

# Comparative Analysis and Pedagogical Implications of the ‘SFLEP’ Intercultural Competence Contest and Intercultural Competence Test in Chinese ELT

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## Abstract

China has been actively working to bolster its global communication and dialogue efforts. As part of these efforts, a considerable number of graduates take part in the “SFLEP” Cup National College Students’ Intercultural Competence Contest (SNICC) and Intercultural Competence Test (ICT). This paper offers a foundational overview of these important tests in the context of intercultural English language teaching in China. Namely, we explore and analyze both tests, identify their similarities and differences, and offer suggestions for improvements and pedagogical implications. Through comparative analysis, we found that both the SNICC and ICT offer valuable frameworks for assessing intercultural competence, though they differ in their approach and implementation. SNICC emphasizes practical, team-based tasks, while ICT focuses on individual assessments through a structured, machine-based format. Implications for curriculum designers, teachers, and institutions are discussed to aid in developing intercultural competence among Chinese students. We conclude by arguing that educators should adopt and integrate the strengths of both SNICC and ICT. Such an approach would improve their intercultural teaching practices and better prepare students to thrive in an increasingly globalized world.

**Keywords:** intercultural competence, SNICC, ICT, student competitions in language learning

In the context of globalization, individuals often find themselves working and residing in multicultural settings, engaging with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. However, despite such increased global mobility and cultural blending, effective communication is not automatically guaranteed (Yu, 2021); therefore, possessing intercultural competence (IC) is deemed a crucial skill, enabling globalized citizens to live and work harmoniously and efficiently with others. China is not immune to this global movement, and to too needs to bolster its global communication and dialogue efforts, necessitating a considerable number of individuals who are proficient in narrating China's story and engaging in cultural exchanges with foreign countries (Shen, 2019).

Of not here is the importance of language learning, which is described as “intercultural and humanistic” (Byram, 2023, p. 2), where foreign language education is fundamentally rooted in intercultural education (Neuner, 2012), which can and should play a crucial role in developing intercultural competence (Byram, 2014; Zhang et al., 2018). However, despite the emergence of various forms of teaching practices in intercultural foreign language education, there remains a notable gap in corresponding research on assessing intercultural competence (Gu, 2017; Peng et al., 2020). After all, “teaching involves assessment” (Rea-Dickins, 2004, p. 249), and a crucial concern in IC assessment in foreign language teaching is effectively addressing the components of IC in a cohesive way and understanding their interactions with language usage (Yu, 2021).

Against this backdrop, two influential localized IC assessment approaches in China are worth mentioning. First, the “SFLEP” Cup National College Students' Intercultural Competence Contest (SNICC for short), organized by Shanghai International Studies University and managed by Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press (SFLEP), has been successfully administered for eight years since its initiation in Shanghai in 2016. Notably, SNICC stands out as the first of its kind in China, focusing specifically on assessing intercultural competence. As of 2022, students from approximately 500 universities and vocational colleges spanning over 20 provinces nationwide have actively participated in the contest (Center for Intercultural Competence Assessment [CICA], 2023). Meanwhile, in 2023, Professor Peng Renzhong's team from Huazhong University of Science and Technology and Professor Wu

Weiping's team from Wuhan University of Technology introduced the Intercultural Competence Test (ICT) through the CICA platform of SFLEP. This is the first large-scale computerized nationwide test in China for intercultural competence, and the initial test took place on May 28th, 2023, spanning multiple colleges and universities across the country. The ICT is conducted biannually, and the second test was implemented on November 18th, with test centers in 20 provinces. Participants included students from nearly 300 colleges, universities, high schools, and some working people (Wang, 2023).

These national IC assessments, especially the SNICC, have gained widespread recognition and high praise from both foreign language education circles and educational administrative departments in Chinese universities. Therefore, these two items, the IC contest and test, have some inevitable influences or pedagogical implications on intercultural English language teaching in China. The effect that assessments have on teaching and learning is called washback (or backwash) (Alderson & Wall, 1993). As Pearson (1988) suggests, well-designed assessments can serve as constructive teaching-learning activities, fostering a positive teaching-learning process. However, there are few studies on SNICC or ICT, especially regarding ICT, let alone their washback effects on intercultural English language teaching.

Overall, this study aims to give a foundational overview and comparative discussion of SNICC and ICT. Meanwhile, pedagogical implications for Chinese intercultural teaching and learning practices are made to prepare students to thrive in an increasingly globalized world.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Culture in Intercultural ELT***

As for language teaching and learning, culture has traditionally been perceived as factual knowledge or a component of content in language acquisition. This implies that, besides developing the four linguistic skills, students typically focus on acquiring cultural knowledge and an awareness of differences and similarities with the target culture (Díaz, 2013, p. 19). The conventional view characterizes culture as knowledge about the target country (or region) and its people,

encompassing literature, philosophy, arts (products or artifacts), as well as aspects of daily life such as ways of living, behaviors, and actions, which are also a static understanding of culture (Byram & Wagner, 2018; Yu, 2021). From this perspective, intercultural issues in applied linguistics have often been predominantly influenced by a “large” cultural approach (Holliday, 1999), revolving around “large” ethnic, national, and international cultural differences in culture learning and teaching. However, this approach often leads to oversimplified generalizations and the marginalization of “foreign” educators, students, and societies (Holliday, 1999; Kramsch, 1993). In contrast, small cultures, unlike larger and more static conceptions of culture, are more fluid and dynamic as they engender shared practices and norms at localized levels, where interactions between members continually co-construct shared realities through everyday practices.

