While the focus group interviews were not anonymous, I ensured that participants' identities would not be linked to their specific responses in the analysis. By creating a safe and open environment, participants were less likely to feel the need to present themselves in an overly positive light, thus reducing the influence of moralistic response tendencies on their responses. I also attempted to separate the roles of teacher and researcher in the minds of the students prior to the intervention. Emphasising that the data collected was for research purposes only and would not affect their academic standing or relationship with the teacher helped achieve this separation. Triangulating data from multiple sources, such as peer evaluations, instructor assessments, and self-reports, can also enhance the validity of the findings. Future research may also use indirect questioning techniques, such as asking participants to describe the behaviours or attitudes of a hypothetical peer can provide insights into their own perspectives without triggering social desirability biases as strongly.

9.3 Contributions of the Study

The journey of this research has been both academically enriching and personally transformative. This section highlights the dual contributions of this research: its academic contributions to the field of ICC and its impact on my professional growth as a teacher.

9.3.1 Academic Contributions

This dissertation enriched the evolving body of knowledge on ICC within the specific context of a private Chinese university. In this particular educational setting, where institutional priorities may include both academic excellence and market-driven imperatives, fostering ICC takes on a critical role. This research explored how ICC could be integrated into ELT in China in a way that aligns with the goals of both the university and its students, who are preparing to navigate a globalised world. The research also validated ICC's critical role in fostering competent intercultural communicators with attributes featuring openness, tolerance, and cultural empathy.

First, the research contributed to the existing literature on intercultural communication by offering empirical evidence of CIEs' potential to enhance students' ICC within a Chinese higher education context. By examining the interplay between ELT and intercultural instruction, the research provided insights into effective strategies for integrating cultural sensitivity into language education curricula. It argued for a holistic approach to language teaching that goes beyond linguistic proficiency and acknowledges the importance of cultural understanding and intercultural dialogue in cultivating competent intercultural communicators.

Moreover, this dissertation extended the theoretical framework of ICC development by applying Byram's model within the Chinese educational setting. This application contributes to a deeper understanding of how ICC can be fostered among EFL learners in China. The research demonstrated how Byram's model, originally

conceptualised in Western educational contexts, could be adapted to resonate with the philosophical perspectives (e.g., harmony) deeply rooted in Chinese culture. By intertwining these philosophical perspectives with Byram's framework, the research bridged cultural divides and enriched the model with a depth uniquely attuned to the Chinese context. This synthesis illuminated the potential for Byram's model to foster a comprehensive, culturally nuanced form of ICC sensitive to the values, thought processes, and communicative practices prevalent in China.

In application, the dissertation illustrated how to operationalise Byram's model to design pedagogical interventions that deeply engage with philosophical perspectives shaping students' worldviews and interactions. These interventions promoted cultural awareness and intercultural sensitivity, encouraging learners to navigate and appreciate the complexities of global cultures through a lens that is both universally informed and distinctly Chinese. This approach acknowledged the importance of cultural empathy and the pursuit of harmonious relationships, which are aspects emblematic of Chinese philosophical thought and integral to effective intercultural communication.

Additionally, the methods used in this research to develop and apply CIEs offered an approach that other educators could adapt to foster ICC in varied contexts. The outlined procedures for generating and employing CIEs were designed to be flexible, encouraging educators to modify these strategies to their specific teaching scenarios. This flexibility underscored the potential of CIEs to enrich teaching practices beyond the specificities of this study's context.

9.3.2 Professional Growth

Conducting this teacher action research (TAR) research has been a transformative journey. After completing this research, I believe I have made significant improvements in three key areas: my understanding of TAR, my insight into my students and our relationship, and my grasp of the field of intercultural communication.

Understanding of TAR. Engaging in TAR has revolutionised my perception of research methodology. Initially, I viewed research as a purely objective endeavour, where personal emotions and reflections played no part. However, this qualitative TAR experience illuminated the dynamic and iterative nature of the research process. Unlike quantitative methods that often seek to confirm hypotheses through statistical analysis, qualitative research explores and interprets complex human experiences. Through this journey, I have come to appreciate the depth and richness of the qualitative data, which can provide nuanced insights that numbers alone cannot convey.

