

English-major Students' Perception of the Impact of Cultural Barriers on Intercultural Communicative Competence

Lam Thi Lan Huong¹✉, Nguyen Phuong Thao²

¹ lamhuong@tlu.edu.vn
Thuyloi University
(Vietnam)

² stellaphuong263@gmail.com
Thuyloi University
(Vietnam)

✉ Corresponding author

ABSTRACT: *Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) is a crucial skill for English-major students in today's globalized world. This study investigates the intercultural communicative competence of English major students by examining their self-perceptions and the cultural barriers that hinder its development. Guided by Chen and Young's (2012) ICC model, the research focuses on three core dimensions of ICC: cognitive, affective, and behavioural, integrating insights from existing literature to contextualize and interpret the findings. While ICC fosters adaptability and effective communication across cultural boundaries, students often face challenges such as fear of making mistakes, limited exposure to multicultural environments, language difficulties, cultural bias, and stereotypes. A quantitative research design was employed, using a 30-item questionnaire to collect data from 60 participants. The findings provide insights into students' awareness of cultural obstacles and how these challenges affect their intercultural interactions. The study also offers practical implications for educators and curriculum designers in developing strategies to enhance students' intercultural competence. By addressing these issues, the research contributes to improving English language education and preparing students for academic and professional success in multicultural environments.*

KEYWORDS: Cognitive, affective, and behavioural dimensions; emotional elements, Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC); cultural barriers.

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1. Introduction

Intercultural communication competence (ICC) has become an essential skill, especially for English major students who frequently interact with diverse cultures and languages. One aspect of intercultural communication competence is the individual's comprehension of both their own and other cultures' norms. Yet, ICC suggests that one knows how to apply such information to construct bridges in culturally diverse contexts effectively and to communicate with others who do not share the same background (Akdere *et al.*, 2021; Toscu & Erten, 2020). The growth of this competency will undoubtedly impact identity, emotions, and thought processes. Given that these are the structures that organize behaviours, interactions, values, and individual imaginations, the latter may vary from culture to culture. Consequently, each participant in an intercultural exchange views the world through

the prism of their own personality and cultural group, as noted by Lantz–Deaton and Golubeva (2020). Furthermore, cultural knowledge and communication skills are inextricably linked as culture shapes communication norms and conventions (Avgousti, 2018). ICC not only helps them adapt to cultural differences but also builds meaningful relationships and communicates effectively in a multicultural environment. However, many studies have shown that cultural barriers still significantly hinder the development and application of ICC among students.

Vietnamese students in universities face difficulties due to limited International Communication Competence, which affects their academic achievements and reduces their future employment prospects. Business leaders increasingly value their employees' multicultural adaptability. Therefore, it is crucial to study how students understand cultural barriers while

developing proven methods for barrier removal, given their urgency to overcome this situation and succeed in achieving a strong ICC.

Grounded in the framework of intercultural communicative competence proposed by Chen and Young (2012), which conceptualizes ICC as a multidimensional construct comprising intercultural knowledge, attitudes and skills, this study aims to explore how third- and fourth-year English-major students at a public university in Hanoi perceive ICC as well as the influence of cultural obstacles on their ability to communicate across cultural boundaries. The study helps students learn how to overcome cultural differences while advancing their understanding of their effects in the context of academic communication by highlighting common viewpoints and challenges.

In order to achieve the aims, this study proposed the following research questions

1. What is the perceived level of intercultural communicative competence among English major students in terms of intercultural knowledge, attitudes, and skills as defined by Chen and Young (2012)?

2. What cultural barriers do English major students perceive as hindering the development of their intercultural knowledge, attitudes, and skills?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Intercultural Communicative Competence

The term ‘Communicative Competence’ was introduced by Hymes (1972), and since then it has been popular among teachers, researchers, and others interested in language. The diversity in values, perspectives, cultures, ethnic origins, social customs, political beliefs, sexual orientations, and religions clearly affects how people around the world interpret the surrounding world based on their personal perceptions (Tesoriero, 2006). In recent years, many studies have focused on these differences, leading to the formation of the concept of ‘intercultural communication competence’.

Intercultural communication competence (ICC) is often seen as an aspect of ‘communication competence’ (Deardorff, 2006). ICC, the ability

to adjust knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours to be open and flexible with other cultures, has become an important factor in the globalized society of the 21st century (Alred & Byram, 2002). According to Huang, Rayner, and Zhuang (2003), individuals with ICC can build relationships with people from different cultures, resolve complex conflicts arising from cultural differences, and enhance their ability to work with partners from various cultural backgrounds. Therefore, learning how to interact effectively with different cultures requires cultural awareness, communication skills, personal attitudes such as empathy and flexibility, self-awareness, and understanding of the values, beliefs, and norms of others.