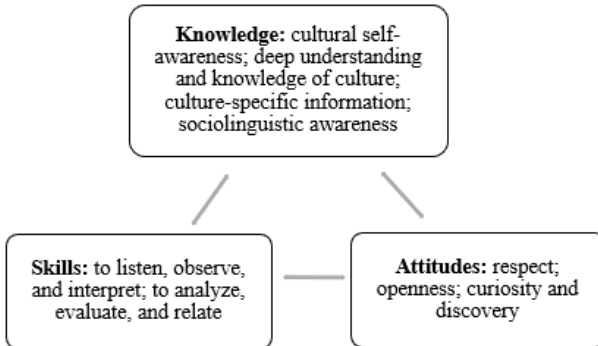
Encouragingly, while the concept of “knowledge that” remains influential, educators increasingly recognize the significance of “knowledge how” (procedural knowledge), and the concept of competence (intercultural competence), has gained widespread usage (Byram & Wagner, 2018, pp. 5-6).

### ***Intercultural Competence and its Assessment***

Over the last fifty years, many studies have explored intercultural competence and its diverse terms. In foreign language education, “intercultural competence” and “intercultural communicative competence” are often used interchangeably, with many scholars and educators considering them equivalent (Lustig & Koester, 2010; Nikiforova & Skvortsova, 2021). This paper uses “intercultural competence” to encompass both concepts. There are more than 20 different definitions and frameworks mentioned by Spitzberg and Changnon (2009), and according to Deardorff (2004), the top-rated definition of IC among intercultural scholars is “the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one’s intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (pp. 183-184). This is regarded as the theoretical framework of this paper, and is shown below in diagram form.

## Figure 1

*Theoretical framework (Adapted from Deardorff's IC pyramid model, 2006, p. 254)*



This framework, on the one hand, has revealed the IC conceptualization inherent in both SNICC and ICT, showing their connections. On the other hand, three key components have contributed to adjusting teaching objectives of intercultural communication courses, which is beneficial for IC curriculum optimization. As Gu (2017) mentioned, *attitude* serves as a prerequisite for successful intercultural communication; *knowledge* forms the foundation, and *skills* guarantee effective intercultural interaction.

Assessment is crucial for aiding teachers in comprehending and enhancing students' intercultural competence. Research confirms that intercultural competence “can, indeed, be assessed” (Deardorff, 2016, p. 121). The assessment methods for intercultural competence can be broadly categorized into indirect, direct, and combined approaches (Fantini, 2009; Sinicrope et al., 2007). As highlighted by Deardorff (2016, p.121), the indirect assessment method only presents “half of the picture” regarding intercultural competence, particularly in the realms of education and the humanities, where the other half is often overlooked. Thus, it is advisable for intercultural competence assessments to adopt a multi-method, multi-perspective approach (Deardorff, 2006, 2016).

China's exploration of intercultural competence research began later than that of Western countries, and it has experienced a gradual growth over the last two decades (Hu, 2013). However, there is still a scarcity of research on IC assessment within the context of foreign language education in China (Gao, 2014). Regarding the SNICC, Zhang et al. (2018) pioneered the development of an assessment indicator system to guide its design and demonstrate its feasibility for evaluating IC in foreign language learners. Tang et al. (2020) conducted an empirical study on Shanghai college students' intercultural competence using SNICC, proposing recommendations for teaching and SNICC improvement. Yu's doctoral dissertation (2021) focused on "intercultural case development," "scenario analysis," and "China story," suggesting these tasks as effective assessment methods in English language teaching in China.

Considering the ICT, only two closely related articles were found. Peng et al. (2022) used the Rasch measurement model to analyze the elementary level of ICT, revealing "unidimensionality and high reliability" (p. 12) and offering insights for ICT enhancement. Wang (2023), meanwhile, provided a brief overview of ICT, outlining its background, primary content, theoretical modeling dimensions, and benefits of taking ICT. It was published ahead of the ICT's first test run.

### ***Summary***

In conclusion, although China's educational guidelines stress the importance of intercultural competence, research on assessing IC in foreign language education is limited and lacks pedagogical insight. Thus, there appears to be a significant gap between the goals for modern foreign language professionals and current assessment methods. Simply relying on self-report scales and surveys falls short of meeting the requirements for assessing the complex and dynamic nature of intercultural competence (Yu, 2021). Furthermore, despite being influential national IC assessment approaches, only a few studies have discussed SNICC and ICT. To the best of our knowledge, this paper represents the first initial attempt to explore and contrast both approaches,

highlighting their commonalities and distinctions. Meanwhile, the paper also offers suggestions for their enhancement and discusses their pedagogical implications for intercultural English language teaching in China.

## **Discussions on SNICC and ICT**

### ***The SNICC***

SNICC explores an innovative approach to assessing intercultural competence through contests. The contest is university-based, and teams are composed of three Chinese undergraduates, with no restrictions on grades or majors (though there is a maximum of one English major student per team). Each team includes a designated leader and 1 to 2 instructors; English serves as the working language throughout the contest. The structure of SNICC consists of three levels: school contest, provincial contest, and national contest, featuring preliminary, semi-final, and final stages. Universities organize the preliminary contest internally to select one team for the provincial round, where the top-performing team(s) proportionally advance to the national contest. Both provincial and national contests comprise semi-final and final stages with identical formats and the time and location for the provincial and national contests are centrally coordinated by the contest organizing committee. Certificates are awarded to winning teams (contestants) and instructors at each level, as recognition of their achievements.

