Intercultural Communicative Competence among Chinese Language Teachers in the UAE: Perspectives, Practices, and Challenges

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Abstract

With the globalization of education, Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) has become a critical element in foreign language instruction. This study aims to investigate the ICC levels, perceptions, and pedagogical practices of Chinese language teachers in the UAE's K–12 public schools, while also identifying the challenges they face in multicultural teaching environments. Adopting a mixed-methods design, the study employed a structured questionnaire based on Byram's ICC model and intercultural contact scales, and conducted semi-structured interviews grounded in Karabinar & Guler's framework. A purposive sample of 37 Chinese teachers participated in the survey, and 5 were selected for in-depth interviews. Quantitative analysis revealed that teachers demonstrated high levels of ICC, especially in attitudes and skills of interpreting and relating, while critical cultural awareness was less developed. Intercultural contact at the workplace was the strongest predictor of ICC development, whereas social media interaction had negligible influence. Thematic analysis of interview data highlighted pedagogical strategies such as cultural comparison and simulation, alongside recurring challenges including religious sensitivities, lack of cultural resources, and psychological stress. The findings suggest that ICC not only affects teaching effectiveness but also impacts teachers' mental well-being and professional identity. Implications include the need for targeted teacher training programs focusing on critical cultural awareness, the expansion of intercultural resources, and institutional support mechanisms. These insights contribute to the refinement of Chinese language education policies and promote intercultural understanding in the context of multilingual and multicultural education in the UAE.

Introduction

Throughout the past three decades, researchers have emphasized the importance of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) in language teaching, aiming to equip students for a multicultural

environment and enhance their global competitiveness (Byram, 2021). ICC has proven to be an integral part of foreign language teaching, which involves not only language skills but also the development of cross-cultural competence, understanding and communicating across cultures (Sercu, 2006)(Deardorff, 2006). For an international business hub like the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the English, French, Spanish, and Chinese languages are taught in schools to promote international exchange (Baycar, 2023)(Hopkyns & Wang, 2025). The UAE was the first Arab country to integrate the Chinese language into its national basic education system in 2019 (Fulton, 2019), thereby strengthening ties with China.   In the 2022-2023 academic year, 172 Chinese language teachers were recruited at 158 public schools in the UAE, where Chinese ranks second in terms of foreign languages most commonly taught. However, many of these teachers taught abroad or in the Arab region for the first time, with the challenge to be placed in a culturally diverse educational environment (Zhu et al., 2021).

With the progress of globalization, foreign language education brings ICC into one of its core instructional goals. Regarding their professional growth, teachers' also showed interest in improving their intercultural knowledge and enhance their educational and pedagogical practices (Byram, 2021; Leeman, 2003)(Kramsch, 2014). However, despite the UAE's official endorsement of multiculturalism and the incorporation of Chinese into its national K–12 curriculum, questions remain as to whether the local environment genuinely facilitates the development of ICC among Chinese language teachers. Several studies suggest that institutional inclusivity alone is insufficient to address the cultural blind spots that often arise in practice. Teachers usually struggle to navigate multicultural contexts effectively due to limited localized training and inadequate preparation in cultural sensitivity (Brown et al., 2021; Al As Anuas et al., 2024; Quirós Domínguez et al., 2025). Navigating local cultural norms and delivering effective instruction in such contexts poses significant challenges.

While ICC has been widely recognized as a core component of foreign language education, limited empirical research has explored the ICC development of Chinese language teachers in K–12 settings within the UAE. Existing studies tend to focus on tertiary education or remain largely theoretical, offering little insight into the practical realities faced by teachers in emerging Chinese language teaching contexts. Therefore, this paper aims to investigate the perspectives and applications of ICC on K-12 Chinese language teachers in the UAE and examine the problems they encounter, thereby filling the research gap in this field. The research questions are as follows: (1) What are UAE Chinese language teachers' views on ICC, and what are their levels of ICC? (2) Does intercultural contact affect teachers' ICC? (3) What are the primary challenges teachers face in intercultural teaching?

