



Research on Intercultural Communication Competence of Freshmen Majoring in Business English

—A Case Study of Sichuan University of Arts and Science

Wei He

Foreign Language Department, Sichuan University of Arts and Science, Dazhou, China

Email: Fionahewei@qq.com

How to cite this paper: He, W. (2020) Research on Intercultural Communication Competence of Freshmen Majoring in Business English. *Open Access Library Journal*, 7: e6054.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1106054>

Received: January 7, 2020

Accepted: February 22, 2020

Published: February 25, 2020

Copyright © 2020 by author(s) and Open Access Library Inc.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

Abstract

Currently, intercultural communication competence is considered as an important topic for many professors and college students. In other words, the way of acquiring intercultural communication competence has become the focus in recent academic papers. This paper conducts a survey in Sichuan University of Arts and Science, involving 82 freshmen majoring in Business English. By the combination of qualitative and quantitative analysis, this paper is to discuss the obstacles influencing the cultivation of ICC of freshmen majoring in Business English. After this investigation, it can be concluded that most participants are sensitive to cultural differences, willing to have intercultural communication, and with certain cultural knowledge. At the same time, language barriers and lack of cultural knowledge hinder the formation of their ICC. Meanwhile, this paper puts forward three solutions accordingly, which serves as guidance for teachers in future intercultural communication teaching.

Subject Areas

Economics, Education, Sociology

Keywords

Freshmen Majoring in Business English, Intercultural Communication Competence, Culture Sensitive, Culture Knowledge

1. Introduction

Living in a globalized world, many people need the ability to communicate with

individuals with diversified cultural background. Therefore, ICC has become a field of study that attracts the attention of many academics. The concern of intercultural communication competence reflects the changing environment of higher education in China. Before the open-up policy, college students seldom got the chance to pursue further education abroad. In contrast, now China has accelerated its speed of embracing the whole world. Government offers financial support for students to study overseas, in addition, it attracts people from other countries to study and work in China. With the advent of One Belt and One Silk Initiative, Chinese are more likely to communicate with people with different language and culture background, which put forward with a task for Chinese higher education to cultivate college students' ICC, because people with different social backgrounds, social systems, and customs have difficulties in understanding and communicating with each other even they can speak to each other in the same language, like English [1]. That is why language learning and culture learning cannot be separated, for language is the carrier of culture. As Mak asserted that language learning is a deep, conceptual activity which involves explicit analysis of language and culture [2].

Nowadays, it is of great importance for student majoring in Business English. First, they must communicate with people with different cultural background when they get into the field of foreign trade. Second, intercultural communication competence is one of the five required ability stipulated in the interpretation of national standard for undergraduate teaching of business English in colleges and universities by Liu Yonghou [3]. This paper aims to explore the status qua of ICC of freshmen majoring in Business English. They have already been studying English more than six years before entering college, and their scores of English in Gaokao (national entrance examination for college) are between 95 - 135 (the total score is 150). In addition, students have access to any information they want in an electronic age. Therefore, it is easy to see that some of them have already acquired ICC to some degree before entering college. Consequently, it is necessary for teachers offering this course to have a basic understanding of the condition of the ICC of his students. In Sichuan University of Arts and Science, the course entitled with Intercultural Communication in English is offered to sophomore in business English and provide suggestion accordingly.

The research objectives of this paper are to analyze current status qua of ICC of freshmen majoring in BE Sichuan University of Arts and Science, find obstacles that hinder the formation of ICC, and provide solutions to solve those obstacles.

2. Theoretical Framework

ICC is a continuing process that can never be fully completed. Scholars define ICC as the ability to show appropriate and effective behavior in different cultural contexts [4]. Effectiveness refers to "the accomplishment of valued goals", and appropriateness means the consideration of "valued rules and norms" [5].

Stella Ting-Toomy offers her understanding of this term in her book *Communicating Across Culture*: “Intercultural communication is viewed as a symbolic exchange process between persons of different cultures [6]. The general goal of effective intercultural communication is to create shared meanings between dissimilar individuals in an interactive situation”. Then, what is intercultural communication competence, for Janet and Milton Bennett, intercultural communication competence is the ability to communicate effectively in cross-cultural situations and to relate appropriately in a variety of cultural contexts [7].

Other scholars defined ICC is one ability including certain aspects. Spitzberg and Changnon indicate that ICC tends to demonstrate similar components, namely, attitude, knowledge and skill, involving individuals fostering their own cultural knowledge and comprehension, increasing awareness and sensitivity, and expressing these with appropriate verbal and non-verbal behaviors [8]. Gertsen suggests that knowledge is likely to develop positive attitudes, but such attitudes do not always lead to an effective and appropriate communication [9].

