

# A STUDY OF INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN DIGITAL ERA FOR CHINESE AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHERS

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## ABSTRACT

Nowadays, as the Chinese as a Foreign language continues to heat up, the dispatched Chinese teachers and foreign students studying Chinese as a Foreign language have encountered more and more problems in the cultivation of intercultural competence. This study is grounded by Byram's intercultural competence model to conduct a series of questionnaires and structured interviews which hope to answer the perspectives of current teachers of Chinese as a foreign, their professional skill development related of intercultural competence in the digital era and how they perceive intercultural competence contributes to learner' Chinese communicative competence. It shows that currently Chinese as a foreign language teacher's lack of emphasis on cultural teaching, and also awareness of the cultivation of intercultural competence. Teachers of Chinese as a foreign language will be able to improve their intercultural competence accordingly in the digital era surrounding foreign cultural knowledge, the ability to adapt to the new culture, curiosity and respect for foreign culture by which criteria will help improve students' Chinese communication competence the most.

**Keywords:** Intercultural Competence; Chinese as a Foreign Language; Chinese as a Foreign Language Teachers; Communicative Competence; The Digital Era

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## INTRODUCTION

Thailand is a country with a highly developed tourism industry, so mastering a suitable foreign language is extremely important to the development of individuals and society, in terms of the current situation of foreign language learning in Thailand, Chinese as foreign language has achieved a dominant position. According to the official publishing, there were 184,799 foreign students receiving academic education in China in 2019. Countries along The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI or B&R) (National Development and Reform Commission, 2019) have become the driving force for studying in China, and the coverage of international students is stable. The top 10 countries include: South Korea, United States, Thailand, India, Russia, Pakistan, Japan, Kazakhstan, Indonesia and France. Countries with a large number of students studying in China can show that Chinese as a foreign language has a great influence in various aspects. Thailand ranks the third place, obviously, the status of Chinese as foreign language in Thailand has been rising and plays an important role. More than 3,000 schools in Thailand have offered Chinese as foreign language subject basically from kindergarten to university (Zeng, 2020). At the high school stage, the Thai education system is divided into two aspects: science and liberal arts. The liberal arts class stipulates that students must learn a foreign language which includes Chinese, Japanese, French, Vietnamese and other language classes. The most popular is the Chinese as foreign language (People, 2019).

In the 21st century the world is shifting from the industrial revolution to a brand-new economic domination of information technology, which popularly called the digital era. Due to the advent of the digital era, the world has also become a global village, and people living in the global village are conducting efficient economic, cultural, political, linguistic, and other exchanges. The endless problems in the communication process of people all over the world due to cultural differences make the Chinese as a foreign language educators more and more concerned over the study of intercultural competence (Denys and Wanja, 2019).

## OBJECTIVE

This study focuses to answer the following questions:

1. What are Chinese as a foreign language teachers' perspective toward intercultural competence?
2. How do Chinese as a foreign language teachers develop their intercultural competence in the digital era?
3. How do Chinese as a foreign language teachers perceive intercultural competence contributes to learners' Chinese communicative competence?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Communicative competence*

Language as a system of communication that enables humans to exchange verbal or symbolic utterances. This definition stresses the social functions of language and the fact that humans use it to express themselves, and to manipulate objects in their environment (Alyona, Tatyana and Oxana, 2019).

