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Bridging the Discursive Divide: Exploring the Tension Between Linguistic Proficiency and Intercultural Competence in Thai Language Education in China



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Abstract

This study investigates the “discursive divide” within Thai as a Second Language Education (TSL) in Chinese universities, focusing on the gap between high-level policy rhetoric and pedagogical reality. Situated in the under-researched context of China–Thailand educational and professional exchange, the study adopts a qualitative, multi-stakeholder design involving 22 stakeholders, including program chairs, students, alumni, and employers. The findings show that although Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) is recognized in principle, it remains manifests vaguely in practice, particularly within early curriculum design, routine pedagogy, and assessment. Language training continues to receive stronger emphasis, while the interpretive, mediatory, and role-sensitive capacities needed for professional interaction are less systematically developed. The study also suggests that overseas exposure alone does not ensure ICC development when it is not supported by explicit guidance and reflection. In addition, assessment practices continue to privilege linguistic accuracy over intercultural learning, helping explain the gap between formal certification and the workplace readiness. The study contributes to research on Less Commonly Taught Languages (LCTLs) by showing that ICC frameworks remain useful but may require context-sensitive interpretation in South–South educational settings shaped by institutional conditions, professional demands, and situational mediation.

Keywords: Thai as a second language, intercultural communicative competence, south–south educational settings, workplace readiness, less commonly taught languages

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Introduction

In an era of intensified globalization and cross-border mobility, second language education has increasingly emphasized not only linguistic proficiency but also intercultural communicative competence (ICC). Foundational models such as Byram (1997) and Deardorff (2006) helped establish ICC as an important goal in language education. More recent scholarship has also stressed that interculturality should be understood in context rather than as contact between fixed national cultures (Dervin, 2024; Holliday, 2018). This perspective advocates for “un-writing” these national narratives to better account for the power dynamics and institutional settings where interculturality is actually co-constructed (Dervin & R’boul, 2025). This shift has encouraged educators to move beyond the teaching of cultural facts and to pay greater attention to interaction, interpretation, and reflection.

Nevertheless, much ICC research remains concentrated on English and major European language contexts. Less Commonly Taught Languages (LCTLs), including Thai, have received less sustained attention, especially in regional settings outside Anglophone-centered scholarship. This gap matters in the context of China–Thailand exchanges, where language learning intersects with study abroad, workplace transition, and regional cooperation. In such settings, intercultural demands are shaped not only by language proficiency, but also by institutional roles, relational expectations, and professional communication.

Thai language education in China provides a useful site for examining these issues. With the growth of China–Thailand cooperation in recent years, demand for Thai-language graduates has increased, especially in Yunnan Province, the gateway to Southeast Asia, currently, fifty universities across China offer a Thai language major, including nineteen in Yunnan alone (Sunshine Gaokao, n.d.). Many universities have adopted a “3 + 1” model (3 years in China, 1 year in Thailand) (Liu, 2022) that combines domestic study with a period of study in Thailand. At the same time, this expansion raises an important question: how is ICC actually developed within programs that often place strong emphasis on language forms, overseas exposure, and employability?

Existing studies on Thai language education in China have provided useful pedagogical suggestions, but many focus mainly on curriculum design or teaching methods and rely on single-source perspectives, such as teacher accounts or student surveys (e.g., Hu et al., 2020; Zhang, 2016). As a result, we still know less about how ICC is understood and enacted across the full pathway from program planning to student learning and later workplace use. A multi-stakeholder perspective is therefore needed to examine how institutional goals, classroom practice, overseas experience, and workplace expectations come together in shaping ICC development.

To address this gap, the present study investigates how ICC is understood, taught, and valued in Thai language programs in Chinese universities. It adopts a qualitative, multi-stakeholder design involving program chairs, students, alumni, and employers. By bringing these perspectives into one analytic frame, the study aims to show how curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and workplace expectations intersect in the development of ICC. The study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do program chairs, students, and alumni perceive and experience the development of ICC within the TSL teaching and learning context?
2. How do employers assess the intercultural communicative abilities of TSL graduates, and what expectations do they hold for situational mediation in professional settings?
3. In what ways do classroom practices, curriculum design, assessment, and institutional conditions facilitate or constrain ICC development among TSL learners?

Research Context: Thai Language Education in China

The policy priority attached to ICC is particularly visible in Thai language education in China, where national strategies linked to regional cooperation have increasingly emphasized the need for graduates who can communicate effectively with Thailand in professional and social settings (Ministry of Education, 2016, 2022). In practice, Thai language programs may include semester exchanges, short-term immersion visits, and internships with partner institutions (Jackson, 2018).

Crucially, the China–Thailand context raises intercultural questions that cannot be reduced either to simple difference or to assumed familiarity. Although China and Thailand are sometimes grouped together within a broad “Asian” frame, this study does not treat such a label as an explanatory category in itself. Rather, it focuses on how communicative expectations are mediated by institutional roles, relational positioning, workplace demands, and locally meaningful norms in particular educational and professional settings. In some educational and workplace encounters relevant to Thai language use, participants may orient to hierarchical positioning or to concerns sometimes discussed through the notion of *kreng jai*, but such orientations should be understood as context-sensitive interactional tendencies rather than as fixed cultural essences (Komin, 1990). This means that students frequently encounter interactional demands that are not adequately addressed through language proficiency alone. With this context established, the following section reviews the broader scholarship on ICC, intercultural pedagogy, and assessment that frames the present study.

Literature Review

Policy Imperatives and the Global Shift in Language Education

Driven by the demand for globally competent graduates in an increasingly interconnected world, the Chinese Ministry of Education has identified Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) as a major goal in foreign language education. This orientation is reflected in the National Standards (Steering Committee, 2018, 2020), which call on foreign language programs to move beyond a narrow emphasis on linguistic proficiency and to foster broader intercultural capability, i.e., the learner’s ability to interpret meanings in context and communicate effectively and appropriately across cultural settings. Intercultural education here is positioned as an integrative part of intercultural ability development. At the institutional level, this policy shift has also been reflected in the growing use of study-abroad and exchange schemes, including the “3 + 1” model, which is often designed to provide students with opportunities for sustained intercultural contact.