For domestic academics, more than 3000 articles can be found on CNKI concerned with ICC, most of which are concerned with ICC of college students, like “The Research on the Status Qua of the Intercultural Communication Competence on College Student and Its Strateries” By Gao Yongchen [10]. Among those articles, there are only 300 articles about ICC about in Business English, most of which focus on the development of teachers in business English and curriculum design, like “The Investigation on the Status Qua of Business English Teachers in Local College” by He Hongli [11], and “The Research on the Curriculum Design of Business English in Vocational College” by Wang Chaohui and Liu Gangfeng [12]. It is seldom to find one article analyzing the status quo of ICC of freshmen in Business English.

What is the current status qua of intercultural communication competence of freshmen majoring in BE? This paper conducts a survey in Sichuan University of Arts and Science, involving 82 freshmen specializing in business English from foreign language department. The survey objectives are to find out the obstacles that hinder the development of ICC, and put forward relating solutions.

3. Methodology

This survey is conducted in the form of questionnaire. Questionnaires are distributed to 82 freshmen from class 6 & 7 (20 male, 62 female) majoring in BE from foreign language department (Table 1), all participators have already acquired certain English language ability because they have already learned English

Table 1. Participants.

Class Gender	Female	Male
Class 6	32	9
Class 7	29	10

7 or 10 year before entering College.

This research employs both qualitative and quantitative analysis methods. The questionnaire is divided into three parts, and includes 33 questions, with the hope of exploring students' cultural knowledge, intercultural sensitivity and intercultural communication skill. In this survey, 81 valid questionnaires are collected, and the recovery rate is 98.7%. All participants are anonymous. All those strategies ensure that the data from questionnaire are credible.

4. Data Analysis

4.1. Evaluation and Analysis of Culture Knowledge

There are 10 questions in this part, which evaluates students' cultural knowledge of American value.

As seen from **Figure 1** and **Figure 2**, most participants believe that Americans are individualist (58%), and more than half of participants agree that Americans often refer to each other by first name (56.1%), in contrast, only 12.2% (**Figure 1**) and 26.83% (**Figure 2**) participants show disagreement. The high degree of agreement shows the most freshmen have a basic understanding of American

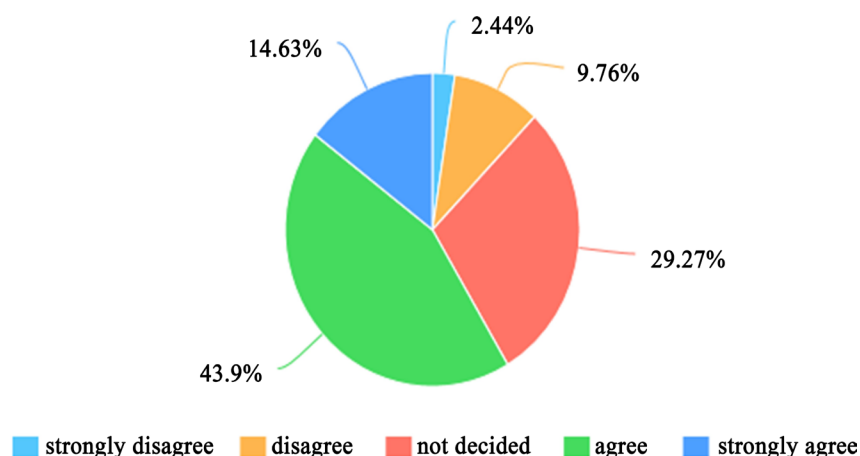


Figure 1. American are individualists.

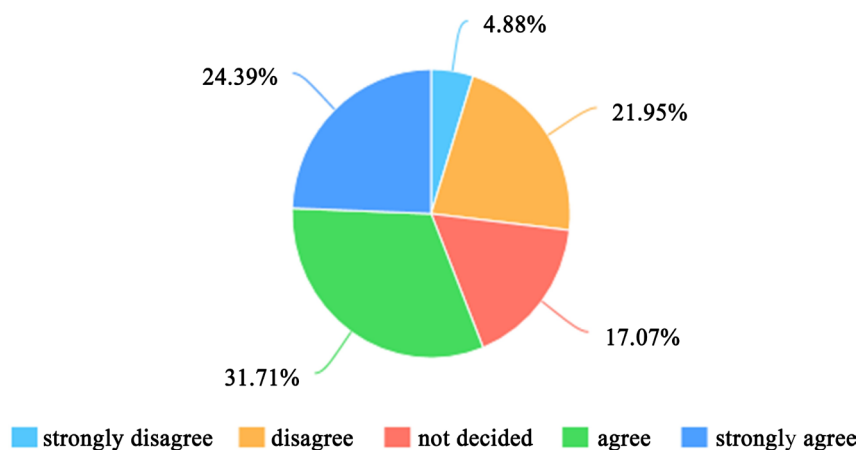


Figure 2. American often refer to each other by first name.

value. That is partly because nowadays it is very easy for students to see TV series and movies from American, and all those programs preach the dominating value—individualism to their audience. While watching those programs, students are unconsciously affected by those values. For example, in movies *superman*, *spider-man* and *Iron man*, wherever there is crisis, there will be an omnipotent person to save the whole world.

