

Intercultural Competence of Chinese College English Teachers: A Comprehensive Study

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Abstract: This study investigates Chinese college English teachers' intercultural competence (IC) through mixed-methods research involving 69 survey respondents and four interviews. Findings reveal systemic challenges in integrating cultural instruction, including teachers' self-perceived knowledge gaps (39%), pedagogical skill deficiencies (36%), and curricular misalignment with policy mandates. While national reforms emphasize IC development, classroom practices remain constrained by exam-oriented priorities, limited training (only 26% received in-service IC training), and textbook biases favoring Anglo-American cultures. Quantitative analysis shows teachers' confidence negatively correlates with teaching experience, but positively with education level, suggesting advanced academic training enhances IC integration capabilities. Qualitative data highlight tensions between ideological-political curriculum requirements and authentic intercultural pedagogy, with teachers creatively adapting content to balance cultural perspectives. The research identifies two critical gaps: (1) policy-implementation disconnect in cultural education, and (2) insufficient professional development despite training demands. Recommendations emphasize holistic reforms: expanding workshop-based teacher training, redesigning textbooks with balanced cultural representations, and aligning assessment systems with IC objectives. This study underscores the necessity of addressing both institutional barriers (time constraints, testing systems) and individual competencies to bridge China's intercultural education aspirations and classroom realities.

Keywords: Intercultural Competence (IC); Cross-cultural Communication; College English Teachers.

1. Introduction

The integration of cultural education into English language teaching in China emerged in the 1980s, initially focusing exclusively on British cultural content (Li, 2016). This pedagogical orientation shifted significantly with America's growing global economic influence, leading to the gradual replacement of British cultural dominance by American cultural elements in textbooks and curricula since the late 20th century. However, this persistent Anglo-American cultural emphasis in English instruction has sparked academic concerns regarding its educational implications. Scholars argue that the disproportionate focus on Western cultural frameworks has resulted in a notable deficit in Chinese cultural literacy among English learners. This phenomenon, termed "Chinese Culture Aphasia," manifests as students' diminished capacity to effectively express and transmit Chinese cultural concepts in English communication (Cong, 2000).

As China hosts the world's largest English-learning population, cultural education integration has become a national priority. The *2010-2020 Education Reform Outline* mandated cultural communication and Chinese culture promotion, guiding universities' teaching reforms. Reinforced by the 2015 "World Class Universities" plan, traditional culture preservation became one of five key educational tasks. The foundational *Guidelines on College English Teaching (2020)* structures curricula into three pillars: general English, specialized English, and intercultural communication. It requires mandatory Chinese Culture courses at basic levels, with advanced cultural studies (Chinese History, Philosophy, Literature) at higher levels, aiming to develop students' bicultural competence alongside English proficiency.

International scholars have systematically investigated cultural representations in EFL instructional materials and learner perspectives on intercultural communicative competence through empirical studies (see Larzen-Ostermark, 2008; Fantini, 2011; Song, 2018). Current research predominantly isolates textbook analysis or learner perspectives, neglecting the interconnected pedagogical triad (materials, learners, educators). Integrated approaches to enhance teachers' intercultural competence (IC) remain underexplored.

Considering the research gaps of the previous research, this article completed a comprehensive study from Chinese College English teachers' perspectives. Questionnaires and one-on-one interviews with college English teachers are conducted to gather their views on intercultural competence, sensitivity level, textbook cultural content, teaching methods and integration challenges in language teaching.

2. The Present Situation of IC in English Language Teaching

In the context of globalization, intercultural competence has emerged as a crucial higher education objective, necessitated by English's dominance as the global lingua franca. (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2011). According to Byram (1997), IC is "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."

Based on Byram's concepts, EFL teaching should go beyond factual knowledge and communication skills to foster personal and social development for successful multicultural communication (van Ek, 1986; Aguilar, 2010). It should focus on attitudes, skills, and intercultural awareness, enabling

students to relativize their own culture with others' (Risager, 2007). Among these, attitude is fundamental as openness is crucial for learners (Lynch & Hanson, 1998; Deardorff, 2006). Griffith et al. (2016) further suggested including behavioral components in the IC model. IC, as a measurable capability, can be assessed through multi-method approaches to enhance validity. Researchers recommend employing multiple assessment methods (Griffith et al., 2016; Ingulsrud et al., 2002), with surveys and portfolio analyses emerging as predominant tools for evaluating IC development.