Theoretical Framework

Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) serves as the core theoretical framework of this study. ICC refers to the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people of other cultures, encompassing not only linguistic knowledge but also the ability to understand and mediate between different cultural perspectives (Byram, 2021). Byram's model distinguishes five key dimensions of ICC: knowledge, attitudes, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness. These components together contribute to learners' ability to engage meaningfully in intercultural contexts. Bennett (2017) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) further complements this by conceptualizing the development of intercultural competence through six progressive stages: denial, defense, minimization, acceptance, adaptation, and integration. The model offers a developmental framework for assessing an individual's progression in intercultural sensitivity and understanding.

In addition, Cultural Learning Theory (Wilson et al., 2013) emphasizes the significant role of socialization in cultural competence acquisition. This theory emphasizes that individuals acquire cultural knowledge and skills through interactive experiences and immersion in multicultural environments, which are crucial for adaptation and learning. Pettigrew (1998) Contact Hypothesis also informs this framework, positing that under the right conditions, namely, equal status, shared goals, cooperation, and institutional support, intergroup contact can reduce prejudice and foster mutual understanding. However, this theory also notes that not all contact is equally compelling; face-to-face interaction is generally more impactful than indirect or mediated forms, such as through social media.

These theoretical models collectively guide the understanding of how Chinese language teachers in the UAE develop and apply ICC within multilingual educational settings.

Literature Review

As the UAE continues to develop as a global commercial hub, the demand for Chinese language education has grown in response to the increasing Chinese expatriate population and the deepening bilateral relations with China (Hopkyns & Wang, 2021). Currently, over 210,000 Chinese nationals reside in the UAE, particularly in Dubai, underscoring the need for accessible and structured Chinese language instruction (Wenchang et al., 2024).

This demographic shift occurs alongside a broader trend of multilingualism in the UAE, where English is increasingly becoming the lingua franca, often at the expense of Arabic (Al-Issa, 2017). In response, the UAE Ministry of Education has introduced initiatives promoting bilingual and multilingual education, which potentially pave the way for integrating Chinese language programmes into schools alongside Arabic and English (Raddawi, 2015). However, the implementation of such multilingual programmes requires careful attention to sociolinguistic, cultural, and educational factors (Harper, 2020).

Within language education, culture is not an ancillary component but a core one. Culture encompasses a range of values, practices, and behavioural norms, and must be considered integral to the process of language learning (Auladi, 2024; Brislin, 1990). Harper (2020) argues that effective language education goes beyond linguistic structures to include cultural content and the development of intersubjective thinking, particularly among students from diverse backgrounds.

Despite the relevance of the ICC in global education, empirical studies that focus specifically on Chinese language teaching at the K–12 level in the UAE remain scarce. While existing literature acknowledges the importance of teachers' ICC in fostering students' learning outcomes (Feng et al., 2024; Sercu, 2006), a significant gap persists between theoretical models and actual classroom practice (Risager, 2011). Furthermore, although theoretical research supports the premise that intercultural contact enhances ICC (Harper, 2020), quantitative data assessing these relationships, particularly in the context of Chinese language education in the UAE, are extremely limited.

Some preliminary studies suggest that different forms of intercultural contact (e.g., workplace interaction, friendships, and social media) influence ICC to varying extents (Arasaratnam-Smith, 2025; Thongpan & Thumawongsa, 2023; Wang, 2024). However, the specific impact of these contact types, especially on Chinese language teachers' ICC, has not been systematically quantified. This research thus addresses a critical gap by examining the levels of ICC among Chinese language teachers in the UAE, the factors influencing their competence, their attitudes toward ICC, and the effects of various forms of intercultural contact.

Methodology

Research Design

The study utilized a mixed-methods research design, wherein the qualitative phase data was collected through semi-structured interviews and the quantitative phase witnessed a questionnaire survey. Both these phases occurred simultaneously at K–12 level of public schools in the UAE. With strict ethical following, participants were ensured that their identities would be kept confidential and informed consent was sought.