During my narrative interviews with Group A students, I strived to understand their experiences through their stories, empathising with their challenges and using those narratives to generate critical incidents for Group B students. Over two research cycles, both my students and I collaborated to maximise the value of these incidents. I was constantly surprised by how my students uncovered culturally relevant insights that I had not considered when initially creating the incidents. This experience underscored the importance of remaining flexible and responsive as a researcher.

Moreover, the cyclical nature of TAR—planning, acting, observing, and reflecting — became central to my teaching and research practice. As I continually adjusted my methods to better foster the development of intercultural competence, I realised that this iterative process not only enriched my students' learning but also deepened my own understanding. It taught me the value of being open to unexpected findings and ensuring that the research remained responsive to the evolving context and needs of the students.

Now that this dissertation is complete, I recognise that my engagement with TAR does not end here. TAR is not simply a methodology that I applied for this research, it has become an ongoing journey of professional growth and learning. The reflective approach that TAR fosters is something I will carry forward into my future work to improve my teaching and understanding of Intercultural communication.

Stronger Student Relationships. My research journey provided a more holistic view of my students' experiences, challenges, and aspirations. Through the interviews, formative progress worksheets, and questionnaires, I realised I held inherent biases as a teacher. For instance, I previously equated a positive attitude towards English learning with a general enthusiasm for all aspects of education. This research challenged such assumptions and underscored the importance of listening to student voices.

I also recognised that actively involving students in the research process—such as encouraging them to generate incidents and offer suggestions—can empower them to share their insights and contribute to the development of effective interventions.

This collaborative approach fostered a sense of mutual respect and shared knowledge construction. Conducting this research allowed me to build deeper trust and rapport with my students, which is crucial for gathering authentic and meaningful data. I even developed friendships with several students outside the classroom, a move that challenges the traditional stereotypes of Chinese teachers.

However, I also became acutely aware of the power imbalances that exist in the teacher-student relationship. I questioned whether certain responses, such as expressions of motivation linked to personal affection for me as their teacher, reflected genuine feelings or a desire to please. Implementing methods to ensure confidentiality and separating my roles as teacher and researcher helped mitigate these dynamics, but the experience made me more mindful of these issues.

Grasp of intercultural communication. My understanding of intercultural communication has evolved significantly through this research. Previously, like many educators, I relied heavily on Western ICC models and authoritative materials. However, exploring students' authentic experiences and challenges revealed the limitations of these models within the Chinese context. I identified key areas where support is needed and recognised gaps in ICC teaching within Chinese higher education.

Most importantly, this research has deepened my understanding of the complexities of intercultural communication. I learned that ICC is not a static skill but an ongoing journey that requires continuous practice and development. By engaging with students' real-life experiences, I gained valuable insights from my students and

realised that culture is fluid and ever-changing. The research also highlighted the critical role of culturally informed pedagogy that respect and integrate students' cultural backgrounds into the learning process. It has underscored the importance of continuous reflection, adaptation, and the incorporation of local cultural perspectives into teaching practices. In the context of China, this means the need to integrate Chinese philosophical thoughts and values, such as harmony, into ICC teaching. This approach helps create a more relevant and resonant learning experience for Chinese students, acknowledging and valuing their cultural heritage while preparing them for global interactions.

Moving forward, I am inspired to continue exploring and integrating these insights into my teaching practice to create a more inclusive and empathetic educational environment. The continuous journey of ICC learning and teaching will undoubtedly contribute to a more interconnected and culturally aware global community. As educators, we must continuously adapt and evolve to ensure that our teaching practices remain relevant and impactful in an ever-changing cultural landscape.

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Appendixes

Appendix 1 Pre-Questionnaire for Course Learners

Thank you for your precious time. Your responses are very valuable to this investigation. It won't take you more than 20 minutes to complete this form. Please feel free to use as much space as necessary.

Pseudonym (choose any English name you like) _____

Gender: _____

English entrance result: _____

1. What aspects of English-speaking cultures are you familiar with?

Please give some examples.

2. Have you had any English classes where the discussed cultural aspects that are different from your culture? If yes, what topics were addressed?

Yes: ____ No: ____ Explain:

3. Have you been taught in your previous English classes how to interact with People from different cultures?

Yes: ____ No: ____ Explain:

4. What aspects of the language do you feel you need to improve?

5. Do you practice English with native speakers? Yes: ____ No: ____

When? _____

Who with? _____

How often? _____

6. Do you find you have difficulties when you interact with people from different cultures?

If so what types of difficulties?

