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*2025 3rd International Conference on the Sociology of the Global Economy, Education, Arts and Humanities (GEEAH 2025)***Enhancing Intercultural Competence among College Foreign Language Students: The Critical Role of Educators**Huiying Zhang ^{1,*}, Yiting Li ¹ and Shuying Li ¹¹ Guangdong University of Science and Technology, Dongguan, Guangdong, China

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Abstract: This study investigates the intercultural competence of college students majoring in foreign languages, focusing on enhancement strategies and the pivotal role of educators. Based on a questionnaire survey of 122 undergraduates and qualitative interviews with two students, the findings reveal that teacher-guided discussions on foreign cultures, in comparison with Chinese culture, significantly foster students' cultural self-confidence and sense of national identity. Furthermore, classroom group discussions are found to be essential for improving interpersonal and oral communication skills. Assignments designed by instructors also promote critical thinking and creativity. Overall, the results highlight the importance of well-structured classroom activities and effective teaching methods in developing intercultural competence within foreign language education.

Keywords: intercultural competence; foreign languages; educators; national pride

1. Introduction

As China's global presence continues to expand, cultivating individuals with strong intercultural competence has become increasingly important. College students represent a vital part of the nation's talent pool, and the intercultural abilities of foreign language majors are especially crucial in supporting international exchange and global communication. Recent academic and policy discourse has emphasized the need to enhance international communication by presenting a more well-rounded and culturally informed understanding of China to global audiences. In this context, foreign language professionals serve as key facilitators of cross-cultural understanding and communication.

For students majoring in foreign languages, it is essential to foster national identity, contribute meaningfully to society, develop international perspectives, and acquire effective intercultural and language communication skills [1]. Scholars have emphasized that internationally competent talents should possess cultural grounding, global vision, and the ability to interpret and express perspectives through a culturally informed lens [1]. Foreign language education should therefore integrate linguistic training with the cultivation of cultural awareness, enabling students to develop a thorough understanding of Chinese heritage and the ability to engage with diverse global cultures. Such education should encourage learners to embrace innovation, maintain cultural confidence, and develop an open and inclusive mindset [2].

This paper employs both quantitative and qualitative methods to explore strategies for enhancing intercultural competence among foreign language majors, with a focus on college students as the primary research population [3]. It also examines the crucial role

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of educators in this process and provides insights and recommendations for effectively fostering intercultural skills within the framework of higher education.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Definition of the Concept of Intercultural Competence

Intercultural competence has become a central focus in the development of foreign language proficiency. Scholars have approached the concept through various related frameworks, such as intercultural communication competence, cultural intelligence, and intercultural sensitivity [3]. Research across different countries indicates that intercultural competence includes both personal attributes — such as flexibility, empathy, openness, self-awareness, adaptability, language skills, and cultural knowledge — and contextual factors, such as shared goals, mutual understanding, equality, and individual agency [2].

Early perspectives suggested that competence increases when individuals solve problems effectively with greater awareness of relevant factors, emphasizing the importance of individual ability [4]. Intercultural competence has also been defined as the ability to engage in behaviors that support cooperative relationships across diverse cultural and social contexts. It involves the capacity to negotiate meaning across cultures, build cross-cultural connections, maintain harmonious relationships, and support mutual development [3].

In educational contexts, comprehensive models of intercultural competence have integrated both communicative and intercultural elements [5]. Communicative competence includes linguistic, pragmatic, and strategic components, while intercultural competence involves sensitivity, tolerance, flexibility, cultural awareness, and practical communication skills. These models emphasize the importance of global awareness, cultural adaptability, and knowledge application in real-world communication scenarios.

Efforts have also been made to develop measurement tools for assessing intercultural competence among university students. One such tool includes components like linguistic and sociolinguistic skills, discourse strategies, and intercultural awareness [4]. For example, a sample item might state: "I am skilled at observing cultural differences between individuals from various cultures during interactions."

However, many of these tools rely heavily on English-language contexts, which may limit their relevance in multilingual environments. For instance, items such as "When interacting with individuals from different cultures, I use conversational fillers like 'you know' or 'well' to gain thinking time", or "I can quickly adapt to English with various accents", reflect a narrow focus. While English is widely used in international communication, there is a growing need to expand the development of intercultural competence within a multilingual framework, especially for students majoring in foreign languages [5,6].

Although existing research offers solid foundations and practical insights, it often underrepresents the importance of a strong cultural identity. In international communication, having a clear sense of one's cultural background and the ability to articulate it respectfully plays a crucial role in effective intercultural engagement [3].

