



# Cultivating Intercultural Communicative Competence in Chinese General University Students Using the Triad-Layers Model

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**Abstract:** Developing intercultural communicative competence among Chinese university students is essential in the era of globalization; however, disparities persist between ranked universities and general universities. While RUs benefit from extensive internationalization resources, general universities often lack structured intercultural communication instruction and opportunities due to resource disparities, prestige, or geographic constraints, and economic and social factors. This study aimed to enhance intercultural communicative competence in general universities by proposing and testing the Triad-Layers intercultural communicative competence model, an experiential framework grounded in Vygotsky's social constructivism. Using a qualitative design and development research approach, the study involved 40 first-year undergraduate students from non-English majors and adopted mixed methods. Data were collected through pre- and post-instruction intercultural communicative competence tests, semi-structured interviews, and students' reflective writing. The model consisted of three phases: MOOCs for pre-class preparation, interactive in-class activities, and post-class reflective writing. Quantitative results showed significant improvements in intercultural communicative competence, with the strongest gains in source culture knowledge and communication skills. The findings of the study revealed that students increasingly viewed intercultural communication as an opportunity rather than a barrier, actively engaging in intercultural exchanges and developing conflict navigation strategies. The model also mitigated Chinese Cultural Aphasia by enhancing cultural knowledge. This study demonstrates that experiential, curriculum-integrated approaches can effectively foster intercultural communicative competence in resource-constrained settings. It highlights the need to assess the effectiveness of MOOCs during pre-class preparation, balance source and international culture content to address, and emphasize student-centered pedagogies even during theory introduction.

**Keywords:** Intercultural Communicative Competence, Social Constructivism, Experiential Learning, Chinese Cultural Aphasia, General University

## 1. Introduction

Higher education institutions play a fundamental role in developing students' intercultural communicative competence (ICC), which is essential for success in both academic and professional arenas in the era of globalization and internationalization. To achieve ICC development, Chinese universities are increasingly engaged in international collaborations, not only by sending Chinese students abroad, but also by enhancing academic resources at home. For instance, many prestigious universities have hired international professors and incorporated the original English textbooks from renowned American institutions (Huang, 2006). Moreover, this institutional emphasis on ICC aligns closely with broader national trends. As China becomes more integrated into the global economy, there is a growing demand for a workforce capable of effective intercultural communication (IC). Consequently, these dynamic underscores the importance of ICC in facilitating effective cross-cultural interactions and collaborations in both academic (Yang & Pan, 2019) and professional settings (Dai & Feng, 2025; Gui, 2024). Recent research has underscored the importance of ICC in Chinese higher education. Feng et al. (2025) underscored the imperative of incorporating ICC into higher education curricula to equip students for global participation. Wang et al. (2025) examined trends in internationalization at home (IaH), asserting that integrating international perspectives into domestic educational environments improves students' ICC.

De Wit and Altbach (2021) defined internationalization in higher education as a deliberate process of incorporating an international, intercultural, or global aspect into the objectives, operations, and provision of post-secondary education, aimed at improving the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and making a significant contribution to society. However, it is important to recognize that due to economic constraints or academic reasons (under expected GPA or admission score), a limited number of students could study overseas or attend China's prestigious universities, but the majority could only fulfill their internationalization requirements through IaH. IaH transcends the physical travel of individuals to globalize the education of students who remain in their country (Wächter, 2003; Wang et al., 2025). This study defines IaH as the "deliberate integration of international and intercultural components into both the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic settings" (Beelen & Jones, 2015). The formal curriculum encompasses syllabus, instruction plans, and the mandatory necessary for degree attainment (ICC course to earn credits), while the informal curriculum pertains to various proactive activities students participate in within educational environments beyond the classroom.

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The advancement of ICC in China has evolved significantly over recent decades, shaped by globalization, economic reforms, and educational policies. IC courses appeared in universities as advocated by Hu (1999), and the accession to the WTO expedited cross-cultural corporate exchanges. In 2020, the Chinese Ministry of Education (MOE) proposed the English Language Teaching Guidelines, which expressly included the enhancement of students' ICC as a goal, marking the inaugural incorporation of ICC into national language education standards.

Despite efforts to advance ICC, a disparity persists between ranked universities (RUs) (the Project Double-first Class, 985, and 211 universities) and general universities (GUs) (other universities besides the above-mentioned categories). Numerous obstacles stemming from resource disparities, prestigious or geographic constraints, and economic or social factors remain impeding GUs from ICC development. In contrast, students at RUs found internationalization activities more accessible, and their ICC was much improved by participation in these events than their counterparts at GUs. This difference was brought to light by a study conducted by Ma and Yue (2015), which involved 1,264 students from 39 different universities and verified that RU students were more accessible to ICC through student mobility, international cooperation, and research collaboration by hosting international debates, forums, and workshops (Zhuang et al., 2024).

Likewise, several disparities limit students' IC exposure. One major gap lies in faculty composition. RUs tend to attract significantly more faculty members with international experience. A survey of 1,200 Chinese universities conducted in 2020 revealed that faculty holding international degrees or with more than two years of overseas learning account for 25–40% in RUs, whereas the figure for GUs remains below 5% (Ministry of Education, 2020). Regarding attracting international students, GUs may lack attraction, either for prestigious reasons or geographical convenience. For example, Beijing and Shanghai usually attract the largest number of international students, while remote areas (e.g., Guizhou, Yunnan) may receive fewer than 500 annually (Lu et al., 2023).

There is also a notable absence of a comprehensive and well-defined instructional model for developing ICC that specifically addresses the needs of students in GUs. Existing frameworks often fail to consider educational disparities in China, thereby limiting their applicability in under-resourced contexts. Although Byram's (1997) and Deardorff's (2009) models provide valuable conceptual foundations for ICC, they offer limited practical guidance for designing instructional strategies tailored to institutions with minimal international exposure. These models tend to focus on defining learning outcomes but provide insufficient direction on how to implement ICC instruction effectively in resource-constrained settings. To address this gap, the current study aims to design a model to cultivate students' ICC in a GU and to evaluate its effectiveness. Accordingly, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. How to design a model to cultivate students' ICC in a General university in China?
2. To what extent does the ICC instruction model help students improve ICC?

