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Understanding the Effect of Professional Learning Community on EFL Teachers' Intercultural Teaching Competence

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Abstract

Professional learning community (PLC) has been a generally recognized model for promoting teacher development, including EFL teachers' writing assessment literacy, intercultural teaching competence, digital literacy, and so on. However, research on whether the changes in beliefs of teachers engaging in a PLC affect their teaching competence is relatively scant. To fill this gap, the present study investigated the extent to which a PLC with intercultural components changed EFL teachers' beliefs in intercultural teaching, which in turn affected their intercultural teaching competence. In doing so, adopting an exploratory sequential method, qualitative data from teachers and a questionnaire from students were collected and analyzed through NVIVO 12 and SPSS 26.0. The data analyses revealed significant changes in the EFL teachers' knowledge construction, motivation inspired by peer interaction, and reflection on intercultural learning and teaching practices. These changes led to transformations in their beliefs and practices concerning intercultural instruction, although individual orientations were observed in their pedagogical approaches. Furthermore, the study's findings were supported by evidence of corresponding changes in students' learning outcomes in the development of intercultural competence. The study highlights the significance of PLCs in enhancing EFL teachers' intercultural teaching competence and their professional development.

Keywords: professional learning community, teacher development, intercultural teaching competence, EFL teachers; exploratory sequential design, intercultural teaching

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1. Introduction

In the current multilingual and multicultural context, enhancing EFL teachers' academic literacy has become a salient component (Fu & Wang, 2022), such as intercultural teaching competence (Wang & Hemchua, 2022), EFL teachers' writing assessment literacy (Wang et al., 2023a) and digital literacy (Derakhshan & Fathi, 2023; Gao et al., 2022; Guo et al., 2023; Shen et al., 2022; Wang, 2023; Wang et al., 2023b; Wang et al., 2023c). Under such an umbrella, the integration of intercultural competence into foreign language teaching has been highlighted in recent decades in China since *National guidelines for College English curriculum*, a key document of China's higher education reforms, is featured with the emphasis on development of intercultural competence. The changes in foreign language teaching and learning pose challenges for teacher development. A language teacher is expected to become 'a teacher of culture' and assume new responsibilities, such as focusing on developing learners' skills, attitudes, and critical awareness of the target language culture rather than simply imparting knowledge (Derakhshan & Shakki, 2019). In other words, the new responsibility of a foreign language teacher is to develop students' competency by encouraging them to relate and compare values, attitudes and skills reflected in the language of various cultures (Sercu, 2006; Shakki, 2022b; Shakki et al., 2021; Zhang, 2007).

In Chinese EFL context, learners' intercultural competence cannot be advanced without the proper guidance and innovation from interculturally competent teachers, as English class is the primary venue for fostering students' intercultural competence through language teaching. In the context of a current rise in studies on intercultural instruction, extensive research has demonstrated various models to navigate language teachers' intercultural teaching (Biebricher et al., 2019; Dimitrov & Haque, 2016; Liddicoat, 2004; Peng et al., 2020), or articulate an intercultural approach to language teaching (Chang & Zhao, 2012; Liao & Li, 2017; Liao & Li, 2020; Liddicoat, 2002). However, even if there is a high consensus on the significance of intercultural teaching in language education, scant guidance is provided for language teachers in the areas without adequate intercultural contacts to enhance their beliefs and perceptions regarding intercultural competence

components and conduct effective intercultural instruction.

Professional learning communities (PLCs) have been seen as feasible and sustainable approach to teacher development, which provide an environment for long-term collaboration with colleagues, with a focus on topics related to the daily teaching practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Guo & Xu, 2015; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Stoll et al., 2006; van Es, 2012; Wen, 2017; Zhi & Wang, 2023). This continuous engagement in shared work promotes changes to teachers' practice and challenges them to evaluate and modify their personal beliefs about teaching and learning (Pareja & Margalef, 2013; Shakki, 2022a), which will be directed to student needs and achievement (Dufour et al., 2010; Hord & Hirsh, 2008; Wang, 2016). While language teachers' beliefs and perceptions of the value of shared work in PLCs are both well-founded and relevant (Guo & Xu, 2016; Wen & Ren, 2011; Zhang & Wen, 2020), it is essential, particularly in the EFL context, to comprehend the outcomes of the transformations of beliefs into teaching practice and student learning. However, there have been few long-term and in-depth investigations into whether the changes in the beliefs and perceptions of teachers engaging in learning communities concentrating on learning and teaching intercultural competence over time lead to expected teaching practice and student learning achievement.

Based on a plethora of qualitative and quantitative data from teacher participants and their students, the present study has sought to achieve the following two research aims: (1) to investigate the changes in the beliefs of EFL teachers engaging in a locally school-based professional learning community; (2) to ascertain the extent to which such changes can impact the teachers' intercultural teaching competence. This study is to contribute to a deeper understanding of intercultural teaching and teacher development in three major ways. First, it is expected to provide accessible and applicable reference for teachers' intercultural competence development, as well as empirical evidence for the support of a PLC to teachers' ITC; Second, it records a long-term and in-depth description of the process of language teachers' engaging in intercultural instruction, highlighting the transformation of EFL teachers' beliefs into practice; Last, by assessing student learning outcomes and expectations, this study sheds light on the teaching dilemma

and problems in designing and implementing intercultural teaching, as well as English teachers' perceptions on pedagogical practice.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Intercultural Competence

Intercultural competence has been the core content of foreign language teaching in China since it became the objective of college English curricula. Researchers and pedagogical staff have stressed the relevance of being able to communicate effectively with individuals from diverse cultures. Despite a body of different conceptualizations in defining intercultural competence, there is a lack of consensus upon its definition (Deardorff, 2011). By identifying the components of intercultural competence for assessment, Deardorff (2004) framed it as “the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one’s intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes” (p. 194). Bennett and Bennett (2004) defined the term by highlighting the effectiveness and appropriateness of the intercultural situation as “the ability to communicate effectively in cross-cultural situations and to relate appropriately in a variety of cultural contexts” (p. 149). Similarly, Fantini (2009) briefly described it as a set of skills required to communicate effectively and appropriately with those who are linguistically and culturally distinct from oneself.