Sampling

For the survey, 37 Chinese language teachers working in these public schools were recruited. Most participants held at least a master's degree, 73% had previous overseas teaching experience, and 97% had received training in intercultural communication. The participants were selected through purposive sampling to represent Chinese teachers who were based in the UAE. For the interview, five teachers were selected again through purposive sampling, not a part of the survey participants. Notably, these teachers had various teaching experiences, cultural adaptation levels and professional backgrounds. The interviewees' diverse perspectives provided in-depth insights into teachers' ICC development, teaching challenges, and adaptation strategies.

Data Collection Instruments

Two forms of data collection instruments were employed in this study; firstly, a questionnaire survey derived from (Byram, 2021) ICC model. This ICC tool measured attributes like knowledge, attitudes, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness, each through a separate subscale. The survey also included an intercultural contact component, which instructed

participants to report how often each of the intercultural interactions occurred: viz., contact with colleagues, contact with friends of other nationalities, and social media interaction (Thongpan & Thumawongsa, 2023).

On the other hand, the qualitative data was collected through a semi-structured interview with questions based upon the framework of Karabinar and Guler (2013). These interview questions were grouped into five major themes, namely, teacher background, perceptions of ICC, application of ICC in teaching, teaching reflections and challenges, and future outlook. Previous research (Castro et al., 2004) was drawn upon to refine the questions and then they were validated through expert review.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed at three stages. At the first stage, the survey data was analyzed through descriptive and inferential statistics to investigate the relationship between ICC components and the frequency of intercultural contact variables. This included a correlation analysis, and a multiple regression analysis. High reliability of the scale was confirmed through Cronbach's Alpha (0.895). At the second stage, the semi-structured interview data was transcribed and coded using thematic analysis and manual coding to identify key patterns. In the initial stage, open coding was done, after which the codes were sorted into existing predefined themes relevant to the research questions. In the last stage, applications of a multiple regression model were used to gauge the influence of intercultural contact on ICC levels. The model then measured the various contributions of these sources: work contact with other employees, friends of international colleagues, and social media engagement. The three forms of contact explained 27.8% (as indicated by an R^2 value of 0.278) of the variance in ICC levels. All data were stored securely and anonymously so that confidentiality was maintained. To validate the findings and to minimize bias, interviews were member checked with the participants.

Results

Right at the outset, descriptive statistics and reliability analysis were carried out to compare means and standard deviations for each ICC dimension of teachers. Table 1 shows good internal consistency of the scale with Cronbach's Alpha at 0.895. Later, a correlation analysis was used to determine the relationship between ICC dimensions and the frequency of intercultural contact, to understand how different contexts of contact influence teachers' ICC. Furthermore, the independent effects of contact frequency with colleagues, friends from other countries, and through social media on teachers' ICC are further tested using multiple regression analysis, while determining the relative contributions of these contacts to ICC.

Table 1: *Reliability Analysis*

Category	Sub scale Items	Cronbach's α
Reliability Statistics	-	0.895
	A	0.901
	K	0.897
	IR	0.872
	DI	0.854
	C	0.888
	ICC	0.842

Note: A-Attitude; K-Knowledge; IR- Interpreting and relating skills; DI- Discovery and interaction skills; C-Critical cultural awareness; ICC- Intercultural Communicative Competence

Thematic analysis of interview transcripts enabled obtaining key themes in accordance with the research questions. Open manual coding was used for initial coding, and the themes like teacher background, ICC cognition, teaching application, reflection and challenges, and future outlook were further analyzed. Other emerging themes were also identified that relate to the mental health and professional development of teachers, thus, contributing to other implications of ICC in their practice.