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Cultural And Contextual Understanding Beyond Linguistic Proficiency: Redefining ICC

ICC has been generally defined as the ability to communicate effectively in cross-cultural situations and to relate appropriately in a variety of cultural contexts (Bennett & Castiglioni, 2004; Byram, 1997). It describes the capacity to interact effectively with people from different cultures from our own, and it acknowledges the fundamental role of language differences, and therefore the need for linguistic alongside cultural competence, in many intercultural encounters (Wilkinson, 2020). Yet, with the advent of World Englishes, the growing acceptance and normalization of diverse English varieties have reshaped expectations around language use in intercultural contexts, meaning linguistic competence is no longer a rigid barrier that it once posed to effective communication (Canagarajah, 2007). Given this, the ICC definition in the current research will not highlight linguistic competence.

The establishment of the ICC is grounded in a nuanced understanding of dismantled terms, i.e., culture, intercultural, intercultural competence, and communicative competence. Synthesizing these dimensions, ICC refers to the capacity to interact effectively with people from diverse cultural backgrounds by drawing on sufficient intercultural knowledge of both the source culture (e.g., Chinese culture) and international cultures. Effective engagement in such contexts demands a positive and open attitude, as well as communicative skills that promote comprehensibility and intelligibility.

### 2.2. Contextualizing ICC Instruction: Bridging Theory And Practice In GU

ICC development necessitates the implementation of effective instructional models, and curriculum design plays a pivotal role in this endeavour. According to Aytac and Kaygısız (2021), curriculum designs are broadly categorized into three models: subject-centered, learner-centered, and problem-centered. Among these, the problem-centered model structures the curriculum around real-life issues, thereby allowing students to engage in authentic learning experiences and develop transferable skills for solving real-world problems. Such a form of experiential learning is particularly suitable for GUs, where limited resources often constrain opportunities for international exposure. Its flexibility and affordability make it a practical choice, while its capacity to simulate intercultural experiences provides students with meaningful engagement. MOOCs provide cost-effective, flexible access to diverse cultural content and global perspectives. Interactive classroom strategies simulate real-world intercultural situations, allowing students to explore attitudes, beliefs, and communication styles in a structured yet dynamic environment. Reflective writing fosters metacognitive awareness, helping learners to internalize intercultural concepts and evaluate their own assumptions and behaviours. Together, these experiential tools offer an inclusive, scalable, and pedagogically sound model for fostering ICC in contexts where traditional study-abroad or immersion experiences are not feasible.

While prior research has explored ICC from various aspects, addressing the challenges in ICC development for GUs requires the implementation of structured and context-sensitive intervention models. To support this, numerous theoretical frameworks have been suggested to inform ICC education, each possessing distinct advantages and drawbacks in cultivating ICC. Byram's (1997) model is one of the most recognized. It comprised five key components: attitude, knowledge, skill of interpreting and relating, skill of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness. While his model included certain

skills, it provides limited practical guidance for fostering ICC through experiential and interactive learning strategies. Likewise, Deardorff's (2006) process model of intercultural competence presents a process-oriented framework involving internal and external outcomes. The former encompasses attitudes such as respect, openness, and flexibility; adaptability to different communication styles; and empathy. The latter refers to the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in an intercultural context. While her model explains ICC at the individual level, it does not adequately address the role of educational settings, thus offering limited direction for how institutions can promote ICC through curriculum and pedagogy.

In the context of technology advancements, recent studies have proposed pedagogical strategies emphasizing effective digital and blended ICC instruction (Cheng, 2025; Iswandari & Ardi, 2022; Lee et al., 2023; Muszyńska et al., 2023). These methods illustrate how technology-mediated environments can enhance ICC. Sun (2016) proposed an ICC model, which has been viewed as one of the representatives of ICC theoretical models in China, and Gu (2017) proposed a theoretical model for ICC training that is considered more compatible with foreign language teaching in China. Although Sun's model provides practical use, it fails to address digital communication, virtual exchange, or global capabilities beyond linguistic abilities, making it less suitable for post-COVID educational contexts where blended and virtual intercultural communication learning is essential. Furthermore, it is predominantly tailored for foreign language majors in China, constraining its wider usefulness. Gu's model similarly presents essential constructs, including interaction, global/local awareness, and value systems; however, it lacks explicit guidance for implementing these elements in classroom practices, assessments, or quantifiable learning outcomes, rendering it predominantly theoretical and challenging to operationalize in educational contexts. Given these constraints, there is a pressing need for an ICC instructional model whereby not only builds on the strengths of existing frameworks but is also tailored for the context of GU by intentionally integrating experiential learning opportunities to ensure students develop ICC meaningfully.

### 2.3. The Impact Of Teacher Cognition On Student ICC Development

The exploration of educators' cognition toward ICC and learners' ICC level may explain why GUs need ICC instruction and why Chinese students tend to exhibit a moderate ICC level. Teacher cognition, as articulated by Borg (2019), encompasses the knowledge, beliefs, and thoughts possessed by educators. Consequently, most of the prior research on ICC cognition emphasizes instructors rather than students, as teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and perceptions regarding ICC may influence the intercultural content delivered in the classroom (Megawati et al., 2020). Teachers' perceptions of ICC are shaped by the coexistence of multiple languages and cultures (Zhang, Su, & Lütge, 2024). Research has shown that Chinese university English teachers' conceptualization of ICC and its relevance to English teaching is vague (Li & Han, 2011; Gu, 2016). Besides, from a quantitative perspective, Lei (2020) acknowledged that Chinese pre-service English teachers' ICC is only moderate, with an average score of 3.20 (the score range is 1-5). The present work does not aim to elevate instructors' ICC conceptualization levels, but rather to motivate educators to take initiative and exert greater effort.

### 2.4. Disparities In ICC Among Chinese Undergraduates

The existing study revealed inadequacies in Chinese students' ICC (Zhou et al., 2024), indicating that their overall competence level remains moderate (Moradi & Ghabanchi, 2019), and the moderate level is associated with six dimensions: awareness, attitude, skills, strategies, critical thinking, and knowledge. Gao's (2016) findings indicated that the ICC level of Chinese studies varies depending on the type of university, gender, and subject classification. The score attained in the knowledge module indicated that third-grade pupils demonstrate superior academic performance relative to their first and second-grade counterparts. Conversely, the scores of the other five categories for second-grade pupils exceed those of both first and third grades. Furthermore, students engaged in liberal arts have enhanced performance relative to their peers in the scientific disciplines. Ultimately, in the two distinct modules of knowledge and critical thinking, 985 universities, 211 universities, and GUs exhibit a declining trend. Although Gao's research is thorough, it has limited applicability for classroom teaching implementation.