7. Besides the formal language classes, what do you do to improve your English?

8. Why are you taking this course? And what are your expectations of this course?

9. What culture-related topics would you suggest to discuss in this course?

Appendix 2. Post-Questionnaire

1. Please share your overall impression of the sessions. (General Evaluation)
2. Please identify the parts of the course you found most engaging and least engaging. (General Evaluation)
3. To what extent did the intercultural teaching align with your expectations?
Examples are appreciated. (Expectation Measurement)
4. Do you have any feedback on how the course was structured?" (Course Design Assessment)
5. What are your thoughts on the Cultural Intelligence Education (CIE) approach?"
(Activity Assessment)
6. Can you describe how CIE has contributed to your Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) development?" (Learning Impact)

Appendix 3. ICC Domains Developed in Session 1 and Corresponding Evidence

ICC developed in session 1	√ Or	Evidence
Knowledge (n=16)	√	<i>"I now understood I am a collectivism. And I will always think what is the effect of my actions on the collective, so it is possible that why I have cultural differences with Westerners"</i> (CIS1s18) <i>"The teacher is from western so he is a individualist and the student is from China so he is a collectivism. That's is the reason why students will have a misunderstanding toward the teacher"</i> (CIS1s6) <i>"The individualist teacher gave students freedom in class, but the collectivist students misunderstood the teacher as irresponsible because the class was student-centered. And collectivist Chinese student has a hierarchical view of teacher, so he is not used to be so close with the teacher"</i> (CIS1s16) <i>"Each culture has its diversity and its special way of thinking. People are different."</i> (CIS1s4) <i>"Each culture is featured with a unique mode of thinking and its own diversity. There are many differences among human beings."</i> (CIS1s8) <i>"Different culture make differences in building relationship. Some people like this, but others like that. We must know the key knowledge and culture."</i> (CIS1s3) <i>"The class atmosphere are different in different countries"</i> (CIS1s4) <i>"the student-centred education is different from us. It is more advanced. Student can learn more from this environment. That's the reason why I would like to go abroad for study."</i> (CIS1s2) <i>"the westerners are individualism and the easterners are collectivism."</i> (CIS1s4) <i>"different people have different thoughts"</i> (CIS1s4)

		<i>“ the difference between teacher-student relationship is a reflection of cultural differences” (CIS1s11)</i> <i>“The American has a different atmosphere of studying.” (CIS1s10)</i> <i>“I should integrate to the different cultures, and try to understand the behavior.” (CIS1s8)</i> <i>“It is a developed country. Its education is of high quality.” (CIS1s7)</i> <i>“I like the academic atmosphere in the US. Firstly, I think it has an advanced higher education system. It stresses on improving students’ creativity. In addition, it helps students to find a way to solve tomorrow’s problems.” (CIS1s5)</i>
Attitude (n=12)	√	<i>”In America, for example, they act and think differently. That’s why researching in advance is very important. So I can behave properly in order to avoid any culture shock.”(CIS1s4)</i> <i>“Understanding the differences before we really get into the situation plays a significant role in preventing the occurrence of any cultural shock.” (CIS1s8)</i> <i>“ Do as the Rome Do, it can help you integrate into the different cultures” (CIS1s8)</i> <i>“We should accept the different cultures based on the different environment.” (CIS1s4)</i> <i>“It’s interesting to consider how different cultures perceive social interactions like this. In some cultures, it might be seen as friendly, while in others, it could be perceived as crossing a professional boundary.” (CIS1s3)</i> <i>“This situation highlights the importance of understanding cultural nuances and sensitivities when interacting with students from diverse backgrounds.” (CIS1s12)</i> <i>“This incident prompts us to reflect on how social customs and expectations vary across different cultures and how they influence</i>