Generally speaking, from **Figure 3**, most participants think that American seldom express their opinions openly, together with 12% of them are not sure about this saying. **Figure 4** demonstrates that more than 41.46% participants are not sure whether American emphasize social rank or not, at the same time, 14.64% participants disagree with this description. From **Figure 5**, it is easy to conclude that 56.1% participants show disagreement with this depiction.

The above data show that the vast majority of participants have a wrong understanding about those three depictions. Because the values in **Figures 3-5** belong to deep culture, which is invisible to outsider in daily life. American prefer culture of low context, low power distance and future orientation, that is why they are more likely to speak directly, ignore hierarchy and like to make plan for future. While Chinese tend to speak indirectly, emphasize people's status in society and turn to glorious past for wisdom. Those standards used to compare

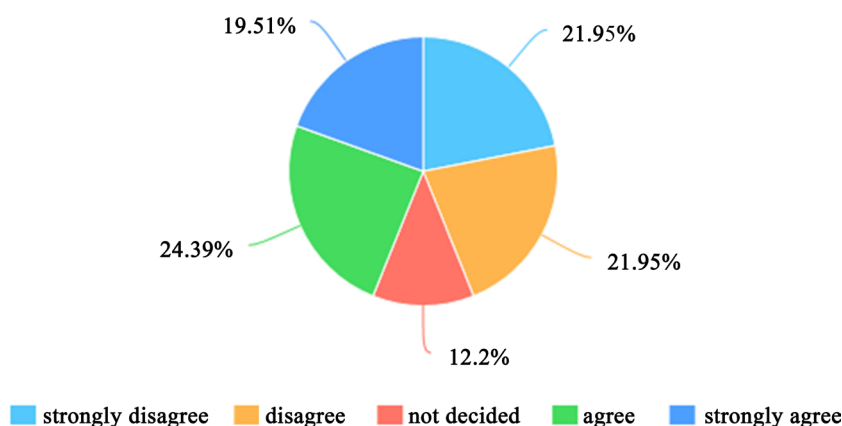


Figure 3. American seldom express their opinions openly.

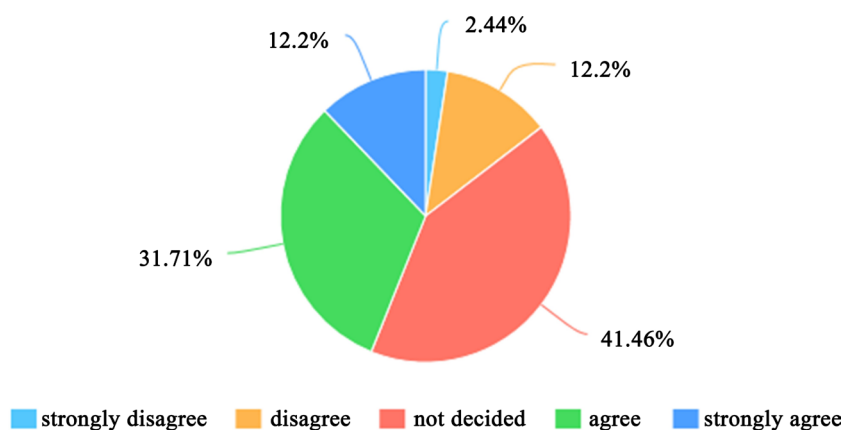


Figure 4. American emphasize social rank.

culture are hard to experience by watching movie, not to mention students in our university do not have enough chance to contact people from America in daily life.

4.2. Evaluation and Analysis of Intercultural Sensitivity

There are 13 questions in this part, which evaluates students' intercultural sensitivity.

As can be seen from **Figure 6** and **Figure 7**, 63.41% participants enjoy interacting with people from different cultures, and 48.78% of them have a feeling of enjoyment after experiencing cultural difference. Those data illustrates the positive attitude of participants towards intercultural communication. In other words, most freshmen accept cultural difference and enjoy the chance to experience cultural difference.

Figure 8 demonstrates that 53.65% participants disagree that people from other cultures are narrow-minded, and 24.39% of them are not sure about this judgement. The high percentage of disagreement shows that freshmen do not advocate culture hegemony, that is why they treat cultural difference as a natural thing instead of labeling them as something bad. From **Figure 9**, it is easy to see