### 2.5. Building Cultural Confidence To Address Chinese Cultural Aphasia (CCA)

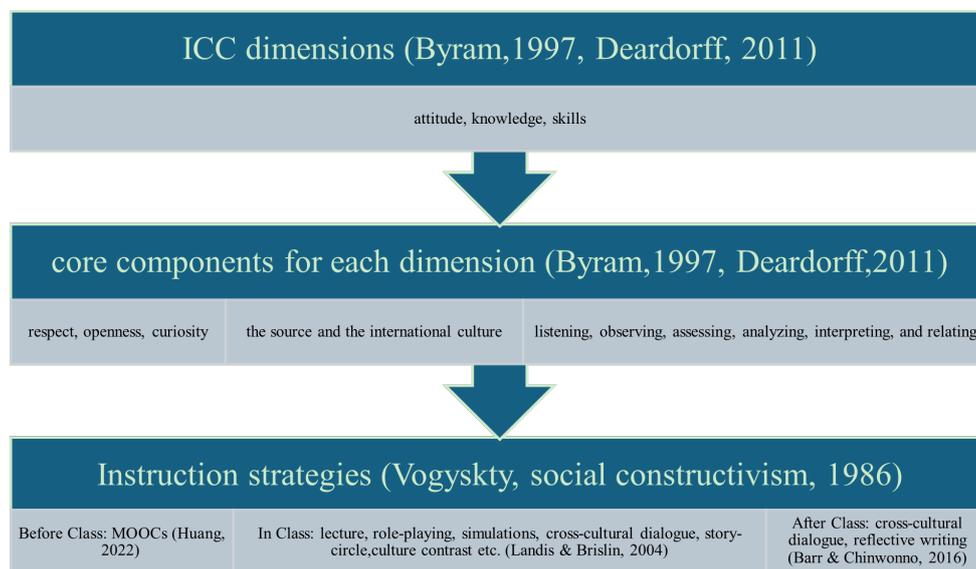
CCA denotes a scenario in which international culture predominates over Chinese culture among language learners. Chinese students often assess their own culture against external standards and view it as inferior to other civilizations (Zheng & Gao, 2019). In summary, Chinese cultural confidence is lacking (Iswandari & Ardi, 2022; Yang et al., 2025; Zhou et al., 2024). The manifestation of CCA may be attributed to educators' insufficient emphasis on Chinese culture (Gong et al., 2022). Research indicates that numerous English language instructors in China primarily emphasize Western cultural content, frequently overlooking the incorporation of Chinese cultural components in their pedagogy (Wang, 2021). This issue is further compounded by language learners' pursuit of a particular goal (Yan, 2022), namely, attaining native speaker fluency, which necessitates students removing themselves from their cultural background and acknowledging the inherent power dynamics favouring native speakers in any given engagement (Tenzer & Pudelko, 2017). Considering these challenges, it is necessary to alleviate the symptoms of CCA and enhance cultural confidence to improve ICC.

The Triad-Layers ICC model responds to CCA by embedding source culture content into each phase of instruction. Unlike existing models that emphasize global cultural exposure without adequately addressing students' cultural roots, this approach deliberately integrates both cultural knowledge. In the pre-class phase, MOOCs include modules on Chinese culture viewed from both insider and outsider perspectives. Interactive in-class activities create opportunities for cultural comparison and dialogue, promoting learners to critically evaluate and confidently represent Chinese cultural values. Finally, post-class reflective writing deepens students' understanding of their culture and equips them to navigate intercultural contexts. This design moves beyond outcome-based frameworks like Byram's and Deardorff's by providing practical, resource-sensitive strategies to cultivate cultural confidence alongside intercultural skills.

### 2.6. Theoretical Framework Of The Study

The framework begins with outlining the three core dimensions of ICC as identified in Deardorff's and Byram's models: attitude, knowledge, and skills. Each dimension is broken down into its specific components in the next tier. Attitude covers respect, openness, and curiosity, knowledge embraces both the knowledge of the source and the international culture, and skills embody listening, observing, assessing, analysing, interpreting, and relating. The third tier highlights the theoretical foundation

of the ICC instruction, drawing on Vygotsky's (1978) theory of social constructivism, which emphasizes that learning is socially mediated and scaffolded through meaningful interactions. In line with this, post-COVID scholarship highlights blended and digital pedagogies as vital for ICC in non-mobile populations (Huang & Zhang, 2025). Building on this foundation, instruction is structured into three distinct phases. In the pre-class phase, MOOCs are utilized to preview content and activate students' prior knowledge, and prepare students for deeper classroom engagement. Next, during the in-class phase, a range of interactive strategies is employed, including lectures, role-playing, simulations, cross-cultural dialogue, arts comparison, story-circle, culture contrasts, and case studies (Landis & Brislin, 2004). Finally, the post-class phase focuses on reflection and continued cross-cultural dialogue, enabling students to reinforce, internalize, and personalize their learning experiences.



**Figure 1:** The framework of the study, Source: by the author

A core principle of constructivism is that learning is an active process in which learners negotiate their comprehension based on their experiences within a new learning environment. In this context, learners are not passive recipients; instead, they incorporate existing experiences and cultural backgrounds into new learning environments. Olusegun (2015) emphasized that students do not attend the classroom unprepared; rather, they come with preconceived beliefs and imaginative expectations for their learning. Building on this premise, this study encourages students to convert their assumptions and creativity into preparatory acts that enhance the integration and acquisition of new knowledge. Accordingly, instruction begins with a pre-class phase using MOOCs, which allow students to activate prior knowledge and familiarize themselves with key concepts before classroom engagement.

The subsequent phase entails executing lessons in the classroom, where interaction is crucial for cultivating ICC. Social constructivists assert that knowledge and understanding are collaboratively developed through social interaction, with language functioning as the primary instrument through which individuals formulate their conceptions of reality. This perspective underscores the significance of classroom engagement, which includes both teacher-student and student-student interactions in the English language. Within this collaborative learning environment, instructional practices like reflective writing and cross-cultural discussions function as effective tools. These methods enhance students' critical thinking and offer organized chances for substantive dialogue.