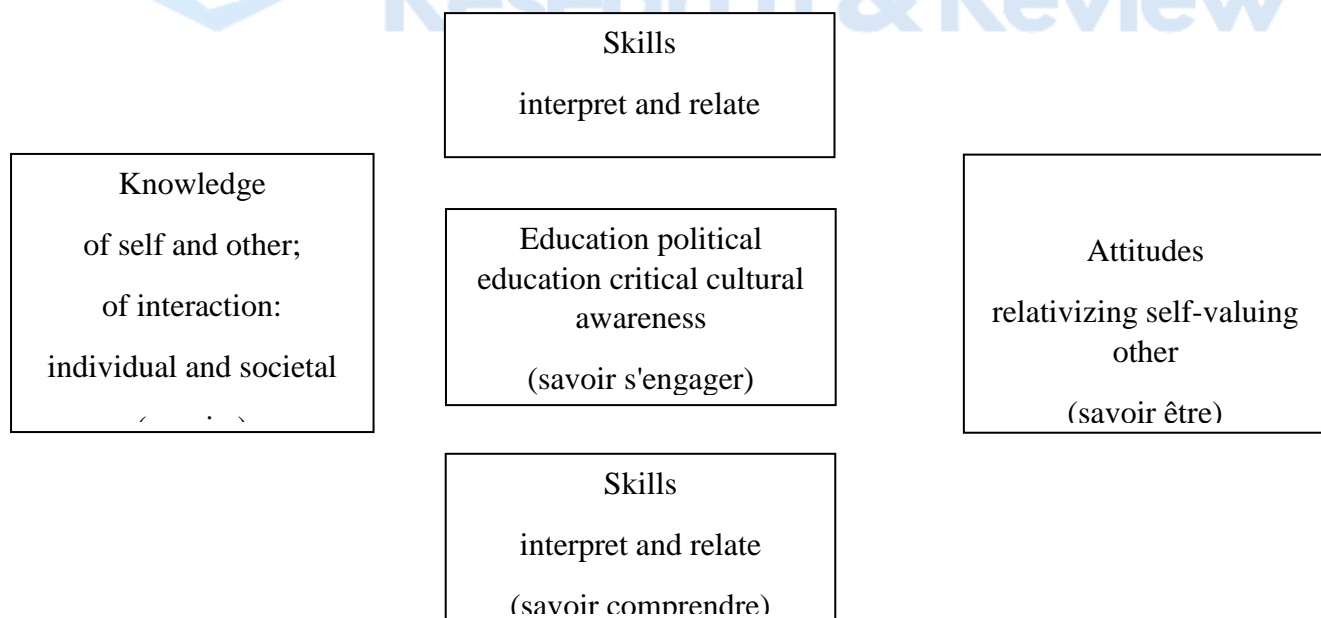
Considering of Chinese as a foreign language teaching, it is important for teachers to teach students the communicative competence and it is what I have been focusing on in my teaching career. Communicative competence teaching focuses on developing students' skills to conduct meaningful communication in the target language in purposeful situations and its key objective has been to achieve effective exchange of information and message between the interlocutors (Okoli, 2017).

## INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

As a result of globalization, the increasing communication among people from different language and cultural backgrounds is challenging the objectives of second and foreign language teaching. Many researchers suggest that achieving only communicative competence, which has been regarded as the goal for language education for more than two decades, is no

longer sufficient. The notion of communicative competence largely neglects the exploration of culture that is necessary to facilitate and make sense of how exchange of information is performed effectively and appropriately in various cultural settings. A body of research has suggested that communicative competence should be broadened to include the notion of intercultural competence (Oana, 2019; Win, 2018).

Intercultural competence is first conceptualized in the field of intercultural communication after that then it is introduced to second and foreign language education. From the current intercultural communication literature, it is found that the most widely recognized theory is from Byram by his model of intercultural competence. It contains five components which are: attitude, knowledge, interpret and relate skills, discover and/or interact skills and education. For the relationship between these five components, Byram represented it by Table 1. Among these five components Education was placed at the center of his theoretical model which he believes that the purpose of education is not to change learners' values, but to make them aware of where they stand when they are critical of other cultures. He also emphasized that the prerequisites of the five components are knowledge and attitude, through the application of these two skills, it can enable intercultural communicators to further develop their skills in a realistic language environment (Byram, 1997).



