

Unpacking the relationship between english proficiency and intercultural communicative competence: Contributions to sustainable higher education

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Abstract: This study explored the relationship between Chinese graduate students' English language proficiency (ELP) and intercultural communicative competence (ICC). With the acceleration of globalization, an increasing number of Chinese students choose to study abroad, making it crucial to enhance their intercultural communication ability and language skills. However, China's exam-oriented education system to some extent limits students' holistic development and poses challenges for them in intercultural exchange. A quantitative survey method was employed, collecting questionnaire data from 249 Chinese English-major graduate students to analyze the relationship between their English ability and intercultural competence. The results indicated a certain positive correlation between English proficiency and intercultural competence but also pointed to the need for further unpacking of complexity and influencing factors. Future research with more robust methodology is still warranted to provide deeper insights into the linkage between the two constructs in the Chinese graduate context.

Keywords: English language proficiency (ELP); intercultural communicative competence (ICC); Chinese graduate students; globalization; sustainable education

1. Introduction

As Spitzberg (2000) noted, barriers between cultures are breaking down as globalization increases intercultural contact and mobility worldwide. The communication between different cultures is growing significantly. This trend is evident in higher education as well. Foreign countries have increasingly become popular destinations for Chinese students to seek quality international education experiences (Kang et al., 2019). On top of that, institutions abroad also employ wide-ranging internationalization strategies to recruit more international students and faculty, establish overseas branch campuses, and foster cross-border research collaborations (Maringe et al., 2013). Such strategies aim to resolve global challenges by welcoming diverse perspectives that internationalization brings. Studying abroad provides Chinese students beneficial opportunities to integrate with other nationalities, build confidence, and gain valuable global perspectives (Lillyman and Bennett, 2014). However, the transition also presents adaptation challenges. For Chinese international students especially, issues with English proficiency, culture shock, social and psychological adjustment, and academics persist as prominent obstacles (Malakloulunthu and Selan, 2011). Even after years of English learning and attaining requisite entrance exam scores, differences in language systems and culture pose sizable barriers to their English academic communication in host countries (Yassin et al., 2020). Without adequately developing English and intercultural skills, Chinese

students risk poorer academic performance and well-being (Zhai and Razali, 2022). As Sarwari and Abdul Wahad (2018) found, intercultural communication competence appears able to mitigate such cross-cultural challenges faced during sociocultural transitions abroad. Developing multifaceted competence encompassing language mastery (Dou, et al., 2024; He et al., 2024; Huang, et al., 2024), cultural knowledge, flexible attitudes and adaptive behaviors is integral for international students' success (Zhai and Razali, 2022). Higher education plays an important role in better equipping all students with such competencies through immersive opportunities, targeted intercultural coursework, support systems, and customized language development (Meng et al., 2024; Zhai and Razali, 2022). Doing so takes on rising significance as global mobility and interconnectivity grow substantially in the modern world (Spitzberg, 2000). Therefore, under this background, this study aims to figure out the relationship between English proficiency and intercultural communication competence, and further provide some suggestions on how to enhance Chinese students' intercultural communication and mitigate cross-cultural challenges.

2. Literature review

2.1. Sustainability of higher education

English language education in China faces increasing challenges to prepare graduates for global interactions in today's interconnected world (Hussain et al., 2022). College students are expected to demonstrate strong English skills in listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation upon entering the job market. However, despite studying English for over 10 years, many lack confidence and competence in intercultural communication using English when interacting with other cultures. While achieving great language proficiency, their ability to communicate cross-culturally remains limited. This mismatch between language skills and intercultural competence poses ongoing problems as China's global ties expand. As a result, developing intercultural communication competence (ICC) has become a primary objective in teaching English as a foreign language in China. The rise in focus on ICC stems from both China's growing international and intercultural engagement, as well as less than satisfactory displayed English communication abilities of Chinese graduates interacting with other English speakers.