The combination of intercultural communication competence and communication competence is defined by Chen and Starosta (1998) as the ability to perform communication behaviours effectively and appropriately to negotiate each other’s cultural identities in a multicultural environment. Their definition emphasizes three basic components of intercultural communication competence: intercultural sensitivity (the affective process), intercultural awareness (the cognitive process), and intercultural adroitness (the behavioural process), essentially referring to the linguistic and non-linguistic factors of communication mentioned above as part of intercultural communication competence. Fourteen years later, Chen and Young (2012) further developed this framework by identifying additional skills and contextual conditions necessary for the development of intercultural communication competence in increasingly complex cultural environments (see Figure 1 below).

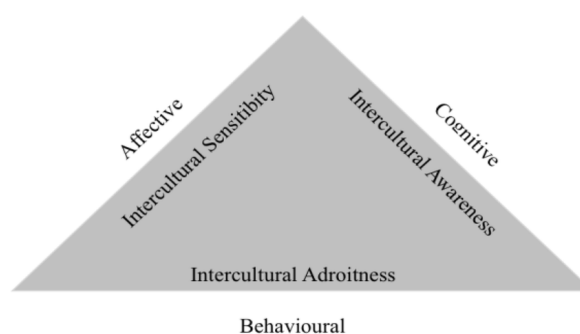


Figure 1: Model of intercultural communication competence (Chen & Young, 2012, p. 177)

The affective elements

Affective elements consist of emotional elements in language learning, including motivation, anxiety, self-esteem, and attitudes toward language speakers. The emotional aspects of affective elements influence how students engage in their language learning, while they remain committed and their language abilities develop, making them essential for second language success and navigating bilingual contexts (Brown, 2000). Intercultural sensitivity functions as an affective element by referring to the practice of developing positive emotions and feelings during intercultural exchanges (Chen & Starosta, 2000).

The Cognitive Elements

Cognitive elements indicate intercultural awareness. These elements relate to understanding the characteristics of the target culture, its beliefs and values, as well as the ways in which people from different cultures think (Chen & Starosta, 1997; Lee & Song, 2019). Following the arguments of Chen and Young (2012), it is necessary to reduce ambiguity and uncertainty (including discomfort, confusion, and anxiety) in order to develop the cognitive elements.

The Behavioural Elements

According to Chen and Young (2012), intercultural adroitness refers to the ability to achieve one's communication goals in intercultural interaction through behavioural performance. An interculturally effective person can discriminate which verbal and nonverbal behaviours, communication styles are the most suitable in specific intercultural encounters. The interculturally effective person displays respect and acts under the set of rules, values, and assumptions that govern the host culture. Therefore, intercultural adroitness embraces the individual's "ability to maintain the face of one's culturally different counterparts" while interacting (Chen, 2009, pp. 529–532).

The ICC model developed by Chen and Young (2012) has been chosen as the theoretical framework for this study due to its comprehensiveness and process-oriented approach, with three core components: affective, cognitive, and behavioural. This

model is particularly significant and aligns with the objectives of my research as it not only clarifies how cultural barriers affect students' communication competence but also provides a solid theoretical foundation for conceptualizing and measuring these aspects.

2.2. Cultural Barriers

Cultural barriers encompass a wide array of obstacles that significantly hinder effective intercultural communication. The cultural walls will hinder the process of exchanging information between people from disparate cultural settings thereby misunderstanding and misinterpretation of messages will often ensue. Cultural obstacles appear in the forms of language and socioculture to make interactions meaningful. Culture challenges emerge from varying norms, values, ways of communicating, or nonverbal behaviours (Samovar, Porter & McDaniel, 2012). Kumbakonam (2016) also argued that cultural differences emerge when people come across conflicting values and beliefs because of their different cultural backgrounds. Among all the cultural barriers, language-related barriers seem to be the most apparent. Even though English major students may possess a high level of linguistic competence, they often lack the pragmatic dimension of communication, such as indirectness, humour, or idioms, which are invariably culture-bound (Chen & Starosta, 2000).