Among all the conceptualizations or models, Byram’s model enjoyed high popularity for its being pedagogical, and specifically applicable in formal language learning context (Echcharfy, 2019; Liao & Li, 2020). It emphasized five *saviors*, i.e., knowledge of others and self, skills to interpret and relate, skills to discover and/or interact, attitudes of curiosity and openness and critical cultural awareness (Byram, 1997), which has become the general framework for Chinese English teaching (Zhang, 2007). The applicability of these conceptions to teaching practice and student learning outcomes has been the subject of few empirical investigations (Byram & Feng, 2004). This study is grounded on the components of intercultural competence proposed by Byram (1997) and Deardorff (2006) to assist English

teachers in evaluating their teaching practices and students' learning effectiveness.

2.2 Studies on Intercultural Teaching Competence

The expanding globalization in the contemporary world addresses the great need for intercultural understanding and competence in all spheres, including educational institutions, which are responsible for fostering the development of knowledgeable and interculturally competent speakers for this ever-changing context (Wang & Kulich, 2015; Wang et al., 2022a; Wang et al., 2022b; Wang & Derakhshan, 2023; Wang et al., 2023c).

The development of students' intercultural competence demands a core of teachers and educators who not only possess this sensitivity and skills themselves but are also capable of transmitting them to students in their care (Cushner & Mahon, 2009). Despite the growing recognition of the need for interculturally competent teachers, many teachers still feel unprepared for intercultural teaching design and implementation. Insufficient guidance has been provided to educators on how an intercultural approach to language learning might be operationalized in instruction, and assessed fairly and reliably with explicit criteria (Byram & Risager, 1999). This necessitates approaches or training programs that better prepare language teachers for the challenges of promoting students' acquisition of intercultural competence and language learning, particularly in Chinese EFL context where both teachers and students lack adequate intercultural contacts. Furthermore, teachers are expected to reflect upon their initial beliefs and perceptions regarding culture-language teaching, as well as how to enhance their intercultural teaching competence (ITC).

Given the importance of teacher being interculturally competent in language classrooms, the model or the key components of ITC must be identified to guide teachers in reflecting upon their identity in language teaching practice and the ways in which they integrate intercultural competence into their curriculum teaching (Deardorff, 2009). Despite the abundance of intercultural studies, there is a paucity of literature on how to build teachers' ITC, with the exception of those focusing on teacher training abroad (Alfaro & Quedada, 2014; Huang et al., 2019; Vogt, 2016).

Studying and receiving proper training abroad seems to be an effective approach to enhancing teachers' intercultural competence. Alfaro and Quedada (2010) argued that teachers who leave their home culture to teach abroad in a different cultural context tend to become more open and culturally minded, which, in turn, might be advantageous for the task of promoting their students' intercultural competence—an especially apparent goal of language teachers. However, Byram et al. (2002, p.11) argued that “the outsider's understanding of another country's identities and cultures is just as valid as that of an insider”, so the teacher does not need to have experience or be an expert on the country. In other words, the teacher should design a series of activities to enable learners to discuss and draw conclusions from their own experiences of the target culture, and provide authentic information to encourage comparative analysis with learners' own culture. It seems that overseas training programs are desirable approaches, but not the essential prerequisite for boosting language teachers' ITC, which requires more extensive preparation and iterative pedagogical practice in classrooms.

Based on Byram's (1997) conceptual definition of intercultural competence and an international study that investigated the aspects of intercultural teachers' profiles, Sercu (2006) specified knowledge, skills and attitudes that a foreign language teacher should possess to teach intercultural competence. This provided insights for defining the objectives and developing a teaching plan for the acquisition of foreign language and intercultural competence. Her study revealed that teachers' beliefs about instruction impact their understanding of certain teaching situations and teaching practice. Therefore, providing teachers with professional training to advance their beliefs could make them more compatible with teaching intercultural competence, since it is “a precondition of rising to constantly changing new challenges of the contemporary world” (Pajak-Wazna, 2013).

According to Dimitrov & Haque (2016), the majority of university teachers feel unprepared for the task of intercultural teaching since they have not received any formal training in intercultural learning or inclusive education. In light of prior research, Dimitrov et al. (2014) suggested an ITC model that includes 20 key instructor competencies and teaching strategies, which are organized into three

categories: foundational competencies, facilitation skills, and curriculum design competencies. This model provides a reflective tool that identifies concrete teaching strategies for teachers to readily implement in their classrooms through critical reflection and feedback. It also includes suggestions for incorporating the approach into faculty development programs and learning communities. The model aims to transform teachers of diverse disciplines in multicultural classrooms into interculturally competent facilitators. Although it demonstrates the effectiveness and operability of ITC components in the international educational contexts, this model needs to be modified appropriately and validated in other specific contexts, especially the Chinese language teaching context, where teachers and students share many linguistic, cultural, and even social similarities.

In response to the current demands of social and institutional development in China, Zhang (2007) formulated a framework for foreign language teachers' ITC. She emphasized that, besides possessing intercultural competence themselves, teachers should also advance their teaching concepts and techniques throughout time. They should not only fully comprehend the relevance and fundamental meanings of intercultural foreign language teaching, but improve their teaching abilities. They need to acquire the abilities necessary to implement intercultural foreign language teaching by formulating syllabi, designing teaching activities, adopting teaching methods, selecting appropriate teaching materials, and evaluating teaching and learning outcomes. She proposed that teachers' ITC be evaluated in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes, but be promoted with systematic and planned intervention and training. This result lends support to Sercu's findings (2006).