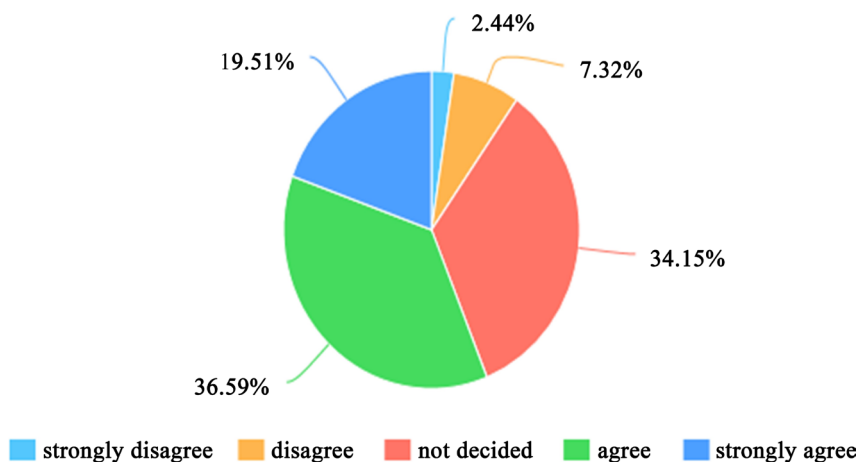


Figure 5. American emphasize the future more than the past.

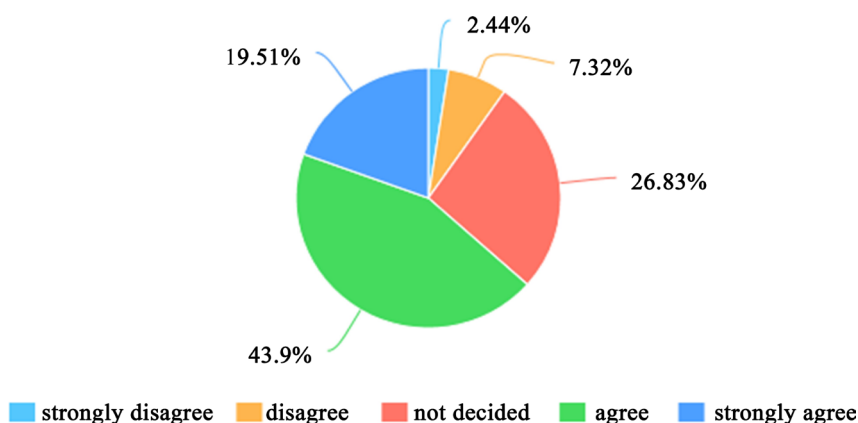
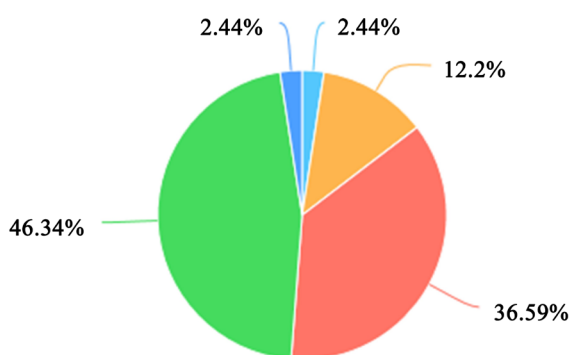
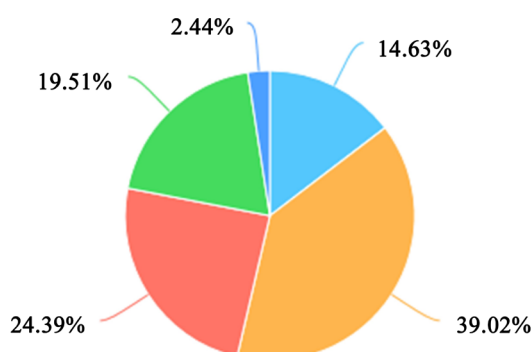


Figure 6. I enjoy interacting with people from different cultures.



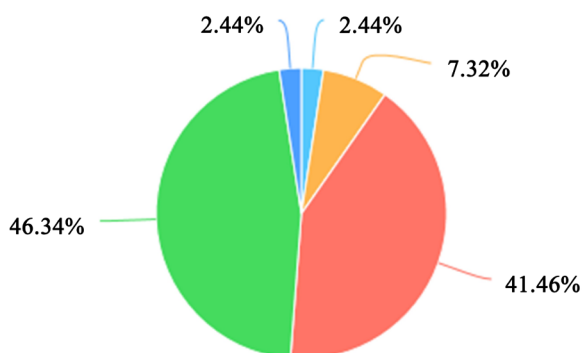
strongly disagree disagree not decided agree strongly agree

Figure 7. I have a feeling of enjoyment towards differences between my culturally-distinct counterpart and me.



strongly disagree disagree not decided agree strongly agree

Figure 8. I think people from other cultures are narrow-minded.



strongly disagree disagree not decided agree strongly agree

Figure 9. I am sensitive to my culturally-counterpart's subtle meaning.

48.78% participants agree that they pay attention to the hidden meaning from their culturally-counterpart, which means that they are aware of the different communication styles between people from different countries.