The goal of enhancing ICC reflects the imperative for Chinese students to communicate effectively across cultures aligned with China's expanding global connections (Qin, 2024). Looking ahead, China must continue exploring robust ways to better equip students with intercultural communication skills through foreign language education. Study abroad programs, immersion experiences, international collaboration and interactive digital learning tools all hold promise for more deeply fostering global perspectives and cultural dexterity. With cross-border ties sure to rise further, strengthening ICC remains imperative for smooth intercultural exchanges using English in China's expanding international arena. Various efforts have been made in China to strengthen college students' intercultural communication competence (ICC) and better equip them for rapidly growing international business and cultural exchange needs.

At the national policy level, the Ministry of Education introduced reforms in 2000 with the National Syllabus for English Majors (NSEM). Significantly, the NSEM teaching principles marked the first-time instructors were directed to prioritize developing students' ICC. This syllabus revision represented increasing government recognition of the importance of intercultural skills for China's future engaged global role.

ICC refers to the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to communicate effectively across cultural differences (Sarwari and Abdul Wahad, 2018). It involves understanding how cultural norms shape daily interactions between individuals from various backgrounds (Nadeem et al., 2017). Key aspects of ICC include abilities to initiate interactions, express oneself, understand others' perspectives, as well as language proficiency, communication skills, and logical/mental acuity. ICC has been conceptualized in various ways. Generally, it is viewed as behavioral competence and success in a given context (Spitzberg, 2000). Effectively encoding and decoding meaning requires aligning how symbols, words, and behaviors are interpreted with one's interaction partner (Beamer, 1992). Redmond and Bunyi (1993) defined ICC as including communication effectiveness, adaptation, social integration, language skills, cultural knowledge, and social perspective taking.

Several studies have contributed to understanding ICC and its development. Wiseman et al. (1989) examined relationships between ICC dimensions, cultural knowledge, and cross-cultural attitudes in Japan and the U.S. Liddicoat (2019) critiqued past limitations and proposed a broader, pluralistic, and socially just view of cultures in the field. Zimmermann (1995) focused on religiosity's impact on Malaysian international students' ICC, developing a culture-general model more suited to that context. Redmond and Bunyi (1993) explored how ICC components relate to international students' stress experiences and coping at a U.S. university, finding adaptation and social factors most impactful.

Research has demonstrated how English proficiency levels significantly influence psychological well-being for individuals living abroad (Alharbi and Smith, 2018; Zhang et al., 2012). Discrimination also mediates relationships between low proficiency and stress (Zhang et al., 2012). Given these findings, understanding the connection between English skills and ICC competence could offer meaningful insights for supporting international students' social integration and wellness (Zhai and Razali, 2022).

As globalization increases interconnection and mobility, developing ICC and language abilities grows increasingly important for Chinese and other international students pursuing education abroad in culturally diverse settings. But past research on intercultural dynamics among students has focused primarily on Western contexts, highlighting the need for studies from pluralistic perspectives within Asian contexts as well (Sarwari and Abdul Wahad, 2016).

2.2. Globalization of Chinese higher education

English language proficiency (ELP) encompasses abilities for proper performance and use of an acquired language (Sarwari and Abdul Wahad, 2018).

It plays an important role in today's globalized world. However, China's exam-oriented education system has some limitations. Studies have shown the negative washback effects of high-stakes tests on students' learning behaviors, mental health, and the development of comprehensive abilities (Li and Gu, 2023; Zhan and Andrews, 2013). The overwhelming focus on exams has led to homogenized teaching and strategic learning aimed solely at test scores (Cairns, 2021). Anxiety, especially exam anxiety also arises and hinders learning (Huang, et al., 2024; Lenski et al., 2024). Intercultural communication competence, an increasingly vital skill, receives insufficient support. Lim and Griffith (2016) found Chinese students lack intercultural sensitivity due to an exam-centered education. Wickline et al. (2024) called for experiential learning opportunities like international exchanges to nurture cultural awareness. Given the fast growth of globalization, students must learn to communicate cross-culturally with confidence. Educational authorities should reconsider how exams can better serve students' long-term proficiency development instead of short-term scores (Thompson, 2017; Yang et al., 2024). Multifaceted reforms integrating qualitative, ongoing assessments are warranted to equip youth for successful intercultural engagements. Overall, rebalancing China's test-oriented system with a comprehensive, student-centered approach seems paramount for the future.