Given abundant related studies, there has been a broad consensus on ITC components and the necessity of ITC training. Yet, the majority of research on the training of language teachers' ITC is conceptual, with few research work published on the approaches of study or overseas training programs. There is a dearth of empirical studies on how training helps teachers improve their intercultural competence and intercultural teaching competence, as well as how teachers' beliefs and perceptions change in practice while actively participating in intercultural

training programs, experiencing multiple cultures, collaborating with like-minded peers, improving research skills and developing reflective skills (Wen, 2017; Zhang & Wen, 2020; Zheng, 2019).

2.3 Professional Learning Community: An Approach to Language Teachers' ITC

Due to the striking differences between schools in the strength or the professional learning communities, and even within the same districts in levels of collegiality, faculty innovativeness, and learning opportunities (McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993), it is necessary to explore approaches that are suitable for the actual situations of intercultural education in individual school. Establishing a school-based professional learning community to enhance teachers' theoretical knowledge and practical skills is the most influential at present. The literature review on PLCs provided important sources for the present study (DuFour, 2004; Hord, 1997; Little, 2002; Stoll et al., 2006; Vescio et al., 2008).

There is widespread international consensus on the conception of PLCs, which suggests a group of people sharing, critically examining their practice in a reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented way, and operating as a collective enterprise (King & Newmann, 2001). According to Newmann (1996) and Hord (1997), PLCs have five essential characteristics: shared values and vision, collective responsibility for student learning, reflective dialogue, deprivatizing practice and collaboration, which are intertwined and operating together on the potential that the teacher participants can mutually enhance each other's learning as well as students' learning (Shulman, 1997; Stoll et al., 2006). Collaborative inquiry within a learning community not only enhances teachers' knowledge base, but also has a substantial effect on their classroom practices (Andrews & Lewis, 2007).

Given the virtues of PLCs proposed in the existing studies, this study was grounded on a school-based professional learning community, working for enhancing teachers' ITC as well as student candidates' ability for Intercultural Competence Contest (ICC). ICC is a national foreign language contest designated to assess the efficacy of intercultural foreign language teaching by evaluating language

performance and intercultural competence. Based on the abundant research on intercultural competence assessment (Deardorff, 2009; Fantini, 2009; Sinicrope et al., 2007) and the basic conceptual framework of intercultural communicative competence, the evaluation index system of ICC contains 3 first-level indicators of knowledge, attitudes and skills, and 10 second-level indicators, like general knowledge of culture, knowledge of Chinese culture, knowledge of foreign culture; self-cognition, national identity, global vision, international understanding, cultural conflict management, and reflection and evaluation. These fully consider China's foreign language teaching and intercultural learning characteristics, combining with the objectives of cultivating foreign language discipline talents in the new period, so as to ensure the operability of evaluating intercultural competence in contest (see more information in Zhang et al., 2018). While training student candidates, teachers participating in the learning community collaboratively study the regulations and specifications about ICC, videos of previous contestants recorded in entry field, as well as the latest research on intercultural competence. They actively work together to address the issues about the preparation for the contest, and the challenges and difficulties from training and teaching practice, thereby increasing their opportunities to reflect intercultural teaching and training. The ultimate goal of this ICC learning community is to improve teacher participants' ITC so as to promote their students' intercultural learning outcomes.

However, whether the continuous collaborative learning, interaction, reflection in the ICC learning community could lead to both the enhancement of teachers' ITC and student accomplishment needs to be validated by various empirical data. Theoretically informed by the conceptions of intercultural competence and intercultural teaching competence formulated by previous researchers (Byram, 1997; Dimitrov & Haque, 2016; Sercu, 2006; Zhang, 2007), the present study aims to explore to what extent the ICC learning community changed Chinese English teachers' beliefs and perceptions about intercultural competence components, thereby impacting their implementation of intercultural teaching for the goal of students' outcomes. Under this overarching research question, three specific questions are generated:

RQ1: In what ways does the ICC learning community change the beliefs of EFL teachers in intercultural instruction?

RQ2: How do they implement their intercultural teaching with the planned intervention from the ICC learning community?

RQ3: How much variance in student learning outcomes can predict EFL teachers' growth in intercultural instruction?

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

As this study aims to explore the extent to which the ICC learning community can affect language teachers' intercultural teaching competence, it follows an exploratory sequential design with the qualitative data first collected from the sample teachers and then the quantitative data from their students (Teddlie & Tashakkori 2009, p.26), so as to subsequently synthesize the effect of the planned intervention of the ICC learning community on language teachers' ITC. Qualitative data are used to understand participants' beliefs and perceptions on intercultural competence, the processes of the intervention from the community, and the changes in participants during the first academic year, while the quantitative data from a student questionnaire are used to measure the effects of the intervention of the ICC learning community. This exploratory sequential research design is expected to "give a greater understanding of the topic or problem in question" (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) and to yield an overall picture and patterns of response (Cohen et al., 2018).

3.2 Participants and Context

This study was undertaken in a university in a third-tier city in China. Seven college English teachers of varying ages and educational and professional backgrounds comprise the participants. In addition, they were also the members of a school-based professional learning community with the shared goal of training student candidates for annual Intercultural Competence Competition (short for ICC). The

ICC learning community, which has run for about two academic years, provided the teacher participants with various targeted learning and training experiences, such as learning the specifications and regulations of ICC, previous excellent competition videos, related literature, and academic seminars on intercultural studies.

The seven participants represented the profile of intercultural teaching for non-English majors at this university, where non-English majors took up the majority of English learners. All the teacher participants demonstrated their consent and willingness to support the completion of the study.