		interactions in educational settings." (CIS1s10) "This story challenges us to think about how we navigate cultural differences in everyday interactions, even something as seemingly casual as a smoke break invitation." (CIS1s6) " This incident highlights the complexities of intercultural communication and the importance of sensitivity and respect in all interactions." (CIS1s4) "This incident underscores the complexity of navigating cultural differences in educational contexts and emphasizes the importance of empathy and awareness." (CIS1s3) "It's important to acknowledge that cultural differences can affect teacher-student relationship" (CIS1s2)
Skills of interpreting and relating (n=6)	√	"I never try to relate my behavior with my culture, now a lot of things can be understood, I understand more about myself." (CIS1s15) "I used to think I am very westernized. But in fact, I am not." (CIS1s2) "I tend to stand on the teacher's point to think of the whole thing" (CIS1s4) "Different cultures, even different people in the same culture have a different purpose for a certain behavior. I need try to understand them." (CIS1s3) "I need to first think why I think so, is it related to my own cultural background." (CIS1s13) "A lot of academic context <in a foreign country >need the ability of relating, for example class activities, test rules, if you always take your own routine as standard then you will never get used to others." (CIS1s10)
Skills of discovery and interaction		
Critical cultural awareness		

<i>Other</i>		
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Appendix 4. ICC Domains Developed in Session 2 and Corresponding

Evidence

ICC developed in session 2	√ Or	Evidence
<i>Knowledge</i>		
<i>Attitude (n=6)</i>	√	“being lack of confidence and reluctance to communicate due to such presuppositions <the native speaker will look down them or refuse to communicate with them> is really 因小失大 (yin xiao shi da) (penny wise and pound foolish) “ (C1S2s17) “a foreigner, we should not be shy, (should) be confident to talk with him (them)”(C1S2s3) ‘Talk confidently to them, if you want to make friends with them. No one will mock you.”(C1S2s10) “it is clear that building confidence in language skills is crucial for intercultural competence” (C1S2s5) “...language proficiency should not be a barrier to participate in social events.” (C1S2s8) “I think it is silly to decline following invitations, otherwise, you will never step out your comfort zone.” (C1S2s7)
<i>Skills of interpreting and relating</i>		
<i>Skills of discovery and interaction</i>		
<i>Critical cultural awareness</i>		
<i>Other (n=12)</i>	√	“the language that bridges the world”(C1S2s5) “common communication tool”(C1S2s7) “a passport that permits you go everywhere” (C1S2s3) “English is used worldwide by every people” (C1S2s8) “You should be confident, you are not inferior to anyone....And we are same, we are all

		<i>students.” (CIS2s7)</i> <i>“English is so important in communicating” (CIS2s6)</i> <i>“I think I need to learn English better to avoid this situation” (CIS2s11)</i> <i>“I have my own biases and assumptions about language proficiency.” (CIS2s12)</i> <i>“This situation provides an important lesson on the impact of social acceptance and encouragement on language learners” (CIS2s11)</i> <i>“it is clear that fostering a sense of belonging is crucial for the development of intercultural competence.” (CIS2s10)</i> <i>“there are both external and internal difficulties faced by International students” (CIS2s9)</i> <i>“It is important to have certain training to teach us how to talk with non-Chinese, not language, but how to process the communication” (CIS2s5)</i>
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Appendix 5. ICC Domains Developed in Session 3 and Corresponding Evidence

ICC developed in session 3	√ Or	Evidence
Knowledge		
Attitude (n=15)	√	“Now, I realized I have stereotype toward them <the American> as well.” (C1S3s7) “Like in the incident, in our class we have Shanghai community and students group from other cities, I <a shanghainess> have certain stereotype towards certain areas other than Shanghai.”(C1S3s4) “Do not do to others what you do not want” (C1S3s1) “I stereotyped the teacher in session 1” (C1S3s9) “Not all the American are the same, so as we Chinese”(C1S3s10) “It is important to foster respect for all individuals by appreciating their unique cultural identities and experiences” (C1S3s1) “It is crucial to develop empathy by understanding how harmful stereotypes and derogatory terms can deeply affect one’s self-confidence” (C1S3s8) “we should also reflect on our own biases and attitudes towards different cultures, it is a crucial step in developing intercultural competence” (C1S3s16) “after learning this incident I understand the necessity of advocating for changes in attitudes and behaviors that perpetuate cultural stereotypes and discrimination.” (C1S3s7) “it is essential to recognize and address microaggressions, which can perpetuate stereotypes and negatively affect individuals” (C1S3s10) “ we should reject any form of cultural or racial bias” (C1S3s8) “I should first reflect myself to see if I have discriminated others before” (C1S3s1) “so it is very necessary to treat all individuals with respect and dignity, regardless of their

