

A Review of Empirical Studies on Intercultural Communication in China

Chengchieh Su

School of Foreign Languages, Zhaoqing University, Zhaoqing, China

Email: 2226767165@qq.com

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Abstract

This study reviews empirical research papers on intercultural communication in China from 2012 to 2022 and provides insights and implications derived from these papers. Although the number of empirical studies has increased, most studies have a single analytical approach, less cross-cutting discussions, weak theoretical foundations, insufficient theoretical analyses, and a lack of comprehensive questionnaire content. This study recommends enriching the methodology of empirical research on intercultural communication, increasing longitudinal studies, emphasizing the development of intercultural communication competence or intercultural sensitivity scales for Chinese learners, and expanding empirical research on different ethnic groups and mother tongues in the context of intercultural communication in China. Finally, this study provides pedagogical insights.

Keywords

Intercultural Communication, Empirical Study, China

1. Introduction

Intercultural communicative competence is a form of communication between individuals from different cultures through verbal or nonverbal means (Hymes, 1972; Chen & Starosta, 1997; Chen & Starosta, 1998; Omaggio, 2001; Kim, 2001; Wiseman, 2003; Arasaratnam & Doerfel, 2005; Dearnorff, 2006 among others). Globalization and regional economic integration are trends in today's world. With the increasing development of international trade and investment, resources and talent are moving on a large scale, globally. Countries are becoming increasingly closely connected to each other. Therefore, the study and application of intercultural communicative competence have become the focus of talent training and higher education reform in the new era.

China has made remarkable progress since the introduction of intercultural communication studies abroad in the early 1980s. According to the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database (CNKI was founded in June 1999 and is China's largest academic database), 8577 research papers have been published on intercultural communicative competence from 2000 to 2022. These papers cover the relationship between intercultural communication and foreign language teaching, the relationship between intercultural communication and teaching Chinese as a foreign language, the relationship between intercultural communication and rhetoric, the development of intercultural communicative competence, intercultural communication and translation, linguistic errors in intercultural communication, intercultural communication in business and trade, and nonverbal communication.

Although there has been considerable research on intercultural communication using different research methods, empirical research is relatively rare. [Hu \(2005\)](#) surveyed journal papers on intercultural communication and found that most research was dominated by general discourse and discursive articles with a low proportion of empirical papers, calling on intercultural communication researchers to vigorously strengthen empirical research in China. Summarizing the three main paradigms and research methods of intercultural communication research abroad, [Liu \(2022\)](#) mentioned the small number of empirical studies on intercultural communication in China as an area that required strengthening in the future.

Accordingly, this study seeks to answer the following questions: 1) What are the characteristics and trends of empirical research on intercultural communication in China from 2012 to 2022? 2) What are the implications of the research findings for future research? To answer these questions, this study employed “intercultural communication” and “empirical study” as keywords to sort and classify the papers in CNKI journals in the past 11 years. Based on the research data, the development characteristics and trends of empirical research on intercultural communication were explored. In summary, insights and implications stemming from these studies are discussed.

2. Empirical Studies on Intercultural Communication in China

To review the empirical research papers on intercultural communicative competence more clearly, the second part of this study is subdivided into two subsections. The first section is a review of the empirical research and the second section characterizes and highlights the review in the field, thereby paving the way for the implications of this study.

2.1. Overview

According to the CNKI database, there were 1297 journal papers dealing with intercultural communication between 2012 and 2022 (from January 1, 2012 to

December 31, 2022). From the data found, much has been achieved in the study of intercultural communication in China, most of which is theoretical in approach. Excluding papers that did not conduct substantive empirical research, there were only 68 journal papers on empirical research, representing 5% of all intercultural communication research. **Table 1** presents the intercultural communication studies conducted using empirical research methods from 2012 to 2022.

Table 1 shows that, in terms of the subjects of the empirical study, the majority were university students. In terms of research area, the largest number of studies are in language teaching and learning followed by cultural studies. The studies worth considering are explored below, excluding those with similar research topics and results.