Table 1 provides an overview of the contest structure, illustrating that each level comprises distinct tasks, each with different point values. The total score for each level is 100 points.

**Table 1***The overview of SNICC (Adapted from Yu, 2021; Zhang et al., 2018)*

<b>Contest Round / Level</b>	<b>Task item</b>	<b>Weight</b>
Preliminary (school contest)	Cultural stories sharing, etc.	100%
Semi-final (provincial / national contest)	Intercultural case development	80%
	Intercultural quotations interpretation	20%
Final (provincial / national contest)	Cultural knowledge multiple-choice questions	6%
	Scenario analysis	70%
	China story	24%

As shown in Table 1, the contest incorporates a series of tasks designed to assess students' proficiency in integrating language use and intercultural competence. Recognizing that no single task can fully capture the dynamic and multilayered nature of intercultural competence (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2010), the SNICC features the following tasks (Zhang et al., 2018):

1. Cultural Stories Sharing:
  - Preliminary event at the school level.
  - Students use English to narrate cultural stories, share intercultural experiences, and reflect on intercultural communication.
2. Intercultural Case Development:
  - Main task in the semi-finals with on-site performance and case preparation.
  - Teams choose a theme from "multicultural life," "public diplomacy," or "business communication" and create an original case based on their experiences or observations.
  - Teams present, interpret, and analyze the case (60% weight) and one member answers judges' questions (20% weight).
3. Intercultural Quotations Interpretation:
  - The committee provides a relevant famous quotation or sentence.
  - One team member interprets it, ensuring accurate understanding and expansion based on actual conditions.

#### 4. Intercultural Multiple-Choice Questions:

- Initial task in the final stage, testing knowledge of general culture, Chinese and foreign cultures, and intercultural communication concepts.

- Each team answers six questions, with one member responding.

#### 5. Scenario Analysis:

- Central task in the final stage.

- Committee shows videos of cultural differences and conflicts.

Teams choose a video, prepare for 30 minutes, then analyze it together.

- Three members analyze the video, identify intercultural points, provide explanations, and propose solutions. One member answers judges' questions.

#### 6. China Story:

- Final task where one team member uses English to introduce China to foreigners and share Chinese stories based on provided prompts.

In provincial and national contests, team members must strategically delegate tasks; one student cannot undertake all individual tasks. In essence, the elicitation process in SNICC encompasses a series of tasks strategically designed to make the construct of intercultural competence visible in a learner's performance (Yu, 2021).

### ***Conceptualizing IC for SNICC***

The IC assessment indicator system of SNICC is based on Zhang's IC framework (2007), which encompasses affective, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions.

Cultural knowledge, affective attitudes, and behavioral skills serve as the first-level indicators in the assessment indicator system of the contest (see Figure 2). Subsequently, more detailed indexes for each component are developed to make it more operationalizable, considering China's intercultural teaching, learning characteristics, and combining them with the cultivation goal of foreign language talents in China.

**Figure 2**

*IC assessment indicator system in SNICC (Adapted from Zhang et al., 2018, p. 55)*



The cultural knowledge indicator assesses contestants' familiarity with foreign cultures and emphasizes their proficiency in Chinese culture. It encompasses conceptual and theoretical knowledge for analyzing intercultural communication activities, such as cultural icebergs, stereotypes, and high/low context.

The affective attitude indicator centers on the role of self-awareness in intercultural communication, considering national identity, global vision, and international understanding. Self-awareness involves reflecting on one's cultural identity, understanding one's cultural group, and recognizing how cultural identity influences communicative behavior. National identity relates to understanding and complying with national political systems, core values, and cultural traditions. Global vision involves having broad global knowledge and a perspective of globalization, enabling an individual to transcend one's own culture and helping them to analyze and solve problems in a competitive international context. International understanding encompasses understanding human civilization, global challenges, and the values of community and human destiny (Zhang et al., 2018).

Behavioral skills, according to Zhang et al. (2018), are the external manifestation of intercultural competence, including communication

skills, conflict management, and reflective evaluation. Conflict management entails controlling emotions, identifying conflict causes, and adopting coping strategies to maintain harmonious relationships and facilitate communication. Reflective evaluation involves monitoring and reflecting on intercultural experiences to gain insights and lessons.

Importantly, task items in different contest stages carry varying weights, corresponding to the three indicators of cultural knowledge, affective attitude, and behavioral skills. Additionally, ten secondary indexes are assessed, including general cultural knowledge, national identity, and communication skills (see Table 2) (Zhang et al., 2018; Yu, 2021).

**Table 2**

*Tasks and major indexes used for assessment (Adapted from Yu, 2021; Zhang et al., 2018)*

<b>Contest Round / Level</b>	<b>Task Item</b>	<b>Major Indexes</b>
Preliminary (school contest)	Cultural stories sharing, etc.	self-awareness, reflective evaluation
Semi-final (provincial/ national contest)	Intercultural case development	general cultural knowledge, communication skills, conflict management, reflective evaluation
	Intercultural quotations interpretation	general cultural knowledge
Final (provincial/ national contest)	Cultural knowledge multiple-choice questions	general cultural knowledge, Chinese cultural knowledge, foreign cultural knowledge
	Scenario analysis	global vision, international understanding, communication skills, conflict management, reflective evaluation
	China story	Chinese cultural knowledge, self-awareness, national identity, reflective evaluation

Based on the information provided in Table 2, it is assumed that through the completion of assessment tasks, knowledge, skills, and attitudes can synergize with language use to generate observable

performances. The detailed indexes contribute significantly to both intercultural competence assessment and the ongoing intercultural teaching and learning process.