The pedagogical value of cultural instruction is globally recognized by scholars across academic communities. However, intercultural teaching remains secondary to language instruction in EFL contexts, evidenced by 91.43% of Spanish teachers allocating over 80% class time to linguistic content (Sercu et al., 2004), a trend prevalent across EFL countries (Zhou, 2011). Cultural pedagogy predominantly focuses on superficial target-culture transmission while neglecting critical cultural reflection (Byram, 2014; Sercu et al., 2004). This may stem from teachers' fragmented understanding of intercultural competence (IC), with most prioritizing factual knowledge (Atay et al., 2009; Gu, 2016), while others emphasize skills (Larzen-Ostermark, 2008) or attitudes (Zhou, 2011), resulting in pedagogically marginalized culture teaching across information allocation, content depth, and linguistic integration.

3. Research on College English Teachers' Perceptions and Practices in IC

3.1. Teachers' Challenges in IC-Language Integration

Previous studies identifies teachers' challenges in IC integration as stemming from: (1) self-perceived pedagogical deficiencies (IC conceptual gaps, cultural knowledge limitations) (Jokikokko, 2005); (2) temporal constraints balancing linguistic-cultural instruction amidst learners' low L2 proficiency (Larzen-Ostermark, 2008); (3) curricular ambiguity and assessment systems privileging linguistic competence (Lindholm & Myles, 2019); compounded by (4) resource scarcity and student disengagement (Bayyurt, 2006; Gu, 2016).

3.2. Research Questions on College English Teachers' IC

Teachers' perceptions pedagogically influence instructional practices; EFL educators' intercultural competence understanding, pedagogical strategies, and influencing factors enhance collegiate IC development objectives, all of which require exploration. Thus, Chinese college English teachers' IC needs to be explored.

The research questions are:

1. What are Chinese college English teachers' perceptions of IC?
2. How can college English teacher improve students' IC in teaching?
3. Do teachers feel confident in teaching to develop students' IC?

4. Research Methods

4.1. Questionnaires

Participants

The study distributed questionnaires to College English teachers across 15 undergraduate institutions in 6 Chinese provinces, collecting 69 valid responses (42 female, 27 male) with open-ended completion time. 33 respondents voluntarily opted for follow-up interviews.

The participant distribution showed geographical concentration, with 72.5% in Sichuan (n=34) and Chongqing (n=16), while the remaining 27.5% were distributed across 4 provinces (≤5 participants each). Participants demonstrated substantial teaching experience (M=8 years, range=23 years), with 52.2% (n=36) exceeding a decade in college English instruction and 20.3% (n=14) under five years.

Participants completed the survey via www.wjx.cn, comprising two sections: IC perceptions (Items 1-7) and teaching method perceptions (Items 8-14). All questions—excluding demographic data—adopted a predominantly multiple-choice format with optional open-response components for specific items. The survey was preceded by a research overview detailing objectives, procedures, and content.

4.2. Interviews

Post-questionnaire analysis, four consenting instructors (1 male, 3 female) participated in 15-minute semi-structured interviews conducted in Chinese to triangulate survey data. Employing a three-phase protocol, sessions commenced with research purpose clarification and ethical procedures, followed by experience-driven questioning targeting: (a) IC conceptualization, (b) textbook cultural content ratios, (c) effective pedagogies, and (d) professional development needs. Interviews concluded with participant verification of interpretation accuracy and opportunity for supplementary input. Audio recordings underwent verbatim transcription with professional English translation.

Thematic interview foci were systematically organized:

1. IC Cognition (Items 1-3): Educators' operational definitions of intercultural competence and experiential influences on IC understanding.
2. Curricular Design (Items 4-5): Optimal distribution of cultural content types (local/international) and functional applications across proficiency levels.
3. Instructional Praxis (Item 6): Empirical validation of classroom-tested IC teaching strategies.
4. Professional Development (Items 7-9): Critical evaluation of in-service training adequacy regarding content relevance and practical applicability for IC enhancement.

This phased approach enabled granular examination of how teachers' experiential knowledge informs their (a) intercultural pedagogy decision-making, (b) textbook content evaluation criteria, and (c) perceived institutional support mechanisms. Methodological rigor was ensured through member-checking during closing phases and back-translation verification procedures.