The following table provides a more detailed overview of the participants (listed as T1-T7).

Table 1
Overview of Seven Participants

Teachers	Age	Research specialty	Academic degree	Year of teaching	Title	Experience outside China
T1	37	English education	Ph. D candidate	17	Senior lecturer	1 year of Chinese teacher In the USA
T2	28	Linguistics	MA	3	Novice teacher	1 year of studying In UK for Master degree
T3	41	Translation studies	MA	19	Senior lecturer	No
T4	38	English education	MA	17	Junior lecturer	No
T5	42	English education	Ph. D candidate	18	Senior lecturer	28-day visiting scholar in the USA
T6	42	Translation studies	Ph. D candidate	19	Senior lecturer	28-day visiting scholar in the USA
T7	40	Literature	MA	16	Senior lecturer	No

The students of the selected participants are also included in this study as a supplement data resource, who have received a specially-designed questionnaire after completing the first academic year's college English study, so as to additionally represent a general situation of intercultural instruction implemented by their teachers.

3.3 Data Collection

The data were collected by qualitative and quantitative methods. In order to meet the requirements of triangulation, multiple methods of data collecting were employed (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). The qualitative data were collected sequentially from teachers' reflective journals, semi-structured interviews, peer classroom observations and the documents of related learning and teaching materials. Reflective journals, gathered in nearly two academic years, provided more retrospective accounts about the teacher participants' understanding and perceptions of the regulations and components of ICC, which exerted implicit and explicit impact on their intercultural teaching and curriculum design.

In light of the initial reflective journals, semi-structured interviews were conducted at the end of each semester, so as to probe the participants' experience in the learning community and their respective teaching orientations in intercultural instruction. The questions of the interviews mainly included: (1) Which part of the ICC learning community do you think has contributed the most to your teaching? For example, the previous excellent contestants' videos, theoretical knowledge, research methodologies regarding intercultural studies, the exchange in members' interaction, the process of training students in designing intercultural cases, etc.? (2) In what ways do you think ICC assessment indicators are beneficial to your classroom teaching? Can you share some specific stories? (3) What components of ICC most inspire and facilitate your teaching, *sharing cultural stories, developing, presenting and analyzing cases of intercultural conflicts, interpreting renowned intercultural statements, or telling China stories*? Can you share your teaching approach in detail? To strengthen the validity of the findings, all interviews were transcribed into text and returned to the interviewees for member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 1992).

Peer class observations focus on not only the specific pedagogical approaches and activities or teaching orientations utilized in the intercultural instruction, but also the response of students to the incorporation of language with culture. These may further validate the teachers' understanding of intercultural competence and their implementation of intercultural language teaching with the planned

intervention from the ICC learning community.

Based on the specifications and components of ICC and ITC mentioned in the literature review (Deardorff, 2009, Dimitrov & Haque, 2016; Peng et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2018), the quantitative data from a questionnaire for participants' students are collected as additional evidence to report the students' experience and reaction to their teacher's implementation of intercultural instruction. The questionnaire contains 5 items about basic information and 21 items corresponding to students' outcomes of intercultural learning, 20 statements structured on 5-point Likert scale indicating the degree of agreement (1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree), and 1 item for any desirable suggestion for future intercultural learning.

Table 2 shows a summary of multiple data on methods, collection time and the details of the data.

Table 2
Summary of Database

Methods	Data collection time (February, 2021-July, 2022)	Data in detail
Reflective journals	February 20, 2021-June 10, 2022 (The period of learning and training); Ongoing	4-5 copies for each instructor (33 copies with total 20,899 Chinese characters in written texts)
Semi-structured interview	December 20, 2021-July 10, 2022; Ongoing	3 to 4 times for each instructor (audiotaped and transcribed); 22 interviews total (average about 40-70 minutes each by WeChat, QQ apps or in person)
Peer classroom observations	September, 10, 2021-April, 30, 2022 (Irregular observations according to each instructor's teaching time)	Field notes from different peers; Several audio clips in accordance with participants' consent
Documents	February, 2021-June, 2022; Ongoing	Previous excellent competition videos; Related literature and academic seminar videos for community learning; Course syllabi, teaching plans and other related teaching materials (PowerPoints, etc.)
Questionnaire for Participants' students	June 20-July 20, 2022	761 valid questionnaires (digital)

3.4 Data Analysis

As required by the research, an exploratory sequential design has been implemented in which one strand of the research or research approach determines the subsequent strand or approach and the major findings from all strands are then synthesized (Teddle & Tashakkori 2009).

The data at issue were analyzed iteratively through three phases, “where quantitative and qualitative data were sequential for the need to identify” the ways participants experience and view the world (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011, p. 10-11). In the first phase, content analysis (Patton, 2002) was adopted to clear and categorize the data from the reflective journals and the first two rounds of interview transcripts into prominent themes and tentative categories, with the coding process adhering to the constructs of ICC and the components of ITC in order to examine the teachers’ perception and reflection on intercultural competence and intercultural teaching. Based on the preliminary analysis, the second phase focused on the last round of interview transcripts and field notes of peer classroom observation along with various documents for the intention to explore and identify individual desirable pedagogical approaches, activities or teaching orientations employed in intercultural teaching and design. All these data in question were reviewed repeatedly throughout the research by which prominent themes and tentative categories were generated. The categories were developed directly in participants’ own language, concepts and retrospective description. The study really gained special insights by comparing and contrasting the experiences of each teacher who displayed certain orientations in cultural teaching.

The qualitative data must be triangulated to ensure the validity of qualitative findings. To be specific, the data from reflective journals and semi-structured interview were participants’ self-report regarding the changes in their beliefs and class observations are the report from peers concerning the transformed beliefs into practice. Thus, the last stage concentrated on the questionnaire data analyzed by SPSS 26.0 to probe students’ intercultural learning outcomes and experience, providing evidence for the changes brought about by the PLC to the participants. Table 3 shows the reliability of questionnaire with α value of 0.948, indicating high covariance, or strong internal consistency among items.