### ***Judging Criteria***

Judges assess students' abilities in analyzing and solving problems within multicultural and intercultural contexts, which is manifested in the four dimensions of intercultural understanding, intercultural sensitivity, intercultural affective attitudes, and intercultural behavioral skills, all of which strongly support the theoretical framework of this paper. The specific scoring criteria are organized into three dimensions and five perspectives (CICA, 2023b).

#### 1. Three Dimensions.

- Content Dimension: Assesses the depth and breadth of intercultural cases, considering authenticity, originality, and the accurate application of intercultural concepts and theories.

- Effectiveness Dimension: Evaluates the relevance and appropriateness of intercultural analyses, and the reasonableness and effectiveness of the provided suggestions.

- Presentation Dimension: Examines the overall quality of presentations and responses to questions, focusing on expressive, appealing, and adaptive abilities.

#### 2. Five Perspectives.

Contestants are assessed based on their ability to demonstrate intercultural awareness and sensitivity, identify cultural differences, and analyze problems from a cultural perspective. Additionally, they must exhibit an intercultural affective attitude; thus, the assessment extends to mastering and applying intercultural concepts and theories, possessing intercultural communication skills, and exhibiting innovative thinking.

Overall, the SNICC judging criteria serve as a valuable reference for contestants and instructors in preparing for and reviewing their performances. Simultaneously, these criteria provide guidance for teachers to adjust and enhance the teaching objectives of and evaluation methods for intercultural communication courses.

### ***Benefits of engaging in SNICC***

The SNICC emphasizes both language proficiency and intercultural competence in talent development. The contest process intertwines English language skills with collaborative case creation, going beyond mere memorization and understanding to application, analysis, reflection, and creation (Yu, 2021).

In 2023, two special events accompanied the main competition. One involved an interaction between judges and instructors, addressing queries on intercultural talent training, curriculum design, and SNICC preparation. The other event was a signing ceremony between outstanding contestants and large enterprises, facilitating close communication and immediate contract signings with prominent international companies. These initiatives support intercultural teaching and improve students' employment opportunities.

### ***Intercultural Competence Test (ICT)***

The ICT is designed to assess candidates' competence to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations. It tests comprehensive skills through six elements: intercultural communication skills, intercultural cognitive skills, intercultural attitudes, intercultural awareness, knowledge of Chinese culture, and knowledge of foreign culture (CICA, 2023a). The test is machine-based and is conducted biannually for college students and employees in diverse, multicultural settings. ICT is categorized into three levels: elementary, intermediate, and advanced, and candidates can choose any of these levels. The ICT syllabus (2023) offers guidance for level selection (see Table 3).

**Table 3**  
*Guidance for level selection of ICT*

	<b>College English Test in China</b>	<b>Tests for English Majors in China</b>	<b>International English Tests</b>
Elementary	College English Level 1 to Level 3; CET-4 < 425.		IELTS < 4 ; TOEFL < 32
Intermediate	425 < CET-4 < 649; 400 < CET-6 < 579	qualified or good scores in TEM-4	$4 \leq \text{IELTS} \leq 6$ $32 \leq \text{TOEFL} \leq 78$
Advanced	CET-4 $\geq 650$ CET-6 $\geq 580$	TEM-4 outstanding TEM-8 passing scores	IELTS $\geq 6.5$ TOEFL $\geq 79$

The Elementary test is for those with College English Level 1 to Level 3, a College English Test Band 4 (CET-4) score of 425 or below, an IELTS score of 4 or lower, or a TOEFL score of 31 or less. The Intermediate level is for candidates with CET-4 scores from 425 to 649, CET-6 scores from 400 to 579, qualified or good scores in the Test for English Majors-Band 4 (TEM-4), or equivalent scores in other English tests. The Advanced level is for those with higher scores in CET, TEM, IELTS, TOEFL, or equivalent proficiency. Registration fees are RMB 280 for Elementary, 300 for Intermediate, and 320 for Advanced.

Since 2020, ICT has tested over 2,300 students from 10 universities, providing insights into college students' intercultural competence (Peng et al., 2022). Experts in intercultural studies and testing validated the "CAK model" and sample papers, offering feedback on the constructs, content, methods, and question types. Peng et al. (2022) highlight how a Rasch model analysis confirmed ICT's high reliability and validity.

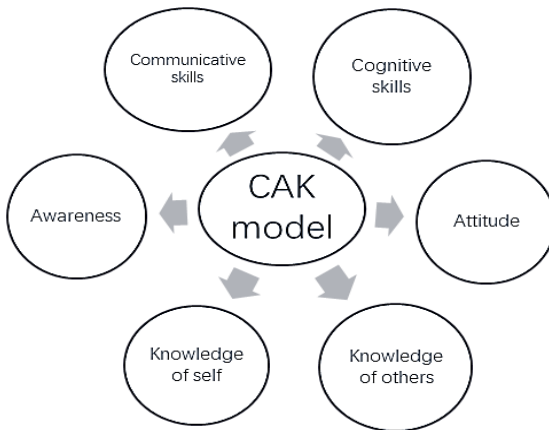
### ***Conceptualizing IC for ICT (CAK model)***

Drawing on intercultural competence models proposed by scholars (Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006; Fantini, 2000), Wu et al. (2013)

conducted an empirical study within China utilizing surveys and interviews. Their findings led to the development of a six-dimensional intercultural competence model, the CAK intercultural competence assessment model, illustrated below.

