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Developing Intercultural Communicative Competence Through Multicultural Short Stories Among Chinese EFL Learners

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the influence of reading multicultural literature (ML) texts on the development of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) among Chinese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Despite the increasing importance of ICC in language education, Chinese students often lack direct intercultural experiences. To address this gap, this study investigates how reading multicultural short stories can improve learners' cultural knowledge, interpretive skills, intercultural attitudes, and critical awareness. Fifteen participants were first-year English majors at a Chinese university who engaged with four multicultural texts through an inquiry-driven, spiral reading approach. A qualitative design was utilized, collecting data from reflective journal entries and follow-up semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis was conducted following Byram's (1997) ICC model. The findings revealed a three-phase developmental trajectory of ICC aligned with the KWL framework (Know–Want to Know–Learned). Phase 1 showed surface-level awareness and initial curiosity; Phase 2 demonstrated increasing empathy, openness, and interpretive skill; Phase 3 reflected critical cultural reflection and integrated intercultural understanding. Additionally, an iterative spiral

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model illustrated how each literary text encouraged deeper ICC development through recursive interpretation, emotional engagement, and ethical insight. The study emphasizes the transformative potential of ML to promote meaningful intercultural learning in EFL contexts. It provides pedagogical implications for integrating literature-based methods into curriculum design to develop reflective, empathetic, and globally competent communicators.

Keywords: Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC); Multicultural Literature (ML); Chinese EFL Learners; Cultural Awareness; Literature-Based Instruction

1. Introduction

Reading has long played a central role in second language acquisition, particularly in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, where access to authentic linguistic and cultural input is limited ^[1,2]. Traditionally associated with gains in vocabulary, grammar, and comprehension, reading is now increasingly recognized as a significant medium for exposing learners to diverse worldviews and cultural perspectives ^[3,4]. In response to globalization and the rising need for intercultural understanding, reading pedagogy has expanded beyond a narrow focus on linguistic competence to embrace the development of intercultural communicative competence (ICC), which combines language learning with cultural awareness and intercultural skills ^[5,6].

In EFL contexts, ICC plays an essential role in preparing students to use English proficiently and engage meaningfully across cultural boundaries. Drawing on Byram's model ^[7], ICC is widely understood to involve four interrelated dimensions: knowledge, skills, attitudes, and critical cultural awareness. These dimensions complement linguistic proficiency by enabling learners to interpret diverse perspectives, navigate cultural complexities, and reflect critically on their own and others' worldviews. For EFL learners, ICC is not an ancillary outcome but a crucial competence for navigating globalized, multilingual environments ^[8]. However, this competence remains underdeveloped in many Chinese EFL classrooms, leaving students ill-prepared to meet the intercultural demands of an increasingly interconnected world.

This need is particularly salient in the Chinese EFL context, where growing international engagement has increased the demand for graduates who possess both linguistic proficiency and intercultural sensitivity ^[9]. While national policies increasingly emphasize global competence and ICC, classroom practice remains dominated by

test-oriented instruction. Reading curricula continue to prioritize vocabulary and grammar acquisition over intercultural engagement, with decontextualized texts and rote learning limiting opportunities for critical reflection and exposure to diverse cultural viewpoints ^[10–12]. Consequently, students' intercultural development often remains superficial, restricting their preparedness for authentic intercultural communication.

Multicultural Literature (ML), particularly short stories, presents a promising approach to these challenges. Informed by Rosenblatt's ^[13] transactional theory of reading, ML encourages learners to engage with texts as active meaning-makers, drawing on personal and cultural experiences. Empirical studies in Iran, Thailand, and Armenia have shown that literature-based instruction enhances learners' interpretive abilities, intercultural understanding, and affective dispositions such as empathy and openness ^[14–16]. These studies also emphasize that affective components of ICC evolve gradually, underscoring the need for sustained and reflective engagement with literary texts.

In China, emerging research supports the value of structured intercultural instruction. Such instruction can create intentional opportunities for learners to reflect on cultural differences, engage in guided interpretation of perspectives, and progressively develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes central to ICC. For example, Liu, Gao, and Ji ^[17] demonstrated gains in intercultural knowledge and skills through ICC-based teaching, while Zhou et al. ^[18] and Zhao ^[19] noted the importance of integrating authentic intercultural experiences into curricula. Sun ^[20] further linked literary exposure to increased intercultural motivation and awareness. However, much existing research focuses on general cultural awareness or curriculum-level interventions. Few studies have systematically examined how specific literary genres, such as multicultural short stories can foster comprehensive ICC development across Byram's four dimensions.

Multicultural short stories offer a compelling medium for fostering ICC development in EFL learners. Their narrative form allows students to encounter diverse cultural contexts, interpret characters' actions and values, reflect on personal assumptions, and critically evaluate cultural perspectives, corresponding to Byram's dimensions of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and critical cultural awareness. With their brevity, thematic richness, and cultural density, short stories are particularly well-suited to multi-phase instructional models that include pre-reading inquiry, guided interpretation, critical discussion, and reflective writing. However, existing research has not fully explored how sustained and scaffolded engagement with multicultural short stories supports holistic development across all four ICC dimensions, particularly within Chinese EFL contexts. This study addresses this gap by answering the following research question:

How does engaging with multicultural short story reading affect the development of ICC among Chinese EFL learners?

By embedding culturally diverse short stories within a structured, reflective instructional framework, this study traces learners' evolving competence across ICC's four dimensions. The findings aim to inform culturally responsive pedagogy and contribute to deeper, more sustainable intercultural learning in Chinese EFL education.

2. Literature Review

This section reviews several concepts that are related to this research: (1) definition and dimensions of ICC, (2) ML, and (3) the Theoretical Framework of this study.

2.1. Definition and Dimensions of ICC

ICC refers to the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people from various cultural backgrounds ^[21]. It requires language proficiency, an awareness of cultural diversity, openness to differences, and the ability to navigate intercultural interactions with respect and insight ^[7].