## 2.7. Description And Structure Of The Model

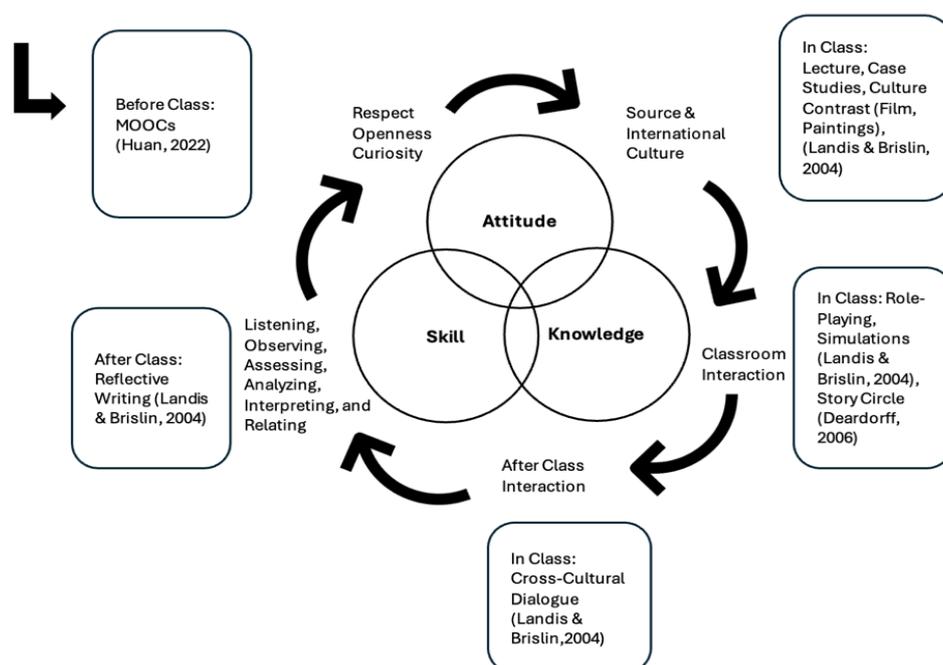
The Triad-Layers ICC instruction model derives its name from its three layers (Figure 2). Byram's and Deardorff's models put attitude, knowledge, and skills as the fundamental constituents of ICC, so situating them at the core of the model, namely at the innermost layer. This study, utilizing Deardorff's model, which suggests an ordered relationship among elements, underscores attitude as the primary focus of the pre-class preparation period, facilitating subsequent information acquisition and skill development based on accumulated attitude and knowledge. The middle layer, containing elements from each dimension, is situated adjacent to the inner layer.

MOOCs offer a flexible and cost-effective approach to ICC instruction. They provide access to a wide range of multimedia resources, including personal anecdotes and cultural narratives, which help illustrate cultural diversity and contextual variability. This exposure encourages learners to suspend premature judgments and cultivate the dispositions essential to ICC (Deardorff, 2011). Furthermore, the interactive features of MOOCs, like discussion forums and peer collaboration, allow students to engage with culturally diverse peers (Huang, 2022). These exchanges challenge learners to navigate ambiguity and develop intercultural awareness and sensitivity, the key skills aligned with an open and curious mindset (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). Research robustly supports the efficacy of many teaching strategies in promoting ICC. Lectures serve a pivotal function among these. They give extensive coverage of ICC ideas, enabling educators to deliver thorough explanations of theoretical frameworks, their underpinnings, and importance, which are essential for establishing a robust conceptual basis (Deardorff, 2006). Furthermore, lectures establish a systematic learning framework that logically organizes knowledge, directing students methodically through essential components of ICC development (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). Their scalability renders lecture a realistic and efficient means of offering ICC institutions to extensive student cohorts in higher education (Deardorff & Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017).

In addition to lectures, multimodal and experiential strategies enhance students' engagement and application of intercultural knowledge. For instance, films provide "real-life" settings and cultural contexts that are beneficial for ICC

promotion. Huttayavilaiphan (2021) demonstrated that movie-based mobile learning is proven to develop Thai university students' ICC level. Similarly, Zhou and Li (2021) utilized contemporary English language films to improve the learning of intercultural nonverbal skills among learners. Alternative approaches include painting comparisons, which have demonstrated the capacity to augment students' intercultural understanding by prompting them to analyse and interpret artistic representations from diverse cultural viewpoints (Nuamthanom Kimura & Kanprachar, 2015). Likewise, role-playing offers immersive experiences that help students internalize cultural principles and practice navigating cross-cultural interactions. Li (2024) confirmed that role-playing strengthens students' understanding of cultural differences and enhances their ability to respond appropriately in intercultural contexts. Denok (2014) observed that role-playing also improves communication skills by allowing learners to apply language in realistic multicultural scenarios, thereby reinforcing both linguistic and intercultural competence

Moreover, several interactive strategies have demonstrated a significant enhancement in ICC by engaging students cognitively, emotionally, and behaviourally. One way is to utilize case studies, enabling students to analyse real-world interpersonal and intercultural conflicts. This method deepens their ability to interpret cultural differences and communicate effectively across cultures (McKay-Semmler, 2022). Classroom discussion of intercultural case studies encourages students to reflect on their cultural preconceptions and biases while learning from their peers' diverse perspectives (Deardorff, 2009; Fantini, 2007). Similarly, simulation games serve as dynamic tools for ICC development by helping learners interact and build familiarity in intercultural settings (Shirts, 1976). Simulations that integrate essential cultural dimensions, including language, non-verbal communication, and decision-making processes, offer experiential learning opportunities that deepen students' comprehension of cultural diversity and bolster their cross-cultural communication abilities (Fowler & Pusch, 2010). Cross-cultural dialogue is an effective approach, providing opportunities for students to exchange perspectives with peers from diverse cultural backgrounds (Kratzke, 2013; Lehtomäki et al., 2016). These interactions promote intercultural sensitivity and empathy by allowing students to engage with differing worldviews. Such exchanges help learners recognize and appreciate cultural differences, fostering more respectful and effective communication (Ilie, 2019). Structured dialogues further support students in navigating misunderstandings, clarifying intentions, and refining their communication strategies, which are essential skills for ICC, too (Spencer-Oatey, 2008). Moreover, story circles create a secure and inclusive atmosphere where participants exchange personal experiences, promoting active listening and mutual understanding, core components of ICC (UNESCO, 2020). Storytelling cultivates empathy, tolerance, and adaptability, enhancing their intercultural understanding on multiple levels (Deardorff, 2020). Finally, reflective writing plays a critical role in fostering cultural self-awareness, a foundational element of ICC (Barr & Chinwonno, 2016; Byram, 1997). By critically examining their own beliefs, assumptions, and behaviours, students gain insight into how their cultural backgrounds shape their perceptions and interactions. Reflecting on intercultural experiences allows students to internalize intercultural attitudes and knowledge, moving beyond surface-level understanding and encouraging deeper emotional and cognitive engagement (Deardorff, 2006).