### Figure 3

*IC assessment model of ICT (Adapted from Peng, 2023)*



In the CAK model, “C” denotes communicative skills and cognitive skills; “A” signifies attitude and awareness; and “K” stands for knowledge of self and others. This categorization roughly aligns with the perspective of many scholars who argue that intercultural competence primarily involves knowledge, skills, attitudes, and awareness (Peng, 2023b). These six dimensions encompass a total of 39 specific elements, as detailed in Table 4.

**Table 4***Details of CAK model (Adapted from CICA, 2023a)*

<b>Test Level</b>	<b>IC Dimensions</b>	<b>Major Elements</b>
Elementary/ Intermediate/ Advanced	Communicative skills	skills of comparing and relating; skills of multi-perspectivity; skills of cooperation; skills of avoiding offense; skills of conflict management; skills of evaluating.
	Cognitive skills	skills of acquiring knowledge; skills of reflecting; skills of interpreting.
	Awareness	cultural similarities and differences; cultural identity; cultural situations.
	Attitude	openness; curiosity; equality; respect; empathy; tolerance.
	Knowledge of self	history; education; custom; social norms; values.
	Knowledge of others	history; education; custom; social norms; values.

The explanations below outline how intercultural competence is conceptualized in ICT (CICA, 2023a).

(1) Knowledge of Chinese culture. Assesses knowledge of Chinese society and culture in terms of history, education, customs and habits, social norms, and values.

(2) Knowledge of foreign cultures. Candidates at different test levels are expected to demonstrate varying levels of familiarity with foreign history, education, customs, social norms, values, and so on.

(3) Intercultural Communication Skills. Evaluates an individual's proficiency in employing strategies for effective and appropriate communication, covering skills like contrasting and correlating, adopting a multi-perspective approach, fostering cooperation, preventing offense, managing conflicts, and evaluating communication.

(4) Intercultural Cognitive Skills. Evaluates candidates' ability to acquire knowledge and experiences in intercultural contexts, including skills in knowledge acquisition, reflective learning, and interpretation of intercultural encounters.

(5) Intercultural Attitudes. Assesses emotions toward other cultures, including openness, curiosity, maintaining equality in communication, and understanding and tolerating cultural differences and behaviors.

(6) Intercultural Awareness. This evaluates candidates' perceptions and awarenesses of elements within intercultural communication, encompassing the object, content, and environment, focusing on the internal thought processes that contribute to awareness of intercultural dynamics.

### ***Test tasks and item types***

ICT, grounded in the CAK model, comprises 83 items in total with three sections: multiple-choice questions (75 items), short-answer questions (6 items), and case analysis (2 items). At present, listening and speaking test questions are not included. The test is conducted in English and lasts two hours, and the details are shown in Table 5.

The questions and scenarios presented in ICT are grounded, encompassing diverse situations from everyday life, academic settings, and working environments. These scenarios include classroom learning, friend gatherings, group collaborations, business negotiations, and corporate exchanges, offering candidates an opportunity to enhance their skills for living, studying, and working in multicultural settings through the test.

**Table 5***Test tasks and item types of ICT (Adapted from CICA, 2023a)*

Test level	Test item	Question type	Number of questions and score	Score ratio	Suggested time
Elementary/ Intermediate/ Advanced	Knowledge of self	Multiple choice questions	15*3 points	15%	75 mins
	Knowledge of others	Multiple choice questions	15*3 points	15%	
	Communicative skills	Multiple choice questions	15*4 points	20%	
	Cognitive skills	Multiple choice questions	15*1 points	5%	
	Awareness	Multiple choice questions	15*3 points	15%	15 mins
	Attitude	Short answer questions	3*6 points+ 3*9 points	15%	
	Intercultural case analysis	Essay questions	15 points+ 30 points	15%	
<b>Total</b>			<b>83/300 points</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>120 mins</b>

Each ICT level has a total score of 300 points, with a passing threshold set at 180 points. Candidates achieving scores between 180 and 209 will be awarded a Pass Certificate, those scoring between 210 and 239 will receive a Good Certificate, and those scoring 240 and above will be granted an Outstanding Certificate. Furthermore, ICT is organized as a National Intercultural Competence Competition (NICC) event. Successful candidates not only receive a certificate of achievement but also earn a certificate of merit based on their national and provincial rankings. In the event, if a student candidate secures a national or provincial award, their instructor is recognized with a corresponding “Outstanding Instructor Award” (CICA, 2023a).

### ***Benefits of engaging in ICT***

As a crucial component of IC assessment, ICT overcomes the limitations of traditional self-assessment scales, promoting independence and standardization in evaluating intercultural competence. It contributes to enhancing the credibility, validity, and practicability of intercultural assessment tools. Additionally, ICT serves as a scientific reference for assessing an individual's IC level, applicable in talent selection and training in colleges, enterprises, governments, and international organizations.