Byram's ^[7] influential model of ICC outlines four interrelated dimensions that can be developed through language and cultural education:

- Knowledge: Awareness of cultural practices, world-views, and social norms.
- Attitudes: Openness, curiosity, and willingness to engage with cultural differences.
- Skills: The ability to interpret, relate, and interact in intercultural contexts.
- Awareness: The ability to critically evaluate cultural perspectives, including one's own.

Deardorff's ^[22] Process Model of ICC emphasizes ICC as a dynamic, developmental process. It begins with foundational attitudes (e.g., respect, openness), progresses through skills and knowledge (e.g., observation, interpretation), and culminates in both internal (e.g., empathy) and external (e.g., appropriate behavior) outcomes. This model highlights the importance of adaptability, reflection, and ethical responsiveness. However, it has been critiqued for underemphasizing sociopolitical contexts such as identity, power, and inequality that influence intercultural encounters.

Bennett's ^[23] Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), one of the earliest frameworks, takes a psychological perspective on ICC. It outlines six affective and cognitive stages, from Denial to Integration, through which individuals shift from ethnocentric to ethnorelative worldviews. While it does not specify communicative skills, DMIS emphasizes the emotional and experiential processes that underpin ICC, including discomfort, empathy, and transformation.

Together, these models highlight ICC as a dynamic, multi-dimensional construct. For EFL learners, its development requires intentional engagement with culturally rich content, critical reflection, and opportunities for perspective-taking, all of which inform this study's pedagogical design.

2.2. Multicultural Literature (ML)

ML is defined as literature that authentically represents diverse cultural experiences, values, and perspectives, often those of historically marginalized groups ^[24,25]. Language education provides learners opportunities to critically examine global issues, question cultural assumptions, and develop empathy and intercultural awareness ^[26,27]. Key features of ML include cultural authenticity, plu-

rality of perspectives, and critical engagement with social issues ^[28], making it a valuable pedagogical resource for ICC development.

Among literary genres, short stories are especially suitable for EFL instruction and ICC development. Their brevity allows focused analysis, while their narrative complexity supports exploration of intricate cultural themes within limited instructional time ^[29]. Their concise structure promotes close reading, critical reflection, and meaningful discussion, allowing learners to engage deeply with diverse cultural perspectives without cognitive overload. When integrated into dialogic and reflective reading practices, short stories enable learners to explore unfamiliar viewpoints, raise critical questions, and express their values in intercultural contexts ^[30,31]. This approach supports the broader pedagogical goal of positioning students not as passive recipients of cultural knowledge but as active contributors to intercultural dialogue.

This active, reflective engagement is based on Rosenblatt's ^[13] Transactional Theory of Reading, which conceptualizes reading as a dynamic interaction between the reader and the text. Meaning emerges from the text and the reader's personal, cultural, and emotional response.

Applied to ML, this theory positions learners as co-creators of meaning, bringing their own cultural frameworks into dialogue with the text. This interactive process fosters deeper intercultural negotiation, emotional engagement, and the development of empathy and critical awareness, which are the main components of ICC.

2.3. Theoretical Framework

This study integrates three complementary theoretical perspectives: (1) Byram's ^[7] ICC model provides the primary framework for analyzing ICC development, outlining specific dimensions (knowledge, skills, attitudes, and critical awareness) to assess learners' growth. (2) Deardorff's ^[22] Process Model of ICC guides the study's focus on ongoing, developmental change in learners' intercultural orientation. (3) Rosenblatt's ^[13] Transactional Theory of Reading informs the instructional design, emphasizing learners' active role in constructing meaning through interaction with multicultural texts. **Figure 1** depicts the integration of these theoretical components and their collective function in guiding the study's investigation into ICC development among Chinese EFL learners.

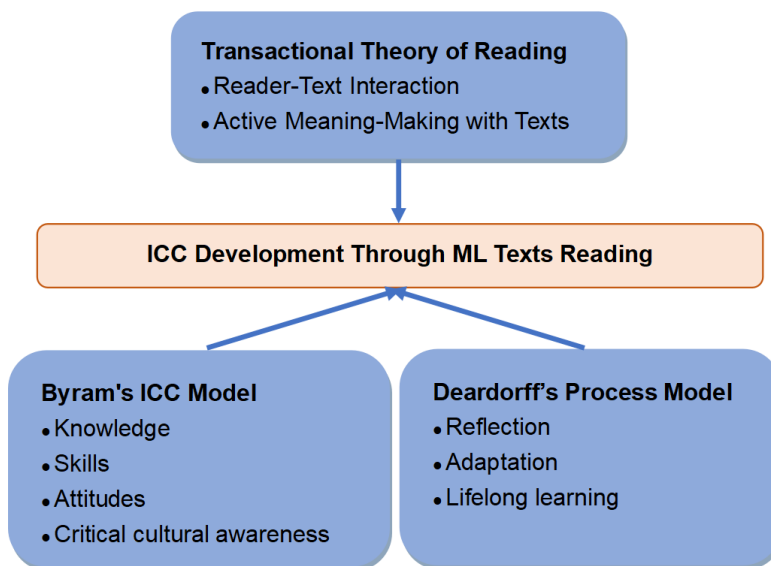


Figure 1. Theoretical Framework of the Study.

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative case study de-

sign to investigate the development of ICC among Chinese EFL learners through interaction with multicultural short stories. As Creswell and Poth ^[32] note, a case study

enables an analysis of a bounded system, such as an EFL reading class at a Chinese university, capturing the complexity of intercultural learning in real-world educational settings.

3.1. Research Design

A qualitative case study approach was selected to gain detailed insights into how Chinese EFL learners develop ICC by reading and discussing multicultural short stories. Creswell and Poth^[32] describe a qualitative case study as a design that examines a bounded system (or “case”) in its natural setting.

In this research, the bounded system consisted of a first-year university English reading class of 15 English-major students following a prescribed curriculum (Contemporary College English Reading) that included four multicultural short stories. This focus permitted a comprehensive examination of classroom interactions and how students’ engagement with multicultural texts influenced their intercultural knowledge, attitudes, skills, and awareness.