Using the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale questionnaire designed and developed by *Chen & Starosta (2000)*, *Zhang (2017)* investigated the intercultural sensitivity of undergraduate students majoring in English at Capital Normal University and provided new methods for improving students' intercultural sensitivity. The results showed that the overall intercultural sensitivity of English majors was at the upper-middle level. In the five-factor Intercultural Sensitivity Scale model, students had the highest level of respect for cultural differences, followed by communicative engagement, communicative attentiveness, communicative enjoyment, and communicative confidence. Additionally, students possessed open-mindedness, unprejudiced attitudes, cultural empathy, and a high level of communicative attentiveness and engagement. However, they lacked self-esteem, self-confidence, and the ability to self-regulate and easily became agitated and

Table 1. Empirical study methods for Intercultural Communication from 2012 to 2022.

Research subject	Sample (N = 68)	Proportion (rounded)
University students	43	65 %
Vocational school students	14	21 %
High school students	1	2 %
Foreign language teachers	4	6 %
Employees (translators, business representatives)	6	9 %
Research areas		
Language teaching and learning	48	73 %
Cultural study	10	15 %
Linguistics	1	2 %
Economics	3	5 %
Journalism and communication	1	2 %
Information technology	1	2 %
Translation	4	6 %

flustered. Thus, the ways in which they enhanced intercultural sensitivity were to increase their self-esteem and confidence in interacting with people from different cultures, learn self-restraining skills, and adapt to all different communicative situations. The ICC model developed by Chen & Starosta was applied to Li (2022), Zhang (2015), Qu & Do (2014), Lu & Li (2012), Ye & An (2012), and Yu (2012).

Based on Byram's (1997) theory, Wu, Fan, & Peng (2013) designed a set of intercultural competence assessment scales for university students through exploratory factor analysis and certification factor analysis, and used this scale to survey 447 university students who were computer, automation control, and management majors from five comprehensive universities across the country. The assessment scale consisted of six main factors: knowledge of local cultures, knowledge of foreign cultures, attitudes, intercultural communication skills, intercultural cognitive skills, and intercultural awareness. The results showed that, among the six factors considered for measurement, knowledge of others was the most decisive, followed by intercultural communication skills. Intercultural cognitive skills play a weak role, whereas intercultural awareness plays the weakest role.

Xiong & Huang (2022) investigated the English learning situation of Business English majors, intercultural communication awareness, and intercultural communication anxiety in a higher vocational college, using questionnaires and the Intercultural Communication Anxiety Scale proposed by Neuliep & McCroskey (1997). Combined with student feedback, the results revealed a generally high level of intercultural communicative anxiety among students. The problem with students' anxiety regarding intercultural communication lies in their English language proficiency. Although more than half of the students liked the culture of English-speaking countries and were interested in learning English, the statistical data were negatively correlated with the students' understanding of the culture of English-speaking countries and their motivation to communicate in English in the English classroom. The data also showed that all students believed that the main factor affecting their anxiety about communicating with foreigners was their knowledge of the culture of the English-speaking country. Over half of the subjects did not understand the culture of the English-speaking country, which also correlated negatively with students' preferences for the culture of the English-speaking country. Referencing the Intercultural Communication Anxiety Scale, the high level of anxiety reflected by the scale was positively correlated with students' ability to engage in intercultural communication. Xiong & Huang suggested that instructors be conscious of their instructional design of classroom arrangements and should exploit group activities and public speaking for students' interactions to positively influence the practice and development of their intercultural communicative competence.