**Figure 2:** Triad-Layers ICC Instruction Model. Source: by the author

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Research design

To achieve its research objectives, the study adopted a design and development research (DDR) methodology. Richey (2006) asserts that validating an instructional design model involves an empirical process that not only demonstrates the model's effectiveness in practice but also provides evidence supporting the value of its components. Both qualitative and quantitative data were gathered to assess the intervention model. A paired t-test approach was employed to evaluate alterations in participants' ICC levels based on quantitative data. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to investigate students' perspectives of the IC intervention concerning qualitative data. Moreover, reflective writing functions as an instrument for formative assessment, illustrating progress in ICC while also obtaining individualized feedback.

### 3.2. Participants

The population of this study was first-year undergraduates in Pu'er Tea College, West Yunnan University of Applied Sciences (WYUAS), China. As a representative GU located in a remote region, WYUAS exemplifies the resource limitations and pedagogical challenges that the Triad-Layers ICC model aims to address. An intact class of 40 non-English major students enrolled in the course during the second semester of the 2025 academic year was selected through purposive sampling. This class size aligns with typical sample ranges in DDR, where the primary objective is not statistical generalization but the iterative design, refinement, and evaluation of an instructional intervention within a specific educational context (Richey & Klein, 2014). All participants demonstrated a B1 level of English proficiency based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) standard (China's Standards of English Language Ability, 2018). Forty of them joined in the pretest and posttest, and reflective writing, and 34 of them were in the interview. The participants were informed about the experiment, and consent forms were signed by all participants before the research.

### 3.3. Instructional Instruments

The thematic structure of the classroom instruction aligns closely with the weekly content of the MOOC, establishing a cohesive instructional sequence. In this blended design (Table 1), the MOOC mainly serves as a prelude that introduces core concepts, terminology, and foundational knowledge, while the classroom sessions act as an extension that deepens learners' understanding through interaction, contextualization, and application. Class instruction followed the know, analyze, do, and reflect model. This logical sequence led to a thorough intervention strategy that moved from theory to practice and reflection. Over 16 weeks, 1.5-hour sessions provided 24 hours of education. The table summarizes instructional processes and contains lesson-aligned exam items (see last column). This alignment ensures that the assessment follows "teaching to the test," or evaluating what was expressly taught and learned. To ensure content validity, the lesson plan was reviewed by three experts in the field of ICC using the Index of Objectives Congruence (IOC). The index of IOC ranges from -1 to 1, and the value of the instruction plan is 1, which can be interpreted as valid.

**Table 1:** Instructional Design Overview: Weekly MOOC-Class Integration, In-Class Focus, Activities, and Assessment Alignment

logic	Week	MOOC Chapters	Class content focus	Activities	Class time	Corresp_Qs in ICC test
<b>know</b>	1	Not Applicable	Course overview, Pretest Chapter 1 Introduction	test	1.5	
	2	Introduction to ICC (definitions of culture, intercultural, IC, ICC, etc.)	1.1. The notion of IC 1.2. The historical view of the study of ICC 1.3. The nature of the study of ICC and its application	Lectures, video clips from movies, case studies	1.5	1-7
<b>Analyze</b>	3	Communication and culture (the origin and definition of communication, noise, the model of communication by Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver (1949).	Chapter 2 Communication and Culture 2.1. The notion of communication 2.2. The model of the communication process 2.3. The noise in communication 2.4. Communication in culture	Lectures, video clips from movies, case studies, culture contrast, culture contrast Lectures, video clips from movies, case studies, role-playing, and cultural contrast	1.5	8-14
	4	The characteristics and elements of culture, and the way to find out about people's values.	Chapter 3 Cultural Perception 3.1. Understanding culture 3.2. Culture and perception	Lectures, video clips from movies, case studies, role-playing, and cultural contrast	1.5	15-21
	5	The definition and importance of language, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, and the social categories of language.	Chapter 4 Communication and Language 4.1. Language and culture 4.2. The notion and types of verbal communication 4.3. Verbal communication styles 4.4. Verbal communication in intercultural settings Chapter 5 Improving ICC Cultural adjustment	Lecture, culture contrast, case studies, role-playing, simulation	1.5	22-28
<b>Do</b>	6-9	Openness, respect, and a curious attitude of ICC. The process and coping strategies of cultural adjustment.	Achieving intercultural understanding 5.1. Experience Chinese culture 5.2. Experience international culture 5.3. Communicative skills 5.4. Cognitive skills	Lecture, case studies, role-playing	6	29-66

logic	Week	MOOC Chapters	Class content focus	Activities	Class time	Corresp_Qs in ICC test
			5.5. Attitude			
	10	Cultural fingerprints in art (e.g., Chinese harmony vs. Western individualism)	Chapter 6 Art for Enhancing ICC: Paintings	Cultural contrast	1.5	
	11-12	Cultural values shape storytelling, visuals, and themes in Chinese vs. Western films	Chapter 6 Art for Enhancing ICC: Films	Cultural contrast	1.5	
	13-14	Listening, observing, assessing, analyzing, interpreting, and relating	Cross-cultural dialogue, Story Circle	Guest speaker (s)	3	
Reflect	15	Summary review	Reflective writing		3	
	16	Not applicable	Post-test, semi-structured interview	Test, interview	1.5	

Source: by the author

### 3.4. Research Instruments

An identical repeated-measures ICC test was administered before and after the intervention, comprising single-choice, multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blank, and case analysis questions—the latter aimed at evaluating students' analytical and practical application skills. The assessment criteria for case analysis were based on the analytic writing scoring method developed by the Centre for Intercultural Competence Assessment (CICA). Test validity was confirmed by three ICC experts, yielding an IOC score of 0.914, indicating acceptable validity. The test's internal consistency, measured by Cronbach's Alpha ( $\alpha$ ), was 0.70, which is considered acceptable. A semi-structured interview followed the post-test to identify changes in participants' attitudes, knowledge, or skills resulting from the intervention. Three ICC experts reviewed the interview questions for accuracy and alignment with the research objectives, resulting in an IOC score of 1, denoting excellent content validity. Similarly, reflective writing was conducted using writing prompts that were also validated with an IOC score of 1.