5. Results and Discussion

Subsequent sections synthesize findings through systematic analysis of quantitative survey data and qualitative interview transcripts.

5.1. Research Question 1: What are Chinese college English Teachers' Perceptions of IC?

Intercultural awareness emerged as the predominant IC construct, identified by 69 participants (52%) as paramount (Figure 1). This construct is operationally defined as “the cognitive recognition of self-other cultural distinctiveness” (Chen & Starosta, 1998, p.30), encompassing critical analysis of sociocultural systems, normative behaviors, and value paradigms (Chen & Dai, 2014). As interviewee A put it:

“I see awareness as key to intercultural skills—you gotta notice differences first before engaging with them. Learned this through real-life mix-ups caused by different mindsets. Now I pay closer attention when interacting with Westerners.”

Participant A's intercultural awareness emerged through behavioral norm discrepancies in Western interactions, triggering cognitive awakening; while Participant B's narrative further revealed:

“Coming from the Qiang minority, my cultural awareness grew from misunderstandings with Han friends. Learning cross-cultural communication and interacting with foreigners deepened this. Now I teach diverse cultures to sharpen students' cultural radar.”

Participant B's intercultural awakening notably originated from intra-national encounters during professional engagements with China's ethnic minority communities. These formative experiences, subsequently enriched through transformative cross-cultural interactions with friends, catalyzed the systematic integration of IC into her language teaching.

The rationale for prioritizing awareness as a core element of intercultural competence (IC) can be summarized as follows: Cultural awareness serves as the foundational step to spark students' intrinsic motivation for acquiring intercultural knowledge and skills. By recognizing cultural differences, learners become more inclined to actively engage with related content while simultaneously guiding educators' pedagogical approaches and classroom practices.

Knowledge was ranked the second essential component. Survey responses indicate that most teachers conceptualize “knowledge” as encompassing both English language proficiency and multifaceted cultural literacy, including native, target, and global cultural contexts. Many college English instructors emphasized that comprehensive cultural knowledge forms the basis for developing practical intercultural skills, which they believe significantly reduces misunderstandings in cross-cultural interactions. This perspective aligns with one interviewee's explanation that systematic cultural understanding enables learners to contextualize communication patterns and social norms, thereby enhancing intercultural adaptability. Teachers particularly stressed the interdependence between knowledge acquisition and skill development, noting that cultural literacy without practical application remains incomplete, while intercultural skills divorced from substantive knowledge risk becoming superficial. The prioritization of knowledge reflects educators' belief in establishing cognitive frameworks before expecting behavioral competence in intercultural situations. However, some respondents cautioned against overemphasizing factual knowledge at the expense of critical cultural reflection, advocating for a balanced approach that integrates awareness, knowledge, and skills development.

Curiously, attitude ranked lowest among IC components. While teachers deemed it crucial (“attitude is everything”), many associated it primarily with students, not themselves. Interviewee C stated:

“Attitude matters in developing students' intercultural communication, but it's beyond our teachers' control. Engaged students actively learn; others respond only to exam incentives.”

Interviewee B added that:

“Grammar-heavy English teaching kills students' interest. My class drowns in test-prep basics—no time for cultural stuff they don't see as daily-life useful anyway.”

China's teacher-centered, exam-focused systems led educators to rank attitude lowest, as prior comments highlight.