To strengthen the depth and credibility of the findings, data triangulation was applied using two primary sources: reflective journal entries and follow-up semi-structured interviews. This multi-method approach enhanced the analysis by incorporating both instructional perspectives and learners’ individual intercultural development.

Acknowledging typical limitations of qualitative research, such as subjectivity and limited generalizability, the study was deliberately confined by time (one academic term) and participant selection (a purposive sample of English-major students). These boundaries enabled a focused, context-specific investigation without aiming for wider generalization.

3.2. Participants and Text Selection

Participants included 15 first-year undergraduate students (aged 18–21), all English majors at a university in northwestern China. For confidentiality, they are identified by pseudonyms S1 through S15 throughout this study. They were selected via purposive sampling based on two criteria: (1) enrollment in the “Contemporary College En-

glish Reading” course, and (2) a minimum score of 60 in the course and 425 on the College English Test Band 4 (CET-4), ensuring adequate English proficiency to engage with complex literary texts. This approach ensured a relatively homogeneous group regarding academic and linguistic background, allowing a focused examination of ICC development in a non-Western EFL context.

Four multicultural short stories were carefully chosen based on their cultural significance, instructional value, and potential to promote critical reflection:

- *The Barber’s Uncle* (William Saroyan): Explores themes of cultural assimilation and family relationships in American society.
- *Eleven* (Sandra Cisneros): Addresses personal identity and cultural misinterpretation.
- *Everyday Use* (Alice Walker): Examines African American heritage and conflicts between tradition and modernity.
- *The First Seven Years* (Bernard Malamud): Represents Jewish immigrant experiences and intergenerational tensions.

These texts served as the instructional basis for class discussions, activities, and reflections to enhance intercultural understanding.

3.3. Data Collection

Data were gathered over an eight-week instructional period within a 12-week semester using two main sources: reflective journal entries and a follow-up semi-structured interview. These methods aimed to capture both procedural and retrospective views on ICC development.

3.3.1. Reflective Journal Entries

Each participant completed four journal entries, one after each two-week module, making up 60 journal entries. The journals followed a modified Know–Want to Know–Learned (KWL) format (**Appendix A**), allowing students to express: (1) Know: Pre-existing cultural knowledge, (2) Want to know: Cultural questions and curiosities, and (3) Learned: Reflections on newly acquired insights, intercultural attitudes, and communication strategies. This format was chosen for its alignment with the four ICC dimensions (knowledge, skills, attitudes, and awareness) and its ability

to support student reflection. Journal writing was integrated as a graded course task to ensure participation and minimize workload. Participants received brief training in reflective writing and completed each journal within 20–30 minutes. These journals provided longitudinal, process-oriented data for thematic analysis.

3.3.2. Follow-up Semi-Structured Interview

A semi-structured follow-up interview was conducted post-intervention to validate journal data and explore students' evolving perceptions of their ICC development. Each interview lasted 30–40 minutes and was conducted in Chinese to ensure authenticity and ease of expression. The interview protocol (**Appendix B**) included open-ended questions designed to elicit reflective and genuine narratives^[33]. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed thematically. Ethical safeguards were rigorously maintained, including informed consent, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw.

3.4. Data Analysis

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's^[34] six-phase thematic analysis model: (1) Data familiarization, (2) Generating initial codes, (3) Searching for themes, (4) Reviewing themes, (5) Defining and naming themes, and (6) Producing the report. To ensure theoretical consistency, the analysis employed the four ICC dimensions, knowledge, skills, attitudes, and awareness, as sensitizing concepts. This combined approach allowed deductive classification based on ICC theory and inductive identification of emerging themes. A Qualitative Themes–ICC Dimensions Matrix (**Table 1**) was created to link thematic categories to specific ICC dimensions, guided by Byram's ICC model.

All data sources, including journal entries and follow-up interview transcripts, were coded using a structured reference system to ensure consistency in citation and analysis. **Table 2** presents the coding scheme used throughout the findings.

Table 1. Qualitative Themes—ICC Dimensions Matrix.

ICC Dimension	Thematic Category	Qualitative Indicator
Knowledge	Recognition of cultural symbols and practices	Learners identify symbols, customs, and norms embedded in literature and relate them to broader cultural frameworks.
	Historical and contextual understanding	Learners connect literary narratives with historical or socio-political contexts.
	Differentiation of cultural norms	Ability to distinguish between one's own and others' cultural behaviours and perspectives.
Skills	Interpretive and analytical skills	Ability to infer meaning, interpret characters' motivations, and analyse cultural tensions.
	Communication and interaction strategies	Use of questioning, clarification, or paraphrasing to enhance intercultural dialogue.
	Adaptive language use	Students use more culturally sensitive and context-appropriate language over time.
Attitudes	Openness and curiosity toward cultural differences	Demonstrates interest in unfamiliar cultural settings or practices.
	Empathy and perspective-taking	Emotional identification with characters' struggles and cultural dilemmas.
	Willingness to suspend judgment	Learners delay evaluative responses and explore unfamiliar values or worldviews.
Awareness	Self-Reflection on cultural identity and bias	Learners acknowledge their own cultural assumptions and reconsider them.
	Recognition of culture as dynamic and contextual	Learners realize that culture is not fixed and varies within and across communities.
	Ethical and social responsibility	Learners demonstrate increased awareness of social justice, fairness, and equity in cross-cultural contexts.

Table 2. Coding Structure for Original Materials.

Code	Material Name
JE1	Journal Entries of <i>The Barber's Uncle</i>
JE2	Journal Entries of <i>Eleven</i>
JE3	Journal Entries of <i>Everyday Use</i>
JE4	Journal Entries of <i>The First Seven Years</i>
FSI	Follow-up Semi-structured Interview

4. Results

This section presents the study's findings through two complementary analytical perspectives. The first part applies the three-phase KWL framework ("Know," "Want to Know," and "Learned") to trace the developmental trajectory of learners' ICC across four essential dimensions: knowledge, skills, attitudes, and awareness. The second part investigates the iterative and spiral nature of ICC development as learners engaged with four multicultural short stories, highlighting how literary texts progressively enhanced students' intercultural insights across journal cycles. The analysis mainly draws on learners' reflective journals (JE1–JE4) and is supplemented by follow-up semi-structured interviews (FSI). Participant quotes are identified by pseudonym (e.g., S1–JE2 = Student 1, Jour-

nal Entry 2). This dual lens offers a developmental and a reflective understanding of learners' intercultural growth.