This policy direction is consistent with a broader shift in language education scholarship. Over the past several decades, researchers have increasingly challenged the assumption that successful language learning can be equated with grammatical mastery or approximation to a native-speaker norm. Instead, language education has come to place greater emphasis on learners’ ability to interpret, mediate, and relate across differences in context-sensitive ways (Byram, 1997; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). This shift has also been developed through classroom-based and teacher-education studies showing how intercultural learning can be enacted through language teaching, classroom interaction, and reflective inquiry (Kearney, 2015; Kohler, 2015; Tolosa et al., 2018; Wang, 2023). Empirical studies focused specifically on bridging linguistic and intercultural dimensions reveal that intercultural understanding is closely associated with the capacity to interpret and reflect on social meanings, relationships, and pragmatic judgements (McConachy & Liddicoat, 2016; McConachy, 2018; McConachy & Liddicoat, 2022). Recent scholarship continues to support this shift, suggesting that instruction explicitly focused on intercultural learning can better prepare students for complex global engagement than approaches centered mainly on acquisition of language forms (Feng et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2025). However, while

ICC research has expanded considerably in English and European language education, it remains relatively limited in Less Commonly Taught Languages (LCTLs), including Thai (Ngo, 2025; Klayklung, 2023). It is within this broader gap that the present study is located.

The Gap Between Mandate and Pedagogical Practice

Despite strong policy endorsement of ICC, a persistent gap often exists between institutional discourse and classroom practice. Research has shown that even when intercultural learning is formally valued, teaching may still focus mainly on vocabulary, grammar, test preparation, and the transmission of cultural information rather than on interactional mediation (Sercu, 2005; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013; Tolosa et al., 2018). More recent classroom-based work also shows that teachers often need structured support and reflective inquiry to translate intercultural aims into concrete language-teaching practices (Tolosa et al., 2018; Wang, 2023). In this sense, institutional support does not necessarily mean that teachers possess the professional orientation or practical repertoire needed to implement intercultural education in systematic ways.

This pedagogical gap is particularly problematic because interculturality should not be treated as an encounter between fixed national cultures, but as a dynamic process shaped by discourse, positioning, institutional context, and unequal relations of power (Byrd Clark & Dervin, 2014; Diaz, 2013; Levine & Phipps, 2012). From this perspective, teaching culture as a body of stable facts leaves learners underprepared for the ambiguity involved in real interaction. Furthermore, the commonly assumed link between immersion and intercultural development is misleading. Regional proximity may create an assumption of mutual intelligibility but contact without guidance and reflection often reproduces stereotypes or produces only superficial familiarity (Vande Berg et al., 2012; Jackson & Oguro, 2017).

What students actually learn is shaped not only by explicit curricular goals but also by a hidden curriculum conveyed through classroom routines and assessment signals. Navigating these implicit demands requires what Kramsch (2006) terms symbolic competence—the ability to interpret meanings, positions, and power relations as they are indexed in discourse. Consequently, successful intercultural learning also encompasses an affective dimension, requiring emotional agility during real-life interactions. This should be understood not as an isolated personal trait, but as a dynamic capacity for navigating uncertainty, managing discomfort, and engaging in relational negotiation amidst ambiguity (Jackson & Oguro, 2017). In Thai language programs in China, while linguistic proficiency and study-abroad participation are highly emphasized, these deeper interpretive and emotional dimensions of ICC remain pedagogically marginalized (Chen, 2021; Lin, 2018; Ngo, 2025).

The Assessment Vacuum and Structural Challenges

A major structural driver of this pedagogical marginalization is the assessment gap. Assessment practices historically lag behind theoretical developments in intercultural language education (Deardorff, 2011). In the context of Thai language education, high-stakes proficiency examinations—including the CU-TFL and the Yunnan Provincial Thai Major Band 4 and Band 8 examinations—primarily assess Thai language proficiency rather than operationalizing ICC as an explicit assessment construct (The Sirindhorn Thai Language Institute, n.d.), this observation is further supported by the author's analysis of publicly available proficiency descriptors and representative test papers.

When high-stakes tests ignore the pragmatic and relational demands of actual interaction, intercultural development is treated as peripheral or optional. This creates a structural problem by obscuring the criteria for what constitutes legitimate achievement and often pushes teachers to default to a “culture-as-fact” approach due to a lack of shared rubrics or assessment tools for integrating intercultural learning

systematically (Romijn et al., 2021; Landini, 2025; Kong, 2019). While recent critiques have shown that traditional ICC models may not fully capture the multimodal and co-constructed nature of interaction (Álvarez Valencia & Michelson, 2023), scholars continue to note the practical need for viable conceptual and assessment frameworks in language-education settings where intercultural learning remains institutionally marginalized. In the case of Thai language education in China, this raises an open question rather than a settled conclusion: to what extent can existing ICC frameworks support analysis and pedagogy, and where might they require contextual reinterpretation?

Theoretical Framework

To systematically examine these policy, pedagogical, and interactional conditions, this study utilizes Byram's (1997) model of Intercultural Communicative Competence as its structural baseline and interpretive lens, while also drawing on his later elaboration of the intercultural speaker in foreign language education and subsequent reconsideration of the framework (Byram, 2009, 2021). A key contribution of Byram's work is his rejection of the native-speaker ideal, instead proposing the intercultural speaker as a learner who can mediate between perspectives, interpret meanings across contexts, and engage critically with both self and other. This also raises a broader question regarding the extent to which an ICC framework developed primarily within European language-education traditions and grounded in specific educational and sociopolitical assumptions can be applied to intercultural learning in educational settings shaped by different institutional, sociolinguistic, and regional conditions. In particular, such a framework emphasizes democratic citizenship and learner autonomy—orientations that may not fully align with educational contexts where teaching remains more teacher-centred and assessment-driven, and where intercultural learning is consequently framed and enacted in different ways.