Table 3*The Assessment of Internal Consistency of Questionnaire Items*

	Knowledge	Attitudes	Skills	Total
Cronbach's α	0.855	0.898	0.907	0.948
N of Items	6	7	7	20
Valid N	761	761	761	761

4. Results

4.1 Changes in Teachers' Beliefs on Intercultural instruction from the PLC

To address the first research question, we found the most salient components in participants were the changes participants experience from the PLC. Table 4 shows that three major changes were discovered and generated, namely, knowledge construction developed from collaborative learning, motivation inspired by peer interaction, and reflection on learning and teaching practice. In fact, these three factors did not develop independently, but rather intersected and advanced together. They are listed separately here to demonstrated the plurality of factors that contribute to the changes of the participants from the impact of ICC learning community.

Table 4*Changes of Participants from the PLC*

Changes	Convictions of PLCs	Traits	Examples
Knowledge construction developed by collaborative learning	Knowledge constructing	Intercultural competence indicators; Cultural dimensions, Stereotype, ethnocentrism, Suspending judgment; Different research methods in literature; etc.	In designing intercultural teaching, these indicators appear to constantly remind me: how to guide students to perceive national culture correctly, how to develop their international vision and global awareness; how to develop students' independent learning skills through cultural theme inquiry. (T1)
Motivation inspired by	Peer interacting and learning	cooperation, interaction and	Learning and discussion in this community is highly conducive to my

Changes	Convictions of PLCs	Traits	Examples
peer interaction		sharing with peers; Peers' critical thinking; Peers' overseas experience; Different perspectives; etc.	exploration in this field, which is more rewarding than individual learning, and has many promoting effects on my profession or teaching (T2)
Reflection on intercultural learning and teaching practice	Reflective thinking	Critical view toward previous research; Not aware of; Barriers in understanding; etc.	Without community-based learning and communication, I fear I would never know where my blind spots in cultural teaching were. In addition, I often feel like 'narrow-minded', and did not know that such cultural dimensions could be used to illustrate cultural connotations and differences when I described some cultural events to students. (T3)

4.1.1 Knowledge Construction Developed by Collaborative Learning

All teacher participants reported after viewing the previous excellent team videos, they have changed their modes of thought from focusing on superficial cultural differences and phenomena to mining into the profound connotations of cultural events, and greatly influenced by the pattern of “presenting the case-analyzing cultural conflicts-solving the conflicts” as well.

“When I see videos or news about cultures on TV or Internet, my mindset adjusts immediately to ‘encountering cultural phenomena and differences - applying theories to analyze the causes - resolving problems and conflicts’, i.e., looking through superficial cultural phenomena and exploring the deeper cultural connotations, which will undoubtedly benefit my teaching.” (Reflective journals, T4 and T6)

Meanwhile, most teachers expressed that they were inspired by certain indicators shown in the figure of ICC evaluation system, like *cultural confidence, self-awareness, national identity, global perspective, conflict management, reflective evaluation*, etc., which have truly broadened their understanding of intercultural competence learning and teaching and explicitly guided them to design their intercultural teaching content and evaluate its effectiveness.

"I had been unclear what precise intercultural teaching objectives I could set for the cultural theme discussions and how to evaluate the teaching results. These evaluation indicators have provided me a clearer direction and more scientific guidance when setting teaching objectives and evaluating student learning outcomes." (Interview, T5)

Thus, it can be inferred that learning in community did help the teachers accumulate more knowledge in shared goals and approaches to problem solving, which is conducive and useful to their teaching (Tillema & van der Westhuizen, 2006, Zeller-mayer & Tabak 2006).

4.1.2 Motivation Inspired by Peer Interaction

The PLC really provided more chances for members to exchange their minds, identify their weaknesses, blind spots, and even errors, actively enrich and expand their own knowledge in intercultural field, foster their own understanding of intercultural instruction, and gain more insights into their pedagogical design. As evidenced by the data, most teachers regularly claimed that they were often enlightened by their peers' diverse perspectives when discussing research articles.

"As I learned new cultural theories from colleagues, such as The Onion Model of Culture, I discovered that collaborative learning and sharing made the process of team discussion and communication more beneficial and inspiring, compensating for my shallow understanding of certain intercultural theories when we read literature. Sharing experiences with community members can also prompt me to reflect and question." (Reflective journals, T1 and T2)

The learning community created a harmonious atmosphere of mutual trust, mutual support, mutual benefit and equality for the interaction among members, who constructed collectively professional knowledge through sharing, communicating, discussing and debating (Wen, 2017). It also laid a common ground for members to create a shared knowledge of interaction norms. They learned to listen carefully to each other's ideas, rather than focusing solely on their

own perspectives (Koellner-Clark & Borko, 2004). They were greatly motivated through exchanges and cooperation, and intentionally fostered professional development (Little, 2002).

4.1.3 Reflection on Intercultural Learning and Teaching Practices

The Learning community is grounded on the assumption that knowledge is situated in the day-to-day lived experiences of teachers and is best understood through critical reflection with others who share the same experience (Vescio et.al., 2008). According to the retrieved data, in light of the knowledge developed in collaborative learning and the motivation from other members in PLC, almost all participants reported that they have become more reflective than before, and that reflection on learning could help them better understand their teaching practice.

“I used to believe that cultural teaching is to teach some rituals, foods and festivals of English-speaking countries, as well as introduce cultural phenomena through short videos so that students might understand some cultural differences. In fact, I have never really led students to explore why these cultural phenomena are distinct from our own culture.” (Reflective journal, T6)

In the process of literature reading and discussing, they also showed doubt on the application of some influential intercultural models to Chinese teaching context.