Both ELP and ICC can aid university students in conducting fruitful interactions with peers from different cultures, which are essential for daily life and research in today's multicultural campuses with international students. Strong communication competence and English skills are also key requirements for employment in multicultural organizations, which is common in Asia. A number of studies have evaluated the link between language proficiency levels and communication ability. Previous research identified ELP as important for meaningful interactions, university activities, and academic achievement among students (Haneda, 2008; Sarwari, and Abdul Wahab, 2016; Yu et al., 2023). Strong communication skills and linguistic abilities are necessary to achieve communication goals according to Enright (2011). Determining the ELP-ICC connection thus provides valuable insights for preparing students for multicultural careers.

While past work highlights close relationships between these factors, most studies have been situated within Western contexts according to Western norms of communication. Therefore, Sarwari and Abdul Wahad (2018) aimed to examine the ELP-ICC relationship specifically among Arab students in Malaysia's multicultural environment. The researchers found higher ELP encouraged and enabled daily interactions with other international students, helping to further improve ELP (Sarwari and Abdul Wahad, 2016). Participants with higher English test scores also scored higher on measures of ICC. In some cases, low ELP levels and personal characteristics negatively impacted interactions between Arab and other students.

These findings provide novel perspectives on the ELP-ICC relationship for Arab students in an Asian university setting that differs from prior Western-focused research. However, additional areas warrant deeper exploration. For instance, quantitative studies could offer rich insights into how exactly interactions aid ELP and ICC development. Research is also needed on pedagogical practices effectively supporting the language-communication linkage in diverse international learning contexts.

Understanding the interplay between ELP and ICC remains important as global mobility rises. Institutions must consider ways to strengthen both competencies through experiential learning, mentoring support networks, and collaborative programs fostering intercultural exchange. Doing so can help prepare all students for intercultural careers navigating multilingual professional environments worldwide. Based on the above literature, this study aims to study the relationship between ELP and ICC among Chinese graduate students majoring in English.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The study employed a quantitative survey research design to investigate the relationships between English proficiency and intercultural communication competence among Chinese graduate students. Convenience sampling was used to recruit participants, targeting postgraduate students majoring in English across multiple universities in China. An online questionnaire was distributed via major communication platforms in April 2024. It contained items measuring self-rated English proficiency as well as intercultural communication competence. Respondents provided demographic information and signed an electronic informed consent before participation.

A total of 253 responses were received initially. After filtering out incomplete surveys, the final sample comprised 249 valid responses. Participants ranged in age from 21–28 years old, with a mean age of 24.71 years. The sample included 27 males and 222 females. While the gender ratio was notably skewed, in line with trends in English and foreign language studies (Xu et al., 2022), preliminary data screening using SPSS 27.0.1.0 did not reveal any significant differences between males and females on factors being examined. Thus, the sample was deemed homogeneous with regards to potential influence of gender. To gain deeper contextual understanding, the study also collected information on participants' international experience, cultural interests, and familiarity with Western cultures. This provided qualitative background to aid interpretation of quantitative findings. Adopting a survey approach allowed for data collection from a geographically dispersed sample to explore relationships within a real-world setting. Use of online distribution facilitated participation across multiple universities. The study design and sampling yielded a valid dataset to address the research objectives regarding English skills and intercultural adaptability among Chinese master's students.

3.2. Instruments

The Intercultural Communication Scale (ICS) comprises 24 items and utilizes a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Developed by Chen and Starosta (2000), this questionnaire evaluates intercultural communication skills (ICS) across five dimensions: interaction engagement, interaction confidence, respect for cultural differences, interaction enjoyment, and interaction attentiveness.

Interaction Engagement: Measures the commitment of individuals to sustain interactions with others.

Interaction Confidence: Assesses individuals' confidence and self-efficacy in interacting with members of other cultures.

Respect for Cultural Differences: Indicates the open-mindedness of individuals when encountering different cultures.

Interaction Enjoyment: Reflects individuals' interest and enjoyment in intercultural communication.