### 3.5. Data Collection And Data Analysis

Prior to data collection, the University's Ethics Committee on Human Research approved all the instruments used in this study, including the subject information document and the informed consent document. The test was delivered in the classroom with pen and paper. The semi-structured interview was conducted face-to-face. To ensure clarity and comfort, the questions were prepared in both Chinese and English, though all participants preferred Chinese, their native language, for more accurate expression. The reflective writing assignment was scheduled after the completion of the instruction. To guide students and minimize the risk of off-topic responses, a variety of writing prompts were provided, encouraging focused and relevant reflections.

For qualitative data analysis, Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), developed by Braun and Clarke (2006, as cited in Konstantinos, 2024, P1), was applied. RTA offers a flexible, interpretive approach that contrasts with more rigid methods such as grounded theory or content analysis, recognizing the researcher's active and reflective role in identifying patterns and constructing meaning. In reporting, each participant is referenced using a capital letter "P." To enhance the validity of the findings, data from interviews and reflective writing were systematically triangulated with the quantitative pretest–posttest results. Themes identified through qualitative analysis were aligned with the constructs measured in the ICC test, enabling cross-validation of patterns. For example, students' reported increases in source culture confidence reinforced the statistically significant gains observed in the source culture knowledge and attitude subscales.

## 4. Results

To address research question one, the Triad-Layers ICC instructional model was designed based on a needs analysis of general university (GU) students in China, informed by literature review findings and established ICC frameworks. The model integrates the principles of IaH and leverages formal education through structured classroom instruction.

### 4.1. Pre-And Post-Test

To answer the second research question, the result of the pre- and post-tests was demonstrated (Table 2). The mean score of the participants, before participating in the ICC course, was 43.45 out of 135 (SD=9.44). The total mean score was 56.75 out of 135 (SD=10.88), which was higher than the pre-test mean score, indicating a meaningful gain after the intervention. The ICC introduction section rose from 13.00 to 15.35 out of 40 (SD = 4.78, 5.90), while source culture knowledge increased from 5.30 to 7.65 out of 14 (SD = 2.50, 3.16). The mean score for international culture improved from 4.60 to 5.75 out of 14 (SD = 2.08, 2.79). In the skills component, scores advanced from 14.25 to 17.40 out of 28 (SD = 3.68, 4.68). The attitude section rose from 4.75 to 7.25 out of 14 (SD = 3.25, 3.19), and case analysis scores increased from 1.55 to 3.35 out of 25 (SD = 1.60, 3.34).

**Table 2:** Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Pretest/Posttest Scores

Paired Samples Statistics		Mean	SD	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	pre_total_score	43.45	9.44	1.49
	post_total_score	56.75	10.88	1.72
Pair 2	pre_ICC_introduction	13.00	4.78	.75
	post_ICC_introduction	15.35	5.90	.93
Pair 3	pre_SC_knowl	5.30	2.50	.39
	post_SC_knowl	7.65	3.16	.50

Paired Samples Statistics		Mean	SD	Std. Error Mean
Pair 4	pre_IntlC_knowl	4.60	2.08	.33
	post_IntlC_knowl	5.75	2.79	.44
Pair 5	pre_skills	14.25	3.68	.58
	post_skills	17.40	4.68	.74
Pair 6	pre_attitude	4.75	3.25	.51
	post_attitude	7.25	3.19	.50
Pair 7	pre_case_analysis	1.55	1.60	.25
	post_case_analysis	3.35	3.34	.52
N	40			

\*\*\* $p < .001$ , \*\* $p < .01$  note: SC\_knowl=source culture knowledge IntlC\_knowl=international culture knowledge. Source: by the author

Regarding paired samples t-test results (Table 3), each pair shows a negative mean difference, indicating that post-test scores were higher than pre-test scores. A statistically significant  $p$ -value (Sig. 2-tailed) means that the improvement is unlikely due to chance. The strongest effects were seen in skills, attitudes, and source cultural knowledge. The results revealed a significant increase in the total score from pre-test ( $M = 43.45$ ,  $SD = 9.44$ ) to post-test ( $M = 56.75$ ,  $SD = 10.88$ ),  $t(39) = -8.85$ ,  $p < .001$ , Cohen's  $d = 1.40$ , indicating a large effect size. This suggests that the intervention had a substantial impact on enhancing students' ICC.

At the subscale level, significant gains were observed across multiple dimensions of ICC: source culture knowledge improved significantly,  $t(39) = -4.39$ ,  $p < .001$ , with a moderate effect size ( $d = 0.69$ ). ICC Skills (e.g., interpreting, relating, and interaction) also showed notable improvement,  $t(39) = -4.35$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.69$ . Attitude towards intercultural communication, which includes openness, respect, and curiosity, demonstrated a significant positive shift,  $t(39) = -4.21$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.67$ . Case Analysis abilities improved as well,  $t(39) = -4.27$ ,  $p < .001$ , with a moderate effect ( $d = 0.68$ ). Although significant, improvements in international culture knowledge were smaller in magnitude,  $t(39) = -2.34$ ,  $p = .024$ ,  $d = 0.37$ , indicating a modest effect. Similarly, ICC introduction scores exhibited a small to moderate increase,  $t(39) = -2.62$ ,  $p = .012$ ,  $d = 0.41$ .