“Various evaluation models of intercultural competence discussed in the literature are indeed enlightening for our teaching, but since our students and teachers have the same cultural background, some models do not appear to be appropriate for our cultural teaching context. On the basis of those scholars’ contributions, we must explore the most suitable approaches for our own intercultural teaching context.” (Reflective journal, T5)

In the whole process of community learning, the instructors gradually developed the habit of reflecting. With regards to the length, breadth and depth of the reflective journals, it was inferred that their reflective ability has been apparently improved.

4.2 Teaching Approaches in Implementing Intercultural Instruction

4.2.1 Orientations in Teaching Content

The research findings indicated a general accord on the integration of culture teaching with language teaching and the value of PLC shared practice, however there was an evident variance in the orientations and styles of teaching practice among the participants. Table 5 displays the individual orientations in designing and implementing intercultural teaching from three dimensions of cultural knowledge, skills and attitudes.

Table 5
Orientations in Intercultural Teaching Design

Teachers	Cultural knowledge		Skills	Attitudes	
	Inclination to culture input	Preference for cultural topics	Focus on different levels of skills		
T1	More national culture	Small-c & Big C	All	Prejudice, stereotypes, etc.	National identity, global perspective, etc.
T2	All	Small-c	Basic	Aware of stereotypes, etc.	Sense of identity and pride and in native culture, etc.
T3	All	Small-c	Basic	Sensitive to differences, etc.	Being critical of cultural events, etc.
T4	All	Small-c	Basic	Sensitive to differences, etc.	Learning to embrace cultural differences.
T5	More national culture	Small-c & Big C	All	Avoiding stereotyping, taking multiple perspectives, etc.	Being critical of cultural incidents, etc.
T6	All	Small-c	All	Sensitive to differences, taking multiple perspectives, etc.	Being open to cultural differences, etc.
T7	More national culture	Small-c & Big C	Basic	Taking multiple perspectives, etc.	Perspective-taking, cultural identity, etc.

With the regard to **culture dimension**, the participants exhibited different inclinations in culture teaching and cultural topic selection.

(1) **Inclination to culture input.** As can be seen in the table, since the textbook displayed more targeted language culture, the focal teachers intentionally placed special emphasis on national culture, especially in Chinese teaching context, believing that culture learning was not a one-way process.

“When I asked them to look for a corresponding story in Chinese history, I discovered that students actually knew less about Chinese culture than I thought.” (Interview, T2)

*“We have to create living situations for them to identify and recognize the norms, values and perceptions of different cultures so as to expand and deepen their **saviors** of their national culture.” (Interview, T5)*

It was also emphasized in the studies of Sercu (2006) and Echcharfy (2019) that, only when students understood and valued their own culture, could they develop awareness to cultural differences, avoid stereotyping and become an interculturally competent agents over time.

(2) **Preference for cultural topics.** As for the cultural topics reflected in the participants' lecture plans, T2, T3, T4 and T6 devoted more time to Small-c culture, like customs, celebrations, rituals, perceptions, norms and values, social relationships, beliefs, etc., which were closely related to students' daily lives and easy for them to manage in class (Irimia, 2012). T1, T5 and T7, on the other hand, believed that language teachers should provide students with comprehensive and authentic cultural facts, and that Big-C culture, such as politics, economics, religion, education, etc., albeit abstract and complex, could be presented in pictures or videos that were more accessible and understandable. In addition, apart from the textbook unit topics, the culture-themed content and learning materials were often decided by the teacher's personal interests and experiences, which were the influential aspects

of teacher characteristics on teaching behavior. (Okken et al., 2022).

“I like reading history, esp. Chinese history. So I’d like to guide the students to discuss the historical topics, like how westerners viewed Chinese in the past compared to the present.” (Interview, T7)

The dimensions of skills, awareness and attitudes are regularly defined as teaching objectives, blended into cultural knowledge learning to promote students’ intercultural competence acquisition.

(3) **Focus on different levels of skills.** Intercultural skills are mainly classified into two types of skills: skills of interpreting and relating and skills of discovery and interaction (Byram, 1997), which have formed the cornerstone for intercultural English teaching in China (Zhang, 2007, Liao & Li, 2020). However, these two types of skills were not fostered equally in pedagogical practice. Due to students’ lower language proficiency, T2, T3, T4 and T7 noted that they often guided students to *understand*, *relate* or at most *compare* certain cultural events in the learning materials, but less frequently to *analyze*, *reflect* or *solve* the problems that they might encounter in intercultural communication. As explained by T2, *“I primarily ask them to share stories, or mainly tell stories since students may have varying language levels and limited ability.”* In contrast, T1, T5 and T6 reported they often encouraged students to *analyze* and *explain* similarities and differences between cultures, adopted various perspectives to *examine* cultural incidents, and actively searched for effective solutions to cultural conflicts in the learning materials, since the students enrolled in their curriculum were typically liberal arts majors with much higher language proficiency than science majors. These findings revealed that the acquisition of skills of intercultural competence needs to be developed step by step. Therefore, the intercultural teacher should adapt the learning material to the learner’ language level (Byram et al., 2002; Echcharfy, 2019).

(4) **Cultivation of attitudes.** All the participants agreed that different cultural

topics may elicit varying degrees of awareness and attitude. *Being sensitive to cultural differences* and *avoiding stereotypes* were two themes most frequently mentioned in interviews and teaching documents.

“Being aware of cultural differences could help students reinforce the understanding of their national culture and gradually achieve cultural identity.”
(Interview, T2)

National identity and *sense of pride in national culture* are the themes frequently mentioned by T1 and T2 due to their special affections they experienced when abroad. Meanwhile, *perspective-taking* and *multiple perspectives* emphasized by T5, T6 and T7 are also essential elements of intercultural competence indicators. These themes suggested that the teachers valued and consciously utilized intercultural competence evaluation indicators, which served as a useful tool for intercultural teaching design and evaluation.