Interaction Attentiveness: Concerns how individuals react to their interlocutors during intercultural interactions (Chen and Starosta, 2000).

Regarding the scale's validity, Chen and Starosta (2000) estimated the correlation of the ICS with other similar scales, reporting significant relationships. To ensure the reliability of the ICS, its internal consistency was measured using Cronbach's Alpha, yielding a reliability index of 0.78 (Badrkoochi, 2018).

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Descriptive analysis

This study conducted linear regression analysis to examine the relationship between English proficiency (ELP) and intercultural communication competence (ICC) by treating them as independent and dependent variables respectively.

The regression results showed that the prediction equation for the relationship between ELP and ICC is:

$$ELP = 77.855 - 1.044 \times ICC$$

Table 1. Regression results.

Variables	β	t	P
(Constant)	77.855	3.569	0
ICC	-1.044	-0.213	0.831

As shown in **Table 1**, the constant term is 77.855 and the regression coefficient of ICC is -1.044. This indicates that as the ICC score increases, the ELP score would show a relative decreasing trend.

However, the impact of ICC on ELP was not significant ($\beta = -1.044$, $t = -0.213$, $p = 0.831 > 0.05$). This means that ICC did not have statistically predictive power on English proficiency within this study sample. This shows that most sample individuals performed fairly stably and averaged on the different dimensions of ICC. But there was also a certain degree of variation.

Overall, this study did not confirm through linear regression analysis that ICC had significant predictive effects on ELP. This may be related to factors such as limited sample size or individual characteristic differences within the sample. Further research with an expanded sample size and mixed methods design is needed to deeply explore the complex relationship between the two variables.

The relationship between English language proficiency (ELP) and intercultural communication competence (ICC) has been extensively explored in various contexts.

Research indicates that higher ELP facilitates better ICC, enabling individuals to engage more effectively in intercultural interactions. This is primarily because proficient language skills reduce communication barriers, allowing for clearer and more nuanced exchanges. Studies among international students in Malaysia highlight that those with higher ELP tend to exhibit greater ICC, including better interaction engagement, confidence, and respect for cultural differences. The role of ELP in enhancing ICC is also linked to improved academic performance and social integration, as it enables students to access a broader range of educational resources and participate more fully in academic and social settings. Although literature research has found that higher English proficiency often facilitates students' success in intercultural communication, such as participation in activities and adaptation to new cultures. For example, Badrkoohi (2018) discussed how improved ELP enhances ICC, noting that proficient language skills reduce communication barriers, thereby fostering more effective and engaging intercultural communication. Sarwari and Abdul Wahab (2018) conducted a study on Arab students in Malaysia, revealing a strong correlation between ELP and ICC. Higher ELP was associated with greater intercultural sensitivity and competence, which facilitated better academic and social integration. These studies consistently highlight that higher ELP contributes to improved ICC. Proficient language skills enable individuals to engage more effectively in intercultural interactions by reducing communication barriers and enhancing understanding. This relationship is crucial for international students, as it impacts their academic performance and social integration. Our results were inconsistent with past studies, so a larger sample size and mixed methods are needed to further explore factors influencing the relationship between the two variables. Both English proficiency and intercultural competence are complex individual abilities. There may be longitudinal or moderating factors affecting the outcomes, such as cultural background and learning motivation. Future research could examine these potential influence variables to provide a more comprehensive system for explaining the relationship pattern. It should also consider conducting in-depth interviews to understand the role of individual differences in this relationship.

4.2. Challenges ahead

As the world becomes increasingly globalized, effective intercultural communication has become a crucial skill. International education provides opportunities for learners to develop intercultural competence (ICC) through interaction with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. However, language barriers pose challenges, particularly for students attending English-medium institutions in a non-native country. Zhai and Razali (2022) examines research on the link between English proficiency and ICC among international students. Numerous studies have highlighted the important role of English skills for international students at English-speaking universities. Tests like TOEFL and IELTS are commonly used to assess English levels prior to studying abroad. However, Chinese students often experience issues with language anxiety, culture shock, academic adjustment and communication due to differences in language systems and culture, despite passing entrance exams (Zhai and Razali, 2022). Sarwari and Abdul Wahab (2016) also note

language challenges faced by students from various countries interacting in a multicultural academic setting.