2.3. The Relationship between Intercultural Communicative Competence and Cultural Barriers.

The relationship between intercultural communicative competence and cultural barriers is interactive and interchangeable. Cultural barriers serve as barriers to intercultural communication but also as an incentive for the development of ICC. To equip English majors with the abilities they need to succeed in a variety of cultural situations, it is critical to comprehend the connection between ICC and cultural obstacles. By impeding efficient communication and misinterpreting messages, cultural barriers, including language difficulties, nationalism, prejudice, and cultural

misconceptions, limit people's capacity to develop intercultural communication skills (Barna, 1997). The cultural characteristics of individualism-collectivism (Hofstede, 2001) and high-low context (Hall, 1976) communication significantly influence people's interpretations, self-expression, and responses in cross-cultural interactions. According to Gudykunst's Anxiety & Uncertainty Management (AUM) theory, individuals - especially students in intercultural environments - often experience high levels of anxiety and uncertainty when communicating across cultures. However, through direct exposure and increased contact, they learn to manage language differences, adapt their communication, and develop intercultural understanding (Ni & Wang, 2011; Gudykunst, 2005).

In addition, research by Deardorff (2006) illustrates that reflective learning and cultural empathy are essential in negotiating cultural barriers to the extent that one can adapt frames of reference and develop intercultural flexibility. Pedagogically, there are practices that lessen the negative aspects of cultural barriers and enhance ICC. Fantini (2009) reported that formal intercultural learning, engagement from peers, and learning activities (study abroad programs and intercultural projects) significantly develop students' competences to learn about and move past cultural barriers. By using cross-cultural cooperative activities, English-major students used language learning to build confidence and learn competencies needed to contend with a variety of communication contexts. Thus, while initial cultural obstacles may prevent students' ICC, they may also provide opportunities for learning to enhance ICC. The most important skills needed to develop successful intercultural competence is cultural awareness, flexibility, and openness to enter an intercultural dialogue notwithstanding the complexities and challenges.

3. Methodology

The study was conducted at a public multi-disciplinary university in Hanoi in late 2025. The participants were third—and fourth-year English-major students whose English proficiency level was in the intermediate range. They were

frequently exposed to English and culture in all classes using English as a medium of instruction, focusing on different areas such as hospitality and tourism, journalism, economics and finance, project management, event management or human resources management. These students were selected through purposive sampling to ensure their exposure to intercultural communication and relevant academic experiences. 60 students participated in the survey, and the majority of whom were female, accounting for 78.3% of the samples, while male participants made up 21.7%.

In this study, the questionnaire was adopted from the validated instrument developed by Chen & Young (2012), as applied in the study of Li & Deocampo (2025). This instrument measures three key dimensions of ICC: cognitive, affective, and behavioural dimension. These three components fully reflect the aspects of intercultural communication competence, from an open attitude and sensitivity to cultural differences, to cultural awareness and the ability to adjust communication behaviour appropriately in multicultural situations.

The survey in Vietnamese was sent to participants using Google Forms through various channels, including class groups on Gmail, Zalo and Messenger platforms, as well as by sending direct messages to each student. The collected data were entered all the answers into SPSS, with analysis focusing on calculating the mean (M), standard deviation (SD), and Cronbach's alpha (α), for each questionnaire item.

4. Results

4.1. English Major Students' Perspectives of Intercultural Communicative Competence.

The Cognitive Dimension

The data collected from the survey questionnaire shows that the level of awareness among English-major students regarding intercultural communication factors is moderately good, with an overall mean score of 3.2 and a standard deviation (SD) of 1.0. Table 1 indicates that learners possess a certain understanding of concepts related to culture and communication; however, there are still limitations in their awareness, particularly regarding abstract

concepts or those less frequently encountered in practice. Besides, Cronbach's alpha value was approximately from 0.62 to 0.72, demonstrating that the items had acceptable consistency in measuring the cognitive competence.

As shown in Table 1, the majority of participants (56.6%) either agreed and strongly agreed for recognizing cultural beliefs into decision-making (M = 3.58; SD = 0.87). This suggests that students have a fair understanding of the role of cultural beliefs in influencing social decisions, illustrating that students recognize the importance of cultural frames in forming social norms and behaviours, and therefore this may be

perceived to a partial extent, an element of the ICC. Similarly, the concept of "face" and its importance in intercultural communication also recorded a high mean score (M = 3.47), with 50% agreeing. The finding suggests that students exhibit a good cognitive understanding of the term as it may be the case that half of the undergraduates find the concept "face" important, as it is a culturally-dependent one, necessary to negotiate complex social exchange in different cultures. On the other hand, the knowledge of how context (high-context vs low-context communication) affects interaction norms received the lowest mean score (M = 2.87; SD = 1.03).