To identify factors affecting the intercultural communication of foreign teachers working in universities in Fuzhou, Xie (2013) used a questionnaire to survey foreign teachers and current university students. These results suggest that for-

foreign teachers' intercultural competence is influenced by age. Older foreign teachers were more successful at intercultural communication with Chinese students. The findings also showed that nationality influences intercultural communicative competence. Foreign teachers from Asian countries such as Singapore and Malaysia are more interculturally competent than teachers from European and American countries. The intercultural communicative competence of foreign teachers was highly and positively correlated with their language command. The higher the language skills acquired by foreign teachers, the higher their intercultural competence. Moreover, cultural distance was highly and positively correlated with intercultural communication problems. The greater the cultural distance, the greater the intercultural communication problems. Foreign teachers from individualistic cultures have more intercultural contact problems when interacting with Chinese students from collectivistic cultures; however, foreign teachers from cultures similar to those of China communicate more smoothly.

Wang (2012) conducted an empirical study to explore whether the integration of cultural teaching into English language teaching in a higher vocational school can improve students' intercultural communicative competence. The study was conducted with 100 freshmen students from Suzhou Agriculture Occupation Technology College. The students were divided into two groups: control and experimental. Before the experiment began, the authors administered a pre-test to students in both the control and experimental groups. The author then conducted experimental teaching for the experimental group, applying an intercultural and language-teaching model in the classroom. Simultaneously, the control group was taught in the usual manner. At the end of the experiment, posttests were administered to both groups, and a t-test was performed on the scores of the two groups. The mean test score was significantly higher in the experimental group than in the control group, and there was a significant difference between the test scores of the two groups after experimental instruction. Additionally, interviews were conducted with the students in the experimental group. The results of the interviews showed that over 90% of the students were interested in intercultural content, and all students agreed that intercultural knowledge-based courses helped them improve their intercultural communicative competence.

Huang (2015) used a three-dimensional interpretation teaching model to conduct a one-year university English course with cultural themes as cues to examine whether such a teaching model could enhance students' learning outcomes. Two classes (50 students each) at the same major level, divided into experimental and control groups, were used in this empirical study. The same teacher used the same textbook to teach for the same number of hours, and the three-dimensional interpretation teaching mode was conducted in the experimental group, whereas the control group was taught conventionally. After one year of teaching in different modes, both groups improved in their grades, but the experimental group showed a more significant improvement. This indicates that the new model is more conducive to effective teaching and learning in foreign-language classrooms. The questionnaire was administered at the end of the course. The

questionnaire showed that most students preferred the new model. This new model motivates learning. Overall, this three-dimensional interpretative teaching model stimulates enthusiasm for learning, enhances overall communicative skills, and meets society's expectations of international talent.

Xie (2012) investigated two English major classes taking an intercultural communication course: experimental and control. The experimental class consisted of 23 Chinese students and eight foreign students (from the USA, Switzerland, Germany, Japan, and Korea), whereas the control class consisted of 23 Chinese students. The experimental and control classes were conducted using the same materials. The results of the pre-experiment questionnaire showed similar levels of intercultural sensitivity in both classes that were basically the same. After one academic year, the level of intercultural sensitivity in the experimental class increased significantly and was significantly higher than that in the control class. There was no significant change in the level of intercultural sensitivity in the control group after the experiment. Direct contact with foreign students helps improve the intercultural communicative competence of Chinese university students. After conducting a follow-up survey, the students in the experimental class affirmed that the blended model had motivated them to study and improve their intercultural communicative competence.

In addition to studies of students and teachers, empirical research on intercultural communication has been conducted with employees. Zhang & Hu (2018) used the Intercultural Communicative Competence Self-Measurement Scale developed by Zhong, Bai, & Fan (2013) to investigate the intercultural communicative performance of economic and trade talents in Guangxi Province, China. The results showed that their performance was not qualified in language competence, discourse competence, or intercultural knowledge but qualified in sociolinguistic competence, strategic competence, intercultural attitude, intercultural awareness, and intercultural skills, being only slightly above the passing mark. The results of the interviews showed that most participants did not have a deep understanding of intercultural communicative competence. 93% of them could communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds on work and life topics; however, it was difficult to communicate at a deeper level. 91% of them stated that intercultural communicative competence is crucial to their future careers and that they need to adopt several measures to improve it; however, most of them do not know how to achieve that.