Crucially, Byram's (1997, 2021) model posits that intercultural communicative competence is developed through the synergy of two interconnected elements: communicative competence and intercultural competence. The former encompasses linguistic, sociolinguistic, and discourse competencies, providing the structural and social foundation for communication. The latter is composed of five interrelated dimensions: attitudes (openness and curiosity), knowledge of social groups, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness. Together, these elements enable second language learners to navigate the complexities of cross-cultural engagement with both technical accuracy and cultural sensitivity. Ultimately, the model emphasizes that being competent in intercultural communication requires the simultaneous acquisition of both linguistic and cultural proficiency. However, later scholarship has questioned any strong separation between the communicative and intercultural components, arguing that linguistic meaning making is inherently intercultural (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013; McConachy, 2022). In light of this position, Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) argue that intercultural language education should involve learners in active processes of interpretation, comparison, reflection, and interaction, through which they examine both external perspectives and their own underlying assumptions. This pedagogical approach is informed by Kramsch's (2006) concept of symbolic competence, which emphasizes that intercultural meaning-making depends on the ability to decipher indexicality, positioning, and power dynamics within discourse. In this respect, symbolic competence adds a discourse-oriented dimension to ICC, demonstrating that intercultural communication is not solely a matter of attitudes or knowledge, but also of interpreting how meanings and relationships are negotiated through language in context. Notably, Byram (2021) reflects on and incorporates this perspective into his later reconceptualization of ICC, highlighting the growing recognition of discourse and meaning-making processes within the framework. Collectively, these perspectives suggest that intercultural learning cannot be measured by linguistic accuracy or cultural knowledge alone; rather, it demands ongoing reflection, interpretation, and situated judgment, where linguistic ability and cultural knowledge serve as tools to navigate and make sense of difference during intercultural interactions.

In this study, the focus is on how program chairs, students, alumni, and employers converge, diverge, and reveal gaps in their descriptions of valued communicative capacities and perceived deficiencies in Thai language education. The study operationalizes Byram's framework as the interpretative lens for qualitative analysis, particularly its five dimensions—attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness - while remaining attentive to the contextual applicability of the framework within this specific educational culture (i.e., a more teacher-centred and assessment-driven approach) and the broader sociocultural similarities characterizing the China–Thailand South–South context. Recognizing that this framework was developed in a European educational context (Piller, 2011), and that it has also been revisited and reconsidered in later work (Byram, 2021), it is not adopted here as a universally sufficient template; rather, it serves as a reflexive heuristic. The applicability of this framework is therefore treated not as a prior assumption, but as an empirical and theoretical question concerning how effectively its categories travel across differently situated contexts, as viewed through the perspectives of multiple stakeholders. Furthermore, “South–South” in this study is used not as a fixed cultural type or as a civilizational opposite to a homogeneous “Western” model, but as an analytical shorthand for a particular configuration of regional language learning, institutional mediation, and intercultural contact outside Anglophone-centered settings.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative, multi-stakeholder design to examine how ICC is understood, taught, and valued in Thai language education in Chinese universities. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the study aimed to explore participants' views, experiences, and perceived gaps across different stages of the educational and employment process. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from program chairs, students, alumni, and employers, as this format enabled the researcher to use a shared interview guide across stakeholder groups while retaining sufficient flexibility to probe issues that emerged as salient in participants' own settings (Kallio et al., 2016).

Participants and Sampling

A stratified purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit 22 participants across four stakeholder groups: eight program chairs of undergraduate Thai language programs (P1–P8), six current students (S1–S6), four alumni (A1–A4), and four human-resources managers from Thai and Chinese enterprises (E1–E4). The purpose of this sampling was not to achieve statistical representativeness, but to select information-rich participants from different points in the education-to-employment process. In line with the focus of this study, the sample was designed to connect curriculum planning, student learning, graduate transition, and workplace expectations within one analytic frame.

Program chair and student participants were drawn from 17 institutions in Yunnan Province that offer undergraduate Thai language programs. From this pool, eight institutions were selected through stratified purposive sampling to capture variation in program history, institutional profile, and geographic location (Table 1). Program chairs were included only if they met four conditions: they were the person responsible for the Thai language program, they also taught Thai courses, they had served in the program chair role for at least five years, and their institutions met the selection criteria noted above. These criteria were used to ensure that the program chair participants could speak not only to administrative planning, but also to curriculum implementation and teaching practice.

The six student participants were selected from the same eight institutions. To strengthen the relevance of their accounts to the research aims, only third-year students who were studying in Thailand at the time of the interview were included. This criterion was used because these students had already

completed a substantial part of their domestic training and were also experiencing direct intercultural contact in a learning program in Thailand.

The four alumni participants were also drawn from the same eight institutions.

Eligibility was restricted to those employed in Thai enterprises or in roles mandating regular coordination with Thai partners, under the direct supervision of Thai nationals. These criteria ensured a focus on graduates engaged in sustained cross-cultural communication, thereby allowing the study to directly examine the transition from university training to workplace interaction.

The four employer participants were recruited from the companies where the alumni participants worked. This was done to obtain employer views from actual employment settings in which the alumni's communicative and intercultural readiness could be observed in practice. Taken together, these selection criteria increased the relevance of the sample to the aims of the study. At the same time, they also mean that the findings should be understood in relation to participants who had direct involvement in Thai-related educational or professional settings. The participants' profiles are shown in Table 2.

While a small sample group ($n=22$) limits generalizability, this study prioritizes the qualitative depth necessary to examine how curriculum design and workplace realities intersect within this education context.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, a method chosen for its ability to balance thematic consistency with the flexibility required to explore participants' subjective meanings (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Each participant took part in one online interview via WeChat voice call, and each interview lasted about 45 minutes. This format was used because it allowed the researcher to address common issues across groups while also leaving room for participants to describe experiences related to their own roles.

