

Bridging Cultures: Enhancing Teachers' Intercultural Communication Competence in Higher Education Institutions in China

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ABSTRACT

Under the great impact of globalisation, the internationalisation of higher education institutions (HEIs) has become an inevitable trend, aiming to improve sustainable development and quality of education. To thrive in this global landscape, teachers must have strong intercultural communication competence (ICC). This quantitative small-scale study examines teachers' ICC in higher education institutions (HEIs) across China. A total of 57 teachers from international offices and English departments participated, with 30 from Hebei Province and 27 from other regions. Data were collected via an online questionnaire and analysed with SPSS software, utilising both descriptive and inferential statistics. The findings indicate that Chinese teachers possess basic intercultural knowledge and attitudes but lack behavioural competence. Teachers in Hebei Province exhibit lower ICC levels compared to the national average, with the intercultural cognitive aspect being the weakest. Additionally, the study found that teachers with higher ICC levels experience fewer instances of intercultural miscommunication (IM). Future educational efforts should prioritise enhancing intercultural affective aspects to improve overall ICC levels and specifically focus on training teachers in Hebei Province in intercultural cognitive competence. This study sheds light on the global need for educators to enhance their intercultural skills to bridge cultures effectively.

Keywords: China, higher education institutions, internationalisation, intercultural communication competence, teachers

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INTRODUCTION

Many countries, especially in the post-epidemic era, have initiated efforts to promote internationalisation at home (IaH) as an effective approach for the internationalisation of universities and colleges (Li & Xue, 2023). Sercu (2023)

explained that IaH involves the intentional incorporation of international and intercultural elements into the formal curriculum for “all students” within domestic learning settings. It is increasingly important for university teachers to possess intercultural communication competence (ICC) to cultivate students with global perspectives (Zelenková & Hanesová, 2019). ICC includes intercultural cognitive, affective, and behavioural aspects (Haregu et al., 2024). Lacking ICC is the main barrier to conducting helpful intercultural communication and will lead to intercultural miscommunication (IM) (Sarwari et al., 2024). Most studies focus on students’ ICC while little research has been done on teachers. Hebei Province is one of China’s most populous provinces, with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. Consequently, this research seeks to examine the ICC levels and IM among teachers in Hebei and compare them with the national levels to identify and strengthen weak areas, ultimately promoting the internationalisation of Hebei’s HEIs. The research questions are as follows:

1. What are the ICC levels of teachers within Hebei Province compared to those outside the province in China?
2. (What is the relationship between ICC and IM?)
3. How are the intercultural cognitive, affective, and behavioural aspects related?

METHODS

This quantitative study uses an online questionnaire to investigate teachers’ ICC levels and IM problems. Using convenience sampling, a total of 57 teachers from international offices and English departments at internationalised HEIs in China participated, including 30 teachers from Hebei Province and 27 teachers from regions outside Hebei Province.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Teachers’ ICC levels and IM situations with various aspects were tested, including ICC levels of teachers in China, the relationship among the ICC variables, and the relationship between ICC and IM.

General ICC Levels of Teachers in China

As shown in Table 1, teachers’ intercultural cognitive level is the highest (mean = 3.6737). Intercultural affective level is medium (mean = 3.6640). The intercultural behaviour level is the lowest (mean = 3.3620). It can be seen that teachers in HEIs in China have some basic intercultural knowledge and attitude, but intercultural behaviour is still lacking.

A Comparison of ICC Levels and IM Problems of Teachers in and Outside Hebei

Table 2 shows that teachers outside Hebei (mean = 3.6053) generally exhibit slightly higher ICC levels than those within Hebei (mean = 3.5318). Specifically, teachers outside Hebei show a higher mean value in intercultural cognitive levels compared to those in Hebei. In terms of intercultural affective and behaviour levels, the mean difference between the two groups is minimal. These statistics highlight specific areas of ICC that teachers in Hebei need to develop, especially intercultural cognitive levels. Additionally, the IM mean score of teachers outside Hebei is lower than that of teachers in Hebei. As a result, teachers of higher ICC levels tend to have less IM problems.

Table 1
Mean value of teachers' ICC levels in China

	Cognitive	Affective	Behaviour
Mean	3.6737	3.6640	3.3620

Table 2
Independent samples T-tests

	Identity	Mean
Cognitive	Teacher in	3.5967
	Teacher outside	3.7593
Affective	Teacher in	3.6350
	Teacher outside	3.6963
Behaviour	Teacher in	3.3636
	Teacher outside	3.3603
ICC	Teacher in	3.5318
	Teacher outside	3.6053
Miscommunication	Teacher in	3.1375
	Teacher outside	2.7106

Relationship Among the ICC Variables

Table 3 indicates that the correlations between intercultural cognitive, affective, and behavioural aspects with overall ICC are 0.918, 0.919, and 0.907, respectively. This indicates that the relationship between intercultural affective levels and overall ICC is the strongest, suggesting that enhancing intercultural affective abilities is the most effective approach to improve teachers' ICC.

Table 3
Pearson correlation

	Cognitive	Affective	Behaviour
Cognitive			
Affective	0.751		
Behaviour	0.725	0.795	
ICC	0.918	0.919	0.907

CONCLUSION

Chinese HEIs have established a basic foundation for developing teachers' intercultural cognitive and affective aspects, but there is still a deficiency in behavioural competence. Moreover, teachers in Hebei exhibit lower ICC levels compared to the national average, especially in terms of intercultural knowledge. Enhancing affective aspects appears to be the most effective strategy for improving teachers' ICC and overcoming IM.

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