4.1. Three Phases of the KWL Framework

The analysis of learners' journal entries (JE1–JE4) reveals a clear progression in ICC development, marked by three interconnected stages: "Know," "Want to Know," and "Learned." These stages chart a developmental trajectory across the four dimensions of ICC, knowledge, skills, attitudes, and critical cultural awareness. This staged development highlights a cumulative and deepening engagement with ML texts, where each stage builds upon the last, leading to more advanced and meaningful intercultural learning outcomes. **Figure 2** illustrates this three-stage evolution of ICC, highlighting the trajectory from initial exposure to mature intercultural insight.

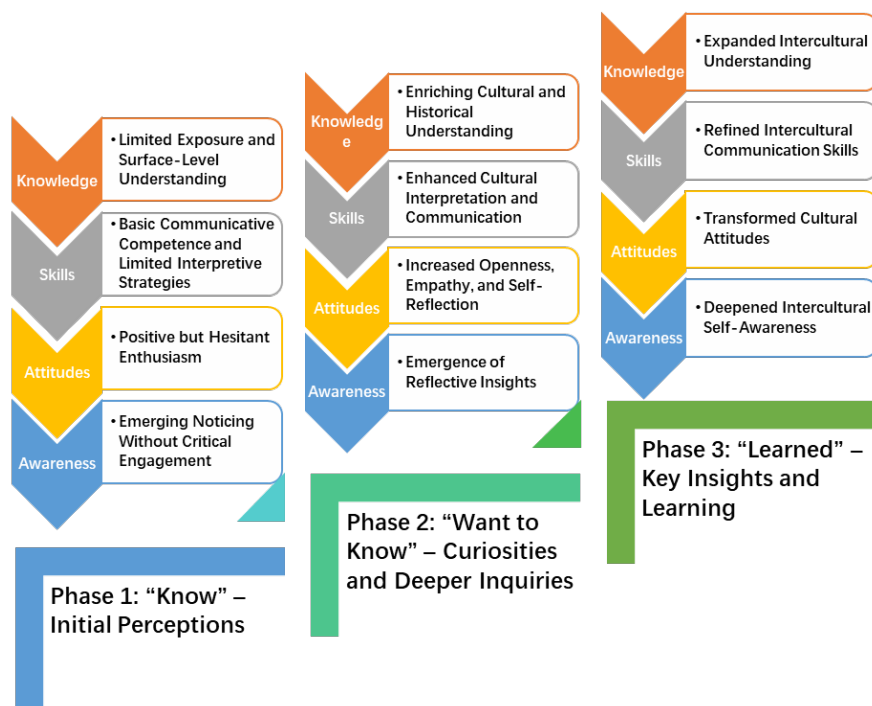


Figure 2. Three- phase Evolution of ICC.

4.1.1. Phase 1: “Know” – Initial Perceptions

Phase 1 establishes the baseline of learners’ ICC, capturing their initial perceptions before engaging with multicultural short stories. Students showed limited knowledge, basic communicative skills, tentative intercultural attitudes, and uncritical cultural awareness at this stage. The analysis across the four ICC dimensions reveals a foundational yet undeveloped intercultural orientation.

Knowledge: Limited Exposure and Surface-Level Understanding

Learners’ prior knowledge appeared fragmented and superficial, reflecting minimal exposure to cultural diversity beyond their immediate context. Most students demonstrated limited familiarity with other cultures, often relying on generalizations or stereotypes. Their reflections focused on surface-level cultural practices (e.g., food, festivals), with little insight into deeper values or beliefs. For example, one learner noted, “*Before reading The Barber’s Uncle, I knew very little about Armenian-American culture. I only had a basic historical idea from textbooks*” (S5–JE1). Another stated, “*I thought American families were the same as ours. I didn’t expect so many differences in how they express feelings*” (S3–JE2). These responses indicate a starting point shaped more by passive reception of facts than reflective cultural engagement.

Skills: Basic Communicative Competence and Limited Interpretive Strategies

Learners’ initial intercultural skills remained primarily instrumental, equating effective communication with language proficiency alone. Across reflections, students often described intercultural communication in transactional terms, emphasizing vocabulary and grammar rather than interpretive or dialogic skills. One participant admitted, “*I thought communicating with foreigners was just about speaking English well. Now I feel it’s more than language*” (S2–JE3). This phase was marked by functional vocabulary use and a lack of interpretive or dialogic competence, main traits of advanced ICC.

Attitudes: Positive but Hesitant Enthusiasm

Regarding attitudes, students expressed an open yet cautious stance toward intercultural interaction. Their reflections reveal genuine interest tempered by uncertainty

about appropriate behaviors and emotional confidence. One student described ICC as “*a highly refined practice that not everyone could master*” (S1–JE1), while another called it “*interesting but sometimes confusing, you don’t always know what is right to say*” (S5–JE4). These views demonstrate willingness to engage, tempered by apprehension and self-doubt.

Awareness: Emerging Noticing Without Critical Engagement

At the awareness level, students showed preliminary recognition of cultural differences without deeper critical analysis. Observations focused on visible contrasts, often lacking examination of underlying values or contexts. One learner observed, “*In the story, they talk to elders differently than in China. I noticed that but wasn’t sure why*” (S11–JE3). Although respectful of difference, students rarely engaged in critical reflection, with responses emphasizing moral appreciation (“we should respect all cultures”) rather than analytical understanding.

Overall, Phase 1 illustrates learners at the threshold of intercultural learning. Their initial engagement with ML laid a foundation for growth, but more advanced skills and insights had not yet developed—a progression detailed in subsequent phases.