2.2. Intercultural Competence Development Pathway

When it comes to cultivating students' intercultural competence, researchers have approached the topic from various angles [7]. First, scholars exploring methods to enhance college students' intercultural competence have proposed several strategies, including classroom intercultural teaching, online audiovisual resources, and speaking libraries, among others [6]. One analysis of 26 quantitative studies conducted both domestically and internationally evaluated the effectiveness of classroom intercultural teaching in promoting intercultural competence. The results show that classroom intercultural teaching can significantly enhance students' intercultural competence, with the most notable impact observed in basic education, while the effect is relatively minor in higher education

[7]. In higher education, the effects vary across different cultural contexts, with intercultural teaching proving more effective in the Chinese cultural environment. Furthermore, the study emphasizes that different teaching interventions have distinct effects on students' intercultural competence. It suggests that intercultural education in China should consider specific national contexts and strive to develop models and theories of intercultural competence that reflect the cultural characteristics unique to the region [8]. While the study confirms the effectiveness of classroom instruction, it lacks detailed information on specific teaching methods and content, highlighting the need for further analysis and research to create intercultural competence theories that align with the nuances of Chinese culture [5].

One proposal suggests that utilizing the network audiovisual speaking resource library can enhance college students' intercultural communication skills. This involves fostering an international perspective in students through the library, understanding the political, economic, and cultural developments of other nations, appreciating multiculturalism, and boosting global awareness [6]. Furthermore, enriching students' language and cultural education requires exploring history, geography, customs, and habits, enabling them to acquire relevant cultural knowledge that supports classroom learning. Additionally, this can create further opportunities for students to practice their communication skills. It is recommended that teachers utilize the online audiovisual speaking resource library to present case studies on intercultural communication, helping students build confidence and assurance in their intercultural interactions [9]. Finally, educators are encouraged to enhance their own intercultural teaching skills. The study provides specific strategies for improving intercultural communication competence but does not include empirical research on the effects of these enhancements [10].

3. Research Design

3.1. Research Methods

In this study, a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods was used, starting with a questionnaire survey of 108 undergraduates majoring in foreign languages. This survey included questions designed to enhance intercultural competence and identify the classroom factors that contribute to its development. The response options were rated using a Likert scale (5 = very much in line ~ 1 = very much out of line). Subsequently, participants reflected on key experiences that fostered their intercultural competence during an interview-based data collection session, focusing on two specific cases. Each student's journey to improve intercultural competence was examined in a follow-up analysis and reporting session of the results [11].

3.2. Research Participants

The participants in this study were university students majoring in foreign languages, specifically those in their third to fourth year of study, aged 20 to 23, with different levels of proficiency in foreign languages proficiency.

3.3. Data Collection and Analytics

This study gathered data through online questionnaires and interviews. The questionnaire was distributed to 122 university students over the internet. Before the assessment, the students were informed about its purpose and assured that their data would remain confidential and be used solely for research [9]. After the assessment, 108 questionnaires were retrieved, resulting in a response rate of 88.5% with 108 valid responses.

Before the interviews, we utilized questionnaires to collect participants' case materials, organize factors related to enhancing intercultural competence, and adjust the interview questions as needed. During the interviews, participants were first assessed on their development of intercultural competence and then encouraged to share significant experiences related to their growth in this area [12]. The interviews lasted from one to one and

a half hours. The initial draft of the interview text was created using the automatic transcription feature of the recording device, and the research data was finalized after conducting two thorough word-for-word reviews [12].

4. Results

Firstly, regarding intercultural competence, the survey and analysis findings indicated that over 50% of participants felt their intercultural competence had significantly improved due to the effective teaching provided by their instructors. This study refers to the definition of intercultural competence that includes communicative competence (comprising linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence) as well as intercultural competence (which encompasses intercultural knowledge, attitudes, awareness, and skills). With the inclusion of cultural self-confidence, the intercultural competence discussed in this paper comprises linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, intercultural knowledge, intercultural etiquette, levels of intercultural communication, cultural self-confidence, national self-confidence, and globalization awareness — totaling 15 components. According to the average value-added effect of intercultural competence (see Table 1), the highest value-added effect is "national pride as a Chinese" (4.39), closely followed by "confidence in Chinese culture" (4.37), "foreign culture and etiquette" (4.37), and "globalization awareness" (4.37). Next, we find "knowledge of foreign culture and etiquette" (4.19), "knowledge of Chinese culture and etiquette" (4.16), "interpersonal skills" (4.07), and "oral expression in foreign languages" (4.06). Additionally, the list includes "critical thinking skills" (4.04), "globalization awareness" (4.03), "problem-solving skills" (4.01), "creative thinking skills" (3.94), and the "ability to communicate with foreigners in a foreign language" (3.93), as well as "foreign language translation ability" (3.91), "foreign language reading ability" (3.91), "foreign language listening ability" (3.91), and "foreign language writing ability" (3.73).