From **Figure 10**, 17.07% participants are not confident in interacting with people from different cultures, and 48.78% participants are not sure of themselves. As can be seen from **Figure 11**, 34.16% participants feel it very hard to

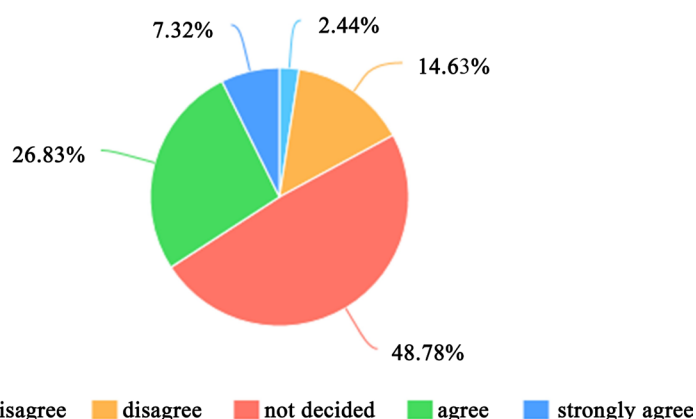


Figure 10. I am pretty sure of myself in interacting with people from different cultures.

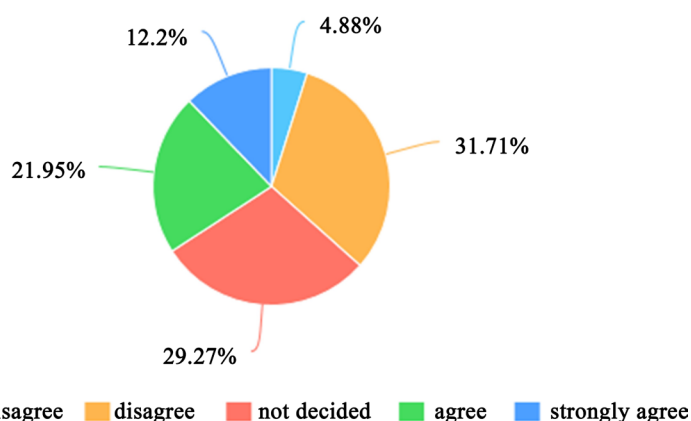


Figure 11. I felt it very hard to talk in front of people from different cultures.

talk in front of people from different cultures, together with 29.27% participants are undecided about this saying. Those data show that most participants are with certain degree of intercultural sensitivity, aware of the cultural difference, but they are not confident and do not know what to say in intercultural communication.

4.3. Evaluation and Analysis of Intercultural Communication Skill

There are 10 questions in this part, which evaluates students' intercultural communication skill.

From **Figures 12-14**, it is easy to get that 56.09% participants have grammar problems when interacting with people from different cultures, and 37.71% of them often miss parts of what is going on in intercultural communication, at the same time, 43.9% of them can't express their ideas clearly in intercultural communication. All those data above indicate that nearly half of those participants have language problems (especially listening and speaking) that serve as disincentive during intercultural communication.

Figure 15 demonstrates that 36.59% participants do not know how to initiate a conversation in intercultural communication, together with 41.46% of them are not sure about it. Meanwhile, **Figure 16** indicates that more than half (53.66%)

of them can use appropriate eye contact in intercultural communication. Above data shows that although those participants have already gained certain cultural knowledge (about body language), they are ignorant of other relevant ones, like acceptable topics in intercultural communication, which will discourage them to

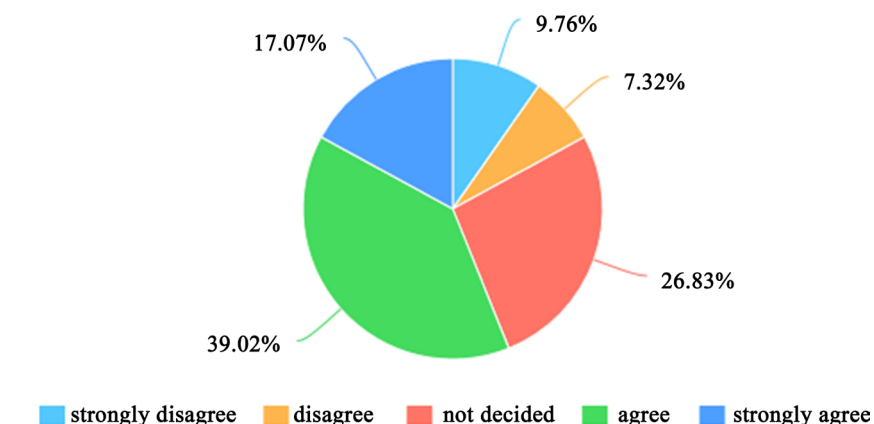


Figure 12. I have problems with grammar when interacting with people from different cultures.