4.1.2. Phase 2: “Want to Know” – Curiosities and Deeper Inquiries

Phase 2 signifies a transitional stage in learners’ ICC development, as initial recognition of cultural difference evolves into a stronger desire to understand. “Want to Know” reflects learners’ growing motivation to inquire, empathize, and reflect to interpret multicultural texts more deeply. Students’ journal reflections showed a clear move toward inquiry, empathy, and reflective engagement. Each ICC dimension demonstrates this advancing sophistication in its intercultural development.

Knowledge: Enriching Cultural and Historical Understanding

Building on early awareness, students’ knowledge in this phase expanded to include deeper exploration of cultural narratives, traditions, and histories. Learners shifted from general recognition of difference to analyti-

cal engagement with cultural and historical content. They sought to grasp symbolic meanings behind food, rituals, and language, linking these to broader historical and social contexts. For instance, one student noted, *“Through reading this story, I learned about small anecdotes and delved deeper into the historical and cultural background of Armenians”* (S1–JE1). Another reflected, *“I was curious to understand better how African American families passed down their cultural heritage... what it means to preserve and value those cultural roots”* (S6–JE3). These responses indicate growing intellectual commitment to exploring cultural evolution and resilience, reflecting a deeper, more empathetic approach to cultural knowledge.

Skills: Enhanced Cultural Interpretation and Communication

Alongside increasing curiosity, students’ skills advanced in interpreting subtle cultural cues and adapting communicative behaviors accordingly. Learners became more attuned to communication differences, including indirectness, non-verbal signals, and cultural norms. One participant shared, *“I was curious why some cultures... rely heavily on non-verbal cues and context, while others prioritize direct and explicit communication”* (S4–JE1). Another stated, *“I want to learn how to flexibly adjust communication skills based on people’s reactions during cross-cultural interactions, as understanding these nuances is key”* (S3–JE4). These reflections demonstrate growing interpretive sensitivity and adaptability—both essential components of ICC development.

Attitudes: Increased Openness, Empathy, and Self-Reflection

Learners’ attitudes developed greater emotional depth, as literary encounters fostered tolerance and genuine empathy. Students increasingly viewed cultural encounters through a humanistic lens, emphasizing shared struggles and identity tensions. For example, one student wrote, *“I am very interested in the struggle of the characters... between expressing themselves and meeting family expectations”* (S5–JE3). Another noted, *“I am curious about the role of family heritage and the clash between tradition and modernity, it makes me reflect on my own identity in relation to cultural expectations”* (S13–JE3). These responses highlight a shift from merely observing others to empa-

thizing with them, prompting a reassessment of personal beliefs within diverse cultural contexts.

Awareness: Emergence of Reflective Insights

At the awareness level, Phase 2 reflections show a pivotal shift toward critical self-examination. Learners began to reflect not only on other cultures but also on how cultural background shapes personal identity and worldviews. One learner expressed, *“By reading this text, I began to see how deeply cultural backgrounds influence our personal outlooks, reshaping the way I view myself in relation to others”* (S4–JE4). Another stated, *“I began to see how deeply cultural backgrounds influence our personal outlook, reshaping the way I view myself in relation to others”* (S12–JE4). This evolving self-awareness laid the foundation for integrative learning explored in Phase 3.

In sum, Phase 2 demonstrates how targeted literary engagement cultivated curiosity, reflection, and deeper intercultural orientation, preparing learners for the synthesis of insights observed in the next phase.

4.1.3. Phase 3: “Learned” – Key Insights and Learning

In Phase 3, learners’ reflective journal entries revealed significant development in ICC following sustained engagement with multicultural literary texts. This phase captures the culmination of knowledge acquisition, skill refinement, attitudinal transformation, and critical awareness across the ICC dimensions.

Knowledge: Expanded Intercultural Knowledge

Reflecting deeper immersion, learners’ knowledge evolved from isolated facts to complex, contextualized understandings of cultural diversity. Their reflections showed a broadened and more nuanced comprehension of cultural identity, history, and social change. Rather than merely acquiring information, participants engaged critically with cultural narratives. One learner reflected, *“The source of culture and its development history really caught my attention; it made me deeply aware of how different cultures have evolved over time”* (S1–JE4). Another noted, *“Yes, it helps us understand more about the cultural background of different countries, their customs, and the lifestyles of*

the people at that time” (S2–FSI). These statements highlight learners’ transition from passive receivers of cultural knowledge to critical interpreters of cultural complexity, indicating an expanding intercultural understanding grounded in contextual analysis.

Skills: Refined Intercultural Communication Skills

Building on earlier progress, students’ intercultural skills matured into strategic competencies, including flexible perspective-taking and culturally adaptive communication. The literary texts became spaces where learners practiced cognitive flexibility, shifting between cultural viewpoints and enhancing their interpretive abilities. One participant explained, “*Effective communication requires more than language skills; it demands cultural sensitivity and active listening*” (S7–JE2). Another expressed readiness to apply these skills in real-life contexts, stating, “*When we read these novels, it is equivalent to communicating with different cultures... it may be more effective to communicate with [others] in the future*” (S6–FSI). These reflections indicate a move beyond classroom learning toward practical intercultural preparedness, with learners beginning to see themselves as capable, mindful communicators across cultures.

Attitudes: Transformed Cultural Attitudes

Phase 3 revealed significant changes in learners’ cultural attitudes, shifting from curiosity to genuine respect, inclusivity, and ethical engagement with diversity. Faced with unfamiliar perspectives, participants increasingly accepted multiple ways of being, discarding ethnocentric assumptions. As one participant explained, “*I learned to maintain an attitude of equality and respect toward all cultures,*” one learner noted, “*while remaining open to learning from others*” (S1–JE1). Similarly, another stated, “*It can cultivate our open mindedness... and break limitations*” (S11–FSI). These reflections indicate an attitudinal transformation, learners no longer acknowledged diversity; they embraced it as an essential aspect of ethical, global citizenship. This shift represents a core element of ICC, signaling readiness for ongoing intercultural engagement

beyond the classroom setting.