**Table 3:** Paired Samples t-Test Results

		Paired Samples Test						t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Effect Size Cohen's $d$
		Paired Differences									
		Mean	SD	SEM	95% CI						
			Lower	Upper							
Pair 1	pre_total_score post_total_score	-13.30	9.50	1.50	-16.33	-10.26	-8.85	39	.000	1.40	
Pair 2	pre_ICC_introduction post_ICC_introduction	-2.35	5.66	.89	-4.16	-.53	-2.62	39	.012	0.41	
Pair 3	pre_SC_knowl post_SC_knowl	-2.35	3.38	.53	-3.43	-1.26	-4.39	39	.000	0.69	
Pair 4	pre_IntlC_knowl post_Intlc_knowl	-1.15	3.10	.49	-2.14	-.15	-2.34	39	.024	0.37	
Pair 5	pre_skills-post_skills	-3.15	4.57	.72	-4.61	-1.68	-4.35	39	.000	0.69	
Pair 6	pre_attitude post_attitude	-2.50	3.75	.59	-3.70	-1.29	-4.21	39	.000	0.67	
Pair 7	pre_case_analysis post_case_analysis	-1.80	2.66	.42	-2.65	-.94	-4.27	39	.000	0.68	
N	40										

\*\*\* $p < .001$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , Source: by the author

#### 4.2. Semi-structured interview

Analysis of interview transcripts revealed several key themes. From an awareness perspective, most participants initially viewed intercultural communication as a challenge but reinterpreted it as an opportunity following the instruction. Students demonstrated active engagement with intercultural experiences during and after class. Although much of this engagement occurred online and was mediated through IaH strategies, students developed effective approaches to overcome stereotypes and cultural misunderstandings. They also acquired practical communication skills for managing cultural conflicts and adapting to diverse cultural contexts. Based on their experiences, participants suggested incorporating more foreign teachers from diverse cultural backgrounds to enrich classroom interaction.

##### 4.2.1. Cultural differences are seen as opportunities rather than barriers

While a minority of participants ( $n = 9$ ) perceived cultural differences as obstacles, a greater number ( $n = 25$ ) regarded them as opportunities for personal development in the era of globalization. Participants explicitly noted that cross-cultural awareness helps reduce misconceptions (e.g., shaking one's head in affirmation in India) and enhances professional competitiveness. For example, "Adequate ICC potentially assists in securing employment in a multinational corporation" (P1). "The merging of diverse cultures can stimulate creative thought, presenting various solutions to identical challenges" (P31).

##### 4.2.2. Actively participate in IC engagement in and after the classroom

Students acknowledged that classroom activities boosted their IC participation, motivated them to increase active engagement after class, and they gained Chinese culture confidence in the interaction. The excerpts confirmed the effectiveness of ICC

development in the IaH context. Several students mentioned it. “The story circle forced me to listen and share. At first, I was shy, but hearing others’ stories made me open” (P9). “Role-playing as someone from other cultures made me think differently. I had to “be” them, not just observe (P12). “After class, I joined an online forum to chat with foreigners, even sometimes with language gaps, and I tried using translation applications” (P18). “I now comment on foreigners’ videos if they misunderstand Chinese culture, and I politely explain the facts” (P22). “About Chinese traditions and communications, I think I feel more confident about Chinese norms than before” (P7).

#### 4.2.3. Confronting stereotypes through critical reflection and experiential learning

Participants (n=22) realized their stereotypes toward other cultures (e.g., “African people are lazy”, “Indian way of eating with fingers is not clean”) and sought to dispel them through active learning and critical thinking by emphasizing “seeing is believing” and avoiding one-sided judgments (n=8). For example, verifying information through books, movies, or direct communication (n=14).” After watching a video of Africans cooking, I looked up information and found out that it was a habit caused by resource shortages” (P26).” My English teacher said the Indian way of eating seems unclean, but it is a good way to protect the environment by reducing disposable utensils. I agree with that” (P20). “Only 60% of online information is credible, and it needs to be combined with personal experience” (P22).

#### 4.3. Adapt cross-culturally by understanding taboos and non-verbal signals

Participants exhibited advancements in intercultural adaptation and conflict resolution during the interview. They utilized non-verbal communication adaptively, emphasizing smiles and relaxed facial expressions, enhanced their awareness of cultural taboos through prior preparation, and inquired about the other party’s origin at the outset of communication to subsequently adjust their communication style accordingly. “During a trip to Laos, I used gestures to communicate when language failed, like pointing to water and noodles to ask for hot water” (non-verbal, P6). “Some people say Chinese people are unsanitary because they don’t take off their shoes before entering a residence. I emphasized that shoes could stay warm in most of China’s frigid winters. Instead, if the host asks guests to take off their shoes when entering the house, it will be misinterpreted as if looking down on them and disliking them” (conflict coping, P7). “I only surf the internet for delicious food and good scenery before travelling. After this course, I think it is necessary to learn something about taboos. At least to show people I am trying to respect them” (awareness of taboos, P15). ”I consciously ask where he or she is from so that I can find some corresponding communication methods” (adjusted accordingly, P31).”I found that body language is sometimes more important than words, and keeping a smile, relaxed facial expression, rather than a threatening face, is important” (P1).”I used paraphrasing to understand the foreign customer’s subtle message” (flexibility, P9).

##### 4.3.1. Evaluation and suggestions on course activities

Participants ranked the most effective training activities as inviting foreign guest teachers (n=27), providing direct practice opportunities, story circles (n=19), promoting cultural empathy by sharing personal experiences, and role playing (n=12), simulating real-life scenarios to improve resilience (n=9). Besides, they suggested increasing the frequency of communication with foreign teachers (n=21), integrating online resources (e.g., short video analysis) (n=10), and expanding practical opportunities (e.g., international pen pal programs) (n=7).

#### 4.4. Reflective writing

Aside from the findings, which align with the interview and test results, such as students’ transformation of attitudes towards cultural differences from avoidance to appreciation, the development of intercultural competence skills, including active listening, observation, adaptation, conflict resolution, and enhanced cultural knowledge (both source and international), some unexpected outcomes include profound reflection on intra-national cultural differences and a desire to pursue independent ICC learning. Several students wrote about encounters not just with foreigners but with ethnic minorities in China (e.g., Miao, Yi, Dai). They described inter-ethnic misunderstandings and growing empathy through ICC learning. ICC instruction tends to address intra-national cultural diversity, not solely international differences. “I was curious about Miao’s tradition of singing folk songs to find love, but I just observed from afar. Now I understand” (P3). “In our dormitory, we had a food conflict due to ethnic habits, but we resolved it by sharing the meanings behind the food” (P5).