		cultural background” (C1S3s17) “we should respect each other , love and peace” (C2S3s10) “we need to let other know that we do not want to be treated like that, we should speak for ourselves when we are in a foreign country.” (C2S3s7)
Skills of interpreting and relating		
Skills of discovery and interaction		
Critical cultural awareness		
Other (n=7)	√	“(before the class) I have no idea they <the western> may have those stereotypes about us <Chinese>, now I know I can prepare for myself to explain these <stereotype>, and I will frankly tell them <the western> my stereotype and let them explain as well.” (C1S3s7) “being aware of the potential stereotypes can help you avoid potentially hostile environment” (C1S3s5) “previously, I may not know I am being discriminated. I will just interpret that they <the non-Chinese> are just being curious.I might want to be on my guard’ (C1S3s15) “knowing <can be discriminated> in advance that I can better prepare myself on how to combat back” (C1S3s3) “being prepared enables you to adapt your behavior and expectations, reducing the likelihood of confrontations.” (C1S3s13) “After learning this incident, I understand that mentally prepare for potential challenges, may help reduce the shock and emotional impact of encountering discrimination.” (C1S3s11)

Appendix 6. ICC Domains Developed in Session 4 and Corresponding Evidence

ICC developed in session 4	√ Or	Evidence
Knowledge		
Attitude (n=10)	√	<i>“The more you experience, the better you know yourself.” (C1S4s10)</i> <i>“I wonder who would I be without certain experiences” (C1S4s3)</i> <i>“if one never tries to see the outside world but stays within the comfort zone, he is unlikely to either achieve success or understand who he is.” (S4s1)</i> <i>“Hearing about the diversity within each person helped me realize that two people can be different and similar to each other.” (C1S4s10)</i> <i>“so, empathy is very important in intercultural communication.” (C1S4s1)</i> <i>“I think the reason that she can interact well with the non-Chinese in the fan club is that they understand each other” (C1S4s2)</i> <i>“As she interacts with non-Chinese individuals. She also develops respect for different cultural practices and perspectives. This is reflected in her ability to interact well with others without confronting cultural differences” (C1S4s10)</i> <i>“regular social interactions help the girl understand the viewpoints and experiences of others, fostering a sense of empathy and mutual respect” (C1S4s7)</i> <i>“her ability to navigate and adapt to different cultural contexts within the fan club demonstrates a high level of intercultural competence. She show flexibility in understanding and accommodating various cultural norms” (C1S4s11)</i> <i>“ she may become more culturally aware and sensitive, and I understand that cultural differences exist but do not need to be barriers to interaction.” (C1S4s15)</i> <i>“maybe her positive attitude towards cultural</i>

		<i>diversity helps create and inclusive environment.” (CIS4s13)</i>
<i>Skills of interpreting and relating (n=11)</i>	√	“..... However, this practice showed me that instead, many cultural groups share similarities with others and I belong to many groups as well, making it [easier] to transform intercultural conflict.” (CIS4s9) “I will focus on similarity (for example the skills, our goal of winning the match) instead of differences.” (CIS4s6) “from her, I understand that it is useful to relate one’s own experiences to those of others, finding common ground and building connection.” (CIS4s8) “I need to develop the ability to adapt our own communication styles to suit different cultural contexts, making our interactions more effective and respectful.”(CIS4s11) “regular social interactions help the girl understand the viewpoints and experiences of others, fostering a sense of empathy and mutual respect” (CIS4s7) “the fan club’s behavior may seems crazy to some outsiders, but this is their own culture. We should try understand the rationality behind their behavior, instead of deem them as alien.” (CIS4s12) “just as us, football team has our own culture, we have our jargon as well, we should try to understand them first.” (CIS4s6) “It is important to find common ground rather than focusing on the differences.”(CIS4s11) “if you understand one culture, you will have a sense of belonging. And if you do not belong to one culture, it is important to respect others first and if you are interested in why you can have a research.” (CIS4s13) “I used to have a bad feeling about fans club, but now I think I should have the bias first, I may not join the fan club for my whole life, but I would like to respect their culture. Whatever they do is just to show their