Table 1: The cognitive dimension determines the level of intercultural communicative competence among English major students

Item	M	SD	SD & D (%)	N (%)	A & SA (%)
1. I am familiar with the cultural norms and values in different cultures.	3.27	0.88	20	41.7	38.3
2. It is difficult to understand how cultural values influence communication styles and preferences.	3.20	0.98	21.7	40	38.3
3. I can identify the cultural dimensions, for example, emphasizing group harmony, prioritizing one's own goals, or being aware of verbal cues that shape communication patterns in diverse cultures.	3.40	0.92	13.3	40	46.7
4. I do not know how context affects communication norms in different cultures.	2.87	1.03	36.7	33.3	30
5. I understand how cultural beliefs influence the decision-making process in different societies.	3.58	0.87	11.7	31.7	56.6
6. Recognizing the difference between individualism and collectivism culture in communication is a challenge for me.	3.12	1.06	28.3	38.3	33.4
7. I know well about the concept of "face" and its importance in intercultural communication.	3.47	1.03	16.6	33.3	50
8. It is difficult for me to understand how high-context and low-context communication style affects information interpretation.	3.00	0.99	30	38.3	31.7
9. I can identify the non-verbal communication cues and the cultural differences in their sense.	3.33	1.00	20	35	45
10. I am not familiar with the cultural taboos and etiquette norms of different cultures.	3.22	1.02	20	41.7	38.3
Overall	3.2	1.0			

(Note: M = Mean, Sd = Standard deviation, SD = Strongly Disagree, D = Disagree, N = Neutral, A = Agree, SA = Strongly agree)

It is interesting that 36.7% of participants disagreed and strongly disagreed with this being the case, indicating that a sizeable proportion of students may lack awareness or be uncertain of the role of communication context on behaviour in interaction. This ambivalence is also supported by the low average ($M = 3.00$) of understanding communication due to the situation and the 31.7% students who admitted they met difficulties in understanding the styles which are shaped by contextual influence. This would suggest a surprising degree of cognitive deficiency among students, since knowledge of context-dependent communication processes is essential for effective intercultural communication, noting also the cross-cultural distinction between cultures that use relatively more implicit as opposed to explicit communication cues. Particularly, awareness of key intercultural factors, such as harmony in groups, prioritizing goals, and verbal cues, led to a fairly high mean score ($M = 3.40$), with only 13.3% disagreement and 86.7% agreement.

Additionally, the recognition of culturally unique non-verbal behaviour was accompanied by a positive mean score ($M = 3.33$) and an agreement rate of 45%, indicating the development of competence in reading cross-cultural non-verbal signals. This ability is particularly important in light of the fact that non-verbal communication often carries more meaning than verbal messages in many intercultural transactions. Regarding the ability to identify cultural values in real communication situations, the average score was medium ($M = 3.12$; $SD = 1.06$). For the awareness of differences between individualism and collectivism in communication, just 33.4% showed agreement or strong agreement with the clarity of this difference, whereas 28.3% showed disagreement or strong disagreement. A significant 38.3% of the respondents reported neutrality, expressing skepticism or uncertainty regarding being able to distinguish these cultural values in real communication contexts. This split indicates that although some students are confident in distinguishing between individualistic and collectivistic cultural frameworks, a considerable percentage have uncertainty or a lack of confidence regarding their ability to do

so. The results suggest the need for more targeted educational approaches and experiential learning contexts to enhance students' understanding and application of these major cultural dimensions in real-world intercultural communication.

In general, the findings reveal that English-major students have moderate to moderately high cognitive intercultural competence. The findings also reveal areas—more specifically, the capacity for understanding communication contexts—where there is a need for additional focus on education. Specialized training and experiential exposure to actual intercultural settings, particularly those designed to contrast high-context and low-context cultures, are necessary to reinforce students' cognitive competence and prepare them for effective intercultural communication.

The Affective Dimension

In the next part, the participants had a moderately high level of emotional openness and positive attitude because Cronbach's alpha value was approximately 0.78. Specifically, Table 2 below presents a summary of the perceptions of third- and fourth-year English-major students regarding the affective dimension.

The results from Table 4.2 reveal that a large proportion of participants (85%) hold positive attitudes toward cultural diversity and recognize its benefits in both personal and professional contexts, with the highest mean ($M = 4.25$; $SD = 0.79$). Followed by students who have a distinctly positive perception of the role of cultural diversity, with 83.3% agreement. This high score also indicates that learners can easily develop and expand their understanding through collaboration, even in cultural diversity. Similarly, item 2 ($M = 4.08$, $SD = 0.94$) and item 3 ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 0.89$) showed that students have a high level of openness and enthusiasm in learning about other cultures, with a high agreement at 75% and 80%, respectively.