Based on the data collected from the survey, it can be concluded that there are distinct differences noted in Chinese language teachers in the UAE among the five components of ICC, as shown in Table 2. Teachers score highest in Attitude (A) and Interpretation and Relating Skills (IR), with average scores of 4.32 and 4.23 (on a 5-point scale), both reaching the "very high" level with relatively consistent performance among individuals. This suggests that while most teachers show openness and respect in intercultural interactions, they are also able to understand and share cultural information. However, in Critical Cultural Awareness (C), teachers scored relatively lower, with an average of only 3.99, indicating a "moderate" level. This calls for

improvement of critical reflection and a deeper understanding of cultural differences.

Table 2: *Descriptive Analysis*

Item	A	K	IR	DI	C	ICC	W	F	S	FIC
M	4.32	4.06	4.23	4.07	3.99	4.13	3.95	3.26	3.34	3.52
SD	0.458	0.632	0.445	0.481	0.482	0.395	0.822	0.868	0.83	0.733

Note: A-Attitude; K-Knowledge; IR- Interpreting and relating skills; DI- Discovery and interaction skills; C-Critical cultural awareness; ICC- Intercultural communicative competence; W- Contact with Coworkers; F-Friendship with teachers of different nationalities; S- Frequency of intercultural social media contact; FIC-Frequency of Intercultural Contact

Table 2 reveals that the overall Frequency of Intercultural Contact (FIC) among Chinese language teachers in the UAE, as well as across various dimensions, falls within the "moderate to high" range, with an average score of 3.52. Such a finding indicates that, in general, teachers have relatively high frequencies of intercultural contact in a variety of contexts such as the workplace, daily life and in places of social media interaction. In this regard, contact with Coworkers (W) takes the first place (3.95), suggesting that teachers have more opportunities for intercultural communications within their professional environment. On the other hand, friendship with teachers of different nationalities (F) showed the lowest contact score of 3.26, implying that teachers' social life is lowly connected with international friendship.

Table 3 presents the correlation analysis of this study suggesting that the ICC of Chinese language teachers in the UAE, and its dimensions (i.e. attitude, knowledge, interpretation and relating skills, discovery and interaction skills, and critical cultural awareness), are positively correlated (p < .001). This implies that each of the dimensions above is important to the levels of overall ICC. Discovery and Interaction Skills (r = 0.907) and Interpretation and Relating Skills (r = 0.825) are the strongest of these as they relate to the ICC of the teacher.

Table 3: *Correlation Matrix of ICC and its 5 components*

Variable	Pearson's r	df	p-value
ICC	—	—	—
A	0.672	35	<.001
K	0.791	35	<.001
IR	0.825	35	<.001
DI	0.907	35	<.001
C	0.751	35	<.001

Note: A-Attitude; K-Knowledge; IR- Interpreting and relating skills; DI- Discovery and interaction skills; C-Critical cultural awareness; ICC- Intercultural Communicative Competence

Table 4 also reveals that the FIC is significantly related to all types of contact (contact with colleagues, international friends, and social media), because all reported a score of p < 0.001. Social media contact had the strongest positive correlation because it was found in overall FIC (r = 0.914) indicating its centrality in supporting the process of intercultural engagement with teachers. The contact with international friends (r = 0.902), too, suggests that contacts in everyday life are also important for forming intercultural contacts. However, there is relatively lower correlation with contact frequency with co-workers (r = 0.799), but the exchange of cultures in the workplace is an essential part of FIC.

Table 4: *Correlation Matrix of FIC and its 3 types of contact*

Variable	Pearson's r	df	p-value
FIC	—	—	—
W	0.799	35	<.001
F	0.902	35	<.001
S	0.914	35	<.001

Note: W- Contact with Coworkers; F- Friendship with teachers of different nationalities; S- Frequency of intercultural social media contact; FIC- Frequency of Intercultural Contact

This study thus examines the relationship between the ICC of UAE Chinese language teachers with three types of intercultural contact frequency, namely, Frequency of Intercultural Contact with Co-workers of Different Cultures, Frequency of Off-duty contact with Friends of Different Nationalities, and Frequency of Intercultural Social Media Contact, in a multiple regression analysis. This summed up to an R value of 0.527

and an R² value of 0.278 (see Table 5 for the complete regression model), which means this 27.8% of the variance in ICC levels could be explained by the three types of contact examined. The concomitant correlation between the contact modes and teacher's ICC levels is moderate positive and as such, there may be some other additional factors which were not part of the model, such as teacher's educational background or intercultural training experiences.