Even with years of English learning, inadequate proficiency leads to ongoing communication barriers impacting overseas achievement and well-being (Zhai and Razali, 2022). Zhang et al.'s (2012) research found Asian Americans faced more severe social consequences of limited English proficiency compared to other factors. Spoken fluency and appropriate application of skills across daily interactions are important in educational and social contexts.

Several studies have explored the link between English proficiency levels and ICC among international students. Hismanoglu (2011) investigated relationships between proficiency, target culture experience, formal instruction and ICC development, finding higher ability, overseas living and education positively associated with stronger competence. Similarly, Sarwari and Abdul Wahab (2016) examined this relationship among postgraduates at a Malaysian university, adding a non-Western perspective. Both identify language skills as salient for participation and success in intercultural exchanges (Haneda, 2008; Martin-Beltrán, 2010).

However, the present study found no significant relationship between English proficiency and ICC among Chinese graduate English majors, inconsistent with prior literature. This may relate to limitations such as small sample size not reflecting overall patterns or individual differences impacting results. More investigation is warranted to better understand influencing factors in various contexts. The key findings can be summarized in the following **Figure 1**:

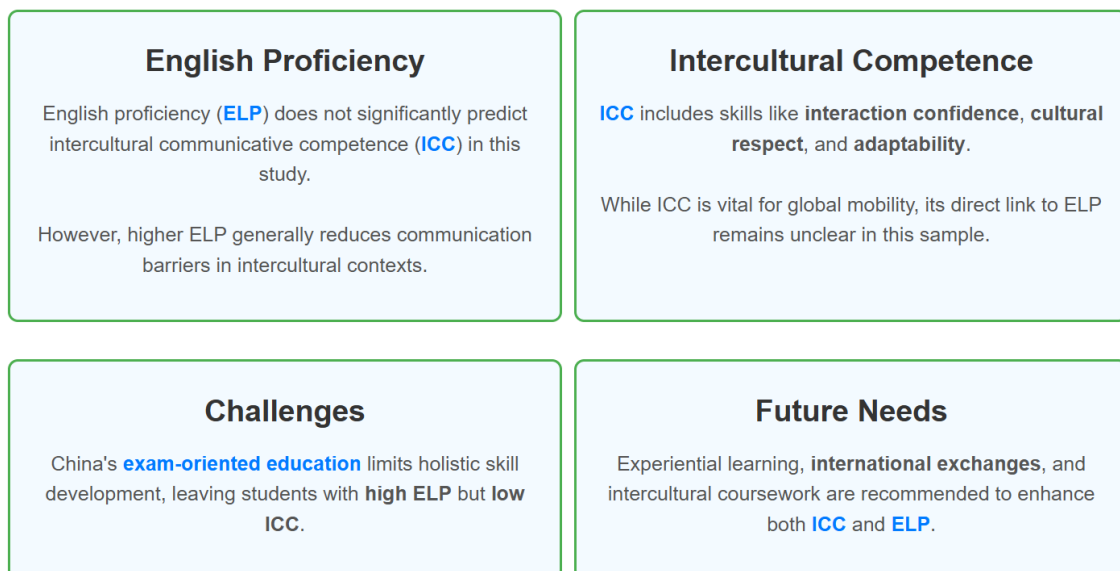


Figure 1. Summary of key findings.

The sample size of 249 participants, while adequate for exploratory research, may restrict the generalizability of the results, and a larger, more diverse sample could yield more robust conclusions. Additionally, the gender distribution was significantly skewed, with 222 female participants and only 27 male participants, which may limit the applicability of the findings to male participants despite reflecting broader trends in English and foreign language studies. Furthermore, the reliance on self-reported

data for both English proficiency and intercultural communicative competence introduces potential biases, such as overestimation or underestimation of abilities. Future research should aim for a more balanced sample and incorporate objective measures of English proficiency, such as standardized tests, alongside observational methods or performance-based assessments to enhance the reliability and validity of the findings.