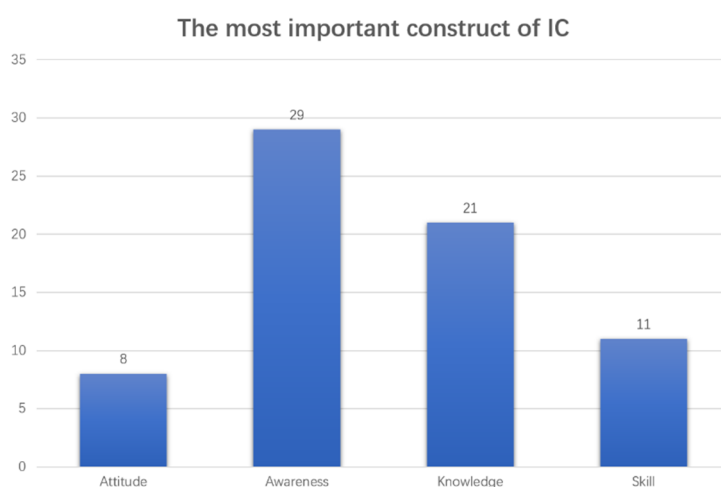


Figure 1. The most important construct of IC

5.2. Research Question 2: How can College English Teacher Improve Students' IC in Teaching?

Survey data revealed comparable priorities in cultural

content for enhancing students' intercultural competence across both cultural contexts. Values & attitudes (23% in Anglo-American and Chinese cultures) ranked highest, followed by culture & symbols (17% Chinese vs 16% Anglo-American), language & communication (15% both), and everyday life (12% Chinese vs 19% Anglo-American).

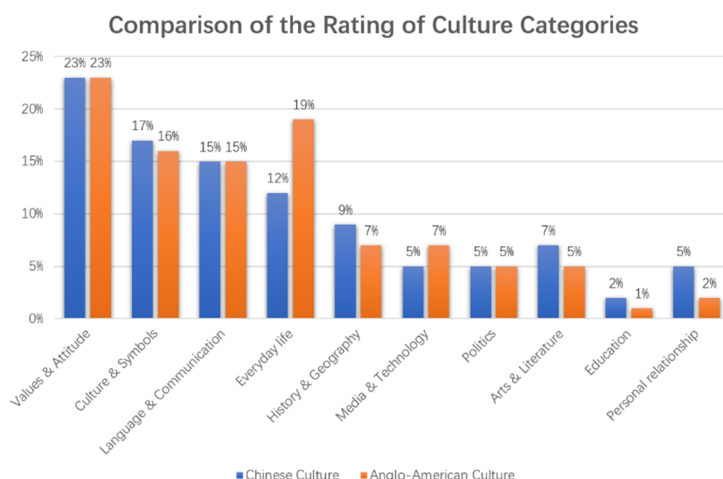


Figure 2. Comparison of the rating of culture categories

Survey results indicated that participants widely recognized cultural values as pivotal for enhancing intercultural awareness among college English learners. However, interviews uncovered a politically influenced rationale behind these preferences. Multiple teachers referenced China's national "Ideological and Political Theories Teaching in All Courses" initiative—a policy first piloted in Shanghai and later nationwide—that mandates integrating socialist core values, patriotism, and internationalism into all disciplines to "cultivate" student consciousness. While framed as fostering holistic education, critics argue this model prioritizes ideological alignment with the ruling party's doctrines, subtly shaping both pedagogical content and educators' priorities. The emphasis on cultural values in survey responses thus reflects not only pedagogical considerations but also institutional compliance with state-driven educational reforms, blurring the line between intercultural education and political socialization. Interviewee D explained the training as follows:

"This semester, our school had experts train us on blending ideological-political content into courses—basically, we're supposed to sneak in "values lessons" every class. Problem is,

the training only pushed Chinese perspectives. But in my English classes, I tweak it: when teaching a unit on "Relationships," I compared how Chinese parents often foster dependency vs. American families emphasizing independence. I use textbook topics to slip in Anglo-American values too, like discussing cultural reasons behind different parenting styles. It's my way of balancing the official "China-first" vibe with actual intercultural awareness. Students dig the comparisons—way more relatable than forced patriotism lectures."

The interviewee D further raised concerns that textbooks' overly favorable depictions of Western societies might weaken students' cultural identification with Chinese heritage.

"Students frequently assume American life is near-perfect aside from gun violence, even questioning reports of U.S. urban poverty. Such biases likely originate from elementary/middle school English textbooks' overwhelmingly positive depictions of Anglo-American culture. Additionally, with few English teachers having visited Western countries, educators lack real-world insights to counterbalance these sanitized narratives, making it challenging to present nuanced views of Western societal realities in class."