Conversely, the interaction with people from different cultures has the lowest average score ($M = 2.83$), indicating that most students do not feel anxious or apprehensive when interacting with foreigners. However, there is still a small group of students with higher levels of anxiety with the

Table 2: The affective dimension determines the level of intercultural communicative competence among English major students

Item	M	SD	SD & D (%)	N (%)	A & SA (%)
1. I feel uncomfortable interacting with people from different cultures.	2.83	1.13	40	30	30
2. I am open-minded and receptive to learning about new cultural perspectives, such as understanding the significance of cultural rituals and adapting to different communication styles.	4.08	0.94	5	20	75
3. I enjoy exploring cultural differences and finding common ground with people from other cultures.	4.05	0.89	8.3	11.7	80
4. Sometimes it is hard to resonate with people from different cultures.	3.20	1.04	25	40	35
5. I am confident in my ability to overcome cross-cultural misunderstandings and conflicts.	3.50	0.97	16.7	33.3	50
6. I value diversity and believe it enriches our personal and professional experience.	4.25	0.79	3.3	11.7	85
7. I am curious about cultural differences and actively seek opportunities to learn from them.	3.92	0.79	5	20	75
8. In the face of unfamiliar cultural customs, I often lack patience and tolerance.	2.92	1.31	43.3	21.7	35
9. I respect my personal cultural identity and beliefs, even if they are different from my own.	4.03	0.96	6.7	18.3	75
10. I believe that cultural diversity can promote mutual understanding and cooperation.	4.23	0.85	5	11.7	83.3
Overall	3.7	0.96			

(Note: M = Mean, Sd = Standard deviation, SD = Strongly Disagree, D = Disagree, N = Neutral, A = Agree, SA = Strongly agree)

relatively high standard deviation (SD = 1.13). While a large number of students are tolerant and patient when facing unfamiliar cultural customs, with a low average score but the highest standard deviation in the entire scale (SD = 1.31), there is still a sizable fraction that responds negatively to cultural differences, making it challenging to acquire intercultural emotional competence, with an agreement rate of 35%.

Overall, the majority of students demonstrate a favourable disposition towards cultural diversity, acknowledging its advantages in personal and professional realms, and displaying eagerness and receptiveness in acquiring knowledge about various cultures. Besides, a considerable number

of students continue to experience anxiety or have negative attitudes towards cultural differences, signifying ongoing difficulty in cultivating intercultural communication and emotional competencies.

The Behavioural Dimension

In general, with an average score of 3.63 (SD = 0.89), it is evident that the majority of participants self-assess as having a certain level of competence in adjusting their behaviour to fit the cultural context. At the same time, this scale demonstrates a high level of reliability, with a Cronbach’s Alpha ranging from 0.75 to 0.78, demonstrating that the items are consistent in measuring the same aspect of competence. Table

Table 3: The behavioural dimension determines the level of intercultural communicative competence among English major students

Item	M	SD	SD & D (%)	N (%)	A & SA (%)
1. I was able to adjust my communication style to suit the cultural differences.	3.73	0.80	5	33.3	61.7
2. I do not actively seek feedback from people from different cultures to improve my communication skills.	3.00	1.06	35	25	40
3. I found it challenging to navigate cultural differences and reach consensus in cross-cultural interactions.	3.08	1.01	28.3	38.3	33.3
4. I am flexible and willing to change my behaviour when necessary, in keeping with cultural norms.	3.82	0.91	6.6	21.7	71.7
5. I try to resolve conflicts caused by cultural misunderstandings or differences.	3.68	0.81	5	38.3	56.7
6. I actively participate in the cross-cultural learning experience in order to broaden my horizons.	3.80	0.92	8.4	23.3	68.4
7. I was able to negotiate cultural differences and find solutions acceptable to both sides.	3.73	0.75	3.3	35	61.7
8. I respect cultural boundaries and avoid imposing my own cultural values on others.	4.08	0.91	3.3	16.7	80
9. Sometimes I find it difficult to adjust my own solution to a cross-cultural challenge.	3.43	0.91	11.7	45	43.3
10. I am committed to continuously improving my cross-cultural communication skills through practice and reflection.	3.98	0.77	1.7	25	73.4
Overall	3.63	0.89			

(Note: M = Mean, Sd = Standard deviation, SD = Strongly Disagree, D = Disagree, N = Neutral, A = Agree, SA = Strongly agree)

3 below presents a summary of the perceptions of third and fourth-year English-major students regarding the behaviour dimension.

The analysis shows that a large majority of participants (80%) agreed to respect cultural boundaries while refraining from imposing their cultural beliefs on others. This item received the highest average score (M = 4.08, SD = 0.91), which indicates a strong pattern of cultural sensitivity and ethical conduct. It is remarkable that this item also achieved the highest reliability ($\alpha = 0.78$); therefore, it contributes to the strengthening of the measurement value of the scale.