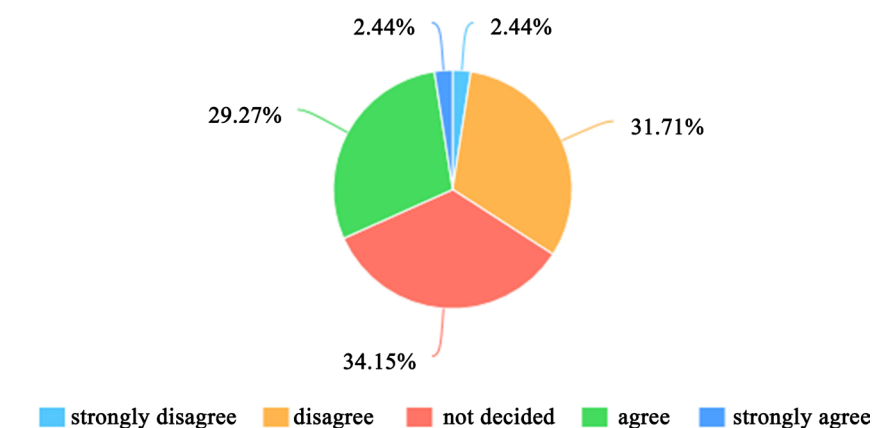


Figure 13. I often miss parts of what is going on when interacting with people from different cultures.

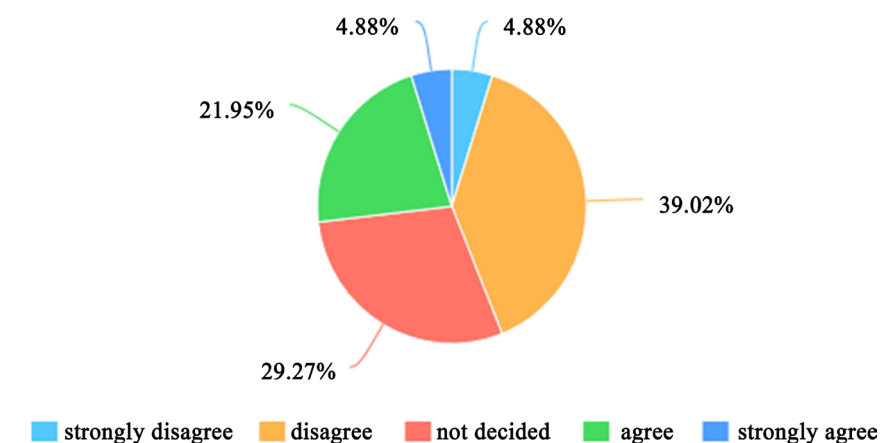


Figure 14. I am able to express my ideas clearly when interacting with people from different cultures.

experience intercultural communication.

As can be seen from **Figure 17**, 41.46% participants disagree with this description, that is to say, they feel nervous instead of relaxed in intercultural communication.

Therefore, it is easy to say that most participants are with cultural awareness, accepting the cultural difference between them and people from other places. In addition, most of them (63.41%) are willing to have intercultural communication.

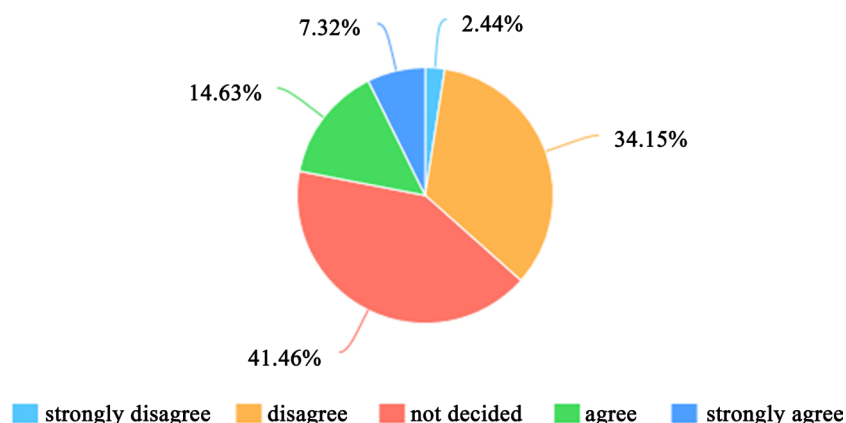


Figure 15. I always know how to initiate a conversation when interacting with people from different cultures.