		<i>likeness to the idol” (C1S4s15)</i> <i>“similarities join us closer...” (C1S4s15)</i>
<i>Skills of discovery and interaction</i>		
<i>Critical cultural awareness</i>		
<i>Other</i>	√	“..... We have our jargon as well” (C1S4s6) “beyond same hobbies or common topics, I think a lot of other factors would determine who I am (self-identity), for example, age, profession, education background. Nation is just one of them.” (C1S4s5) “Now I understand I am who I am. I can be both westernize and Chinese together.”(C1S4s2) “I now feel I belong to the world, my identity is bigger.” (C1S4s7)

Appendix 7. ICC Domains Developed in Sessions 5 & 6 and Corresponding

Evidence

ICC Developed in Session 5 & 6	√ Or	Evidence
Knowledge (n=12)	√	<i>“cultural shock is a natural and unavoidable experience” (C1S5s6)</i> <i>“I’d be concerned if I didn’t experience it <cultural shock>” (C1S5s9)</i> <i>“Several factors would contribute to culture shock...” (C1S5s7)</i> <i>“I’m no longer worried about the culture shock phase.” (C1S5s8)</i> <i>It’s a natural process, and frankly, I’d be concerned if I didn’t experience it. My identity is distinct, and the discomfort from recognizing differences is inevitable. The key is to be ready for it.” (C1S5s9)</i> <i>“I understand that it is natural, and the period will come to an end.” (C1S5s10)</i> <i>“previously, I just thought that it is natural to not to used to the new environment, but I did not know that we can be really enjoy in the first stage...” (C1S5s11)</i> <i>“the U-curve of cultural shock make sense in the representation of the incident.” (C1S5s11)</i> <i>“a lot of things may lead to cultural shock, we should be prepare for that although it seems can not be avoided.” (C1S5s12)</i> <i>“I have a better understanding of what i may feel when I am abroad.” (C1S5s12)</i> <i>“there are 4 stages of cultural shock, i understand it now.” (C1S5s17)</i> <i>“it is important to understand the 4 stages of cultural shock.” (C1S5s18)</i>
		<i>“be ready to encounter difference” (C1S5s11)</i>

Attitude (n=7)	√	<i>“welcome surprising experiences....” (C1S5s18)</i> “Don’t be so cautious, try to say yes to everything, as long as it is safe.” (C1S5s1) <i>“I understand that I will encounter a lot of differences” (C1S5s8)</i> <i>“I will try my best to confronted and solve the difficulties I may meet in the future. I should be more confident” (C1S5s9)</i> <i>“I understand that empathy, respect are two key elements in facing the cultural shock.” (C1S5s12)</i> <i>“with the developed intercultural competence, I will sure deal with the cultural differences” (C1S5s14)</i>
Skills of interpreting and relating (n=5)	√	<i>“adjust identity according to different contexts, and if you stand on other’s point it will be easier to understand”(C1S5s7)</i> <i>“finding a neutral perspective....” (C1S5s10)</i> <i>“Just apologize at the very beginning” (C1S5s9)</i> <i>“Be as polite as possible” (C1S5s4)</i> <i>“...understand that others must have a reason of doing so.” (C1S5s18)</i>
Skills of discovery and interaction		
Critical cultural awareness		
Other	√	<i>“bringing photos of friends” (C1S5s10)</i> <i>“learning to cook authentic Chinese food” (C1S5s9)</i> <i>“remember to bring 老干妈 (Lao Gan Ma) - a favored Chinese chili sauce” (C1S5s5)</i>

Appendix 8. The Script of the Moderator Guide

1. Beginning (welcome, overview of the topic, ground rules)	Good afternoon, everyone, and thank you for being here. Your insights in the post-questionnaire about the ICC sessions were incredibly valuable, and today, I'm eager to delve deeper into your thoughts. Every perspective is important, and there are no wrong responses—only diverse viewpoints. I encourage you to speak freely, whether your feedback is positive or critical. To ensure I capture everything accurately, I'll be recording our discussion with my mobile phone here. Now, let's get started.
2. Warm-up questions	How did you feel about the sessions overall?
3. Questions that yield powerful information	(1) Can you explore why the teaching materials were mentioned as both the highlight and a point of dissatisfaction? (2) In what ways did the sessions align with your expectations, and in what ways did they fall short? (3) Do you have any recommendations for how we could improve the organization and timing of the sessions?
4. Ending questions	Is there anything else you'd like to share that we haven't covered?
5. Closing statements	I want to assure you that your anonymity will be preserved throughout this process. I'm grateful for your contributions today—your participation is invaluable in refining our approach to these sessions.