Table 5: *Linear Regression - Model Fit Measures*

Model	R	R²	Adjusted R²
1	0.527	0.278	0.212

In terms of the three types of contact, Frequency of Intercultural Contact with Co-Workers from Different Culture (W) is the most important predictor in determining ICC levels. The regression coefficient of W is estimated at 0.1592 and is suggesting (p = 0.077) that intercultural contact in the workplace contributes positively towards teachers' ICC (see Table 6). These findings are in line with Lahti and Valo (2013), who stressed the role of intercultural interactions in workplaces in developing teachers' cultural adaptability and flexibility in intercultural communication.

Table 6: *Linear Regression - Model Coefficients - ICC*

Predictor	Estimate	SE	t	p
Intercept	3.0888	0.3012	10.254	<.001
W	0.1592	0.0873	1.825	0.077
F	0.0827	0.1183	0.699	0.490
S	0.0438	0.1279	0.343	0.734

Interestingly, Frequency of Intercultural Contact with Friends of Different Nationalities (F) does not affect ICC (estimate = 0.0827, p = 0.490). However, cross national friendships are mainly formed in informal daily life settings where there are no ways to pursue cultural difference deeply in a professional or educational context, perhaps. Consequently, there was not a considerable change in the ICC when interacting with international friends. This result also suggests that teachers are not in meaningful relationships with foreign friends, which does not help for the growth of ICC.

Lastly, Frequency of Social Media Contact (S) proves to have the least and non-significant impact on ICC improvement (estimate = 0.0438, p = 0.734). Interactions on social media are mostly non-face-to-face with interactions mainly in texts or image and are not of such depth of cultural understanding and effective communication to significantly help ICC. This is in line with Álvarez Valencia & Fernández Benavides (2019) who found that though social media can be instrumental in enhancing intercultural education, its contribution is rather minimal, even compared to face-to-face communication. Specifically, intercultural contact inside the workplace is the most significant for promoting teachers' ICC, whereas the frequency of contact with international friends and using social media contributes in widening cultural exposure; however, this contribution is less critical to ICC as these kinds of contacts are not deep enough.

At the qualitative level, the interview data from Chinese language teachers was evaluated for key themes to understand intercultural teaching in the UAE through a thematic analysis. Those identified themes were then connected to five predefined topics in the interview outline: teacher background, perceptions of ICC, application of ICC in teaching, reflection on teaching and challenges, and future outlook. Further, text and keyword analysis showed a sixth emerging theme of mental health and career development (see Table 7).

Table 7: *Outcome of the thematic analysis*

Theme	Description
Teacher Background	Educational qualifications, cultural adaptation, and international teaching experience.
Perceptions of ICC	Teachers' understanding of intercultural competence and its role in education.
Application of ICC in Teaching	Methods used to integrate ICC in classroom practices, such as cultural comparisons and simulations.
Teaching Reflection and Challenges	Challenges faced in multicultural classrooms, including cultural sensitivity and resource limitations.
Future Outlook	Teachers' expectations and recommendations for policy support and curriculum development.
Teacher Mental Health and Career Development	The psychological impact of intercultural challenges and professional growth opportunities.

The first theme of Teachers' background comprised their educational backgrounds and intercultural experiences, which play a significant role in their ICC levels and adaptability. For example, the Islamic background of Teacher X aided in easier adaptation of UAE culture and helped easier communication with students and colleagues while Teacher Z had to adjust at a slower pace. Moreover, Teacher Z and Teacher Y had studied English, but Teacher X and Teacher W had studied Chinese, which represents diversity in their backgrounds and affects how they adapt to different cultures. Furthermore, all five teachers had intensive international teaching experience and through this experience were able to introduce ICC in their teaching practices. Their career motivations on the other hand, were not the same, and this included salary, cultural experiences and personal growth.

