# A comprehensive evaluation of Chinese college students' intercultural competence

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## A R T I C L E   I N F O

## A B S T R A C T

This study attempts to investigate how the fuzzy comprehensive evaluation index system and model of assessing Chinese college students' intercultural competence are constructed based on the theories of intercultural competence and the method of fuzzy comprehensive evaluation. In the process of model-building, the Delphi method was used to examine experts' opinions concerning the importance of each index of measuring Chinese college students' intercultural competence. In the application of the model, this study collected the participants' self-reported data and the teachers' assessments of their course performance, and the authors had the self-reported data computed in the model. The comparison of the results from the fuzzy comprehensive evaluation model with those from the teachers' assessment reveal that they are basically consistent, which suggests that the fuzzy comprehensive evaluation model can be used effectively to assess Chinese college students' intercultural competence. Thus, the model in this study provides a practical method for evaluating intercultural competence, which has pedagogical implications for internationalized talent training and curriculum design in universities and educational institutions and for college students' understanding and improving their intercultural competence. In addition, the index system and model offer intercultural scholars a new non-Western perspective to doing research on the assessment model of intercultural competence in non-Western contexts. This study makes suggestions for further research on applying the index system and the model.

## 1. Introduction

The issues concerning how to assess a person's intercultural competence (ICC) in the different cultural contexts often arise with growing globalization and internationalization, and the need to do this is of considerable interest to many scholars and educators in this field. Currently, there exist numerous models and ways of assessing and exploring ICC, in both education- and business-oriented aspects (Borghetti, 2013). Recently, however, it has become important to note that most of the models and related assessments have been discussed from a Western perspective, and there have been few from non-Western perspectives on the development and evolution of ICC (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009, p.44).

Today, in the Asian contexts, especially in China, many students mainly learn the language and culture of the Western country from foreign language (FL) classrooms, but in the actual intercultural contexts, most of the students may encounter

various types of intercultural communicative difficulties and barriers when communicating with foreigners in China and abroad, especially in short-term student exchange learning programs abroad or in summer camps in foreign countries (e.g., in the US or the UK). Concerning matters in the Chinese context, studies that assess Chinese students' ICC are necessary. However, no currently effective ICC assessment methods have been found to provide evidence regarding Chinese college students' ICC. Moreover, because of the complexity of the ICC concept, researchers have given numerous definitions of its meaning and constructs (Deardorff, 2006). Because of the discrepancy in the interpretations of ICC, the less quantitative research, and the lack of effective empirical studies and assessment models for Chinese college students' ICC, the current study attempts to discuss the theoretical basis of the ICC definitions and dimensions, assessment tools and methods and to apply fuzzy comprehensive evaluation (FCE) to establishing a systematic and operational index system and model of Chinese college students' ICC, which will provide the students with the knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses of their ICC.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. Western scholars' research on ICC

#### 2.1.1. Concepts and definitions of ICC

The origins of the ICC concept can be traced to the 1970s when Hymes (1972), Ruben (1976), Hammer, Gudykunst, and Wiseman (1978) and other scholars proposed a number of theories of concepts related to ICC. When Hymes (1972) first proposed the concept of communicative competence, he defined it as not only an inherent grammatical competence but also as the ability to use grammatical competence in a variety of communicative situations, thus bringing the sociolinguistic perspective into Chomsky's linguistic view of competence. In an attempt to clarify the concept of communicative competence, Ruben (1976) advocated his communication theory, which involved seven components related to ICC in the different cultural contexts in which people can interact effectively, such as displays of respect, interaction postures, orientations to knowledge, empathy, role behaviors, interaction management and tolerance for ambiguity. In terms of the importance in facilitating intercultural effectiveness, Hammer et al. (1978) identified the dimensions of intercultural effectiveness as the abilities to successively address psychological stress, communicate effectively and build relationships. Their studies appear to offer a preliminary discussion of the ICC concept as it was developed in the 1970s that provide some theoretical implications for its further development and discussion.

Numerous different ICC terms and definitions have been proposed by scholars over the past 30 years. For example, they conceptualize terms such as intercultural competence (Byram, 1997; Fantini, 2006), intercultural awareness (Chamberlin-Quinlisk, 2005), and intercultural sensitivity (Bennett, 1993). Among them, the term intercultural competence (intercultural communicative competence) has been widely used in the study of FL teaching (e.g., Byram, 1997; Fantini, 2006; Sercu, 2006; Borghetti, 2013). As for the teaching and assessment purposes, it can be argued that if some components in the definition of ICC cannot be acquired by learners, they should be omitted (Byram, 1997). Although there exist numerous different definitions of ICC, only a few have been widely discussed by most scholars (Deardorff, 2004, 2009). For example, the definition of ICC given by Lustig and Koester (1993) in their studies noted some key components: communication and context, appropriateness and effectiveness, knowledge, motivation, and behavior. The importance of the relationships and context is also emphasized in intercultural communication. Similarly, Gudykunst (1993) also argued that knowledge, skills, and motivation are the important components of ICC; he suggests that components such as knowledge, skills and motivation are essential to defining ICC. Moreover, other ICC components such as attitudes and awareness have been discussed in the European multidimensional models of ICC, regarding which Byram (1997) holds the view that students' ICC involves abilities related to intercultural knowledge, skills, attitudes and critical intercultural awareness. Later, elements such as knowledge, attitudes, skills and awareness were observed as being core to ICC in studies by Fantini (2000, 2006), Deardorff (2004, 2006), Spitzberg and Changnon (2009).

From the recent research findings of Deardorff's Delphi study, Byram's definition of the nine versions of ICC that were confirmed was viewed as the best, with the approval of more than 90% of the questioned experts (Deardorff, 2004). Byram's definition can be summarized as follows: "Knowledge of others; knowledge of self; skills to interpret and relate; skills to discover and/or to interact; valuing others' values, beliefs, and behaviors; and relativizing one's self. Linguistic competence plays a key role" (see Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2004, 2009). Subsequently, Deardorff (2004, 2006) revisited the definition of ICC and noted that "ICC is the ability to interact effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations, based on specific attitudes, intercultural knowledge, skills and reflection." She also observed that "effectiveness" and "appropriateness" were extremely important. In addition, she argued that "effectiveness" can be decided by individuals but that "appropriateness" can only be determined by the judgment of others; similarly, "appropriateness" is directly related to others' cultural sensitivity and their cultural conventions. From a study on the federation of the Experiment in International Living (FEIL), ICC is considered to be a complex of the abilities that are required when one must perform effectively and appropriately when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different (, p.12).

#### 2.1.2. Assessment tools and methods of ICC

ICC assessment tools, based on the various models, are often used to measure the extent to which an individual has the skills related to various dimensions of ICC from different contexts. Some of these assessment tools are, for example, the Behavioral Assessment Scale for Intercultural Competence (BASIC) (Koester & Olebe, 1988; Ruben & Kealey, 1979), the