For educational institutions, ICT comprehensively evaluates students' intercultural competence and promotes the integration of foreign language proficiency and intercultural competence teaching. This helps teachers better understand the fundamental characteristics of foreign language learning, enrich the content and scope of foreign language teaching, and contribute to the cultivation of high-quality and versatile international talents required in the new era (CICA, 2023b; Wang, 2023).

### ***Comparative Analysis and Discussion***

ICT and SNICC, both significant national IC assessments, possess distinct characteristics while also sharing several similarities.

#### ***Differences***

SNICC operates as a team-based competition, with each school limited to three students for provincial contests, resulting in fewer participants and award opportunities. In contrast, ICT is an individual test that allows more participants and benefits a broader community. Moreover, SNICC involves multiple rounds at school, provincial, and national levels, while ICT awards certificates and honors based on a single test result. Additionally, SNICC is free of charge, whereas ICT requires a registration fee of 280 to 320 RMB, depending on the test level.

Another key difference is the focus on language proficiency. Both assessments underscore the role of language skills in developing intercultural competence in English, but SNICC emphasizes listening skills, speaking skills, and on-the-spot improvisation. Participants showcase their spoken English and body language through tasks such

as intercultural case development, intercultural quotations interpretation, and on-site questions and answers. In contrast, ICT employs a machine-based test that prioritizes reading and writing skills. Candidates face questions in various formats, including multiple-choice, short-answer and case analysis, necessitating careful and fast reading skills. Additionally, short-answer and case-analysis questions demand strong writing skills, including spelling ability and proficiency in English typing.

### ***Relevance***

Aside from the above differences, there are also close associations between SNICC and ICT. First, both assessments share a similar conceptualization of interculturality, focusing on intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Although ICT's CAK model includes an additional dimension—awareness—this dimension is reflected in the secondary indicators of SNICC's "affective attitude": self-awareness, global vision, and international understanding. The theoretical modeling of these two assessments reaffirms Deardorff's view (2006) that the prevailing definition of IC among intercultural scholars is the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural settings based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

Moreover, both SNICC and ICT prioritize national culture, particularly Chinese culture. The themes of SNICC (Strengthening cultural confidence, enhancing international understanding) and ICT (Understanding the world, expressing China) encourage participants to learn about and present Chinese culture confidently in English. Tasks, such as recommending Chinese books or food, or explaining Chinese festivals to foreign friends, are designed to help participants narrate China's story effectively to a global audience, amplifying China's voice and presenting an authentic as well as comprehensive image (CICA, 2023b).

Furthermore, both assessments incorporate intercultural theory into practice, demonstrating their applicability in language teaching. This integrative theory-to-practice approach helps learners connect their intercultural knowledge with practical skills, encouraging mindful application of their knowledge in real-world situations (Ting-Toomey, 1999).

Finally, according to the *Regulations of SNICC (2023)*, all students who reach the national finals can take the ICT the following year for free, regardless of the test level. This allows students to benefit from both events and further develop their intercultural competence.

In summary, the differences and connections between ICT and SNICC collectively form a comprehensive IC assessment system, constituting a closed-loop IC test. This not only aids students in better assessing their IC but also provides valuable pedagogical implications and suggestions for teachers engaged in intercultural foreign language teaching.

### **Pedagogical implications**

Black and Wiliam (2003) strongly stress that assessments in education are most valuable when used by teachers and students to adjust teaching and learning activities. Hence, discussions on SNICC and ICT can provide valuable pedagogical insights for curriculum designers, teachers, and institutions involved in intercultural language teaching in China.

### ***For curriculum designers***

There are three key aspects to consider for curriculum optimization. First, teaching objectives can be adjusted by integrating the SNICC scoring criteria and ICT's CAK theoretical model. This allows for refining the original objectives of intercultural courses, forming a comprehensive "attitude-knowledge-skill" framework. For instance, in an intercultural communication course, attitude goals focus on enhancing students' intercultural awareness and sensitivity towards diverse cultures. Knowledge objectives encompass expanding students' understanding of various cultural knowledge and mastering key theories in intercultural communication. Regarding skills, students are expected to identify, comprehend, analyze, and assess cultural differences or conflicts. Moreover, the curriculum seeks to enhance students' ability to navigate conflicts and uncertainties, fostering critical cultural thinking and innovation (Zhang, 2012). Overall, setting clear course objectives reaffirms that the goal of intercultural foreign language teaching is to cultivate and enhance students' intercultural competence.

Moreover, based on the SNICC and ICT, more innovative teaching methods are encouraged to increase students' intercultural contact. Yu (2021) categorizes intercultural contact into direct and indirect types. Direct contact involves interactions with native or non-native speakers of the target language through spoken or written communication. Indirect contact includes exposure to cultural products such as TV, films, books, newspapers, magazines, and the Internet (pp. 178-179). To facilitate direct contact, teachers can employ activities like "Story Circles" (Deardorff, 2020) and English Corner, or utilize online educational techniques, such as "Intercultural Email Classroom Connections," where teachers can select a class to interact with via email (Peng, 2023b). These methods offer students more opportunities to engage with diverse cultures.

Additionally, curriculum designers can draw inspiration from SNICC tasks to create scenario-based cases or intercultural situations, encouraging students to actively participate in intercultural engagement. For indirect contact, teachers should design or select intercultural and inclusive teaching materials that encourage students to engage with the content emotionally and cognitively. The concept of "authenticity" is particularly crucial in material selection (Yu, 2021). By incorporating real-life stories and experiences, students can gain a more profound understanding of the connections and interactions between different cultures, enhancing their practical perceptions of intercultural communication (Peng, 2023b).