Appendix 9. Student ICC Development in Incident 1 of Cycle 2 and

Corresponding Evidence

ICC developed in C2S2&3I1	√ Or	Evidence
<i>Knowledge</i>		
<i>Attitude</i>		
<i>Skills of interpreting and relating (S1) (n=1)</i>	√	<i>“Before taking incident, I never thought about my culture, my country. I did not give any importance to Chinese culture and I always thought Chinese culture are so old and inflexible. But because of the chance to reflex and compare, I understand that how great our country is and how difficult the development it. I want to tell you more about my culture, it is more important for me now to talk about it.”(C2I1g3s4)</i>
<i>Skills of discovery and interaction (S2)</i>		
<i>Critical cultural awareness</i>		
<i>Other</i>	√	<i>“we need to be prepared for any kinds of culture shock” (C2I1g3s2)</i>

Appendix 10. Student ICC Development in Incident 2 of Cycle 2 and Corresponding Evidence

ICC developed in C2S3I2	√ Or	Evidence
<i>Knowledge</i>		
<i>Attitude (n=5)</i>	√	<i>“I would not be so conservative as before and willing to take the first step of making friend with my classmate. ‘ (C2I2g1s1)</i> <i>‘next time, you can frankly tell us, we truly want to make friend with you and know more about you” (C2I2g1s3)</i> <i>“when we discuss ideas, we can learn to tolerate the others (...) and get into discussions that might solve certain problems. Although both might be wrong, we might reach consensus and solve differences”(C2I2g1s3)</i> <i>“we should respect the differences that exist between each other, if you want to make friend with others it is better to seek common ground between each other.” (C2I2g1s4)</i>
<i>Skills of interpreting and relating (n=2)</i>	√	<i>“once I think what I do is normal, and I never see the reason why I do so and others do not. Like in the incident, the northern girl grow up in a water-scarce area, it is normal that she was not used to wash as frequent as us, it has nothing to do with one’s hygienic habit.”(C2I2g1s4)</i> <i>“the African do not wash head as frequent as us as well, so they will have dreadlocks or shave their hair, it is the origin of their culture, we should respect and not discriminate.” (C2I2g1s4)</i>
<i>Skills of discovery and interaction</i>		
<i>Critical cultural awareness</i>		<i>“It is funny that, <previously> I viewed a lot of intercultural conflict incidents involved Chinese</i>

(n=1)	√	and western, I always find fault in myself first, and always feel like I've done something wrong and offended someone then I automatically changed my behavior so as to cater others, over time I lost myself. Actually there are just different, I have done nothing wrong. But, in intracultural communication, when there is a difference or conflict, I will easily blame the problem on others and even make discrimination..."(C2I2g1s1)
Other		

Appendix 11. Student ICC Development in Incident 3 of Cycle 2 and Corresponding

Evidence

ICC developed in C2S3I3	√ Or	Evidence
<i>Knowledge (n=1)</i>	√	“study the culture do not just learn the basics, for example, do I kiss, shake or bow. We should learn the history, the origin of the culture. ” (C2I3g2s2)
<i>Attitude</i>		
<i>Skills of interpreting and relating (n=2)</i>	√	“It means that you have a higher-degree of cultural self-awareness and a high level of understanding of other cultures and you are able to maintain who you are while at the same time adjusting appropriately for other cultures.” (C2I3g2s2) “To me, adaptation means that you really deeply understand the nuances of the other culture and are able to appropriately shift your behavior in different cultural context.” (C2I3g2s1)
<i>Skills of discovery and interaction</i>		
<i>Critical cultural awareness</i>		
<i>Other</i>		

Appendix 12. Student ICC Development in Incident 4 of Cycle 2 and Corresponding Evidence