Likewise, several reflections ended with students expressing a desire to pursue intercultural communication further, including international internships, pen-pal programs, or studying abroad, even if these were not part of the curriculum. This tends to indicate that the instruction fostered long-term motivation and global curiosity, suggesting a durable impact beyond immediate course objectives. “I want to join international pen pal groups” (P15). “I hope to go abroad and apply what I’ve learned” (P28).

### 5. Discussion

#### 5.1. Alleviating The ICC Gap In GU And Combating CCA

The findings provide strong empirical support for the claim that GU in China faces a significant gap in students’ ICC, a concern echoed in prior literature (Ma & Yue, 2015). This disparity is evident in the pre-test and post-test overall scores, which are only 43.45 and 56.75 out of 135, respectively. However, the present study demonstrates that significant ICC development is still achievable in GU contexts through a well-designed, resource-sensitive instructional model. The implementation of the Triad-Layers Model enabled students to achieve measurable gains in ICC in the IaH context. ICC total score improved from pre-test to post-test, with a Cohen’s *d* of 1.40, indicating that the model is likely effective. These findings resonated with the extant research (Beelen & Jones, 2015), which advocates for a deliberate redesign of teaching and learning to internationalize the curriculum at home, particularly for students with limited access to overseas exchange.

Regarding combating CCA, the post-test results revealed a notable increase in source culture knowledge ( $M = +2.35$ ), indicating that the model was effective in addressing CCA. By centring source culture knowledge alongside international content, the model ensures that students are not just passive recipients of global knowledge but also active cultural contributors. The findings are echoed by Liddicoat and Scarino (2013), who argue that intercultural learning should involve a reflective process of comparing, contrasting, and interpreting both self and other.

However, one thing worth noting is that when students ranked effective activities, MOOCs did not appear. One possible reason for the lower ranking of MOOCs is the asynchronous and self-directed nature, which places greater engagement and comprehension. Some participants may have approached the MOOCs passively, treating them as optional rather than integral to the course. To enhance the effectiveness of the MOOC component, it is critical to strengthen its integration within the broader instructional design. One practical approach could be to implement accountability mechanisms, such as graded quizzes based on MOOC content. As noted in Garrison and Vaughan (2009), effective blended learning requires deliberate alignment between asynchronous and synchronous components to maximize student engagement and learning outcomes.

## 5.2. Minimal Gains In ICC Introduction Session And Cultural Knowledge: Instructional Design Implications

Chapters 1 to 4 of the instruction session in the teaching plan are designed to introduce ICC to help participants prepare for later classroom activities by understanding the most basic ICC concepts, e.g., the relationship between communication and culture, cultural perception, and communication and language. However, the result of the test indicated a relatively low effect size (Cohen's  $d = 0.41$ ), suggesting limited gains in student learning compared to other parts of the course. This outcome is consistent with findings from the interviews. As three participants remarked, "I think it is the same as a normal English class, I feel bored and difficult to hear many terms" (P13). This likely reflects the lecture-heavy instructional approach, offering limited opportunities for student interaction or engagement. These findings highlight the importance of maintaining a student-centred approach, even in sessions focused on theoretical content. Incorporating more engaging delivery methods, simplified explanations, and interactive elements could have enhanced students' understanding and interest in the material.

Similarly, improvement in students' international culture was modest (Cohen's  $d = 0.37$ ). One possible explanation is an instructional imbalance between the source culture and international culture knowledge. While addressing CCA is undeniably valuable, there is a risk that overemphasizing source culture may inadvertently limit students' opportunities to engage with diverse global perspectives. Future iterations of the Triad-Layers model could address such an issue by deliberately integrating more interactive modules on international culture within the pre-class MOOCs and in-class activities. For instance, virtual dialogues with international peers and case studies of global cultural conflicts.

The study has three limitations. First, the study was conducted as a short-term intervention (16 weeks), measuring students' ICC gains immediately after the instructional period. Although the pre- and post-test results indicated meaningful improvements in intercultural attitudes, skills, and source culture knowledge, the question of long-term retention remains unanswered. Therefore, longitudinal studies are needed to track whether students maintain or deepen their ICC development after the course, especially as they encounter real-world intercultural situations. Specifically, a delayed post-test or follow-up evaluation may determine the effects of long-term development. Second, the study was conducted within a single GU. The results may not fully generalize to rural or remote, different types of institutions, for example, vocational colleges. Third, the relatively small sample size ( $n=40$ ) limits the generalizability of the findings. A larger and more diverse sample across multiple constitutions would enhance the robustness of the results and allow for comparative analysis between different types of universities.

## 6. Conclusion and Implications

By proposing and testing the Triad-Layers ICC model, grounded in Vygotsky's social constructivism and emphasizing experiential learning, this research demonstrated that a well-designed curriculum intervention can significantly enhance students' ICC in resource-constrained settings. This study contributes uniquely to ICC literature by tailoring pedagogy to non-elite university contexts, offering practical strategies that are both scalable and culturally grounded—thereby filling a critical implementation gap.

The findings revealed statistically significant improvements across all measured ICC dimensions, attitude, knowledge, skills, and practical application, with particularly strong gains in the source culture knowledge and skills. The qualitative data further supported these results, showing that students shifted from viewing cultural differences as barriers to embracing them as opportunities, engaged more actively in intercultural interactions, and developed strategies to navigate stereotypes and conflicts. Notably, the model also helped mitigate CCA by reinforcing cultural confidence. However, the study also identified areas for refinement, such as the need for more student-centered approaches in the IC general introduction, checking students' preparation before class, and a better balance between the source and international cultural content.

Regarding implications, for educators and curriculum designers, the model provides a blueprint for integrating ICC into GU curricula. Key strategies include blending MOOCs with interactive classroom activities, but need to inspect the preparation at the beginning of the class; furthermore, the balancing between source and international culture content is a question that needs attention to combat CCA while fostering global competence. The current study suggests some topics for future investigations. We acknowledge that our study does not represent a comprehensive analysis of all ICC challenges and needs development within diverse educational contexts. Future investigation could compare studies across different university tiers (e.g., vocational colleges) to assess model adaptability. Similarly, exploring teachers' perspectives on implementing the Triad-Layers model would provide valuable guidance for scaling and institutionalizing ICC instruction in diverse pedagogical contexts.

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