2.2. Characteristics

Although it is impossible to review all the relevant papers in this study, the chosen studies have several characteristics. Most studies have been conducted with university and vocational school students, whereas empirical studies on intercultural communication among other subjects are scarce. This could be because most instructors with intercultural communication research skills or potential tend to work in the educational institutions described, and empirical research employing their own students is often rapid, easy, and feasible for controlling for

other variables. Furthermore, most of these studies focused on foreign language teaching and learning, whereas research in other areas is uncommon.

Among the empirical studies in which the subjects were university students, the majority of empirical studies on intercultural communication were conducted with English undergraduates and a few with non-English undergraduates. These papers also show that the majority of research continues to be empirical studies on intercultural communication in English, with few papers on intercultural communication in other languages. Considering the advantages that undergraduate English teachers have over their research ability, willingness, and environment, it is possible to argue, which is similar to the first characteristic above, that they have an upper hand in conducting intercultural communication research. Additionally, most studies have shown that English majors are more interculturally sensitive and have higher intercultural communicative competence and willingness than non-English majors. Foreign language students have higher intercultural communicative competence, attitudes, and performance than non-English majors.

These studies were conducted using either [Chen & Starosta's \(2000\)](#) or a mixed assessment scale. It follows that most empirical research on intercultural communication concentrates less on subjects' intercultural communicative competence than on their intercultural sensitivity. Similarly, few empirical studies have used the Intercultural Effectiveness Scale proposed by [Portalla & Chen \(2010\)](#), which is a widely accepted and credible scale that requires further attention and citation by Chinese scholars.

Among these papers, an increasing number have examined the relationship between intercultural communication and intercultural sensitivity and the relationship between language proficiency and intercultural sensitivity, suggesting that intercultural sensitivity is a hotspot in empirical research.

Research subjects are becoming increasingly diverse and include university students, vocational school students, foreign language teachers, and even employees. Similarly, research areas are becoming increasingly broad, including language teaching, cultural studies, economics, and translation.

Most of the subjects were Chinese students studying in China; empirical studies with foreign students, people from different ethnic groups, or people speaking different native languages are rare. This is often closely related to the willingness of the researcher and the difficulty of conducting such studies. For example, if most students in a class have different mother tongues, the only way to conduct a survey is to use a common language (e.g., English or Chinese). Therefore, the level of each student's common language will affect the efficacy of the questionnaire or interview and, therefore, the validity of the study.

Longitudinal research on intercultural communication is lacking. This may be due to the fact, to a great extent, that considerable research has been conducted to meet a short-term requirement, rush through an urgent problem, or accomplish a school project.

3. Implications

In a globalized world, intercultural communication is becoming increasingly crucial. A few years ago, only international managers, diplomats, translators, foreign language teachers, and students needed to consider and engage in intercultural communication. Today, this has changed, and people worldwide and from different cultural backgrounds are in regular contact with each other. Driven by shifting and fast-paced technology and globalization, the research methodology and content of empirical research on intercultural communication need to be recast to achieve better goals. The implications of this review and the characteristics outlined above are discussed below.

3.1. Research Implications

It is suggested that intercultural communication researchers expand the subjects, research methods, and research areas of empirical studies. Compared to foreign research, Chinese intercultural communication research is mostly a summary and recommendation of personal experiences, with less empirical research conducted using scientific data. Scholars should expand the scope of their research, strengthen the theoretical construction of intercultural communication from multicultural perspectives, and strive to build a shared academic exchange platform for intercultural communication to promote the academic convergence between domestic and international research. Take Online Intercultural Exchange (OIE) as an example. OIE is considered an important way to enhance students' awareness and competence in intercultural communication. It follows that learners can communicate across cultures through live chat platforms, such as Skype, Facebook, or Twitter. Over the years, OIE research and practice have developed successfully. However, there are very few studies on OIE in China (Ren & Liang, 2014).