4.2.2 Orientations in Specific Activities

Learners' intercultural competences can be strengthened with effective and accessible activities (Byram, 1997). In intercultural teaching, teachers are expected to engage students in various activities and tasks that may affect their attitudes and perceptions of foreign peoples, cultures or countries, and help them develop the awareness of intercultural norms, principles and values. (Sercu, 2006)

According to *College English Teachers' Intercultural Teaching Competence Scale* (Shi & Fan, 2016), there were six activities frequently adopted by Chinese language teachers in class, namely, presentation/speech (without PPTs), pair or group discussions, role play, multimedia show/presentation with PPTs, teacher-led interpretation, and debate. As illustrated in Table 6, the participants showed slightly different preferences to certain class activities. The following are the activities adopted by the selected participants.

Table 6
Specific Activities Adopted by Different Teachers

Activities	Multimedia show	Teacher-led interpretation	Presentation /speech	Pair/ Group	Role play	Debate
T1	always	often	sometimes	sometimes	sometimes	sometimes
T2	often	sometimes	sometimes	sometimes	often	occasionally
T3	often	sometimes	occasionally	often	often	occasionally
T4	often	sometimes	sometimes	sometimes	never	never
T5	often	often	occasionally	often	occasionally	never
T6	often	sometimes	occasionally	sometimes	never	occasionally
T7	sometimes	often	sometimes	often	occasionally	occasionally

Various factors, such as learners' language level, learning materials, teaching time, and teacher's personal preferences may limit the utilization of class activity types. As is shown in Table 6, multimedia show, teacher-led interpretation and pair or group work are the most frequently used activities, while presentation/speech and debate are rarely, or even never used. Role play was often employed by T2 and T3, but never by T5 and T6.

Most participants believed that some activities like speech, role play and debate required higher level of language proficiency, and meanwhile, multimedia show and teacher-led interpretation could help deliver more information in limited class time. In addition, the activities of pair or group work could provide more opportunities for students to interact with one another since interaction would allow learners to "learn from each other, share different perspectives, and share the wealth of cultural knowledge they bring to class" (Arkoudis et al., 2013), which was also a crucial value promoted by the community.

Some activities were reciprocal and logically related to each other. For example, teacher-led interpretation in this lecture was often based on pair or group work in the previous lecture, for the teacher sought to evaluate the students' performance

and provide more additional information on this topic.

“Once, we discussed the topic of honesty/integrity. I asked students to find a traditional Chinese story that corresponds to the one in the textbook. One student gave an interesting story titled ‘Zeng zi Slaughters a Pig’ but without comparing or analyzing the two different cultural stories. So, I need supply more information to enable them to probe the connotations of different cultural values and norms as well as the conception of integrity. This naturally exercised their critical thinking skill.” (Interview, T2)

4.2.3 Critical Reflections in Learning and Teaching

Reflections on teaching were often recorded in teaching documents, mainly focusing on the efficacy of teaching and learning as well as the possible causes for that. Knowledge, skills and attitudes are often seen as the key dimensions for language teachers to evaluate and reflect upon their pedagogical beliefs and practice (Sercu, 2006; Zhang, 2007, p. 282).

Almost all the participants admitted that their knowledge concerning intercultural teaching must be constantly expanded and updated. *“We have to obtain sufficient cultural knowledge so as to figure out what problems students may have and how they deal with them,”* stated T6.

Interculturally competent teachers are not just pedagogical designers or organizers, but also mediators and facilitators of different cultures.

“Considering students’ proficiency level, we should be able to employ appropriate and effective teaching strategies and select appropriate yet challenging learning materials to facilitate the acquisition of students intercultural competence combined with language skills.” (Interview, T5)

Intercultural teaching needs to keep up with the times, so we need to constantly update the teaching concepts, and strive to implement the integration of culture-language teaching. “The development of intercultural teaching competence is a lifelong process of discovery in the same way that the development of intercultural

competence is a lifetime of continuous learning (Deardoff, 2006; Bennett, 2009)."

4.3 Students' Learning Outcomes in Survey

The teaching effectiveness ultimately needs to be measured by their students' learning outcomes. In this study, although participants' self-report revealed the growth of their teaching competence, the evaluation of this improvement must be reflected by students' learning outcomes brought by this change.

Based on a survey of the participants' students, this part was to collect evidence of the impact of the PLC work on students' accomplishment by presenting a quantitative record of changes in students' outcomes and experience.

Table 7

Descriptive Statistics of Students' Learning Outcomes of Intercultural Competence

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
Knowledge	761	2.00	5.00	3.95	.664	.441
Attitudes	761	1.86	5.00	3.90	.675	.456
Skills	761	1.14	5.00	3.84	.697	.486
Valid N (listwise)	761					

Table 7 provided a statistical description about students' intercultural learning experience in three dimensions of knowledge ($M = 3.95$, $SD = .664$), awareness ($M = 3.90$, $SD = .675$), and skills ($M = 3.84$, $SD = .697$), which means that the majority of students agreed or strongly agreed on their learning outcomes in intercultural teaching. Among the 20 items concerning intercultural knowledge (6), awareness (7), and skills (7), item 2 "My teacher often introduce the differences between national culture and western culture in class," item 15 "The intercultural knowledge taught by the teacher is helpful in understanding the cultural differences encountered in my major study," and item 16 "I've learned strategies to avoid stereotyping when viewing different cultural events." gained the highest frequencies of agreement: 99.16% in knowledge, 98.68% in skill, and 99.04% in awareness respectively.