4.3. Developing intercultural communicative competence

Several scholars emphasize the importance of directly teaching ICC as a goal of English education, moving beyond integrating culture within language courses. Teaching should focus on critical thinking to minimize stereotyping and encourage cultural exchange for mutual understanding. Evaluation must consider contextual and dynamic factors rather than rigid rules. Instruction should start with similarities to reduce exaggeration of differences. Four stages are outlined: initial contact, competition, accommodation and integration (Sarwari and Abdul Wahab, 2018), and daily participation in intergroup interactions helps reduce prejudice and conflict.

A skilled communicator demonstrates effectiveness through accomplishing goals appropriately based on cultural and relational norms. When defining intercultural competence, contextual considerations are paramount since expected communication depends heavily on cultural variables (Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017). Language teachers (Wang et al., 2024; Xu and Wang, 2024) should also foster ICC awareness within language instruction and in studying abroad context. Moreover, research on classroom factors' impacts on ICC development and how they interact is limited (Tran and Vong, 2021). Clear ICC definitions, valid assessments and diverse data collection are needed. Broadly surveying stereotyping's influence could promote international exchange and understanding. How competence relates to observable performance also requires clarification.

While this study did not find a statistically significant relationship between ELP and ICC, it is important to consider potential moderating factors that may influence this relationship. For instance, cultural background could play a pivotal role in shaping intercultural competence. Students with greater familiarity with Western cultures or prior intercultural exposure may find it easier to navigate cultural differences, potentially enhancing their ICC independent of their ELP level. Similarly, individual motivation—both intrinsic and extrinsic—may significantly impact the effectiveness of language learning and its translation into intercultural skills (Dörnyei, 2003). Highly motivated learners may engage more actively in intercultural interactions, thereby developing stronger ICC regardless of their ELP scores. Future research should consider these factors by incorporating measures of cultural exposure and motivation into the study design to better understand their moderating effects on the ELP-ICC relationship.

In summary, most research supports the positive relationship between higher English proficiency and stronger intercultural communicative competence. However, the present study reported non-significant findings, indicating the need for more investigation considering contextual and individual factors. Successful intercultural interactions hinge on competence as well as language skills. Educators must foster

both language development and ICC awareness through integrated, experience-rich approaches. Future scholarship should continue exploring this complex relationship across settings. Future studies could further examine longitudinal or mediating influence variables on the proficiency-competence link proposed by Zhang et al. (2012), rather than solely language ability. In-depth qualitative interviews may provide insight into ICC and individual factors. Replicating inquiries within diverse cultural contexts can yield new perspectives (Sarwari and Abdul Wahab, 2016). Mixed methods combining quantitative and qualitative data would offer comprehensive understanding.

4.4. Contribution to sustainable higher education

How this research benefits the continuity of higher education in China is through the investigation of the link between proficiency in English and intercultural communication competence (ICC). Given the fact that China's higher education system is very rapidly being opened up to the world, it becomes important to understand the relationship between these two skills if students are to be equipped with tools that would enable them to navigate the best opportunities in the future. Traditionally, the English education that has been offered in China has relied heavily on the examination and assessment of students' progress concerning passing the examinations. However, at the same time, students ought to possess skills that allow them to engage and interact with people from different cultures to be able to perform optimally. This research addresses the issue where the current educational practices are inadequate, in that, it seeks a more holistic view of teaching which seeks to combine multicultural principles with education to produce successful students.

It further conveys that active participation in hands-on activities in addition to traditional classroom practice offers language courses alongside activities aimed at enhancing the intercultural sensitivity of the learners like study abroad and cultural exchange programs. This will allow students through means of these developments to interact with global cultures and embrace the needed perspectives to become successful in the current situation of the world where a global village prevails. All these strategies help explain why most universities in China try to incorporate such activities into their programs; students are educated not only about languages but also how to deal with people who speak different languages. This promotes practices that are friendly to maintaining Education by enhancing the ability of graduates to work in diverse cultural environments and academic settings.