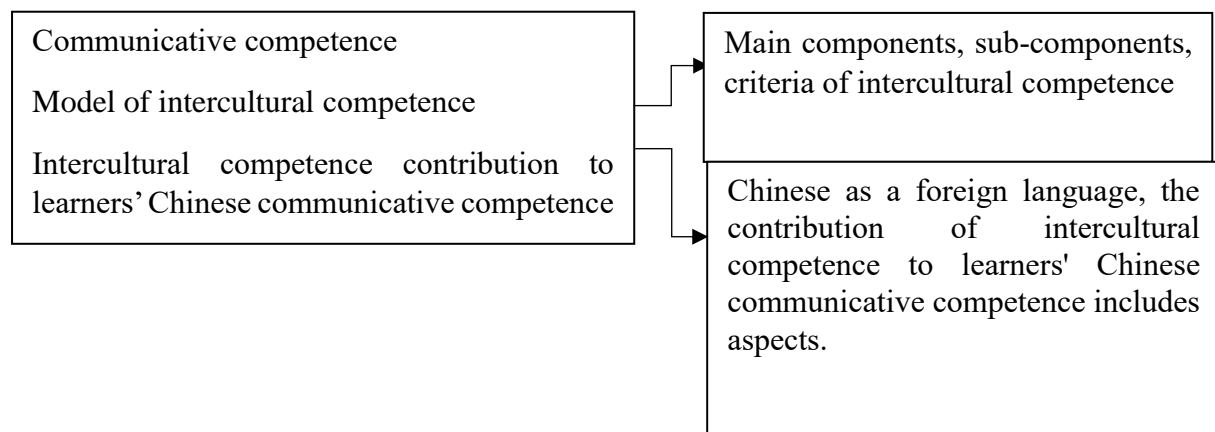
**Table 1** Factors in intercultural competence (Byram, 1997, p. 34)

By weighing the pros and cons Byram's intercultural competence model with its operability in the context of Chinese as a foreign language to answer what are Chinese as a foreign language teachers' perspective toward intercultural competence and how do Chinese as a foreign language teachers perceive intercultural competence contributes to learners' Chinese communicative competence and depending on the frequency and results of the current use of this model in the related research community all have directed me to selected this model as a reference for this study.

## **INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE CONTRIBUTION TO LEARNERS' CHINESE COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE**

By reading the articles of some scholars, most of them have revealed that intercultural communication has become an inseparable part of our daily life, especially in the era of global economic integration and the arrival of the digital era, so that the physical national boundaries between countries are no longer a barrier to people's communication. Since then, understanding the cultures of people in different regions has become a general trend and people's urgent needs for intercultural knowledge has made intercultural competence an indispensable skill in today's society. A bunch of researches showed that intercultural competence has a positive effect on the learner's foreign language communication competence from their language learning. First, it can greatly reduce the communication barriers of students in different language and cultural contexts (Wuri, Fenny and Fatma, 2021). Second, student's language knowledge shows significant improvement with the help of intercultural competence related teaching (Yu, 2019). Apart from this, for students who study foreign languages their vocabulary, speaking and writing skills have improved significantly in the case of integrating intercultural competence into the learning objectives (Thao and Tham, 2018).

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK



**Table 2** Conceptual framework of developing Chinese as a foreign language teachers' intercultural competence which leads to improve learners' Chinese communicative competence

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is conducted by a mixed method research which contains qualitative research and quantitative research. Questionnaires and structured interviews were applied to collect data from teachers of Chinese as a foreign language in schools of Thailand.

This study's questionnaires and structured interviews are grounded by Byram's intercultural competence model with 10 criteria.

## POPULATION AND SAMPLES

Population for this study is teachers of Chinese as a foreign language both from Thai public schools and private schools in Chiang Mai. There are about 200 schools in Chiang Mai, and almost every school offers Chinese as a foreign language courses. There are approximate 238-300 Chinese teachers in Chiang Mai.

Samples for the purpose of this study, fifty-one full-time teachers of Chinese as a foreign language as volunteers (eleven males and forty females) participated in this survey. Thirty-three of them are Thai teachers of Chinese as a foreign language from Thailand's public schools and eighteen of them are native Chinese speakers (Chinese citizen). Thai teachers of Chinese as a foreign language all hold an undergraduate degree in Chinese major from Thai universities. Twelve native Chinese are selected by the Confucius Institute and assigned to teach Chinese as a foreign language in Thai public schools. The other six native Chinese speakers are working in private international schools from Thailand through recruitment.

## RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

*The questionnaire survey contained the following five sections:*

**Section 1:** target groups' demographic information.

**Section 2:** questions about Chinese as a foreign language teachers' teaching objectives.

**Section 3:** questions about Chinese as a foreign language teachers' cultural teaching objectives.

**Section 4:** questions about the purpose of surfing online in the digital era.

**Section 5:** questions about teachers' perceptions of intercultural competence contribution to learners' Chinese communicative. competence.

The interview survey includes four dimensions related to intercultural competence which are: awareness, teaching material, knowledge and ability.

To make sure all the questions are valid three consultants who are holding Master's degree in teaching Chinese as a foreign language were consulted to perform an item-objective congruency (IOC) test of each question item.

## DATA COLLECTION

### Analysis stage

For Chinese as a foreign language teachers' intercultural competence related to this study's objective was carried out from November 2021 to March 2022. There is a data collection process as follows:



1. Study related concepts, theories and researches as to develop and create a conceptual framework in the composition of intercultural competence.

### **Synthesis stage**

1. Study additional documents and related research to obtain a variety of information leading to synthesis.
2. Summary of the results of the main components and criteria of intercultural competence.
3. Evaluation stage
4. Organize investigation by using prepared questionnaires and interview questions to the target groups. Aggregate and analyze findings.

### **Data Analysis**

#### ***Quantitative data***

Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) was applied to perform data analysis. The results of teachers' objectives of teaching, their cultural teaching objectives, their purposes of surfing online and perceptions of intercultural competence contribution to learners' Chinese communicative competence were described by using descriptive statistics.

#### ***Qualitative data***

The interview survey was conducted by ZOOM meeting. Target groups' answers are analyzed in Chinese to maintain the authenticity of the context in which the interview was conducted. The findings are translated into English and reported in the Results and Discussion section below.

### ***Results and Discussion***

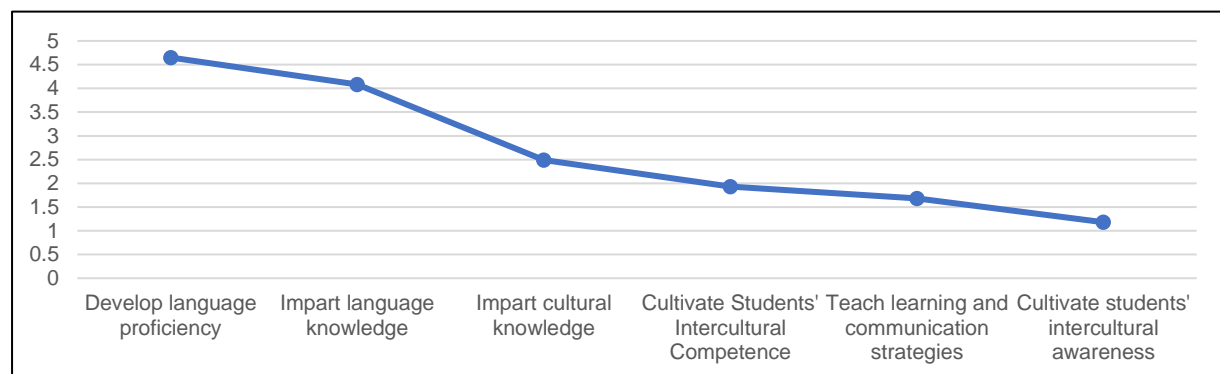
This section will be focused on answering the study's questions after conduct questionnaires and interviews.



### *What are Chinese as a foreign language teachers' perspective toward intercultural competence?*

In the questionnaire survey, teachers are asked to rank the importance of their language classes teaching objectives. Detailed data from table 3.