Finally, curriculum designers can improve the course assessment system by deriving students' overall scores from the SNICC and ICT models. A blended assessment approach, combining indirect and direct assessment methods, such as final pencil-and-paper exams and group case presentations, can provide a comprehensive evaluation of students' intercultural competence. Ideally, integrating these two assessment approaches, the two "halves of the picture" (Deardorff, 2016, p. 121), can provide a comprehensive assessment of students' intercultural competence.

### ***For teachers***

On the one hand, teachers should avoid a rigid and narrow view of culture and update their cultural teaching concepts when conducting

intercultural education (Zhang et al., 2018). This is particularly evident in the following facets.

Cultures are dynamic, and their ever-evolving nature poses challenges to any attempt at maintaining static knowledge (Martin et al., 2002). Therefore, it is imperative for teachers to heighten their awareness of “small culture” in both the assessment of intercultural competence and intercultural English language teaching, emphasizing “a dynamic, ongoing group process” (Holliday, 1999, p. 248), where students understand and adapt to changing situations, such as unique practices within academic departments or community traditions.

In teaching, teachers in China should avoid positioning “Chinese culture” against “foreign culture” and instead promote an attitude of equality and mutual respect. By highlighting the uniqueness and complementarity of different cultures, students can develop a tolerant and open-minded approach toward multiculturalism (Peng, 2023b). Moreover, intercultural communicators nowadays are expected not only to learn from foreign cultures but also to promote their own. For China, there is a growing need to communicate its culture globally, requiring students’ initiative to “tell China’s story” and “use English to interpret and promote Chinese culture,” portraying China’s image and explaining the characteristics of China’s system (Wen, 2014, p. 5). However, simply incorporating Chinese cultural content into English is insufficient; it requires the development of skills and heightened awareness from an intercultural communication perspective. This stresses a need to find a way, with a global perspective, to effectively convey the Chinese message to foreign audiences, serving the purpose of informing and influencing (Yu, 2021).

According to Yu (2021), a survey reported by China Daily, a Chinese magazine, revealed that the contents of books on Chinese culture in the international market predominantly focus on traditional themes. The top five terms frequently used in the titles of these books include “medicine,” “tradition,” “war,” “dragon,” and “ancient,” which are emblematic of traditional Chinese culture (Yu, 2021). However, to effectively promote Chinese culture globally, it is crucial not only to showcase traditional aspects but also to highlight contemporary elements, such as the Spring Festival travel rush, high-speed trains, cross-sea bridges, and Alipay. Given China’s growing

global influence, there is a pressing need for a considerable number of proficient foreign language experts who can vividly portray both the historical and contemporary facets of China to the world, thereby fostering global understanding and support for China.

On the other hand, teachers should try to strengthen students' intercultural reflection, as reflection is crucial for nurturing learners' intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006). This reflective process typically occurs at two levels, both of which require guidance from teachers. Regarding the first level, teachers should lead students to explore fundamental intercultural theories through intercultural teaching (Sun, 2016). This approach aims to cultivate students' capacity to understand and analyze intercultural phenomena while enhancing their abilities in cultural reflection and cultural consciousness (Yu, 2021). Clearly, applying appropriate intercultural theories and concepts to analyze and evaluate intercultural events is a focal point in SNICC and ICT.

The second level of reflection centers on how students would personally behave or feel in each situation, prompting them to summarize and analyze their own intercultural experiences for insights and lessons. This approach allows students to comprehend cultural differences from both their own perspectives and those of others. This introspective and reflective process requires structured and guided steps (Yu, 2021). For example, the "Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters (AIE)" (Byram et al., 2009), a reflective tool designed to prompt users to reflect on and learn from significant intercultural encounters, can be beneficial for learners' developing intercultural competence in education. AIE focuses on face-to-face intercultural encounters, while its counterpart, the "Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters through Visual Media," encourages individuals to contemplate experiences encountered through visual media such as television, films, the internet, and magazines (Méndez García, 2017). Both tools emphasize the process rather than the results, emphasizing critical reflection, intercultural thoughts, and an individual's approach to others, providing a comprehensive view of the development of intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2016).

In summary, teachers should provide opportunities for students to reflect on their intercultural experiences rather than simply evaluating

the outcomes. The latter approach may oversimplify intercultural learning by reducing it to producing “correct” attitudes and behaviors at a surface level (Yu, 2021, p. 181).

### ***For institutions***

Institutions should consider offering professional development opportunities for teachers to improve their intercultural teaching competencies and support the integration of intercultural competence assessments into the curriculum. Meanwhile, there is a need to reinforce the team building of contest instructors. Some SNICC instructors are unfamiliar with the contest process and judging criteria, lack sufficient cultural knowledge, possess weak intercultural communication skills, and demonstrate limited intercultural awareness. Consequently, their pre-contest guidance tends to be haphazard and uninformed, impeding their ability to assist and guide students in contest preparation effectively. Therefore, besides improving their IC, instructors should learn from and collaborate with each other, share resources, and form a cohesive team. Moreover, teachers can actively assist students participating in the SNICC and ICT, allowing them to deepen their understanding of intercultural communication, broaden their intercultural perspectives, and integrate these experiences into their teaching practices. In short, improving the intercultural competence of teachers and their teams is essential because changing teachers will ultimately change their students (Sun & Bennett, 2017).