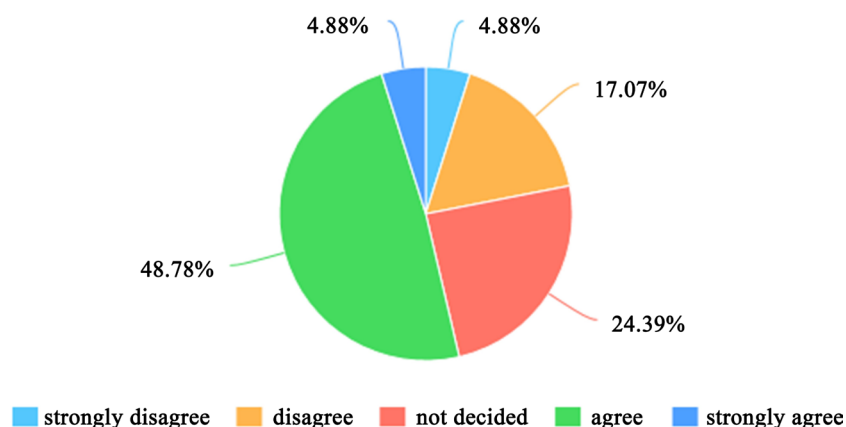


Figure 16. I use appropriate eye contact when interacting with people from different cultures.

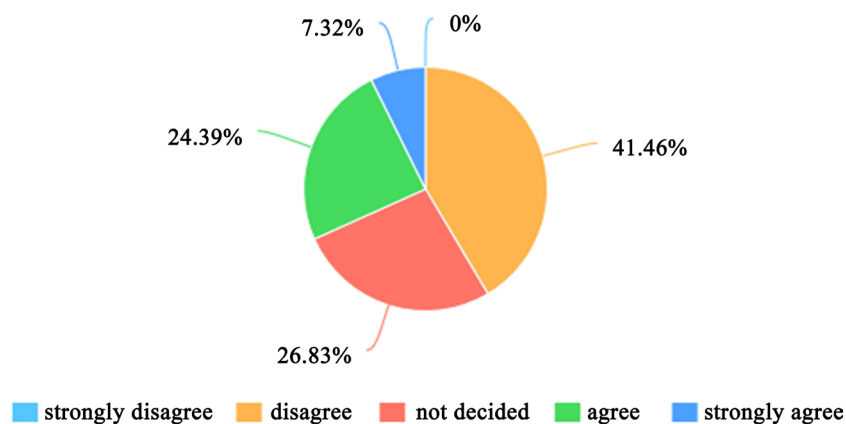


Figure 17. I feel relaxed when interacting with people from different cultures.

Meanwhile, more than half of them treat culture from other countries equally, free from stereotype and prejudice. However, most participants have language obstacles in intercultural communication, namely, grammar, listening and speaking, together with lack of cultural knowledge (different acceptable topics, thinking pattern, time orientation and so on), which discourage them to have effective intercultural communication.

5. Suggestion on Cultivation of College Students' ICC

Based on the above analysis, it can be concluded that most freshmen in Sichuan University of Arts and Science are sensitive to cultural difference, willing to have intercultural communication, and with certain knowledge of cultural difference. At the same time, language obstacles and the lack of important cultural knowledge hinder the formation of their ICC. Based on the findings on this survey, this paper puts forward three suggestions accordingly.

1) Enhance freshmen's language ability

From the survey, it is easy to see that 56.09% participants have grammar problem, 37.71% of them with listening problem and 43.9% of them feel hard to express themselves in English. However, language problem as one obstacle hindering the formation of ICC, surprises a lot of us. Because they have already studied English for more than six years.

On the surface, Language obstacles are problems of language. Take a deep thought, they are in different ways related to culture. Because students tend to cling to meaning of a word or phrase in the new language, regardless of connotation or context, they are likely to understand the meaning of a word or phrase based on the denotation (dictionary meaning). Therefore, teachers should make students realize the difference of denotation and connotation of words.

In addition, teachers can invite foreign teachers in their department to take part in English corner, which will provide chances for students to speak out. If they can express themselves in front of others gradually, then they must be more confident in future intercultural communication.

2) Introduce culture knowledge in class teaching

In *language and culture*, English education experts Deng Yanchang, Liu Runqing said that learning a foreign language not only need to master the pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary and idioms, but also need to know the way they use to look at things, to observe the world; and the way they use to reflect the thought, habits and behavior of their society [13]. In this survey, those freshmen are with culture sensitive, knowing they share different culture with American. However, they do not have a thorough understanding of American values. Because nowadays most intercultural communication is between China and America, then it is necessary for teacher to guide student to have a thorough understanding of American culture, by contrasting and comparing Chinese culture and American culture with the standard by Florence Kluckhohn, Greert Hofstede and Edward. T. Hall.

For Florence Kluckhohn, he provides five orientations to compare culture, and time orientation is one of them. By time orientation, American pay attention to future, making plan for future. In contrast, Chinese always turn to past for wisdom. Hofstede' approach is based on the assertion that people carry mental programs that contain the ideas of culture, and power distance is one of them. American is a country of low power distance that refuses to accept the unequal relationship in organization, while Chinese accept the idea that the whole society is based on unequal relationship. Edward. T. Hall puts forward the theory of high-context and low-context culture. Chinese prefer high-context culture, expressing their ideal in indirect way, while American prefer low-context culture, expressing their ideal in direct way.