As to the open question (item 21), more than 40% students reported that they

were generally satisfied with teachers' design of intercultural teaching, and 27% students address their expectations about intercultural learning, like hoping teachers introduce more about other cultures, increase interaction and discussion with classmates on certain cultural topics, enrich class activities, and provide chance to learn from foreign teachers, and more importantly hoping what they have learned can be closely related to their life and future jobs. The rest students did not give any answer to this question. This may be attributed to their little awareness or insufficient input of intercultural learning. Therefore, the teachers' perceptions and expectations may not align with students' experience in intercultural development.

5. Discussion

The data presented in this study indicated that the ICC learning community had a profound impact on changing the beliefs of EFL teachers regarding intercultural instruction, which contributed to their improvement of ITC.

Participating in the ICC learning community facilitated ongoing learning, interaction, and discussion among teachers. This collaborative environment enabled the teachers to construct new knowledge and gain a systematic understanding of intercultural competence models, evaluation indicators, and intercultural competence development specifications. They also gained access to abundant intercultural cases and approaches to cultural conflicts, which served as a practical guide for integrating cultural teaching into language acquisition. These transformative experiences turned the participants into knowledge-productive learners (Tillema & van der Westhuizen, 2006; Zellermayer & Tabak, 2006; Guo & Xu, 2016; Wen, 2017; Zhang & Wen, 2020).

Engaging in the ICC learning community provided ample opportunities for the teachers to interact with each other, leading to self-growth. They exchanged ideas, perspectives, and insights when discussing cultural incidents, enriching their understanding of intercultural theories and broadening their perspectives. The active questioning and consulting by other partners motivated them to study more actively in their everyday work and expand their vision in the field of intercultural

competence (Skerrett, 2010; Van Es, 2012). Furthermore, the ICC learning community encouraged self-reflection among the teachers, allowing them to reflect on their national and target language culture, teaching practices, prejudices, and possible solutions. This process of self-reflection, both individually and collaboratively, enabled them to question and challenge their teaching beliefs and practices, ultimately enhancing their reflective ability (Pareja & Margalef, 2013).

As the data analyses indicated, active engagement in a PLC brought about the changes in teachers' beliefs in intercultural competence, which explicitly exerted an impact on their implementation of intercultural teaching. They gained guidance from the specifications and evaluation indicators of intercultural competence, leading to the improved selection of teaching materials and setting of teaching objectives related to intercultural dimensions. This transformation led them to consciously adopt the role of intercultural competence facilitators or mediators between different cultures in their classrooms (Bennett, 2009; Deardorff, 2006; Zheng, 2019).

Meanwhile, the focal teachers actively integrated their new beliefs and perceptions into their pedagogical curricula. They displayed individual orientations in designing and facilitating students' intercultural competence development. Some centered on supplementing Chinese cultural knowledge, while others prioritized specific cultural topics based on their preferences and experience. Moreover, they emphasized developing students' basic intercultural skills, such as understanding, relating, and comparing, to cater to varying language proficiency levels. Pair work or group discussions were favored to reduce learners' anxiety and foster shared knowledge through perspective-taking (Koellner-Clark & Borko, 2004). However, beliefs may result in different orientations in practice due to teachers' individual traits. In intercultural instruction, especially in Chinese EFL context, the reconciliation between teachers' beliefs and behaviors is a long and complicated process since they are not only the teachers to facilitate students' intercultural competence development, but the learners to promote themselves through continuous education (Bennett, 2009; Deardorff, 2006; Zheng, 2019).

The quantitative data in this study revealed that students enrolled in the teachers' curricula experienced enhanced intercultural knowledge, awareness, and skills, indicating the effectiveness of the teachers' engagement in the ICC learning community with intercultural competence components. However, it was noted that students' experiences in intercultural learning may not always align with their teachers' perceptions and expectations. Therefore, the teachers need to adapt and refine their intercultural teaching based on students' learning experiences and expectations to improve student learning outcomes (Dimitrov & Haque, 2016). The variance in student learning outcomes serves as an important indicator of the growth and effectiveness of EFL teachers' intercultural instruction resulting from their engagement in the ICC learning community.

6. Conclusion

Under the conceptual framework of PLCs, the present study was designed to investigate the extent to which the changes that EFL teachers have gained from a school-based learning community impacted their ITC. The findings confirmed that the changes in participants' beliefs on intercultural competence components exerted explicit and positive influence on the process of implementing intercultural teaching, but with individual orientations in pedagogical design. The finding that students' learning experience may not be in line with the teachers' perceptions and expectations, sheds light on the principle that teachers should continuously adjust and refine the design and delivery of intercultural teaching by bearing in mind students' learning experiences and expectations for intercultural learning.

Overall, the implications of this study and suggestions for next steps in the efforts to document the impact of the PLC on teachers and learners are included. First, it provided a theoretical and practical reference for institutions to explore the training path for improving teachers' ITC and professional development. Second, the current data highlight the significance of the conviction that the teachers' beliefs and perceptions regarding intercultural competence and intercultural teaching should be updated and aligned with pedagogical practice and students' learning

experience. Third, the method of exploratory sequential design adopted in this study enriched earlier research methods concerning intercultural teaching and teachers.

However, the current study suffers its own limitations. To begin with, considering its time limit, cases and factors in the participants, internal and external, future studies can employ multidimensional research methods to uncover the complexity of EFL teachers' ITC, such as in-depth case studies, longitudinal studies (both qualitative and quantitative), Q-methodology, Time-series methods, etc. (Derakhshan et al., 2023) to examine their teaching practice and student achievement, which will create a powerful picture of impact of the community work on teachers and students. Moreover, a well-recognized intercultural competence level test is required to holistically and accurately evaluate students' intercultural learning outcomes, especially in Chinese EFL context. Such test may provide teachers with more guidance in selecting suitable teaching materials and setting explicit objectives for the integration of language acquisition and intercultural competence development.

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