Similarly, 73.4% of students reported that they are willing to change their behaviour to align with the cultural norms of others, with a high average

score (M = 3.82; SD = 0.91), clearly reflecting their willingness to adapt and awareness of cultural expectations in communication. Additionally, a significant number of students have developed an awareness of embracing diversity in communication, with 71.7% of them agreeing with this statement. This result reflects that students maintain an open and flexible approach toward accepting different values and norms from their own cultural background.

However, not all aspects of behavioural competence are equally valued. Notably, 35% of participants showed hesitation or uncertainty in proactively seeking feedback from individuals from different cultures, with a low average score (M = 3.00; SD = 1.06). Furthermore, 28% admitted to difficulty adjusting to achieve mutual

understanding ($M = 3.08$). This suggests that some students still lack confidence and require additional training in practical interaction skills within a multicultural environment.

Overall, English-major students demonstrate a very positive and proactive attitude in managing intercultural communication behaviours, especially in terms of respect and adaptation. However, they still need to improve their handling and adaptation to cultural differences through practical situation simulation programs and enhanced experiences with foreigners. This will help them become more flexible in global communication.

4.2. Cultural Barriers Hindering Intercultural Communicative Competence

Fear of Making Mistakes

The fear of making language or cultural mistakes has become a significant psychological barrier for students, sometimes as much as the anxiety and hesitation of initiating interactions with individuals from foreign nations. In these discussions, a number of students say they fear judgement or being misunderstood.

For instance, many students are still hesitant when they are confronted with cultural differences, as illustrated in Table 2. In item 1, more than one-third of respondents do not feel comfortable around individuals from different cultural backgrounds, and in item 8, 35% are often impatient and intolerant when confronted with unknown customs. This unease illustrates the issues students face interacting in a diverse culture and may have the negative effect of affecting their ability to function within a diverse population. Thus, it might be worthwhile for one to cultivate cultural competence and knowledge as a way to disperse these anxious feelings and generate more rewarding interactions.

Limited Exposure to Multicultural Environments

Low exposure to a multicultural environment may have a negative impact on students' intercultural communicative competence. This lack of exposure can lead to misunderstandings and a limited ability to engage with diverse

perspectives. Consequently, students may struggle to navigate increasingly globalised contexts, hindering their personal and professional growth.

Data in Table 3 reveal that students do not regularly ask for feedback from their peers ($M = 3.00$, $SD = 1.06$). It also implies that students lack communication practices in a variety of cultural contexts, that in return impacts on their lack of confidence and the difficulty in applying theories to real life situations.

Cultural Biases and Stereotypes

Preconceived cultural biases and stereotypes emerged as a significant theme, influencing how students approached intercultural interactions. This bias is sometimes justified based on common generalizations, for example, that all Westerners are open and direct. For example, there may be a common perception that "foreigners are very open and friendly", but this can lead to misunderstandings about true cultural diversity.

As displayed in Table 1, 28.3% of students have difficulty distinguishing between individualistic and collectivistic cultures ($M = 3.12$, $SD = 1.059$). This bias can lead to an unwillingness to accept cultural differences, thereby creating misunderstandings in communication.

Language-specific Challenges

Language-related difficulties are one of the key obstacles for students' ICC. This can hinder their ability to engage effectively in diverse cultural contexts and interact with peers from different backgrounds. As a result, addressing these difficulties is crucial for fostering intercultural competence in educational settings. As English majors, students may be strong in language, but as found in Table 1, only 31.7% of the students have confidence in interacting with context-based communication ($M = 3.00$, $SD = 0.991$).

This indicates that they are unable to utilize language skills effectively in everyday communication situations, resulting in misunderstandings. Language presents formidable obstacles for learners to acquire intercultural communicative competence, such as pronunciation, dialects, idiomatic usage, and culturally specific terms.

5. Discussions

This research helps to gain a deeper understanding of ICC among English-major students. Adopting the three components of the Chen & Young's (2012) tripartite model—cognitive, affective, and behavioural components, the findings show young people have a favourable general attitude toward intercultural communication and a general awareness of its concept, but lack the practical skills that can enable them to face intercultural interactions. This section discusses the implications of the findings in relation to the research questions and previous literature. It also helps to gain a deeper understanding of ICC among English-major students.