Overall, the excellent cases and questions offered by the SNICC and ICT serve as abundant resources for intercultural teaching and learning. The assessment systems they employ are crucial indicators for intercultural competence progress. The contest tasks and question types provide methods and pathways for the practice of intercultural teaching and learning. Additionally, the outcomes of students’ participation in the contest and their test performances serve as effective evaluations of the success of teachers’ intercultural teaching efforts. It is evident that the SNICC and ICT show significant and inevitable influences on intercultural English language teaching in China, carrying noteworthy pedagogical implications.

## Personal suggestions

### *Suggestions for SNICC*

There are some suggestions for organizing committees of SNICC. Firstly, organizing committees should consider allowing a maximum of two English majors per team. Compared with other majors, English major students benefit more from the competition, as it helps develop their language skills and intercultural competence. They often have exclusive access to intercultural communication courses, enabling them to analyze cases theoretically. SNICC participation provides a valuable experience for reflecting, practicing, and assessing their intercultural competence, offering insights for future intercultural teaching and learning. On the other hand, although non-English majors can significantly enhance their intercultural awareness through SNICC participation, they often lack a theoretical foundation in intercultural communication. Hastily preparing some IC concepts or theories before the contest leads to a shallow understanding, making it difficult to apply them to impromptu tasks, such as answering judges' questions and analyzing scenarios. Additionally, non-English majors, especially those from less developed regions, may struggle with expressing their ideas in English during tasks requiring higher levels of language skills. Consequently, they may focus more on language proficiency than improving their intercultural competence during the preparation and the contest process.

Another suggestion is to add live broadcasts for the provincial semi-finals and finals of SNICC. Currently, only the national contest is broadcast, allowing teachers and students nationwide to watch the contest online. However, provincial competitions better reflect regional conditions, because each time, only the top team(s) from each province proceed to the national competition, with most ordinary college teams focusing on the provincial contest. Broadcasting these events would increase understanding of SNICC and intercultural competence development among a broader audience, including students, teachers, and enterprises. It would also help teachers recognize students' intercultural competence and challenges in their region, providing targeted insights. Watching national and provincial competitions would

also help teachers identify gaps and areas for improvement in future contests and intercultural teaching.

Lastly, it is recommended that an interactive session between expert judges and instructors be added to the provincial contest, like this year's national contest. During this session, judges can address questions about intercultural talent training, curriculum design, and preparation for SNICC. Judges can offer specific suggestions based on students' on-site performances, providing valuable insights that could enhance teachers' intercultural foreign language teaching.

### ***Suggestions for ICT***

Regarding ICT, two suggestions are proposed. First, organizing committees should reconsider whether the proportion of the knowledge-based section needs adjustment. After the discussion of questions in the sample paper, feedback from a foreign scholar in the intercultural field suggested that the test seemed more like a cultural knowledge competition than an intercultural competence assessment, potentially reinforcing stereotypes. Similarly, in the "National ICT Communication" QQ group, students' discussions often focus on the accuracy of knowledge-based questions, with concerns about their broadness and preparation difficulty. However, the goal of ICT is to enhance intercultural competence, not just test it, so updating the ICT guidebook to include explanatory notes on national cultures, foreign cultures, and intercultural concepts and theories would help candidates better prepare and might increase their willingness to take the exam, even with a registration fee.

On the other hand, it is recommended to add detailed score reports and ICT seminars or training sessions. Currently, candidates scoring 180 or higher receive an ICT certificate labeled as "Qualified," "Good," or "Excellent," with a chance to earn a "Certificate of Award" from NICC. Including a detailed transcript of grades would help candidates and teachers understand performance better, thereby enhancing intercultural teaching and learning. Additionally, organizing seminars or workshops on ICT and teaching would provide valuable guidance to teachers on intercultural talent cultivation, curriculum development, and ICT preparation, using data from national candidates.

## Conclusion

This paper compared the ‘SFLEP’ Intercultural Competence Contest (SNICC) and the Intercultural Competence Test (ICT), highlighting their distinct features and interconnections. It was found that both the SNICC and ICT offer valuable frameworks for assessing intercultural competence, though they differ in their approach and implementation. SNICC emphasizes practical, team-based tasks, while ICT focuses on individual assessments through a structured, machine-based format.

Pedagogically, the study suggests that incorporating elements from both SNICC and ICT into curriculum design can enhance the effectiveness of intercultural teaching. For instance, integrating tasks like scenario analysis and intercultural case development into regular classroom activities can foster both direct and indirect intercultural interactions, enriching students’ learning experiences. Teachers are also encouraged to utilize the judging criteria from SNICC and the detailed feedback mechanisms of ICT to refine their assessment methods. Institutions should consider offering professional development opportunities for teachers to improve their intercultural teaching competencies and support the integration of intercultural competence assessments into the curriculum.

Building on these suggestions, future research should explore the long-term impact of participating in SNICC and ICT on students’ intercultural competence and career success. Additionally, action research on intercultural communication courses could be considered to align with the ongoing evolution of teaching objectives, learning processes, and assessment methods. Finally, studies could investigate how these assessments influence students’ attitudes towards cultural diversity and their ability to engage in intercultural communication in real-world settings.

In conclusion, this paper underscores the importance of comprehensive intercultural competence assessments in foreign language education. By adopting and integrating the strengths of both SNICC and ICT, teachers can improve their intercultural teaching practices, and better prepare students to thrive in an increasingly globalized world.

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