Awareness: Deepened Intercultural Self-Awareness

Finally, learners’ critical cultural awareness became more established, enabling them to examine both others’ cultural frameworks and their own. They showed the capacity to evaluate how historical, societal, and personal factors interact in shaping cultural expressions. As one student wrote, “*I began to see how deeply cultural backgrounds influence our personal outlook, reshaping the way I view myself in relation to others*” (S12–JE2). Another reflected, “*It strengthened my awareness of how culture, values, and personal experiences shape our interactions, prompting me to re-examine my own cultural biases*” (S6–FSI). This advanced awareness marks a key stage in ICC development, where critical reflection leads to transformative intercultural competence.

In summary, findings from the three-phase KWL framework show that engagement with multicultural literature supports comprehensive growth across all ICC dimensions. Learners progressed from initial, superficial perceptions to deeper intercultural awareness, expanded knowledge, enhanced communicative skills, and transformed attitudes. This progression highlights the effectiveness of ML texts as valuable tools for developing globally competent EFL learners.

4.2. Iterative Spiral ICC Development Across Four Multicultural Stories

Alongside the phase-based KWL framework, learners’ reflections on the four multicultural short stories, *The Barber’s Uncle* (JE1), *Eleven* (JE2), *Everyday Use* (JE3), and *The First Seven Years* (JE4), revealed a repeated, spiral progression of ICC development. Rather than a linear accumulation, learners revisited, reinterpreted, and deepened their intercultural understanding with each journal cycle. **Figure 3** illustrates this spiral model, showing how learners’ intercultural understanding grew progressively with each literary engagement.

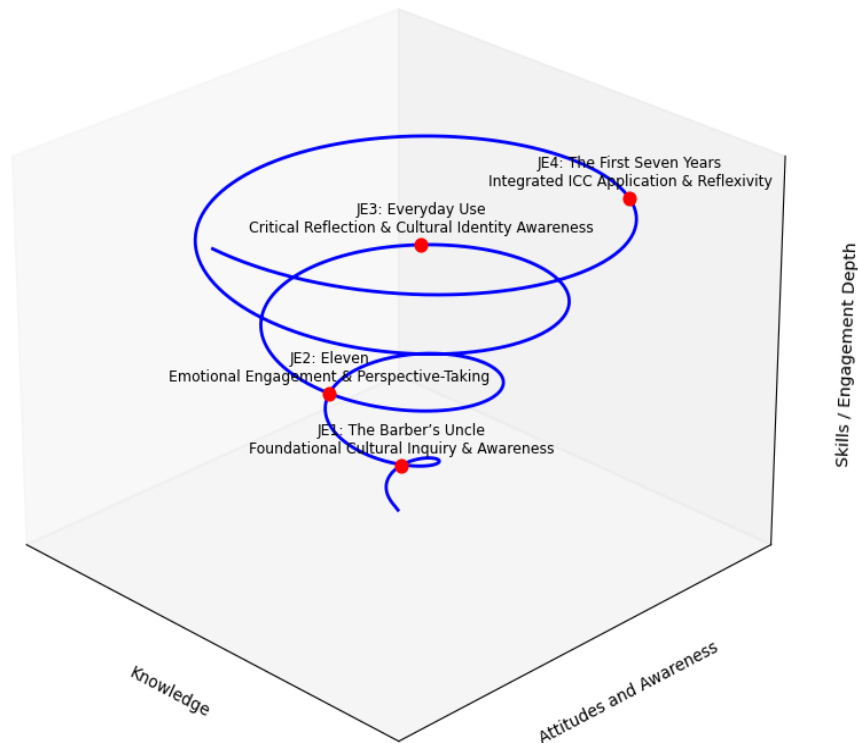


Figure 3. Spiral Model of ICC Development.

In JE1, learners began with minimal guidance and superficial interpretations, marking the initial stage of their intercultural engagement. Each subsequent story encouraged deeper reflection and more complex cultural analysis. By JE4, students exhibited the most integrated understanding across all ICC dimensions, knowledge, skills, attitudes, and awareness. This spiral model of ICC development demonstrates that growth occurred not in isolated phases but through iterative returns to key intercultural themes. With every story, learners refined their interpretations, expanded their cultural perspectives, and engaged in increasingly ethical and reflective analyses.

Knowledge: Expanding Cultural Histories, Norms, and Values

Learners' acquisition of cultural knowledge followed a clear progression from initial exposure to unfamiliar histories toward a more sophisticated recognition of cultural norms, values, and ethical frameworks.

In *The Barber's Uncle*, participants explored the marginalized history of the Armenian community, an initial encounter that revealed overlooked socio-political realities. As they progressed to *Eleven* and *Everyday Use*, their focus shifted toward recognizing culturally embedded behav-

iors and traditions, deepening their appreciation of intra- and intercultural variation. Finally, *The First Seven Years* required learners to interpret complex value systems, such as Jewish concepts of patience and sacrifice, revealing how culture shapes relational dynamics. As S1 reflected, "I gained a better understanding of the background and experiences of the Armenian people as an ethnic group" (S1–JE1), while another remarked, "Sobel's quiet perseverance ... reflects a cultural value of patience and personal sacrifice" (S14–JE4). These evolving insights show how sustained literary engagement fostered a more nuanced, contextually grounded cultural knowledge base.

Skills: Deepening Interpretation, Comparison, and Critical Reading

Following the expansion of cultural knowledge, learners' interpretive and analytical skills exhibited clear progressive refinement. This dimension emphasizes how students' reading practices transitioned from surface comprehension to advanced intercultural analysis.

In the early stages with *The Barber's Uncle*, learners employed basic strategies such as segmenting texts and using contextual clues to decode unfamiliar cultural content. However, by the time they approached *Everyday Use* and

The First Seven Years, their skillset included identifying symbolic meanings, critically analyzing narrative voice, and detecting subtle intercultural tensions. This progression enabled learners to interpret character motivations across cultures and evaluate the foundations of misunderstanding. As S1 explained, “*I developed a strategy for analyzing multicultural texts by breaking them into sections, focusing on shifts in locations and characters*” (S1–JE1), and S10 expanded, “*This scenario reflects how cultural misunderstandings can occur in cross-cultural interactions*” (S10–JE4). Through these layered strategies, students advanced from surface decoding to critical intercultural literacy, illustrating how sustained literary engagement supports the development of intercultural skills.