Cognitively, students have developed a base for recognizing cultural norms, values and variations. Yet, their capacity to make sense of complex intercultural encounters – like working with communication styles influenced by individualism vs collectivism or by high-context vs low-context cultures—has not been significantly developed enough. It gives empirical support to Byram's (1997) observation that superficial cultural knowledge is not sufficient for real intercultural competence. Deep cultural literacy enables learners to comprehend core meanings and make appropriate choices for effective intercultural communication.

At the level of the affective domain, students in general show openness and curiosity towards cultural diversity. They cherish multiculturalism and are able to communicate with others from different cultural groups, consistent with the “intercultural sensitivity” dimension in ICS of Chen and Starosta's (1998) framework. Yet emotional obstacles remain—not least; the fear of embarrassment in cross-cultural situations. This fear could lead to avoidance and therefore hinder the child's development. Effective intercultural communication, as suggested by Gudykunst (2005) in Anxiety Uncertainty Management (AUM) theory, is based on controlling uncertainty and having emotional resilience. Failure to prepare the emotional self can lead even the most motivated to avoid the exchange.

With respect to behavioural competence, students seem somewhat competent to modify their verbal and non-verbal aspects of communication when engaging in intercultural conversation. They are willing to try to adapt their communication style in order to understand, resolve certain misunderstandings, but the access to negotiation of meaning, response to the interlocutor or to respond spontaneously is quite restricted for them. This is consistent with Deardorff's (2006) model where it is also stressed that knowing and believing are not the only two conditions that people need for ICC—they need to have a third capability (the ability to apply knowledge, attitudes within various, dynamic and changing contexts).

The findings of the study indicate that students have an abstract understanding about how to behave intercultural but lack an opportunity to apply them in day-to-day contexts, and are thus unable to perform it in practice. In addition, the study points out the following four principal barriers of culture: (1) fear of making mistakes (2), lack of intercultural experience (3), cultural stereotypes, and (4) language barriers. These types of barriers cover the components of ICC and are consistent with results of earlier research.

Firstly, fear of making mistakes is one of the significant emotional barriers. The findings show that some students feel anxious or afraid of doing something wrong when engaging in intercultural situations. This emotional wall is consistent with the Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) (Gudykunst, 2005) Theory, which suggests that high levels of uncertainty and fear of failure can hinder intercultural communication. For fear of insulting someone or doing something that is considered culturally inappropriate, students may not become engaged or may passively exist in other cultures and in doing so they will not develop sufficient ICC. This reluctance is consistent with the results of Chen and Young (2012), who highlighted the affective aspect of ICC. In their model, openness and emotional stability serve as the base to manage intercultural interaction. If these qualities are not well developed, as the students' experiences reveal, individuals may not take advantage of

the opportunity for intercultural communication, which in turn hampers their ICC.

Secondly, the results pointed to a lack of intercultural experience as another major obstacle. Many students do not have various cross-cultural experiences enough, resulting in the decrease of adaptability and interpersonal skills. This finding supports the study by Vu & Dinh (2021), which reported that Vietnamese students have experienced a lot of challenges in adapting with multicultural contexts due to insufficient exposure. Without interacting regularly with people from diverse cultural backgrounds, students struggle to develop the necessary communication skills for effective engagement. This seems to accent the necessity to establish cultural exchange programs, language practices, and activities for nurturing students to broaden their views and enhance their capability in communication.

Thirdly, the persistence of cultural stereotypes also presented a major obstacle to students' ICC development. As students have increased contact with people from different cultures, their views have changed over time. For example, while some students initially assumed that foreigners were uniformly open-minded, further interaction helped them recognize that individuals from different cultures also have conservative or traditional values. This transition marks a crucial stage in the development of learning and adapting in intercultural communication.

This process demonstrates a movement away from cultural clichés toward a respect for within-cultural variation. Students recognize that each individual has unique characteristics and that a culture cannot be judged solely on superficial generalizations. This finding aligns with Deardorff's (2006) notion that cultural open-mindedness and empathic sensitivity are essential for ICC. Similarly, the work of Neuliep and McCroskey (1997) has shown that students who have higher levels of prejudice struggle more in communicating with individuals from other cultural groups. Students will not be able to appreciate and respect other people's values, traditions, and norms when they have stereotypes and misconceptions regarding other

people's cultures. It not only makes relationship building a challenge, but also results in unnecessary conflicts in communication.

Finally, language-specific challenges were highlighted as a key barrier to ICC. Although students generally possess strong linguistic knowledge as English majors, many expressed difficulties using language effectively in intercultural contexts. This challenge was reflected in students' struggles with using language in intercultural communication contexts (Li & Deocampo, 2025). That may involve appreciating the subtleties of the local language, choosing the right word to fit the moment, understanding unfamiliar abstract concepts, and simply making oneself understood. Failure to realise these can result in ineffective communication and cause confusion among parties. Additionally, students will realize that English is a descriptive language with a large number of idiomatic expressions and complex grammatical structures; they will need to continually learn and understand new words.