In addition, it focuses on students' mental health, which is especially important for those who cannot quickly get used to changing social environments and speech impediments (Lou et al., 2024), automatic speech recognition technologies have gained popularity in second language learning. In particular, this study deals with the problems of students who face cultural and language shock. Students in a foreign country often find themselves in a position where language becomes a problem. This may leave them anxious and cut off from social activity which may be detrimental to both their studies and mental wellness. It is posited that the relationship between ELP and ICC depicts a need for growth in the level of skill and interventions for the skills may be helpful to the well-being of students. In this contemporary era of globalization

and global dimensions, such support provided to students not only equips them with the necessary academic skills but also provides the needed psychosocial support, which promotes individual development as well as the objectives of higher education. The highlights and implications can be summarized into the following **Figure 2**:

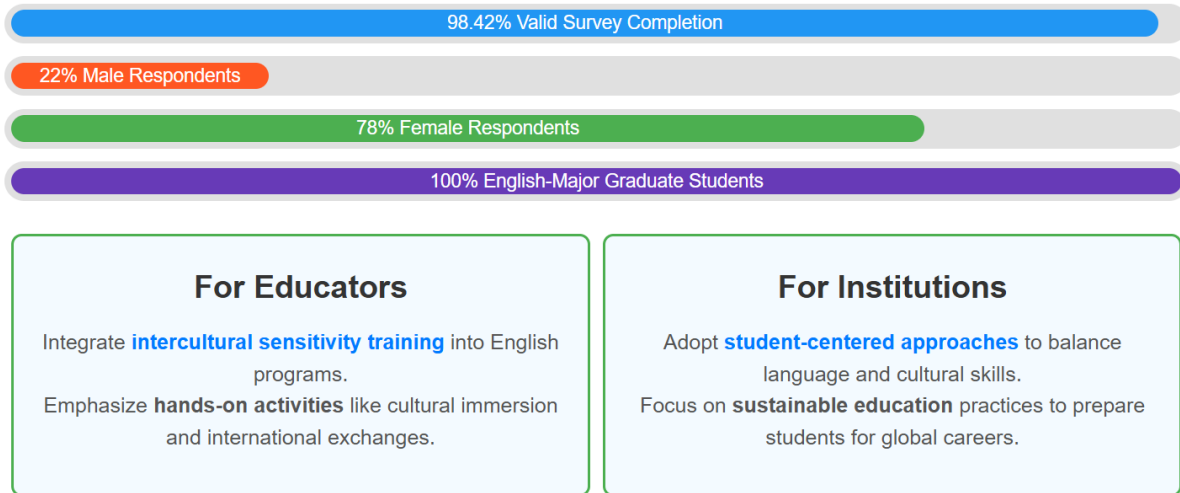


Figure 2. Statistical highlights and implications.

5. Conclusion

This study delved into the relationship between Chinese graduate students' English language proficiency (ELP) and intercultural communicative competence (ICC), emphasizing the importance of enhancing these abilities in the context of globalization. It noted that China's exam-oriented education system has limitations in cultivating students' holistic abilities, resulting in many students lacking confidence and competence in actual communication. Therefore, educational institutions should re-examine their pedagogical approaches with a focus on nurturing students' intercultural awareness and practical skills. It is recommended to introduce more experiential learning opportunities, international exchange programs and intercultural courses to strengthen students' language proficiency and intercultural communicative competence.

However, the present study reported non-significant findings, indicating the need for more investigation considering contextual and individual factors. Future research should consider adopting mixed methods incorporating both quantitative and qualitative data to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between English ability and intercultural communicative competence. The research should also pay attention to how students of different cultural backgrounds adapt and develop in multicultural environments to provide more targeted suggestions for educational policy formulation and implementation. Through these efforts, educational institutions will be better able to support students' international development and help them succeed in globalized professional contexts.

The findings suggest that educational programs should not only focus on ELP, but should pay more attention to the improvement of ICC because it serves as a critical foundation for successful intercultural communication and international cooperation. Lastly, future research should continue to explore this relationship across different

cultural contexts and educational settings to develop more comprehensive strategies for fostering both ELP and ICC among learners.

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