Four interview guides were developed for program chairs, current students, alumni, and employers. While adapted to each stakeholder's position in the education-to-workplace trajectory, all guides were theoretically anchored in Byram's (1997) ICC model. Specifically, the guides operationalized

Table 1. *Institutional characteristics of the selected thai language programs*

Institution	Location	Institutional profile	Thai program establishment (phase)
Yunnan Minzu University	Kunming (Capital)	Comprehensive	1993 (Early)
College of Arts and Sciences Kunming	Kunming (Capital)	Private	2005 (Early)
Southwest Forestry University	Kunming (Capital)	Agricultural and Forestry	2010 (Mid)
Yunnan University of Finance and Economics	Kunming (Capital)	Finance and Economics	2011 (Mid)
Kunming University of Science and Technology	Kunming (Capital)	Science and Technology	2017 (Recent)
Yuxi Normal University	Regional City	Normal	2006 (Early)
Dali University	Regional City	Comprehensive	2010 (Mid)
Pu'er University	Regional City	Comprehensive	2018 (Recent)

Table 2. *Characteristics of the participants*

ID	Gender	Age	Educational status/highest qualification	Relevant experience/context
Program Chairs				
P1	Female	43	Master's	16 (teaching experience; program chair (≥5 years))
P2	Male	46	Master's	22 (teaching experience; program chair (≥5 years))
P3	Male	37	Master's	8 (teaching experience; program chair (≥5 years))
P4	Female	32	Master's	5 (teaching experience; program chair (≥5 years))
P5	Male	38	Doctorate	10 (teaching experience; program chair (≥5 years))
P6	Female	39	Doctorate	6 (teaching experience; program chair (≥5 years))
P7	Female	47	Doctorate	22 (teaching experience; program chair (≥5 years))
P8	Female	45	Master's	18 (teaching experience; program chair (≥5 years))
Students				
S1	Female	22	Year 3	currently studying in Thailand
S2	Female	22	Year 3	currently studying in Thailand
S3	Male	22	Year 3	currently studying in Thailand
S4	Male	23	Year 3	currently studying in Thailand
S5	Female	23	Year 3	currently studying in Thailand
S6	Female	22	Year 3	currently studying in Thailand
Alumni				
A1	Female	25	Bachelor's	2 (working)
A2	Female	26	Bachelor's	3 (working)
A3	Female	27	Bachelor's	4 (working)
A4	Male	26	Bachelor's	3 (working)
Employers				
E1	Female	38	Bachelor's	13 (working)
E2	Male	41	Bachelor's	16 (working)
E3	Female	39	Master's	11 (working)
E4	Male	43	Bachelor's	17 (working)

Byram's five dimensions – attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting/relating, skills of discovery/interaction, and critical cultural awareness – by structuring inquiry around five core areas: curriculum design, pedagogical practices and resources, assessment mechanisms, faculty development, and university-industry collaboration. These areas were selected because they represent the primary sites of enactment where abstract intercultural aims are translated into concrete educational reality. This structure not only facilitated a comparative analysis of how ICC is understood across the transition from higher education to employment but also allowed for the identification of systemic gaps between intended policy goals and actual educational practice.

Interview questions for program chairs addressed curriculum goals, pedagogical strategies, faculty development, and existing assessment toward intercultural education. Current students were asked to reflect on their learning experiences and study-abroad journeys to gauge their perceived preparedness for intercultural interaction and development of intercultural skills. Alumni interviews focused on the transition from university training to workplace communication, specifically regarding the challenges encountered in Thai-related professional settings. Finally, employers were questioned on workplace

expectations, interactional demands, and any perceived gaps in the graduates' preparation. Collectively, these guides mapped the flow of intercultural values from policy (chairs) to reception (students) and ultimately to professional application (alumni and employers).

Interviews were conducted in either Chinese or Thai, depending on participants' language preferences. With consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim in the original language. Quotations used in the article were then translated into English. When culturally loaded terms appeared, translation decisions prioritized contextual meaning over literal equivalence. Back-translation and bilingual checking were used to support semantic consistency. The study was approved by the Mahidol University Institutional Review Board (COA. No. 2025/162.2603), and all participants signed informed consent forms authorizing the use of the information they provided for research and analysis.

Data Analysis

The interview data were analyzed through thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach. To support both theoretical sensitivity and openness to participants' accounts, the analysis followed a hybrid deductive–inductive logic (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). In this process, Byram's (1997, 2021) ICC model was used as a reflexive heuristic to help structure the analysis. In the initial deductive phase, Byram's five dimensions (attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting/relating, skills of discovery/interaction, and critical cultural awareness) were used to develop a set of a priori codes. These codes helped guide attention to how participants described linguistic preparation, interpretive ability, interactional responsiveness, reflection, and perceived intercultural gaps across stakeholder groups. In the subsequent inductive phase, the analysis remained open to emergent inductive codes derived more directly from participants' accounts, including role-sensitive communication, relational management, workplace mediation, and emotional adjustment. These deductive and inductive codes were then compared across stakeholder groups and iteratively clustered into broader themes. This process helped show both where participants' accounts could be interpreted in relation to particular ICC dimensions and where they pointed to context-specific demands that were not fully captured by the framework in a straightforward way. In this sense, the analysis remained informed by Byram's ICC model while also allowing room for contextually mediated dynamics, including institutional constraints and workplace interaction in South–South settings.

In interpreting the data, rather than treating broad cultural labels as self-explanatory causes of behavior, attention was given to institutional roles, relational positioning, and interactional negotiation. This approach was adopted to avoid cultural essentialism and to better reflect the fluid nature of communication in professional South–South contexts. To strengthen trustworthiness, member checking was used to confirm that the interpretations were broadly consistent with participants' intended meanings (Birt et al., 2016). Documentary materials, including course syllabi, were consulted as contextual sources to support the interpretation of interview data. As the interviews were conducted in Chinese and Thai, quotations used in the article were translated into English after transcription in the original language, with back-translation used to support semantic consistency (Brislin, 1970).