Attitudes: Cultivating Empathy, Openness, and Perspective-Taking

Alongside knowledge and skills, learners’ intercultural attitudes evolved markedly, progressing from initial emotional reactions to mature empathy and openness. This trajectory reveals how emotional engagement served as a catalyst for ethical reflection and relational understanding.

Emotional resonance was strong in *Eleven*, where many learners identified with the protagonist’s experience of marginalization and voicelessness. This initial affective response established a foundation for empathetic exploration beyond the self. In *Everyday Use*, students navigated more complex emotional contexts, sympathizing with characters like Maggie, whose understated expression of cultural identity challenged performative notions of heritage. By *The First Seven Years*, learners demonstrated the capacity to ethically assess character motivations through culturally informed perspectives, moving beyond sympathy toward sustained intercultural respect. As one learner noted, “*When the teacher insists that the worn red sweater belongs to the protagonist... this reminded me of how dominant voices can sometimes overlook or dismiss the perspectives of others*” (S5–JE2). Another observed, “*The conflict between the sisters over the quilts symbolizes different approaches to preserving culture*” (S1–JE3). These developments illustrate an attitudinal progression from basic emotional connection to sophisticated perspective-taking, essential for advanced intercultural competence.

Awareness: Fostering Critical Reflection and Eth-

ical Insight

The final dimension, intercultural awareness, represented the peak of learners’ ICC development, marked by increased reflexivity and ethical understanding. Building on accumulated knowledge, skills, and attitudes, learners began to examine not only cultural artifacts but also the broader dynamics of cultural representation.

In texts like *Everyday Use*, students questioned issues such as authenticity, cultural commodification, and generational identity conflicts. This foundational critique extended through *The First Seven Years*, where learners engaged with subtle portrayals of emotional restraint, sacrifice, and subtle devotion, recognizing how cultural expectations influence not only behaviors but ethical worldviews. Learners also grew more critical of surface-level multiculturalism, developing a sensitivity to the difference between tokenistic representation and genuine cultural storytelling. As S3 stated, “*This reading reinforced my belief in the importance of understanding culture in its practical, lived context*” (S3–JE3), and S1 concluded, “*Every piece of history, every country’s culture should not be forgotten*” (S1–JE4). These reflections indicate a shift from awareness as simple recognition to awareness as ethical responsibility, where learners adopt an active, critically reflective stance toward intercultural engagement.

In summary, sustained interaction with multicultural short stories significantly enhanced Chinese EFL learners’ ICC through ongoing, recursive reflection rather than discrete stages. Each story prompted deeper cultural analysis, broader perspective-taking, and increased ethical awareness, producing a progressively integrated ICC development across knowledge, skills, attitudes, and awareness. The phase-based KWL framework captures the developmental path from superficial perceptions to profound intercultural insight, while the spiral model illustrates how learners continually revisit and reinterpret intercultural themes with greater sophistication. This iterative process nurtured increasingly refined cultural understanding, empathetic engagement, and ethical reflection, showing that ML texts functioned not only as material but as a crucial scaffold and stimulus for transformative intercultural learning in the EFL classroom.

5. Discussion

This study examines how sustained interaction with multicultural short stories shapes ICC development among Chinese EFL learners. Drawing on Byram's ^[7] ICC model, Deardorff's ^[22] Process Model, and Rosenblatt's ^[13] Transactional Theory of Reading, the findings demonstrate that learners' ICC evolved through a recursive, emotionally grounded process driven by iterative cycles of literary reading, reflection, and reinterpretation. This section highlights three key contributions that refine and expand current knowledge of ICC development in EFL contexts.

5.1. Recursive and Spiral Nature of ICC Development

This study supports recent findings that ML texts promote empathy, intercultural curiosity, and interpretive insight. For example, Ousiali et al. ^[35] found that culturally rich texts increased Moroccan EFL learners' motivation and intercultural reflection. Meanwhile, Safa and Tofghi ^[36] highlighted the gap between Iranian teachers' ICC awareness and its practical application, emphasizing the need for structured, literature-based methods. Building on this research, this study proposes a recursive, spiral model of ICC development, contrasting with the linear exposure–analysis–reflection sequence identified by Feeney and Gajasen ^[15]. Learners in this study revisited earlier texts with new cultural perspectives, indicating that intercultural understanding evolves cumulatively and reflectively rather than linearly. For instance, after reading *Everyday Use*, participants reevaluated previous interpretations of The Barber's Uncle, demonstrating intertextual layering and emotional reengagement. This finding aligns with Deardorff's ^[22] view of ICC as dynamic and non-linear and illustrates how ongoing literary exposure promotes emotional transformation and ethical reflection, dimensions often overlooked in EFL ICC research.

5.2. Textual Features and Pedagogical Scaffolding

This study adds complexity to existing research by examining how different short story types foster specific ICC outcomes. While prior studies (e.g., Huang ^[3]) ac-

knowledge literature's potential to enhance ICC, few have systematically linked story features to ICC dimensions. This study shows that emotionally charged narratives like *Eleven* and *The First Seven Years* effectively cultivate empathy and attitudinal openness, whereas morally complex texts like *Everyday Use* foster deeper ethical reflection and critical cultural awareness. This contrasts with research that often treats literary texts as interchangeable instruments for intercultural learning without exploring how narrative form or content influences outcomes (e.g., Feeney & Gajasen ^[15]; Ousiali, Housni, & Amezoirou ^[35]). By connecting ICC dimensions to narrative features, this study provides a practical framework for selecting texts targeting specific ICC aspects. Importantly, the study supports Huang's ^[3] claim that instructional scaffolding is crucial when learners encounter unfamiliar cultural content. While earlier studies (e.g., the studies of Bagui & Zohra ^[37]; Nabung ^[38]) noted disengagement due to culture shock or comprehension difficulties, this study demonstrates how structured use of the KWL framework, dialogic questioning, and reflective journals helped learners manage emotional tension productively. These strategies supported cognitive understanding and fostered affective and ethical growth, reducing stereotyping and encouraging sustained engagement. Thus, this study offers a practical support model for EFL educators using ML texts.