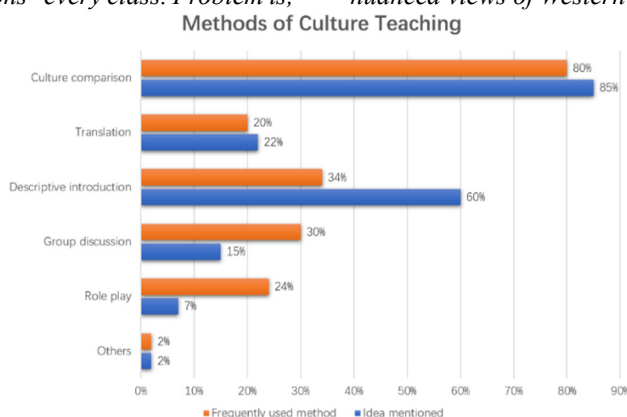


Figure 3. Methods of culture teaching

While teachers generally prioritize instructional methods, they deem effective, a gap exists between perceived and applied strategies for fostering IC. Surveys show culture comparison was the most frequently used method (80%), aligning with its perceived value. However, contradictions emerged: 60% employed descriptive cultural introductions despite only 34% considering them effective, suggesting practical constraints or misaligned priorities may limit adoption of optimal IC-building approaches.

Despite recognizing that interactive methods like group discussions and role-playing more effectively develop IC, many teachers default to less impactful descriptive lectures. Interviews revealed this disconnect stems from practical constraints: time pressures push educators toward familiar, quick-fix lecturing rather than time-consuming active learning. Structural barriers compound the issue—college English courses often prioritize language drills over cultural exploration, while heavy workloads leave little room for

pedagogical experimentation. One teacher highlighted systemic resistance, recounting student pushback when attempting student-led critical discussions on cultural topics, underscoring the challenges of shifting entrenched teaching norms even when their limitations are acknowledged.

5.3. Research Question 3: Do Teachers Feel Confident in Teaching to Develop Students' IC?

Notably, none of the participants claimed full confidence in integrating cultural instruction into college English courses. While roughly half respondents of 69 reported being “confident” or “moderately confident” in their ability, the remaining 50% explicitly admitted to having no confidence whatsoever—a stark divide reflecting systemic challenges in balancing language and cultural pedagogy.

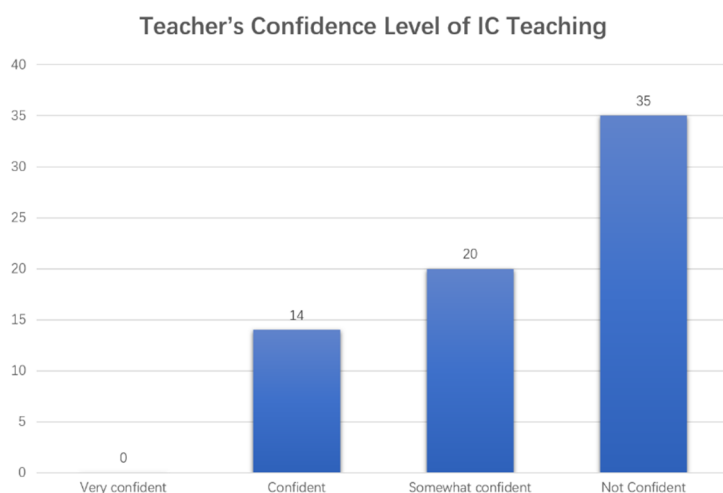


Figure 4. Teacher's confidence level of IC teaching

Analysis using Pearson's correlation revealed that college English instructors' confidence in cultural integration negatively correlates with teaching experience ($r = -.21$, $p < .05$) but positively links to self-assessed education level ($r = .33$, $p < .01$). This suggests educational attainment outweighs experiential factors in predicting confidence, potentially due to enhanced cultural coursework and international exposure. Although most instructors hold MA degrees, growing numbers pursue PhDs abroad, particularly in English-speaking nations, which may strengthen cultural pedagogy competencies. The findings imply advanced academic training fosters greater instructional confidence than classroom experience alone, highlighting the role of specialized graduate education in addressing cultural teaching challenges.

Government policies mandate integrating IC cultivation into college English instruction, requiring cultural integration in classrooms. However, surveys reveal significant implementation challenges: 39% of instructors (27/69 participants) cited insufficient cultural knowledge as their primary barrier, followed by 36% (25) lacking effective pedagogical strategies, 17% (12) noting absent curricular requirements for cultural content, and 4% (3) identifying student disengagement. Despite national emphasis on IC development, nearly two-thirds of educators' report competency gaps in either content mastery or instructional methods. The data highlights systemic issues in teacher

preparation, with over 75% of challenges stemming from insufficient training rather than external factors. These findings underscore the urgency for enhanced professional development programs and curriculum reforms to align classroom practices with policy objectives. The remaining 4% (3 teachers) identified four key obstacles: inadequate textbook cultural content, students' limited English proficiency, restricted instructional time, and learners' insufficient intercultural awareness and cultural knowledge base. These concerns highlight systemic gaps in curriculum design and student preparedness, underscoring the multifaceted challenges educators face in aligning practical classroom realities with broader intercultural teaching objectives.