ICC developed in C2S3I4	√ Or	Evidence
<i>Knowledge (n=1)</i>	√	<i>“There are different social norms in tipping in different countries” (C2I4g2s2)</i>
<i>Attitude</i>		
<i>Skills of interpreting and relating</i>		
<i>Skills of discovery and interaction</i>		
<i>Critical cultural awareness (n=1)</i>	√	<i>“It is important to value and respect all languages and cultures.” (C2I4g2s1)</i>
<i>Other</i>	√	<i>“One of the main reasons is that English is widely spoken as a global language and it is often used as the primary language of business, and international communication. Additionally, many countries have historically been colonized or influenced by countries where English is spoken’ (C2I4g2s1) ‘ respect is earned by good behavior and personal characteristics and not by learning or speaking a kind of language.”(C2I4g2s1)</i>

Appendix 13. Student ICC Development in Incident 5 of Cycle 2 and Corresponding Evidence

ICC developed in C2S3I5	√ Or	Evidence
<i>Knowledge</i>		
<i>Attitude</i>		
<i>Skills of interpreting and relating</i>	√	<i>“Chinese or most Asians tend to couch their remarks very carefully so as not to hurt the feelings of the other person. This results in rather heavy use of ambiguity. So Chinese tend to add maybe at the end of their expression.” (C2I4g3s1)</i>
<i>Skills of discovery and interaction</i>		
<i>Critical cultural awareness</i>		
<i>Other</i>	√	<i>“Language cannot be separated from culture because if you learn the language and you don’t know the culture it means you don’t know the language even if you speak and write it.” (C2I4g3s2)</i>

Appendix 14. Student ICC Development in Incident 6 of Cycle 2 and Corresponding

Evidence

ICC developed in C2S3I6	√ Or	Evidence
<i>Knowledge</i>		
<i>Attitude</i>		
<i>Skills of interpreting and relating (n=6)</i>	√	“westerns tend to be individualistic in their pursuit of face, emphasizing freedom and equality. While Chinese people’s pursuit of face is more with collectivist and hierarchial.”(C2S4g3s1) “...it is totally different, I know a lot of young girl around me who prefer to reveal teethes rather than palatals. In this way, they need only to open the mouth in a small range, so that they can look more feminine when speaking and reduce lip movement” (C2S4g2s2) “I can identify a lot of scenes in the movie that cultural misunderstanding occurs. I understand why the Chinese would do that and why the American would misunderstand these behaviors.” (C2S4g5s1) “some of the misunderstandings I think would have better solutions to the problem that both parties would accept.” (C2S4g6s2) “my dad was a Chinese medicine doctor, So i understand the cultural significance of Guasha well, and I want to spread this cultural wealth to others.” (C2S4g6s3)
<i>Skills of discovery and interaction</i>		
<i>Critical cultural awareness</i>	√	“a lot of stereotypes Asian image in the western movie” (C2S4g2s1) “this movie also present stereotyped image of Chinese, we are not like this anymore and not all Chinese are like this” (C2S4g2s1)
<i>Other</i>		“we need to pay attention to their facial expressions during the intercultural

	√	<i>communication” (C2S4g2s2)</i> <i>“we have never been taught that thing <ICC> before, and I think it is important...” (C2S4g2s1)</i>
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Appendix 15. Student ICC Development in Incident 7 of Cycle 2 and Corresponding Evidence

ICC developed in C2S3I7	√ Or	Evidence
<i>Knowledge</i>		
<i>Attitude</i>	√	<i>“tolerance and being open is mutual whether on the local or global level”</i> (C2S6g2s1) <i>“we should be tolerant but not let them offend our culture. They should accept out culture the same way as we accept theirs.”</i> (C2S6g3s2) <i>“we should be tolerant during intercultural communication, and we are willing to explain the different culture and eliminate their stereotype, but no tolerance for deliberate discrimination.”</i> (C2S6g3s1) <i>“tolerance does not mean bearing everything in intercultural communication.”</i> (C2S6g2s1) <i>“tolerance is based on mutual respect.”</i> (C2S6g1s1)
<i>Skills of interpreting and relating</i>		
<i>Skills of discovery and interaction</i>		
<i>Critical cultural awareness</i>		
<i>Other</i>	√	<i>“I have no idea that these words have the connotation of discrimination against Chinese people, I have not heard these words at all, it is impossible to learn it in previous English classes. There is a good chance that I have been discriminated against, and I say 'pardon' with a smile or have the courtesy to ask the person to explain.”</i> (C2S6g1s1)