Findings

Across the cross-stakeholder analysis, four themes emerged from repeated comparison of program chair, student, alumni, and employer accounts. Together, these themes show where participants converged and diverged in their views of valued communicative capacities, recurring gaps in current Thai language education, and the conditions that shaped ICC development. Read in relation to Byram's (1997) ICC framework, the themes point most clearly to tensions around early ICC provision, interpretive and interactional preparedness, mediation in workplace settings, and the limited curricular and

institutional support available for these capacities. The sections below present these themes as empirical patterns drawn from the interview data.

The Separation of Linguistic and Intercultural Competence

The interview data show a clear difference between instructional priorities within Thai language programs and the expectations expressed by students and employers. Many program chairs described teaching practices as giving priority to grammatical and lexical mastery, while intercultural communicative competence (ICC) was often treated as something to be developed later or mainly through exchange experience. This difference was especially visible in participants' views on when and how ICC should be cultivated.

Most program chairs, who also functioned as instructors, regarded student exchange programs with Thai universities as sufficient exposure for ICC development. As a result, domestic instruction was often seen as needing to focus mainly on foundational language skills. One program chair stated that, "In the first and second years, we definitely place more emphasis on fostering language ability... we would not specifically include any instruction or activities to develop the learner's intercultural competence" (P4). This view suggests a language-first approach in which ICC is treated as a separate element of the program and often excluded from the teaching arrangements.

Furthermore, several instructors questioned the pedagogical feasibility of ICC, viewing it as overly abstract when compared to more tangible linguistic forms. As one participant explained, "If we teach a standalone course on intercultural communication, it is a bit abstract... I don't think it is possible to cultivate intercultural competence as a separate course" (P2). At the same time, not all participants in this group held the same position. A few participants advocated for earlier and more explicit ICC instruction. One instructor emphasized that "ICC should be taught domestically, and its teaching method should enable students to transfer what they learned in overseas practical training" (P5). These accounts show that program chairs were aware of the significance of ICC but had different views in how it should be taught and positioned in the program. This somewhat reflects their limited understanding of the interrelation of language and intercultural dimensions in developing the learners' communicative competence.

Students and employers, by contrast, placed more emphasis on earlier ICC preparation. As one student noted, ICC is "a required course... after taking it we will understand these cultural differences when we are in Thailand for study exchange" (S4). Likewise, employers regarded ICC as an important part of working with Thai counterparts, noting that it had already been included in "recruitment interviews" and "quarterly training" (E2). Across these accounts, linguistic proficiency was viewed as necessary, but not sufficient, for effective interaction in study-abroad or work settings. This difference between language-first instructional priorities and stronger calls for ICC preparation helps explain why ICC has not yet secured a clear place in the current program structure. This not only reflects a structural imbalance between linguistic and cultural development, but also highlights a disconnection between the two, contrary to Byram's view of linguistic and cultural competence as intrinsically interconnected in the development of ICC (Byram, 1997, 2021). It also leads to the next finding: even where ICC is acknowledged in principle, its curricular position and assessment support remain limited.

Marginalization of ICC in the TSL Curriculum

The interview data reveal that despite being recognized in principle, ICC remained marginal on practice—vaguely integrated, limited in resourcing, and lacking clear assessment criteria. Participants consistently indicated that institutional arrangements—particularly curriculum design and assessment

practices—continue to prioritize linguistic mastery, often under the assumption that language ability equates to communicative ability. As a result, ICC is frequently treated as peripheral—regarded as secondary rather than as a clearly defined component of program learning.

Most program chairs acknowledged that ICC lacks a clearly defined curricular position. As one participant noted, “There is no dedicated intercultural communication course... it is embedded within various other courses” (P1). While nominally labeled as “integrative,” this arrangement often resulted in fragmented and inconsistent coverage. Because ICC was often integrated unevenly depending upon individual instructor preference, it lacked explicit learning objectives for systematic development.

This situation was further affected by limited teaching resources tailored to the China–Thailand context. As P4 observed, “There is currently no dedicated Chinese–Thai intercultural communication textbook, and effective case studies are even more scarce.” As a result, instruction often remained confined to abstract concepts or generalized cultural knowledge rather than practical preparation for real interaction. Several student and alumni accounts reflected this gap. One student described feeling “ill-equipped” (S3) when navigating cultural nuances, while another noted: “I have no difficulty using Thai in formal contexts, but when communicating with Thai people in daily life... sometimes I suddenly feel like I don’t know Thai anymore” (S4). Echoing this concern, alumnus A1 criticized Thai literature courses as being “detached from reality,” noting that the curriculum prioritizes historical texts over contemporary social dynamics. Together, these accounts indicate a clear gap between formal linguistic instruction and interactional ability with Thais students later encountered.

A further issue concerned the absence of systematic assessment. One program chair stated, “We do not have a specific evaluation system for intercultural aspects” (P7). Without a clear assessment ‘yardstick’ to measure competence, instructors reported lacking both the guidance and the incentive to prioritize intercultural competence. This view was echoed by P4, who noted that “no standardized framework means no clear direction and learning outcomes for teachers,” implying that curricular components which are not tested are less likely to be taught. Students also questioned the value of existing language certifications. As S1 noted: “A certificate is just a certificate... some people obtain certificates, but their practical abilities may not be sufficient”. These accounts suggest that formal credentials are not always seen as reliable indicators of communicative performance, reflecting the negative consequences of the ambiguous positioning of ICC in the TSL program, which impedes the scaffolded development of intercultural knowledge and skills. More precisely, the absence of clear objectives and assessment weakens cultural knowledge and the skills of interpreting and relating and critical cultural awareness (Byram, 1997, 2021) as developing these dimensions require planned tasks and visible criteria. This concern also helps explain why employer expectations in the next section focused less on certificates and more on practical communicative and intercultural readiness.

The Readiness Gap: Professional Demands vs Graduate Intercultural Skills

Employers emphasized that the challenges faced by graduates were closely related to the communicative demands of workplace contexts involving direct interaction with Thais. In their accounts, effective interaction in those contexts required not only linguistic proficiency, but also sensitivity to indirect meanings, role relationships, and situational expectations. Across the interviews, employers consistently reported a gap between TSL graduates’ preparation and workplace expectations, which was not primarily attributed to deficiencies in grammatical knowledge. Instead, employers highlighted difficulties in using language appropriately in ongoing interaction.