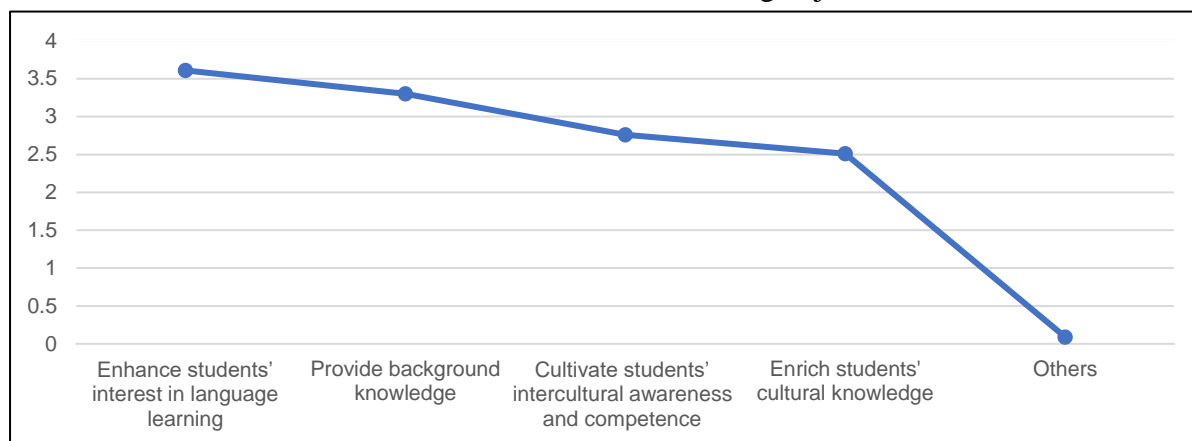
**Table 3** The objectives of teaching Chinese as a foreign language



It revealed that developing language proficiency and imparting language knowledge ranked the top two places and cultivating students' intercultural competence ranked fourth place.

In addition, nearly half of the teachers' cultural teaching objective is to enhance students' interest in language learning and provide the background knowledge required for teaching. The average comprehensive scores are 3.61 and 3.3, respectively. The average comprehensive score of cultivating students' intercultural awareness and intercultural competence is 2.76, and the average comprehensive score of the cultural teaching purpose of enriching students' cultural knowledge is 2.51, which is second only to the average score of cultivating students' intercultural awareness and intercultural competence. The calculation method of the average comprehensive score is: the average comprehensive score of the options =  $(\sum \text{frequency} \times \text{weight}) / \text{the number of people filling this questionnaire survey}$ . It reflects the comprehensive ranking of options, and the higher the score, the higher the overall ranking. See Table 4 for detailed data.

**Table 4** Teachers' cultural teaching objective



After conducting interviews with five teachers of Chinese as a foreign language, it was found that the main problems in the current Chinese teaching classrooms about the cultivation of intercultural competence include: the separation of theory development and the actual teaching practice which the development of language teaching practice lags far behind the development of intercultural communication theory, the lack of emphasis on cultural teaching, and the lack of awareness of the cultivation of intercultural competence. Classroom teaching is mainly based on developing students' language proficiency which is using much more time than cultural teaching. About intercultural competence teaching objective is mainly about cultural knowledge which is mostly about some cultural characteristics in daily life, and it is for the purpose of serving language proficiency teaching. For the purpose of the acquisition of intercultural competence is rarely paid enough attention. In addition, there is a lack of comprehensiveness in the cultivation of intercultural competence. The deficiencies are also manifested in that most of the Chinese classrooms which are involved language knowledge, while cultural knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values are only occasionally involved and are basically not included in the teachers' teaching objectives and teaching design (Zhang, 2017). The edited summary can refer to Table 5 for the status quo of the problems mentioned by the teachers in the interview.