Perceptions of ICC was the second theme, which helped to understand the importance of ICC in teaching and in daily life, and the level of all teachers' agreement with each other. Teacher Z describes ICC as "the ability to understand one's own culture while comprehending others' cultures and finding a balance", which is crucial for successful teaching. Evidently, according to teacher Y, ICC not only has an impact on teaching but also raises teachers' awareness of mental health and career development. All things considered, teachers agree that ICC is fundamental for teachers to accept different cultures and could be another approach to resolving cultural conflicts.

The third theme involved Application of ICC in teaching. Teachers implement ICC by means such as cultural comparison and situational simulations in their teaching. For example, Teacher Z does not simply compare practices in Chinese and Emirati culture like the use of chopsticks in China versus the habit of eating with hands in the UAE (since she herself eats with her hands), rather, she linked this habit to teaching students about cultural differences. Teacher C employed videos and role-play to introduce Chinese cultural practices, such as the greeting "Have you eaten?" and contrasted it with Emirati greetings. Teacher W involved students in Chinese culture beyond the classroom by engaging them in cultural activities, such as celebrating the Spring Festival and the Mid-Autumn Festival, to help broaden their comprehension and participation in Chinese culture. These methods were found to be effective by teachers in enhancing students' acceptance of cultural differences.

The fourth theme was Teaching reflection and challenges. The challenges of cultural adaptation faced by teachers were mainly related to religious sensitivity and a lack of teaching resources. As teacher Z adapted to her new surroundings, the period of adjustment was challenging, but through adjustments to her teaching strategies, she eventually achieved a balance. Teacher Y differentiated between family education values in the UAE and those in the countries she used to work in; thus, she made an effort to motivate students to learn in the class. Teacher X mentioned being cautious when discussing the Chinese zodiac, specifically avoiding the topic of the "pig" to respect religious sensitivities. However, regardless of the cultural differences between them and the students they teach, teachers smoothly adapt their pedagogical strategies to minimize cultural conflict and create a safe classroom environment.

Future outlook was the fifth theme. Chinese language teachers hope to increase the number of cultural resources available to promote the status of Chinese language teaching in the UAE. However, Teacher Z also wished to incorporate more cultural activities, such as festivals like Chinese New Year and Hanfu Day, to help students gain a deeper understanding of Chinese culture. Similarly, recognizing Chinese as a core subject increased student motivation, as Teacher Y suggested. The virtual classrooms were viewed by Teacher C as a means to enhance interaction between Chinese and Emirati students; however, she acknowledged the challenges associated with privacy, as well as religious considerations. In general, teachers consider that the expansion of opportunities for cultural exchange and policy support is essential to the development of Chinese language teaching.

Mental health of the teacher and career development was the sixth theme. The impact of cultural conflict on mental health is a topic discussed by several teachers. Teacher Y observed that cultural conflicts heighten feelings of isolation, "especially when quick integration is difficult". Teacher Z reflected on the role of ICC in psychological adaptation, stating "Intercultural communicative competence determines my sense of belonging in this environment". In Teacher W's belief, a support network among teachers can relieve the pressure of working within a cross-cultural environment.

Concerning the significance of intercultural experiences for career development, Teacher C argues that it has a great influence on personal growth, and teachers agree that ICC is necessary for workers' support and career development. Teacher Y emphasizes the constant adjustments to the mindset that will be required for work and communication in culturally diverse environments. Teacher Z argues that a better understanding of colleagues' cultural backgrounds helps to strengthen her support for teaching, and Teacher

C points out that intercultural teaching inputs have played a significant role in both her personal and professional growth. This is also emphasized by Teacher X, who argues that cultural adaptability helps achieve career success. Generally, teachers' adaptation of intercultural skills affects their mental health and job satisfaction.