At the same time, there are differences in the choice of acceptable topic for daily communication. Westerners prefer to talk about weather, sports, and pets, while seldom mention family, income and other sensitive private topics. Chinese is willing to talk about family, income, children, while seldom mention disease, death. Those knowledges will help them to initiate a conversation easily and successfully, which will in turn make them be more confident in the future.

3) Create real situation for the acquisition of ICC

Leung, Ang, and Tan demonstrate that the greatest contribution to intercultural competence results from direct experience in different cultures. The interactive environment of the experience plays a key role, especially in study and abroad programs [14]. However, students seldom have the chance to get involved in English environment except class teaching. Therefore, teachers should create real situation for students to apply cultural knowledge into practice in class teaching, which will help them to overcome cultural distance.

For instance, after explaining the difference between high-context and low-context culture, teachers can divide the whole class into 4 groups, each group with 10 students, and then assign different tasks to each group to get to apply this term in real life. Because Chinese is a country of high-context culture, preferring indirect communication style, while America is a country of low-context culture, tending to communicate in direct way. The assignment is that two people in the group to be a couple who have been dating for many years. But now the man or woman wants to break up, but not hurt the other persons feelings. Then what would you say? The couple could be both Chinese and both American. Each group is given 10 minutes to prepare and perform in front of all students. Then teacher should give his own comments, point out the problems in their performance, and put forward methods for improvement. After class, teachers should arrange appropriate simulated situation training to enable students to further consolidate their acquired culture knowledge.

6. Conclusions

Conducting a research on freshmen majoring in BE, the discussion of the potential obstacles in the formation of ICC offers a new perspective for further inter-

cultural communication teaching in Sichuan University of Arts and Science. From this research, it can be concluded that most freshmen are sensitive to cultural difference, expect to have intercultural communication, and have obtained certain knowledge of cultural difference. However, language obstacles and the lack of cultural knowledge hinder the formation of their ICC, which serves as a disincentive to have intercultural communication.

“Educational institutions have a role to play in fostering positive intercultural attitudes”, which emphasizes the significance of classroom teaching in the cultivation of the ICC of those students [15]. In another way, this research provides useful information for teachers to ponder what developing strategies they should provide for intercultural teaching in the future.

Founding

This research was supported by Sichuan University of Arts and Science (project entitled with The Research on Intercultural Communication Competence of Student Majoring in Business English of Local Application-Oriented University No. 2018 KR001Z).

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References

- [1] Petrakis, P. and Kostis, P. (2013) Economic Growth and Cultural Change. *Journal of Socio-Economics*, **47**, 147-157. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socec.2013.02.011>
- [2] Mak, A.S. (2010) Enhancing Academics' Capability to Engage Multicultural Classes and Internationalize at Home. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, **3**, 365-373.
- [3] Liu, Y.H. (2015) Interpretation of National Standard for Undergraduate Teaching of Business English in Colleges and Universities. *Yu Wen Xue Kan*, **9**, 81-83.
- [4] Deardorff, D.K. (2006) Identification and Assessment of Intercultural Competence as a Student Outcome of Internationalization. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, **10**, 241-266. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315306287002>
- [5] Spitzberg, B.H. (2000) A Model of Intercultural Communication Competence. *Intercultural Communication: A Reader*, **9**, 375-387.
- [6] Ting-Toomey, S. (1999) *Communicating Across Cultures*. The Guilford Press, Guilford.
- [7] Schoeffel, V. (2014) *How to Facilitate Meaningful Interreligious Dialogue: An Exploration of Potential Contributions from Intercultural Communication Theory*. University Salzburg.
- [8] Spitzberg, B.H. and Changnon, G. (2009) Conceptualizing Intercultural Competence. In: Deardorff, D.K., Ed., *The SAGE Handbook of Intercultural Competence*, Thousand Oaks, Sage, 2-52.
- [9] Gertsen, M.C. (1990) Intercultural Competence and Expatriates. *The International*

Journal of Human Resource Management, **1**, 341-362.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/095851990000000054>

- [10] Gao, Y.C. (2006) The Research on the Status Qua of the Intercultural Communication Competence on College Student and Its Strategies. *Foreign Language and Their Teaching*, **11**, 26-28.
- [11] He, H.L. (2016) The Investigation on the Status Qua of Business English Teachers in Local College. *Journal of Kaifeng Institute of Education*, **5**, 103-105.
- [12] Wang, C.H. and Liu, G.F. (2015) The Research on the Curriculum Design of Business English in Vocational College, Crazy English Teachers.
- [13] Deng, Y.C. and Liu, R.Q. (1998) Language and Culture. Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, Beijing.
- [14] Leung, K., Ang, S. and Tan, M.L. (2014) Intercultural Competence. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, **1**, 489-519.
<https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-031413-091229>
- [15] Arasaratnam, L.A. (2015) Research in Intercultural Communication: Reviewing the Past Decade. *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication*, **8**, 290-310.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17513057.2015.1087096>