For the companies interviewed, ICC was viewed not merely as a soft skill, but as an important part of workplace effectiveness. As one employer noted, “ICC can significantly lower communication

costs and reduce misjudgments” (E1). Conversely, when intercultural misunderstandings occurred, participants warned that the consequences could be larger. As another participant explained: “when a cross-cultural misunderstanding happens, the impact is magnified... it may cause losses or increase costs” (E2). These accounts suggest that employers value ICC not only as a personal attribute, but also as a practical resource for reducing misunderstanding and supporting coordination in daily work.

Employers observed several areas where graduates appeared unprepared. First, many graduates were described as struggling to “read between the lines,” especially when interpreting indirect refusals or polite disagreement in Thai-related workplace communication. Participants described cases in which graduates took statements literally and failed to notice the intended meaning. One employer observed that graduates often failed to “recognize subtle or polite refusals” (E4). This sometimes led to misjudgments, including uncertainty about “when to navigate issues through ‘face’ versus when to engage in cost discussions” (E1). The concern was less about personal traits than about whether graduates were prepared for the pressure and ambiguity of real workplace communication.

The second area concerned responses to unexpected situations during intercultural interaction. Linguistic competence alone was not seen as sufficient for managing such moments. Employers noted that some TSL graduates they worked with “lack emotional stability and adaptability in unexpected situations” (E2). In this context, employers’ concerns about emotional adaptability highlighted a pedagogical gap in teaching situational mediation, rather than reflecting inherent trait deficiencies among graduates.

Third, employers expressed a strong demand for “cultural mediators” rather than language translators alone. Participants expressed frustration with staff who functioned only as conduits for literal translation, without processing the underlying intent or work-style differences involved in the message. As one participant explained, “Companies seek professionals who can bridge cultural differences and work styles, not just translate language” (E3). These accounts suggest that employers valued mediation, interpretation, and coordination across working styles as important parts of communicative readiness.

Ultimately, these three areas of concern underscore a persistent gap between language proficiency and genuine intercultural communicative competence. Employers expect graduates to be “work-ready” for the complexities of real-world interactions and negotiations. This requires more than vocabulary; it demands the ability to interpret intent, manage interpersonal relations, and mediate between overlapping but distinct professional expectations. More specifically, the difficulty of “reading between the lines” reflects Byram’s skills of interpreting and relating, while the need to respond to unexpected workplace situations relates to the skills of discovery and interaction. Employers’ emphasis on mediation across working styles also connects to critical cultural awareness when graduates are expected not only to notice differences, but also to make reflective and situated judgments about appropriate conduct in professional interaction (Byram, 1997, 2021).

To address these gaps, many companies had introduced their own intercultural training for new recruits. However, these efforts were often described as costly and limited in effectiveness, especially when they were one-off activities without sustained follow-up. As one employer explained, the outcomes frequently fell short because “we don’t normally have long-term follow-up and supervision” (E2). As a result, employers expressed a strong preference for “job-ready” candidates, since in-house training alone was not seen as sufficient to build these abilities in a short period of time. These accounts also help explain the subsequent finding: given the highly specific workplace demands, mere exposure or overseas experience is often not enough - particularly when compounded by limited teacher preparation and institutional support.

Reliance on Overseas Exposure

The interview data suggest that ICC development relied primarily on student exchange programs to Thailand. Several participants described a common assumption that teachers and students could develop intercultural competence mainly through overseas study, work experience, or contact with Thai-speaking environments. This assumption appears to have diminished the perceived need for explicit ICC pedagogy, both within the overseas training modules and across the broader curriculum.

A primary factor underlying this assumption was that many TSL teachers, while highly trained in linguistics, lacked formal preparation in intercultural communication pedagogy. There was a widespread perception that overseas study or work experience automatically equipped teachers to teach culture. However, the interview data suggest that experiential knowledge alone was often not sufficient for pedagogical purposes. While teachers might possess personal cultural adaptability, they often struggled to translate those experiences into explicit classroom instruction. As one program chair noted, “our teachers’ understanding of cross-culture is superficial, even newly hired PhDs lack systematic theoretical knowledge” (P5). This led teachers to continue focusing on linguistic instruction, as they lacked both the conceptual understanding and practical pedagogical tools required for systematic ICC teaching.

This situation was further affected by limited institutional support. As another program chair explained, “there is almost no specialized training for intercultural teaching” (P7). Professional development opportunities were described as being more closely tied to linguistic research than to pedagogical innovation. Without sustained support, teachers had few opportunities to update their approaches or align them with ICC-oriented goals. As a result, traditional form-focused teaching often continued not only because of individual preference, but also because alternative pedagogical models were not well supported at the institutional level.

Institutional limits were also visible in university–industry cooperation. Although companies were formally involved, their participation was often described in broad or symbolic terms. Cooperation was frequently framed as a way to “expand job opportunities” (P1) or enable “feedback exchanges” (P2), rather than as a direct source of curricular change. Moreover, as one participant observed, “most business-sector experts universities invited are not frontline practitioners, and they tend to give praise rather than practical suggestions” (P5). These accounts suggest that the feedback loop between universities and employers often remained weak, even though employers had already identified specific communicative and intercultural demands in workplace settings.

Despite these constraints, isolated efforts were also reported. Some teachers introduced intercultural tasks that “increased the employment rate for graduates working abroad” (P5). One institution successfully hired an industry expert, although the process was difficult: “the approval was very difficult... but the effect was very good” (P8). However, such cases remained exceptions and appeared to depend more on individual initiative than on institutional design. Overall, limited support at the program level contributed to fragmented ICC teaching, with “each teacher teaching in their own way” (P1), leaving students with “insufficient training” (S2). This suggests that institutional limits do not merely reduce students’ exposure to intercultural content; they also weaken teachers’ capacity to mediate, model, and scaffold the development of ICC in systematic ways.