**Table 5** The status quo of the problems in current Chinese as a foreign language classroom

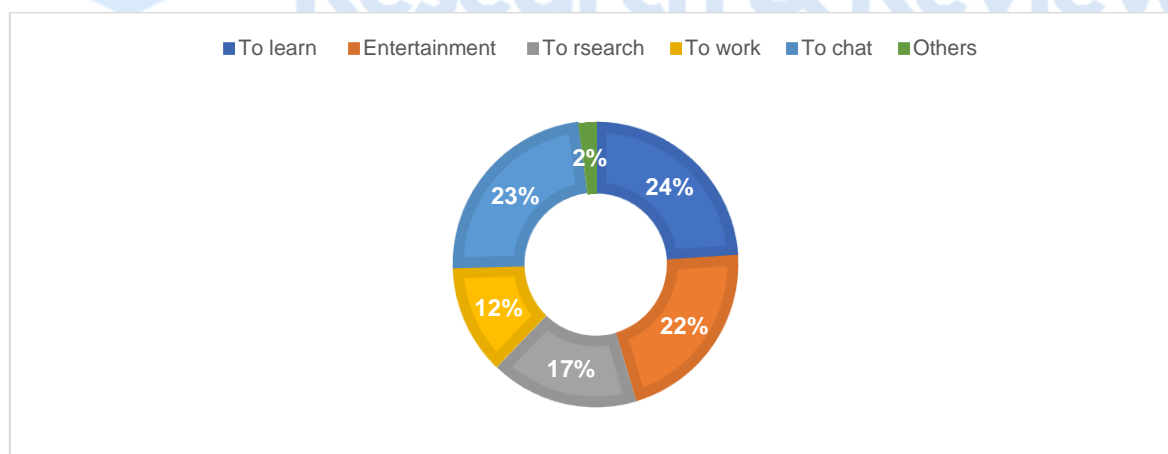
Consciousness dimension	Insufficient intercultural sensitivity, weak intercultural awareness;
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Teaching material dimension	There is a serious lack of suitable teaching materials and corresponding professional learning materials;
Knowledge dimension	Insufficient breadth and depth of cultural knowledge;
Ability dimension	Insufficient intercultural competence, their English-speaking skills need to be improved, their mastery of teaching methods and concepts and information technology cannot fully meet the needs of innovative classrooms.

***How do teachers of Chinese as a foreign language develop their intercultural competence in the digital era?***

By answering this question Teachers were asked about the purpose of surfing online in digital era (Table 6).

**Table 6** The purpose of surfing online in the digital era



From Table 6, 24% of teachers will surf online to learn as to develop and improve their personal and professional skills. Grounded in the concept of lifelong learning in the digital era it is valid and effective for teachers as Chinese a foreign language to develop and improve their personal and professional skills considering of intercultural competence (Jiang, Soon, and Li, 2021).

Teachers of Chinese as a foreign language should be focusing on improving their intercultural competence, enhance their intercultural awareness, and establish intercultural attitudes through teachers 'training, continuous learning and reflection in teaching daily, shared learning among teachers, writing papers, and case analysis and so on. As to the fast pace of nowadays' knowledge economy, schools are seeing lifelong learning as a core component and the digital era has made it much easier for teachers to develop their professional skills anytime anywhere.

By answers to the previous question, teachers of Chinese as a foreign language will be able to improve accordingly in the digital era depending on their shortcomings in intercultural competence.

***How do teachers of Chinese as a foreign language perceive intercultural competence contributes to learner' Chinese communicative competence?***

From the questionnaire survey the participants are re requested to rate the which they perceive that intercultural competence can help learners to effectively communicate in Chinese on a 4-point scale which include: very useful (4), useful (3), somewhat useful (2) and not useful (1). Table 7 reveals the findings in this regard.