Table 1. Enhancing Intercultural Competence.

Number	Elements	Points
1	National pride in China	4.39
2	Confidence in Chinese culture	4.37
3	Increased awareness of foreign cultures and etiquette	4.22
4	Enhanced understanding of Chinese culture and etiquette	4.16
5	Interpersonal skills	4.07
6	Verbal expression in foreign languages	4.06
7	Critical thinking skills	4.04
8	Awareness of globalization	4.03
9	Problem-solving abilities	4.01
10	Creative thinking skills	3.94
11	Proficiency in communicating with foreigners in foreign languages	3.93
12	Listening skills in foreign languages	3.91
13	Reading skills in foreign languages	3.91
14	Translation skills in foreign languages	3.91
15	Writing skills in foreign languages	3.73

The analysis of interview data reveals that the instructional methods employed by teachers significantly influenced the enhancement of intercultural competence. Surprisingly, the two competencies that displayed the most value-added effects were "national pride as a Chinese" and "confidence in Chinese culture". Contributing factors included the teacher's strategy of "explaining the comparison between Chinese and foreign cultures" in the classroom. This explanation highlighted foreign cultures while contrasting them with Chinese traditions, emphasizing the profound influence of traditional Chinese culture on

foreign cultures. These discussions significantly boosted students' national self-confidence and cultural awareness. Furthermore, as the teacher talks about foreign cultures, students engage in comparisons and reflections on Chinese culture, fostering pride in their national heritage and a increased cultural confidence.

Secondly, there is an increasing awareness of foreign cultures and etiquette, along with a deeper appreciation of Chinese culture and customs. During the lectures, instructors clarify foreign cultures and etiquette, particularly by comparing them to Chinese practices. These comparisons help students not only broaden their understanding of foreign cultures but also deepen their grasp of their own cultural norms, which is crucial for college students to comprehend both China and the world. Furthermore, students discover that Chinese etiquette has a rich history, with foreign nations also borrowing from and adapting it, highlighting both similarities and differences influenced by their unique national contexts. These insights significantly enhance students' knowledge of cross-cultural interactions.

Thirdly, the development of students' interpersonal and oral expression skills is significant. The interviews revealed that key factors included group discussions in the classroom and conversation practice. Specifically, teaching effective communication in a foreign language is closely related to students' daily lives. Respondents indicated that many of their foreign language communication skills transferred to their everyday interactions. Moreover, they noted that group discussions with classmates enhanced their ability to communicate effectively and improved their social skills. They observed that teamwork abilities were strengthened through group discussions about completing projects efficiently, while their conversation skills also improved. Comments included, "My oral expression has improved during dialogue practice", and "My ability to express myself openly has increased". It is clear that increasing interactions among students in the classroom and providing more opportunities for foreign language practice not only enhance their speaking abilities but also improve their interpersonal skills. The student-centered teaching method plays a crucial role in advancing students' skills across various dimensions.

Fourthly, students' critical thinking skills, awareness of globalization, problem-solving abilities, and creative thinking have all improved. Respondents noted that they practiced these skills while completing the topics assigned by their teachers by independently researching information and discussing it with their classmates. It is clear that through the effective instructional design implemented by the teachers, all students' capabilities will be enhanced.

Ultimately, students' foreign language skills in listening, speaking, reading, and writing have shown some improvement; however, this progress is modest compared to their other abilities. This indicates that students' proficiency in these areas requires substantial practice, and relying solely on the teacher's instruction is somewhat ineffective.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of the survey in this study demonstrates that teachers' instruction in the classroom enhances foreign language students' intercultural competence. Notably, factors such as national pride, cultural confidence, knowledge of cultural etiquette, interpersonal skills, and oral expression are highlighted. Additionally, fostering critical thinking and problem-solving skills also significantly impacts students. However, improving foreign language skills in listening, speaking, reading, and writing requires enhancements beyond the teacher's classroom instruction. It is clear that effective and engaging teaching, along with structured lesson plans that involve assigning topics to students and encouraging group discussions, positively influences the intercultural competence of foreign language majors. In this paper, intercultural competence is interpreted in a new way by adding cultural self-confidence and national pride, as these are also qualities that should be possessed when communicating with people of different cultures. This study focuses on

some foreign language majors and does not represent all groups. In the future, we should expand the survey population to conduct a more comprehensive research study. A more comprehensive interpretation of intercultural competence is also needed.

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