5.3. Multicultural Short Stories as Effective Medium for ICC Development

Although Neely ^[39] emphasizes the necessity of long-form literary narratives for meaningful ICC growth, this study demonstrates that short stories, when carefully sequenced and scaffolded, can produce similarly transformative outcomes. In time-limited, exam-driven contexts like Chinese EFL classrooms, short stories provide a pedagogically viable alternative, enabling learners to engage with diverse perspectives in manageable formats. Beyond merely conveying cultural information, the stories acted as reflective mirrors, encouraging learners to revise and deepen previous understandings. Each text served both as an entry point into intercultural dialogue and a stepping stone toward more complex cultural reasoning. These findings align with recent studies (e.g., the studies of Ehrnborg and Ring ^[29]; Heggernes ^[30]) highlighting the value of short fic-

tion in promoting reader response and perspective-taking. However, this study expands their work by showing how sustained, scaffolded engagement across multiple texts fosters holistic ICC development, including knowledge, skills, attitudes, and critical cultural awareness. Thus, this study positions multicultural short stories not merely as supplementary materials but as core resources in intercultural EFL pedagogy.

6. Implications for EFL Curriculum

Based on the findings, this study proposes three key pedagogical implications for integrating ML into EFL curricula: First, the study emphasizes the value of a recursive, spiral model in advancing ICC development. Rather than treating each text as an isolated unit, EFL instructors should sequence ML texts thematically and encourage learners to revisit earlier insights in light of new cultural narratives. This recursive approach supports Deardorff's^[22] model of ICC as a dynamic, iterative process and aids learners in moving from surface observations to deeper, ethically grounded intercultural reflection.

Second, the study underscores the importance of text selection in targeting specific ICC dimensions. Stories with strong emotional resonance and interiority can nurture empathy and attitudinal openness, while narratives featuring cultural conflict and ethical ambiguity encourage critical awareness and ethical evaluation. Therefore, EFL educators should adopt a deliberate approach to selecting ML texts that align with their intercultural learning objectives.

Third, the findings confirm the central role of pedagogical scaffolding. The structured use of tools such as the KWL framework, guided discussion, and reflective journal entries was crucial for helping students process cultural complexity and emotional dissonance. These strategies not only enhanced comprehension but also supported students in developing interpretive skills, cultural sensitivity, and ethical engagement.

7. Limitations and Future Research Directions

Despite the valuable insights offered by this study, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sam-

ple size and research context may limit the generalizability of the findings. The participants, Chinese EFL learners from a limited set of educational institutions, represent a specific demographic and cultural background. Consequently, the extent to which these results apply to other contexts or learner populations remains uncertain. Additionally, the findings are inherently subjective, relying mainly on self-reported perceptions and reflective journal entries. These methodological constraints highlight the need for further research to validate and extend the current findings.

Future research could examine three key areas. First, it should investigate a broader range of literary genres in fostering ICC. While this study focused on multicultural short stories, exploring genres such as poetry, drama, or film may reveal how different forms uniquely support intercultural learning. This would assist educators in selecting diverse texts that broaden students' cultural perspectives. Second, longitudinal studies are necessary to determine whether intercultural dispositions developed through literary engagement are sustained over time and translate into real-world intercultural behaviors. Methods such as follow-up interviews, intercultural simulations, or study-abroad experiences could yield valuable insights. Finally, integrating quantitative methods, such as repeated use of validated tools like the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI)^[40] or Cultural Intelligence Scale (CQS)^[41], would enable researchers to track measurable changes in ICC. These results could then be triangulated with qualitative data to enhance the validity of the findings.

8. Conclusions

This study examined the influence of multicultural short stories on developing ICC among Chinese EFL learners. Employing a qualitative research design, data were collected through journal entries and follow-up semi-structured interviews, providing a comprehensive view of learners' evolving intercultural awareness, attitudes, skills, and knowledge. The findings reveal a progressive, iterative process of ICC development through engagement with multicultural short stories. Learners advanced from surface-level cultural recognition to deeper inquiry and critical reflection, demonstrating that ML texts effectively enhance both cognitive and affective dimensions of ICC.

This study supports existing theoretical frameworks and offers practical insights into designing EFL curricula that integrate ML texts with language instruction. Ultimately, it makes a compelling case for the deliberate inclusion of ML texts in educational settings, aiming to foster more empathetic, reflective, and socially responsible intercultural communicators in an increasingly interconnected world.

Author Contributions

A.X. was responsible for the research design, data collection, discussion, and manuscript writing. N.K.A. contributed to supervision and overall proofreading, and served as the corresponding author. S.N.A.R. contributed by adding important discussion points and supervision. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Ethics Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects, Universiti Putra Malaysia.

Informed Consent Statement

All participants provided informed consent before participating in the study. The anonymity and confidentiality of the participants were guaranteed, and participation was voluntary.

Data availability statement

Data will be made available on request.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Appendix A

Journal Entries Template

Objective: to explore the influence of multicultural literature reading on EFL learners' ICC.

Title/Author: _____ **Date:** _____

Journal Entries

1. Know (Existing Knowledge and Perceptions):

- What were your initial perceptions or beliefs about the culture(s) depicted in the literature?
 - How did you view intercultural communication before engaging with this text?
-

2. Want to Know (Inquiries/Curiosities):

- What cultural aspects or behaviors are you curious to understand better?
 - How might this text help clarify or expand your knowledge of intercultural communication?
-

3. Learned (Key Insights/Learning):

- What new cultural knowledge, skills, or attitudes have you gained from this reading?
- Did this reading challenge or reinforce your previous beliefs or attitudes? How?

Appendix B

Follow-up Semi-structured Interview Protocol

Categories	Research Questions
Reflections on ICC	Q1: What new cultural insights did you gain from reading these stories?
Development	Q2: Did reading these stories change how you view people from different cultures? In what way?
	Q3: How do you think reading multicultural short stories has influenced your intercultural understanding and communication?

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