In addition to the findings above, the analysis of high-frequency keywords and common patterns revealed recurring themes such as "cultural differences", "religious sensitivity", and "need for support". These patterns highlight teachers' focus on cultural understanding, religious awareness, and external support. From the analysis of these themes, it is also noted that Chinese language teachers in UAE classrooms heavily depend on ICC, regarding them as central to enhancing their teaching effectiveness as well as their mental health. In other words, the role of ICC appears to be at the core, as all teachers regard ICC as a means of avoiding cultural misunderstandings and facilitating their integration into the teaching environment. Likewise, they agree on the challenges of cultural differences, as teachers stress that these should be addressed through flexible strategies. Interestingly, cultural comparison as a teaching strategy was a recognized technique, since teachers mainly resort to such comparison of cultures to assist students in their understanding of the Chinese language and culture.

Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the ICC among Chinese language teachers in the UAE. In particular, it intended to examine the ICC levels of Chinese language teachers, considering the effect of intercultural contact on the development of Chinese language teachers' ICC; and uncover the impediments to practicing intercultural teaching. As the UAE is a multicultural environment, this study revealed how Chinese language teachers negotiate intercultural interactions in their daily language teaching in schools and how they modify their teaching strategies to facilitate language learning. A closer examination of these dynamics can help policymakers and educators develop effective approaches to enhance ICC training and improve Chinese language teachers' competencies in this new multicultural environment.

The study found that Chinese language teachers in the UAE have a relatively high level of ICC, primarily in the aspects of attitudes and skills related to interpreting and communicating. This aligns with Byram's (2021) ICC model, which emphasizes the importance of openness and cultural sensitivity in language teaching. In line with the findings of Lahti and Valo (2013), the results of the multiple regression analysis indicate that ICC development is greatly influenced by interactions in the workplace — specifically, interactions that offer structured, formal opportunities to engage with cultural material. Essentially, the more familiar teachers are with colleagues from diverse cultural backgrounds, the better they can understand the cultural norms within these societies, which in turn helps teachers improve their professionalism with both colleagues and students. Having said that, teachers' critical cultural awareness is notably underdeveloped, which means more professional development training and reflective practices are required. This result agrees with Sercu (2006), who notes that many language teachers understand the ICC conceptually, but they are not familiar with its practical application. To fill this gap, training programs targeting teachers need to emphasize critical reflection and situational analysis, allowing teachers to contextualize cultural differences in their pedagogical design.

In addition, the study indicates there is an imbalance in teachers' practice of various forms of intercultural contact. Workplace interactions lack depth and are merely surface-level conversations with international colleagues. This statement aligns with Pettigrew (1998) Contact Hypothesis, which posits that for intercultural contact to be meaningful, equal status and cooperative ecology are necessary for positive change to occur. It appears that there is a need for structured cultural exchanges to refine teachers' communication strategies and instructional methods, as well as to support teachers' participation in collaborative professional settings. The findings also support the conclusions of Álvarez Valencia (2019) regarding the limited opportunities that social media provides for cultivating a profound intercultural understanding, especially when compared to face-to-face human dialogue. Although digital communication platforms offer exposure to various cultural perspectives, this exposure does not necessarily lead to deep engagement, which in turn does not result in significant ICC improvements. One possible method for bridging this gap could be encouraging teachers to participate in more interactive and immersive cultural activities that occur outside of their professional roles.

These findings have implications for policy and the creation of institutions to support the development of teachers' intercultural competences. To begin with, training programmes should be utilized for critical cultural awareness raising, by providing teachers with opportunities for reflective practice and experiential

learning (Harper, 2020). Adding elements such as case studies, role-playing exercises, and problem-solving tasks to these professional development programmes can also help develop their ability to deal with an intercultural context. Secondly, more systematic programmes for teacher exchange and cultural immersion could provide teachers with more opportunities for authentic intercultural interaction. Short exchange programs and international collaborations with teachers have been especially effective in exposing teachers to new cultural and pedagogical frameworks. Furthermore, exposing teachers to techniques that aid in including ICC into the classroom could result in greater teaching effectiveness and student engagement. In addition, encouraging mentorship programmes in which senior teachers mentor the newcomers and guide them in tackling intercultural challenges would further strengthen the quality of the teaching environment.