The interviewee C demonstrates that educators' self-perceived cultural knowledge gaps (Nguyen et al., 2016) and curricular constraints constitute significant barriers to developing students' intercultural competence.

“While recognizing the importance of developing students' intercultural skills, I struggle with limited cultural knowledge. I only grasp basic Chinese and Anglo-American cultures, avoiding complex topics like politics and arts due to language barriers. Other cultures remain largely unfamiliar. Currently, college English prioritizes language skills (reading/listening) for CET4/6 exams, with no mandated cultural teaching. My priority is completing textbook content first – I barely have time for unit assignments, let alone cultural discussions.

Systemic focus on standardized testing leaves little room for intercultural training, creating a gap between policy goals and classroom realities. Teachers need both curricular

support and targeted cultural upskilling to effectively nurture students' cross-cultural adaptability.”

Distribution of Teachers' Challenges to Culture Instruction

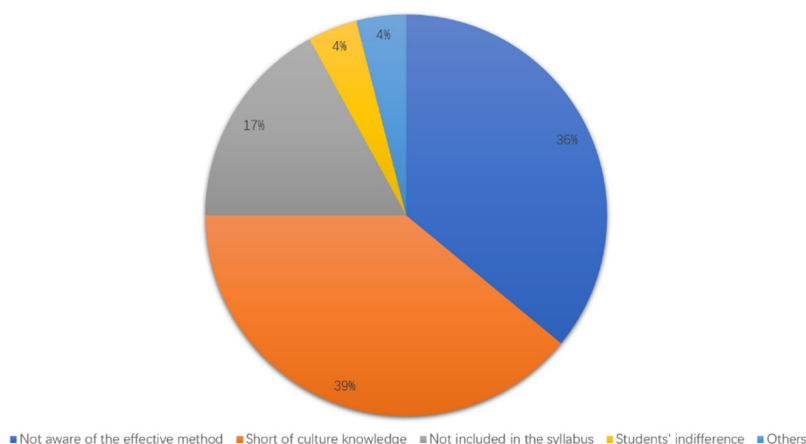


Figure 5. Distribution of teacher's challenges to culture instruction

6. Conclusion

This finding underscores the need to prioritize pedagogical approaches centered on Chinese college English instructor capabilities rather than other matters affect IC teaching.

To identify practical needs in classroom instruction, surveys and interviews with Chinese college English teachers revealed critical tensions between cultural and linguistic pedagogy. Key findings included primary challenges in cultural instruction and multifaceted influences on teaching practices. Analysis showed teachers' limited capacity for integrating culture stems not from isolated issues but from interconnected systemic, curricular, and competency-related barriers. The data underscores the necessity for holistic solutions addressing both instructional skill development and institutional support frameworks.

The study identified two critical gaps in cultural instruction: the disconnect between policy mandates and classroom implementation, alongside insufficient professional development despite teachers' demand for cultural knowledge enhancement. Findings revealed that 79% of challenges stem from educators limited cultural expertise and pedagogical skills, significantly eroding their confidence. Structural barriers such as time constraints and inadequate teaching materials further hindered effective integration. Notably, only 26% of participants (18/69) had received relevant in-service training—a stark deficiency given their experience. This underscores systemic gaps in ongoing teacher support. Addressing these issues necessitates expanding structured professional development through workshops and collaborative symposiums, where educators can engage with experts and peers to exchange strategies, refine methodologies, and deepen cultural competency. Prioritizing such initiatives would bridge policy-practice divides, equipping teachers to balance language proficiency goals with intercultural competence development, thereby aligning classroom realities with institutional objectives.

Acknowledgments

This paper is a phased achievement of the Nanchong Social

Science Research “14th Five-Year Plan” 2025 Project “NC25B046”: A Study on Intercultural Competence of College English Teachers - Case Study of X University.

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