Limited interaction with the environment limits language acquisition is a typical problem when learning a foreign language in non-English-speaking countries. The absence of real-world interaction means that learners miss out on understanding the use of language in context, an issue that serves to reinforce the divide between theory and practice. Accordingly, language and language teaching ought to be combined with culture and communication context education in order to enable students to be more flexible and effective in their real-life language use.

Furthermore, the results of this study also align with those of Li & Deocampo's (2025) which discovered that Chinese English majors identified foreigner anxiety, lack of real contact with foreigners, and more essentialist cultural belief as significant obstacles to ICC. Both studies show the students in either monolingual or examination-oriented contexts lack the active experiential learning necessary to achieve success in ICC development. Apparent similarities and nuances in context between the present study and that of Li & Deocampo emerge. Both groups of students viewed their ICC as moderate and

have difficulty using intercultural knowledge in real life situations. The shared experience of psychological discomfort, fear of being judged in particular, and exaggerated trust in stereotypes is indicative of the shared experience of those in many Asian EFL settings, where instruction in local cultures tends to involve textbooks more than meaningful intercultural engagement.

Nevertheless, some contrasts also appear. While Li & Deocampo (2025) who found that Chinese students encountered more structural barriers because of an exam-based education system, the current study hints that Vietnamese students in particular, seniors—may be somewhat more positive about their behavioural ICC, perhaps because of extensive academic exposure or communicative classroom activities. This could be because English-medium instruction is more widespread, or because there are more classroom presentations and public speaking opportunities. However, both studies support the idea that the lack of direct experience is an obvious weakness and suggests a necessary component of ICC instruction is experiential and task-based learning. In addition, students can also take advantage of experiential learning activities, including role-play, simulation, case studies, or virtual exchanges with students abroad. These procedures not only promote examination of differential behaviours, they also decrease anxiety through repeated exposure to a variety of communicative styles. Without experience, the students may still hesitate or misread cultural cues even though they may have learned them theoretically.

Regarding the methodology, the use of a quantitative survey was appropriate for the study's objective of identifying general trends in students' self-perceived ICC and cultural barriers. The structured questionnaire allowed for the collection of standardized data from a relatively large sample of third- and fourth-year English majors, making it possible to detect patterns across the three dimensions of ICC. This method also aligns with previous studies such as Li & Deocampo (2025), enabling cross-cultural comparison. However, one limitation of relying solely on self-reported data is the potential

for social desirability bias, as students may overestimate their competencies or underreport discomfort with intercultural situations. The absence of qualitative methods, such as interviews or focus groups, also limited the depth of insight into how students interpret and experience intercultural interactions. Future studies could benefit from mixed-methods approaches to triangulate findings and enrich the discussion of students' intercultural development.

In short, this discussion affirms that while English-major students possess a foundation for developing ICC, significant gaps remain in terms of practical readiness, emotional confidence, and experiential depth. The results underscore the interdependence of cognitive understanding, emotional openness, and behavioural adaptability, and align with existing theoretical frameworks in intercultural education. For ICC development to be meaningful and sustainable, curriculum design must shift from abstract cultural knowledge toward interactive, reflective, and culturally responsive pedagogy.

Implications

The theoretical implications of these findings contribute to the existing literature on intercultural communication by emphasizing the interconnectedness of cognitive, affective, and behavioural dimensions of ICC. The study underscores the importance of experiential learning in developing these competencies, suggesting that effective intercultural education should integrate cultural knowledge with practical communication skills. From a practical perspective, the findings advocate for curriculum developers and educators to design learning activities that enhance students' cultural awareness and adaptability. This could include incorporating role-playing, cultural exchange programs, and collaborative projects with peers from diverse backgrounds to provide students with real-world contexts for applying their knowledge.

Furthermore, the study highlights the necessity of addressing psychological factors such as fear of making mistakes, limited exposure to multicultural environments, language difficulties, cultural bias, and stereotypes, which often hinder

students' willingness to engage in intercultural communication. Educators can assist students in developing confidence in navigating cultural differences by encouraging open-mindedness and cultivating a supportive learning environment.

6. Conclusions

In summary, this study highlights the critical need for enhanced intercultural communication

training within the educational framework in order to build the students' capability to thrive in an increasingly interconnected world. By addressing the identified barriers and fostering a supportive learning environment, educators can significantly contribute to the development of students' ICC, preparing them for successful interactions in diverse cultural contexts.

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