Previous empirical studies on intercultural communication have demonstrated that correlations between intercultural communicative competence, intercultural sensitivity, and English language proficiency are rare. According to the conceptual framework of intercultural communicative competence, three components are involved: intercultural awareness, sensitivity, and adroitness (Chen & Starosta 1998). Accordingly, empirical research correlating intercultural awareness, sensitivity, and adroitness is required.

To broaden the empirical study of intercultural communication, it is worthwhile to invest in and pay attention to the study of different nationalities and mother tongues in the context of intercultural communication in China. The relationships and interactions between language proficiency tests, intercultural communicative competence, intercultural sensitivity, and intercultural performance can provide new insights for empirical research on intercultural communication in China and abroad.

There are an increasing number of synthetic or homemade scales measuring intercultural communicative competence and intercultural sensitivity, some of

which have been shown to be valid and reliable. Additional statistical tools and methods can be used in future studies to ensure more objective and scientific research. Furthermore, it is advised to develop an intercultural communicative competence or intercultural sensitivity scale that is credible, widely accepted and appropriate for learners in China.

Longitudinal studies are required. It is expedient to fill this gap in empirical research in China with longitudinal research. Regarding foreign language education at universities, the ultimate goal is to develop students' intercultural communicative competence and performance. Thus, there is an urgent need to conduct a longitudinal study on the development of students' intercultural communicative competence over these four years. Thus, it examines both the successful implementation of the language-teaching target related to intercultural communication and its usefulness as a reference for intercultural communication instruction.

3.2. Pedagogical Implications

In terms of pedagogical insights, there is no definite answer as to what types of cultural or intercultural communication courses are effective in strengthening students' competence and performance in intercultural communication. It is worth discussing whether most intercultural communication materials reflect genuine situations.

Intercultural communication should not be a course of theoretical reflection or a summary of relevant research but rather a course that combines theory and application with relevant practical work. For example, teachers can ask students to complete an intercultural communication task by communicating with foreign students through instant messaging platforms such as WeChat or Tencent meetings. Learners are expected to absorb and internalize content with practical applications through teacher-led and independent learning and consciously add relevant information for lifelong intercultural communication learning. Practical activities, both in and out of the classroom, should be student-led or task-based, and instructors should strive to reduce the distance between input learning and output applications to sharpen students' intercultural sensitivity and communicative competence.

Currently, foreign language classes in China lack scientifically sound tests for evaluating the effectiveness of intercultural instruction. Successful teaching of culture should include cultural content in the examinations; otherwise, teachers are pressured to prioritize the time spent on language proficiency, which has long been covered in the examinations. Foreign language teachers are less knowledgeable about culture and intercultural tests, and it is up to them to be conscious of lifelong and continuous learning and practices.

Multicultural learning environments can foster intercultural communicative competence among students. Research has indicated that, to strengthen learners' intercultural communicative competence, opportunities should be provided to

increase students' direct contact with foreign students in the classroom when conditions permit it. In addition, empirical research has supported a claim that, without the requirement that students reside abroad, the improvement of intercultural sensitivity can be realized through education and training (Altschuler, Sussman, & Kachur, 2003). Cultural adaptation and intercultural training have been crucial in intercultural communication education in Western countries. They should be given due weight in China's education sector.

Universities should not only offer intercultural communication courses in foreign language departments but also in non-foreign language departments with specific intercultural communication content. For instance, intercultural communication courses for hotel management departments should focus on intercultural communication within the hotel management framework.

4. Conclusion

This study reviews empirical research papers on intercultural communication published in China between 2012 and 2022, summarizes the characteristics of the papers, and concludes with research implications to gain insights into the trends and shortcomings of intercultural communication research and to address the issue of establishing theories of intercultural communication on its own. Constructing a model of intercultural communicative competence considering substantial empirical research is a topic for further exploration.

This study has limitations. Empirical studies of intercultural communication may not be comprehensive. The delineation of subjects and research areas can be revised. The papers reviewed in this article may not be sufficiently representative, owing to the author's academic competence. The limitations of this study should be addressed in future studies.

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