Discussion

The findings reveal a fundamental tension between linguistic proficiency and intercultural competence in Thai language education in China, arising from a misalignment among institutional

policy, pedagogical practice, and professional demands. This section examines this tension through three aspects: the linguistic-intercultural discursive divide, the limitations of unguided study-abroad contexts for ICC development, and the impact of assessment signalling on the broader TSL curriculum.

The Discursive Divide Between Linguistic and Intercultural Competence

The persistence of a “focus on forms” in Thai language education may be understood not only as a result of pedagogical inertia, but also as part of a broader instrumental orientation in which Thai proficiency is often framed as a practical resource for regional trade and mobility (Nedopil, 2024). In this orientation, language is frequently treated more as a technical tool than as a medium of meaning-making and relationship-building. Read through Byram’s (1997) framework, this pattern suggests that linguistic competence is being prioritized, while the intercultural dimensions of ICC—particularly attitudes, skills of interpreting and relating, and critical cultural awareness—receive less systematic attention. The findings also suggest that language and culture remain separated in program design and teaching priorities, a divide that risks producing what Bennett (1997) termed “fluent fools”—learners with relatively strong verbal proficiency but limited intercultural understanding. This separation also helps explain why symbolic competence, understood as the ability to read meanings, positioning, and power in discourse (Kramsch, 2006, 2009), remains underdeveloped.

The challenges identified in this study, however, should not be explained through fixed contrasts between “Chinese culture” and “Thai culture.” Instead, the China–Thailand context is better understood through institutional roles, relational positioning, and locally mediated interactional expectations than through stable cultural properties. In this sense, the challenge in South–South interaction is not that participants move between two coherent cultural systems, but that assumed familiarity may reduce the perceived need for critical interpretation and reflection. This presumption of indifference often leads individuals to overlook specific local meanings and subtle nuances, resulting in what Li and Li (2025) term a “familiarity trap” where perceived cultural affinities mask deeper linguistic, ethical, and historical frictions. Our findings indicate that some students approached Thai-face interaction as relatively transparent and straightforward, only to find that workplace and everyday encounters demanded greater sensitivity to indirect meanings, role relations, and situational cues. This is consistent with research on intercultural mediation and metapragmatic awareness, which suggests that intercultural learning depends on how individuals navigate language use, relational expectations, and situated meanings in real-time (Liddicoat, 2022; McConachy & Liddicoat, 2016; McConachy, 2018). Furthermore, viewing these interactions through the lens of relational evaluation and intercultural politeness (Spencer-Oatey & Kádár, 2021) helps explain the nuances of rapport negotiation - a crucial element in South–South settings, where assumed proximity can often mask the underlying complexity of the encounter. What appears analytically distinctive here is not civilizational difference as such, but the way assumed proximity may obscure the need for interpretation, reflection, and mediation. From this perspective, Byram’s (1997) notion of interpreting and relating remains highly relevant but can benefit from more explicit specification in relation to sociopragmatic interpretation, mediation, and interactional positioning in context.

The tension between prioritizing linguistic form and fostering ICC development was also visible across stakeholder perspectives. Program chairs often positioned ICC as something to be developed later, whereas students and employers expressed a stronger need for earlier preparation. This divergence suggests that the issue is not individual student deficiency, but a curricular pattern in which intercultural education is acknowledged in principle but remains weakly embedded in TSL program training. Employer accounts are especially important here; their concern was not simply a lack of cultural knowledge, but that many graduates struggled to perform the necessary interactional positioning and situational mediation required to navigate hierarchical working styles. Put differently, the divide

between form-focused instruction and intercultural reality weakens graduates' ability to act as cultural mediators rather than literal translators. From this perspective, the findings support the need for earlier ICC provision, stronger critical intercultural reflection, and a closer alignment between language teaching, mediation-oriented practice, and assessment.

Taken together, these findings help clarify how an ICC orientation manifests within Thai-related South–South settings. In this context, the study's results provide a concrete elaboration of Byram's (1997) skills of interpreting and relating. Specifically, the analysis highlights how these skills are operationalized through situated mediation and role-sensitive positioning. These dimensions are already inherent in the model, but the present findings show how they may need to be made more explicit in this particular educational and workplace context. Framing the findings as an elaboration of Byram's core ICC dimensions allows for a more nuanced understanding of how intercultural competence is practically negotiated within regional educational and workplace settings.

The Limits of Exposure-Driven ICC Development

The analysis raises doubts about the common assumption that physical presence in Thailand automatically leads to intercultural communicative competence. Viewed through Byram's (1997) framework, the problem with exposure-based learning is not simply limited contact, but the weak development of the skills of discovery and interaction and the skills of interpreting and relating. These capacities require guided interpretation, reflection, and interaction rather than physical presence alone (Jackson, 2018). In this sense, the findings dismantle the “myth of immersion”—the mistaken belief that individuals can absorb language and culture through mere proximity (Vande Berg et al., 2012)—demonstrating that overseas experience should not be treated as a substitute for explicit ICC pedagogy.

This helps explain why the “3+1” model, although valued by many program chairs, did not consistently translate into stronger communicative readiness in the accounts of students, alumni, and employers. The issue should not be framed as a simple failure to understand a fixed “Thai communication style.” Rather, the interview data point to difficulties in situational mediation within role-sensitive and institutionally mediated interaction. In Thai-facing study and workplace settings, learners often had to interpret indirect or non-explicit cues, respond to changing role relations, and manage uncertainty in real time. These demands call not only for linguistic ability, but also for symbolic competence, interactional positioning, and ongoing interactional negotiation (Kramsch, 2006; Baker, 2022). Without such structured intervention, students may reside in the host country while remaining within an “expatriate bubble,” reproducing simplified cultural impressions or biases rather than developing deeper interpretive understanding (Jackson, 2018)."