However, along with the valuable insights into the ICC levels of Chinese language teachers in the UAE, this study is also subject to some limitations. The small sample size for the quantitative analysis (N = 37) raises concerns about external validity. Furthermore, a multiple regression analysis was adopted despite the relatively small sample size, as access to a larger number of participants was not possible. This was mainly since there are very few Chinese language teachers in UAE public schools, making it difficult to recruit a larger sample. A longitudinal approach is recommended for future research to explore the long-term impact of ICC development among teachers of Chinese as a foreign language, as following up on the progress of teachers over a long period would offer better insight into how intercultural exposure has influenced their teaching philosophies and methods. Furthermore, broadening the sample to include teachers from private schools and language centers would increase the generalizability of findings such that the entire picture of ICC in this UAE context is captured. It may also be helpful to conduct further studies to examine the psychological and emotional aspects of teachers' intercultural adaptation, exploring the well-being of teachers in multicultural educational contexts.

Conclusion

This study investigated the Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) of Chinese language teachers in K–12 public schools across the United Arab Emirates (UAE), focusing on their competence levels, influencing factors, and challenges in multilingual and multicultural teaching contexts. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, data were collected from 37 teachers via structured questionnaires and from five participants through semi-structured interviews. The findings revealed that teachers demonstrated high levels of ICC, particularly in attitudes and skills of interpreting and relating. However, their performance in critical cultural awareness was comparatively moderate. Quantitative analysis identified workplace-based intercultural contact as the most significant predictor of ICC development, while social media contact exhibited negligible influence.

Qualitative findings further illustrated how teachers employed pedagogical strategies such as cultural comparison and situational simulation to facilitate intercultural understanding in the classroom. Nonetheless, teachers reported persistent challenges, including religious sensitivities, a lack of culturally responsive teaching resources, and psychological stress. The study highlights that ICC not only affects instructional effectiveness but also profoundly impacts teachers' mental well-being and professional identity in a cross-cultural environment.

Despite the contributions of this study, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the relatively small sample size, particularly in the quantitative phase (N = 37), may constrain the generalizability of the findings. Second, the cross-sectional nature of the study does not capture the dynamic evolution of teachers' ICC over time. Third, the focus on public-school teachers excludes perspectives from private institutions and language centres, potentially limiting the comprehensiveness of the analysis.

Future research should consider adopting longitudinal designs to explore the developmental trajectory of ICC among Chinese language teachers and its long-term impact on pedagogy. Expanding the sample to include teachers from private schools and international contexts in the Gulf region would enhance comparative insight and external validity. Furthermore, a deeper understanding of the psychological and emotional dimensions of intercultural adaptation, such as cultural stress, identity conflict, and professional burnout, would be gained through further inquiry.

In terms of practical implications, this study offers actionable recommendations for educational policy and teacher training. Education authorities should prioritize the enhancement of critical cultural awareness through targeted professional development programs that include case-based learning, reflective practice, and cultural immersion. Furthermore, institutional support structures, such as cross-cultural mentorship,

cultural exchange initiatives, and mental health resources, are essential to fostering sustainable professional growth and intercultural engagement among Chinese language teachers. These efforts will not only enhance language teaching quality but also promote cultural harmony and educational equity within the UAE's multilingual education system.

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The authors claim no conflict of interest.

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Human Ethics and Consent to Participate Declarations:

This study received ethical approval from the British University in Dubai Research Ethics Committee. All procedures involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the institutional ethical standards of the British University in Dubai Research Ethics Committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. Informed written consent was obtained from all participants prior to their involvement in the study. Participants were fully informed of the study's aims, assured of anonymity and confidentiality, and given the right to withdraw at any stage without penalty or any adverse consequences.

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