**Table 7** Teachers' perceptions of intercultural competence contribution to learners' Chinese communicative competence

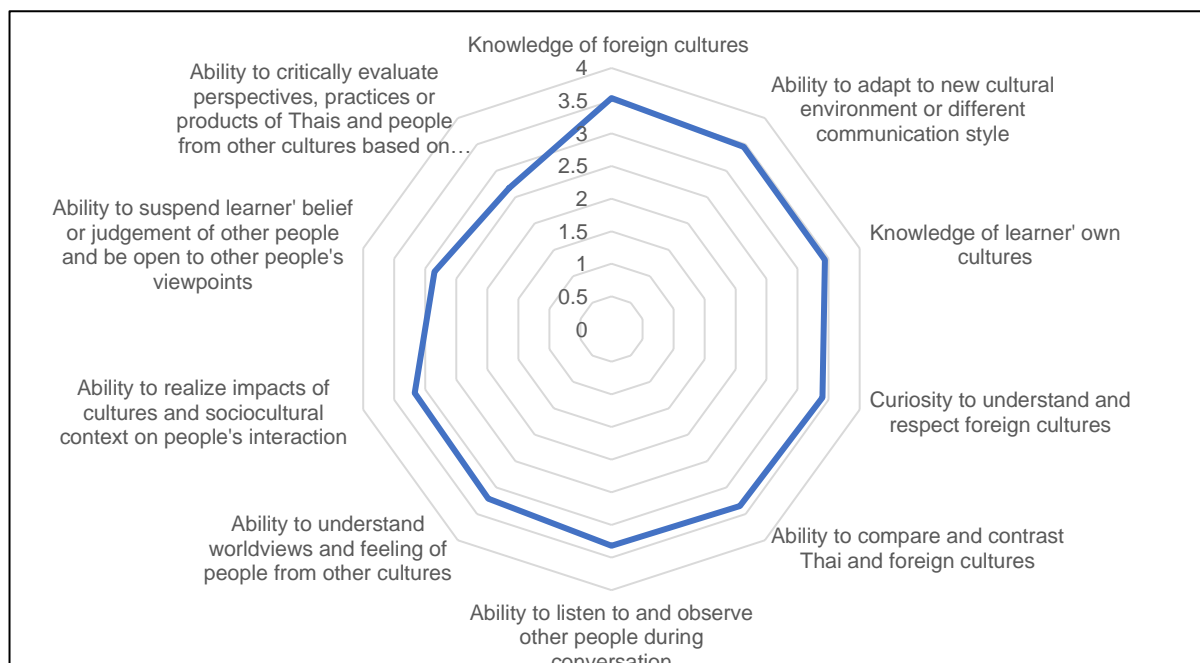


Table 7 shows the participants' overall perception that intercultural competence was useful to learners. Particularly, they perceived that the knowledge of foreign cultures tended to help learners the most while the ability to critically evaluate the perspectives, practices or products of Thais and people from other cultures based on explicit criteria is the least helpful (David, Shorena, Nino and Giorgi, 2017). The ten criteria in the questionnaire are around the five components of intercultural competence, which should be equally important.

However, regarding the limited class hours of Chinese as a foreign language teaching at present, teachers should use the investigation results as a reference. In terms of teaching objectives and design, they should focus on several important criteria in intercultural competence, including foreign cultural knowledge, the ability to adapt to the new culture, students' own cultural knowledge and their curiosity and respect for foreign culture. In this way, teachers can maximize the students' communicative competence in Chinese as a foreign language in the limited learning hours.

Through the above theoretical explanation, investigation, and analysis, it is shown that the problem of decoupling between theoretical research and practical teaching in intercultural competence among teachers of Chinese as a foreign language. The findings also reveal that

teachers of Chinese as a foreign language do not have a solid grasp of intercultural competence and in the context of the digital era it is valid and effective for teachers of Chinese a foreign language to develop and improve their personal and professional skills considering of intercultural competence. It is imperative that intercultural competence should be set as one of the teaching objectives by teachers and be integrated into the daily language teaching through appropriate and effective intercultural approaches. Such integration is necessary and beneficial for intercultural speakers in the current globalized context (Thao and Tham, 2018). In addition, most teacher participants believed that intercultural competence could improve learners' Chinese communicative competence, but only to a certain extent. On the whole, teachers of Chinese as a foreign language believe that intercultural competence are very important, but in actual teaching, the setting of curriculum and teaching objectives is not the primary consideration.

## CONCLUSION

1. Intercultural competence has a positive effect on the learner's foreign language communication competence from their language learning.
2. Currently Chinese as a foreign language teachers lack of emphasis on cultural teaching, and also awareness of the cultivation of intercultural competence.
3. Teachers of Chinese as a foreign language will be able to improve their intercultural competence accordingly in the digital era surrounding foreign cultural knowledge, the ability to adapt to the new culture and curiosity and respect for foreign culture by which criteria will help improve students' Chinese communication competence the most.

## CONTRIBUTION

This study points out the direction of intercultural competence improvement for teachers of Chinese as a foreign language.

## SUGGESTION FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Study about integrating intercultural competence in daily language teaching through appropriate and effective intercultural approaches.

## LIMITATIONS

The number of survey samples is insufficient. In order to comprehensively understand the cultivation of intercultural competence and related situations in Chinese as a foreign language learning of teachers around the world, it is necessary to expand the scope of empirical research to increase the number of samples.

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