Employer accounts make this limitation especially visible. Their concern was not simply that graduates lacked cultural information, but that many were not yet ready to mediate between different working styles, relational expectations, and communicative norms in professional interaction. What employers described as difficulty in “reading between the lines” is therefore better understood not as cultural literacy alone, but as a limitation in mediation, workplace readiness, and interactional judgment. Likewise, concerns about adaptability in unexpected situations are better understood not as personal weakness, but as evidence that emotional resilience remains underdeveloped in actual intercultural interaction.

The problem, then, is not exposure itself, but institutional over-reliance on exposure as if it could automatically generate ICC. As the finding suggests, this reliance is reinforced by limited teacher preparation, inadequate professional development in intercultural pedagogy, and insufficient institutional support for turning overseas or workplace experience into structured learning (Romijn et al., 2021).

For this reason, contact may remain fragmented or descriptive but not pedagogically processed. The findings therefore suggest that ICC development depends not only on mobility opportunities, but also on explicit pedagogical design, pre-departure preparation, reflective scaffolding, and stronger links between classroom practice and the interactional demands reported in workplace settings.

Assessment Signaling and the Hidden Curriculum of ICC

Assessment does more than measure learning outcomes; it also signals what institutions value. As assessment research has long noted, assessment is “an indicator to students of what is regarded as most important” (Boud & Falchikov, 2006, p. 405), consequently, what is assessed is what is valued. Within Byram’s (1997) framework, the limited assessment of ICC does not simply leave one skill untaught. It weakens the visibility of several intercultural dimensions, especially skills of interpreting and relating, critical cultural awareness, and the capacity for situational mediation. In this sense, the assessment signaling in the program appears to give stronger recognition to linguistic mastery, while ICC is relegated to marginal status, rarely recognized as part of academic achievement.

This interpretation is consistent with the interview data. Program chairs repeatedly noted the absence of a specific evaluation system for intercultural aspects and the lack of a clear “yardstick” for judging ICC, while students also questioned whether existing certificates could reflect practical communicative performance. Rather than showing that ICC is rejected in principle, these accounts suggest a weaker but more consequential pattern: ICC is acknowledged in discourse but only vaguely operationalized in curriculum. This helps explain why intercultural learning is often treated as secondary when time, resources, or teaching priorities become constrained.

From this perspective, the issue is not simply whether culture appears in course content, but whether intercultural capacities are institutionally recognized in learning outcomes, teaching priorities, and assessment criteria. The hidden curriculum lies in the message conveyed by routine assessment: grammatical mastery is measurable and therefore important, whereas interactional judgment, symbolic competence, and situational mediation are often more difficult to translate into routine assessment, and therefore more vulnerable to marginalization. This form of assessment signaling also creates wash-back, as students tend to invest most in what is tested. This pattern is consistent with broader concerns in ICC assessment research, which has long noted the difficulty of translating intercultural aims into stable assessment practices (Scarino, 2017). It also sits uneasily with action-oriented assessment models such as the CEFR, which treat sociolinguistic and pragmatic competence as integral to language use and, in the Companion Volume, give more explicit recognition to mediation (Council of Europe, 2020). In this respect, Shohamy’s (2001) argument remains useful: what enters evaluation gains curricular legitimacy, while what remains unassessed often loses instructional time, institutional guidance, and pedagogical priority.

The findings further suggest that this assessment gap has consequences beyond the classroom. When certificates mainly index linguistic attainment, they do not necessarily signal workplace readiness, especially in settings where employers expect graduates to navigate interactional negotiation, manage role-sensitive interaction, and act as situational mediators rather than literal translators. In this sense, the problem is not simply a missing test component, but a structural disconnect between curricular assessment and the communicative demands reported across stakeholder groups. These patterns suggest that a more coherent response would likely require not only new assessment tools, but also clearer learning outcomes, stronger institutional support, and closer alignment between language instruction, ICC development, and the forms of situational mediation valued in Thai-facing professional contexts.

Conclusion

Using a qualitative, multi-stakeholder design, this study examined the conceptualization, instruction, and valuation of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) within Thai language programs at Chinese universities. The findings reveal a structural disconnect between institutional rhetoric and pedagogical reality. This misalignment is primarily rooted in a lack of conceptual clarity and pedagogical expertise at both the faculty and institutional levels, leading to the systemic marginalization of ICC. This gap is further exacerbated by superficial collaboration between academia and industry, as the voices and requirements of employers remain largely absent from curriculum design and classroom instruction.

Theoretically, these findings reinforce the relevance of Byram's (1997) framework within TSL, specifically regarding the interrelation of linguistic and intercultural competence. Employer expectations for "work-ready" graduates underscore the critical need to cultivate the attitudes and skills of interpreting, relating, discovery, and interaction necessary to navigate South–South workplace settings. However, the data suggest that these ICC dimensions benefit from more explicit specification to remain suitable for this regional context. In particular, the skills of interpreting and relating may be understood in this setting as involving a more nuanced "interpretive capacity" that prioritizes high-context pragmatic decoding—the ability to decipher indirect meanings and face-saving norms. This resonates with work on the role of metapragmatic awareness in intercultural communication and language learning (e.g. McConachy, 2018). In the present study, students' difficulty was not only a matter of limited cultural knowledge, but also of noticing how face, hierarchy, role relations, and workplace expectations shaped the interpretation of meaning in Thai-related interaction. Furthermore, the dimension of critical cultural awareness can be more explicitly connected to the situational mediation of divergent working styles, acknowledging that the mediator's role is to proactively resolve workplace friction; this shifts the focus from purely cultural mediation toward professional-situational mediation. Simultaneously, the data highlight localized demands for a "role-sensitive capacity" that embraces symbolic competence—the ability to navigate hierarchy, status, and relational management, which are not always made sufficiently visible in generalized ICC frameworks. Crucially, this study challenges stereotypical assumptions stemming from perceived physical and broad cultural similarities; instead, it advocates for "the learning of otherness within the nearness" through a more deeply contextualized pedagogical approach. These nuances suggest that to render Byram's model fully applicable to South–South professional contexts, it must account for these highly situated, affective, and role-based interpretive demands.

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Data availability statement

The corresponding author can provide the datasets used and/or analyzed in the current work upon reasonable request.

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